Housing wealth leakage, return migration and transnational housing markets: the experiences of UK based African Caribbean homeowners

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A key development within the UK homeownership market in recent years has been the growth in the second homes. However the experiences of ethnic minority homeowners have been sadly neglected in the policy and academic literatures. The paper draws on the author’s doctoral research of Caribbean elders based in Birmingham and London who have used housing wealth accumulated from UK homeownership careers to engage in return migration and housing investments. Most of these investments have taken place on family land assets inherited by informants in the Caribbean. The study brings together various strands of the homeownership, housing wealth, and return migration literatures in developing these perspectives. The theoretical framework used combines financial, social and kinship networks, in exploring the risks and opportunities of overseas housing investments and return migration planning. The perspectives gained, provides unique insights into complex housing wealth consumption among ethnic minority homeowners from a migration background. While its main focus is on micro-level experience and strategies, the paper argues that ‘leakage’ of UK housing wealth and the creation of what it describes as transnational housing markets that are intimately linked to international migration trends have wider macro-level policy and theory implications for our understanding of globalised housing markets.

Introduction

This paper focuses on a cohort of homeowners whose experiences, to date at least, have been poorly served within the academic and policy literatures. Very little is known about the experiences and housing consumption activities of ethnic minority homeowners, particularly those from a migration background, who have established second homes overseas. This omission is surprising given the huge interest in the second homes market and attempts to gain a better understanding of the socio-economic profile of UK homeowners engaging in this activity (Oxley et al, 2008). This gap in the literature is due in part to the limitations of largely quantitative data held on those engaging in this sector of the housing market. This paper pays particular attention to a small sub-set of ethnic minority homeowners; Caribbean elders domiciled in the UK but who are engaging in return migration activity in the Caribbean. The backdrop to these discussions are a number of qualitative studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s reporting significant increase in the numbers of Caribbean elders returning to the Caribbean region (Rubenstein, 1982; Thomas-Hope, 1985; Peach, 1991; Byron, 1994; Byron and Condon, 1996; Goulbourne, 1999). While there are ongoing debates about the nature of ‘the return’ and how it is defined (Thomas-Hope, 1992), there is little doubt that the fall in size in the Caribbean born population in Census returns during this period can be partly attributed to return migration activity (Peach, 1996).

These developments are particularly timely, as there is growing evidence of a much younger cohort of second-generation Black British return migrants emerging from this group (Chamberlain, 1998; Conway et al, 2005; Reynolds, 2008). This diaspora should be seen within the wider historical context of migration flows across the Caribbean region itself. Its people are among the most globalised on the planet, with a long tradition of complex patterns of outward and inward migration.
(Thomas-Hope, 1998; Chamberlain, 1998; Goulbourne and Chamberlain, 2001). For these reasons, the migration flows and experiences of the cohort of Caribbean born returnees, who form the focus of this paper, is widely viewed as a template for understanding return migration trends more generally among second-generation Caribbean returnees and other New Commonwealth labour migrants (Byron and Condon, 2008).

The central thesis of this paper is that housing wealth accumulated throughout homeownership careers by this cohort of post war labour migrants have enabled some to engage in complex investment activities in second homes in Caribbean housing markets within the context of return migration activity. This generation of labour migrants from the Caribbean and New Commonwealth were establishing homeowners careers at a pivotal point in the development of the UK housing market (Phillips, 1989; Byron, 1993). The immediate post war period, not only witnessed the start of mass labour migration from the New Commonwealth, but also a major restructuring of the housing market. This led to a sequence of events which led to the dominance of homeownership ideology, major property price rises, the liberalisation of financial markets enabling homeowners to release significant sums of housing wealth into higher levels of consumption and debt (Forrest and Murie, 1989; Hamnett, 1999; Baker, 2004; Smith, 2005a) and more recently to the current credit crunch.

This paper attempts to synthesize a wide range of academic and policy literatures drawn from the fields of homeownership, housing wealth and return migration. It builds on work from Caribbean return migration scholars who noted the way that Caribbean elders who have established successful homeownership careers in the UK have engaged in return migration (Byron, 1994; Byron and Condon, 2008). This body of literature however, has not drawn explicit links to the second homes or housing wealth literature. Moreover, there is very little understanding within the literature about patterns of housing investment among return migrants in the country of origin, or indeed the way that return migration plans are financed, beyond the use of lifetime savings and retirement pensions. These discourses have far wider implications to policy and theory particularly in our understanding to the workings of global housing markets and possible relationships to changing shifts of international migration. This paper seeks to bridge this gap in knowledge by not only pulling together different strands of literature, but by presenting a theoretical framework that seeks to guide our understanding of the risks and opportunities associated with return migration and overseas housing investment decisions at micro (household) level.

The original fieldwork presented is drawn from the author’s doctoral study which uses life history accounts from a small sample of Caribbean elders based in Birmingham and London who have established multiple residence between the UK and the Caribbean (Joseph, 2007). The paper is organised in four parts. The next section provides a review of the literature. The second section discusses the theoretical framework and methodological account of the study. The case study findings and analysis follows, whilst the conclusions reflect on the issues raised in the paper.

**Literature review**

This section provides a brief review of the relevant policy and academic literatures that have informed the study.

*Post war ethnic minority homeownership in Britain: establishing a foothold on the housing ladder*

In the introduction to this paper, reference was made to the immediate post war period which provided an entry point for Caribbean and other New Commonwealth migrants into the UK housing market. This period is important not only because it marked the start of mass labour migration to Britain, but also witnessed a major restructuring of the housing market leading to the dominance of homeownership as the tenure of choice (Phillips, 1989; Byron, 1993). For this reason, it is important to reflect on the some of the key literature charting the earliest experiences of this cohort of ethnic minority homeowners.
Although levels of homeownership today among households of Black Caribbean origin are comparatively lower than most other ethnic minority groups (ONS 2007), this was not always the case. Despite significant barriers faced by Caribbean and other New Commonwealth migrants in penetrating the labour and housing markets, which are well documented in the literature (Davison, 1966; Rex and Moore, 1967; Smith, 1977; Karn et al, 1985; Sarre et al, 1989), levels of homeownership among this group, in the mid 1960s was at times higher than the indigenous White population (Byron, 1993).

The body of empirical studies emerging from the early 1960s (Glass, 1961; Davison, 1962; Patterson, 1967; Peach, 1968; Rex and Moore, 1968) commonly referred to as the ‘race’ and housing literature, has a distinguished record in drawing attention on the problems facing many post war New Commonwealth migrants. There are a number of underlying themes that have dominated this literature. The first of these is the reconstruction of the post war UK housing market which was still experiencing severe housing shortages (Milner Holland Report, 1965; Rex and Moore, 1967; Phillips, 1987; Byron, 1994). Secondly the relaxation of immigration rules encouraging the recruitment of new workers to run essential public and transport services (Glass, 1961; Davison, 1962; Peach, 1968).

Within this literature it is possible to piece together important insights to the conditions and experiences of post war ethnic minority home owners. For example a number of authors have commented on the problems faced by newly arrived migrants in accessing the home ownership sector (Rex and Moore, 1967; Patterson, 1968; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979; Modood et al, 1997). Other contributions to this literature have provided compelling evidence of the difficulties these groups experienced in obtaining mortgage facilities (Karn, 1978; CRE, 1985; Karn et al, 1985). Discriminatory practices by exchange professionals, and the higher costs associated with property purchase compared with white buyers, have also featured in this literature (Daniel, 1968; Fenton, 1984). The clustering of migrant households in properties at the lower end of the housing market has been highlighted in the literature (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979; Brown, 1984; Karn et al, 1985; Sarre et al, 1989; Smith, 1989). A particular point of interest, which I will return to in the theoretical discussions, is the reliance on migrant groups on informal financial, kinship and social networks used to purchase properties (Karn, 1982; Karn et al, 1986; Sarre et al, 1989).

The emergence of housing wealth and ethnic minority homeowners

The period following the late 1970s marked a further rapid expansion of homeownership and the emergence of housing wealth as a key feature of the UK housing market. The homeownership market, which at the turn of the twentieth century was perceived as the tenure of the rich, had broadened its social base after the war (Saunders, 1990; Malpass and Murie, 1994; Hamnett, 1999). This growth was matched by a collapse in the private rented sector and the transfer of stock that had been privately owned into the homeowners market (Malpass and Murie, 1994). The rise in property prices from the 1960s culminated in the first major boom in the 1970s (Hamnett, 1999). This meant that increasing numbers of homeowners were beginning to accumulate assets in their properties. This period is important because the first comprehensive survey of wealth holding in the UK by the Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth (1977) revealed that the home had now become the most valued personal asset for many households, outstripping pensions, personal savings and other forms of investment. This landmark study triggered a flurry of empirical work that have helped to better understand the social geography of housing wealth (see for example Forrest and Murie, 1989; Thomas and Dorling, 2004), but this literature (with the notable exceptions of Ward, 1982 and Hamnett, 1999) has only rarely explored the experiences of ethnic minority homeowners. There are however important clues that can be gained about the experiences of ethnic minority homeowners from some of the seminal work on return migration literature that emerged from the late 1970s.

Developing links between ethnic minority homeownership, housing markets and return migration
Some of the earliest insights between ethnic minority homeownership, housing markets and return migration planning can be traced to the ‘race and housing’ literature in the 1970s. The hugely influential work of Dahya (1974) and Anwar (1979) provided some of the earliest accounts of complex housing investment activities among Indian and Pakistani households in localised housing markets in the UK. These authors provided case studies of migrant communities acquiring property portfolios within inner city areas, not only as a means of meeting mutual housing needs within social and kinship networks, but also as an integral part of asset building towards achieving return migration. There are other examples in the Caribbean return migration literature, which have linked homeownership status and return migration activity (Thomas-Hope, 1992; Byron 1994; Byron and Condon, 2008). In her study of return migration planning among Leicester based Nevisians, Byron (1994) noted that Caribbean elders who were homeowners, featured more prominently among her case studies than any other housing tenure group.

Moreover, Byron and Condon (2008) drew attention to the use of family land inherited by returnees as a popular site for building a home for a permanent return or as a second home in the Caribbean. I return to this point in the following section and the theoretical discussion. The literature on return migration surprisingly pays very little attention to the way that return migration activity is financed or indeed the financial networks or other assets used. Rather, this literature tends to focus on the role of transnational social and kinship networks in facilitating return migration. Moreover, even less is known about the housing investment decisions in housing markets in the country of return, the risks or opportunities associated with this. This is a particularly pertinent issue for return migrants who have established multiple residence.

Developing possible links between second homes and family land with return migration planning

The growth in the second home market has been an important feature of the home ownership market in the UK in recent years (Gallent et al, 2000; Council of Mortgage Lenders, 2001; ODPM, 2005; Oxley et al, 2008). However, surprisingly, given the size and importance of second homes in the UK, there is very little socio-economic and demographic data available on the profile of second home owners (Oxley et al, 2008) Moreover, the housing consumption activities of ethnic minority homeowners within overseas second homes market is neglected within the literature. There is however some evidence in the Caribbean return migration literature that provides important clues about the use of second homes in the Caribbean region particularly on family owned land used to construct retirement homes by UK base Caribbean elders.

A number of migration authors have highlighting the role played by family land assets held by some return migrants in the island of origin (Byron, 1994; Besson and Momsen, 2007). This literature provides important insights to the system of family land developed across parts of the Caribbean region since the abolition of slavery in the 1800s. This system of landholding differs significantly from that established in most of Western Europe, as land held within families is communally owned and inherited across extended kinship networks. Very little attention is given to overseas land assets held by ethnic minority communities in the UK inheritance literature (Rowlingson and McKay, 2005). The possession of family land within Caribbean families, predating their post war arrival to these shores would suggest there is a much longer tradition of land/home ownership than had previous been presented in the UK housing literature. There is evidence which suggests that access to family land, not only provides an important resource influencing the decision to return in later life, but is a significant factor in reducing the overall cost of the return (Byron, 1994; Byron and Condon, 2008). Byron (1994) noted:

Land in some cases with a building on it, had been inherited by 15 per cent of the migrants while they were in Britain and 20 per cent of the Leicester sample had purchased land but had not yet built on it. (Byron, 1994: 172-173)

The author’s own work in this area (Joseph, 2007), reinforces Byron’s observations, offering further evidence these inheritances of overseas land assets feature increasingly within return migration
plans. Byron’s findings suggested that not only that this cohort were making use of UK housing wealth to develop family land among her sample of Caribbean elders, but also hinted at the existence of a buoyant second home market among those domiciled in the UK.

**Single Asset Network Theoretical Framework**

The study developed a resource framework used to interpret the risks and opportunities associated with return migration and housing investments decisions in the Caribbean. The literature that has developed since the first reports of Caribbean return migration in the 1970s and 1980s has tended to focus on the role of social and kinship networks to interpret return migration planning. Very little attention is given to the existence of financial networks or other assets available to returnees in the island of origin. My single asset network framework is influenced by Byron (1994: 20) who in her study of return migration among Caribbean elders developed a ‘social network resource system’ to conceptualise the network of social and kinship relations Caribbean post war migrants used in achieving a range of return migration goals and housing investment decisions within the Caribbean. Byron’s analytical framework is influenced by social field theory that is applied widely within the migration literature to describe the network of social relations that exists and are used by migrant communities in establishing themselves in host countries and in the remigration process. More recent contributions to this literature by Basch et al (1999), developed the notion of transnational social space. This provides a conceptual framework in which to explore the social, economic and political cross-national processes in which migrant groups are embedded (Ramji, 2006). These social and kinship networks not only enable migrant groups to establish themselves in the host country, but also reinforce transnational ties with the country of origin (Olwig, 1987; Goulbourne and Chamberlain, 2001). Information networks are also intimately linked within these social and kinship networks providing an important resource, enabling migrant groups to formulate return plans (Tiemeko, 2003).

My single asset network framework builds on this literature by including financial networks (both formal and informal) and other assets that might be available to return migrants in the country of origin. One of the key overseas assets identified in the literature, referred to earlier in this paper, and used by Caribbean elders, is the availability of family land. Byron (1994) identified this as an important asset, enabling many of her informants to reduce the overall cost of the return. I have used these networks within my single asset network framework to interpret flexibly the wide range of resources that in practice informants rely on within return migration planning throughout the life course. I have used the term ‘assets’ and ‘resources’ interchangeably to describe tangible and intangible assets that facilitate migration planning and related investments in housing overseas. Moreover this analytical framework enabled the original study to explore the opportunities and risks that informants faced in making important housing investment decisions in the Caribbean housing markets.

**Methodology**

The study included two generations of Caribbean families based in Birmingham and London. One of the main criteria for inclusion in the study was that informants had established homeownership careers at some stage since their arrival to Britain. Two of the informants bought their homes through the Right to Buy scheme. In total 13 families took part. Within my sample of Caribbean elders, nine indicated they had considered return migration at some stage or had already established a second home in the Caribbean. Informants were selected using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. The interviews were undertaken using life histories methodology. There are many examples within the return migration literature where life histories have been used; however this methodology has not been applied to the study of housing wealth. Informants were interviewed over several sessions between November 2002 and January 2005 using a combination of tape recordings and handwritten notes.

The decision to use a qualitative approach in undertaking the fieldwork was partly influenced by the lack of available quantitative data on the housing wealth experiences of ethnic minority households.
I felt using a qualitative methodology was more appropriate given the complex range of interrelated issues involved in this study. Moreover, there were a number of sensitive issues involved, particularly around financial planning, overseas housing investments and inheritance. I felt qualitative approaches would be more appropriate, and could offer me clearer guidance on how best to tackle these concerns (Lee, 1993). The topic guides designed for the life history interviews were based on the single asset network framework discussed earlier in this paper. These encouraged informants to reflect on the range of networks and resources influencing return migration planning and investments they hoped to make on family land inherited by them. Informants were asked a range of questions about the role of their homeownership status in achieving this goal, factors that affected the type of return, and the housing investments they had made or were about to make in the Caribbean. Informants were also asked if there were other issues that affected their planning.

My sample of Caribbean elders was not intended to be representative of the post war Caribbean migrant population. I did hope however, that it would contain a wide range of experiences. The informants on the whole, although describing themselves as ‘working class’, exhibited many characteristics of ‘middle class’ life styles. Many were active in their local communities, church members (in the case of the Birmingham families) or held professional occupations. Slightly different sampling strategies were used to identify potential informants in Birmingham and London. This was influenced by my differing levels of knowledge of Black Caribbean communities in the two cities. Each informant completed consent agreements and a short biographical profile before the interview took place. This was used to construct basic background information on a range of issues (i.e. housing history, family background, employment, migration histories etc). All of the names in this paper have been anonymised.

Research Findings

This section presents the research findings. Table 1 below provides a brief profile of the informants’ return migration and housing investment plans. All of the names have been anonymised. The single asset analytical framework discussed earlier provided opportunities for the life history interviews to focus attention of the mix of assets and networks influencing return migration and housing investment plans in the Caribbean.

Table 1 Profile of housing investment and return migration plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Inherited family land in Caribbean</th>
<th>Made investment in land or property</th>
<th>Type of return*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezra Gunford</td>
<td>Dominica</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Charles</td>
<td>Dominica</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nemiah Albert</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Barclay</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes**</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonny Browne</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes**</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Byron</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Dickens</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Bradley</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Lloyd</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: PR: permanent; MR: multiple residence; ND: not decided

Note: * Type of return There are three ways that this can take place. Permanent return means that the individual intends to return to the Caribbean within the next 6-12 months. Multiple residence means that the individual hopes to set up dual residence between the Caribbean and UK. Not decided means that the individual has not made a final decision whether they intended to migrate permanent or establish dual residence. ** These interviewees started building second home in the Caribbean but abandoned these after financial problems

Source: Fieldwork 2002-2005
The role of housing wealth in funding return migration
My findings indicated clearly that housing wealth accumulated throughout UK housing careers was
the main source of financing return migration and housing investment activities in the Caribbean. This
often combined with other formal financial assets such as lifetime savings, pensions and in
some cases lump sum redundancy payments from previous employment. Informants made clear
connections between their return migration plans, their homeownership status and equity they had
accumulated throughout their housing careers as the following comments illustrate:

We always talk of going back as soon as we reach here..it was a dream that a lot of
us have…for a long time I though that it would never happen, but now it has
become a reality because of my home…I’ve paid off my mortgage and I can afford
to go back in style (Fieldwork interview: Ezra Gunford - London).

We’ve been talking about going back to Jamaica ever since my husband
retired..the children have all grown up and are doing really well, and they want us
to be happy…we are thinking of selling this place which will be hard but the
money will go a long way back home (Fieldwork interview Mary Dickens -
Birmingham).

The role of family land within housing investment decisions in the Caribbean
An important overseas asset influencing decisions to return and housing investment strategies was
the availability of family land in the Caribbean. The study had asked informants whether they had
inherited family land since their arrival to the UK. I called these transnational inheritances. There
was no evidence among my entire sample that interviewees were engaging in purely speculative
investments into Caribbean housing markets. There was strong evidence that the possession of
these types of inheritance played an important role in reducing the cost of the return on retirement:

I inherited land from my mother when she passed away…I think it was in 1973..I
didn’t do much with it then, I didn’t think I could have done it (return migrated)
then because I was struggling to make my way in England..when I was coming
up for retirement I began to think that I could use some of the money on my
house in East London to build a retirement home on the land…it meant that I
could save money because I didn’t have to go through the hassle of finding land
to buy and pay for it…(Fieldwork interview: Daniel Charles – London)

Yes it make a difference having the piece of land that we all get when my mum
died…I would say that it was the deciding factor to use money from this place to
build it up….it definitely helped to make it a lot cheaper…

(Fieldwork interview: Derrick Byron – London)

Deciding whether to make a permanent return or multiple residence?
Perhaps the biggest issue facing many informants at the start of their planning centred on whether
their return should be a permanent move or whether they should establish multiple residence. These
key decisions influenced the scale of disinvestment in housing assets in the UK and the level of
investments in housing markets in the Caribbean. One informant, Daniel Charles a retired print
worker living in London decided well in advance of his retirement to make a permanent return to
the Caribbean. He considered housing disinvestment decisions in the UK housing market relatively
straightforward. The proceeds of the sale of his UK home enabled him to build a large property on
family land he had inherited from his mother:

I knew from a long time that I would go back home and when I did I wouldn’t be
coming back…It wasn’t a big deal for me to sell my house… this place is worth a
lot of money..I was lucky that I bought at the right time (Fieldwork interview: Daniel Charles – Birmingham).

There were a number of informants who were undecided about the type of return that they would make. Unlike Daniel Charles, their decision on whether to make a permanent return was complicated by the consequences of ‘burning bridges’. There were several dimensions to this. Some concerns centred on the impact this would have on close kinship networks in the UK and the loss of a UK base should the return prove unsuccessful. The following comment articulates the concerns expressed by a number of informants:

The thing I worry about most is if we sell our home and go back what will I do if I don’t like it and I want to come back? I know my husband doesn’t mind but I do a bit..I know that my children will be happy for us to stay with them but I don’t want to impose on them (Fieldwork interview: Mary Dickens – Birmingham).

There were also concerns that a permanent return might be a high risk at their phase of the life cycle. This meant that it might be difficult to get back onto the UK housing ladder if the return did not work out:

I guess that I’ve never lost the desire to return back home (Caribbean), the thoughts have never left me even after I was forced to sell the property I built in Barbados when I lost my job here…at the time the biggest issue for me was whether my daughter would want to come with me… in any case if I had sold everything who would I stay with if I changed my mind and wanted to come back…it was a struggle for me to buy my council flat and the way that property prices are going it would have been even more difficult to buy again (Fieldwork interview: Mary Barclay – London).

At my age if I were to sell everything here and go back to Jamaica what will I do if it doesn’t work out and I want to come back…I don’t think I would be able to buy something here even with the money I make from selling my home (Fieldwork interview: Sarah Lloyd – Birmingham)

These two informants were more detached from kinship networks to enable them to make life changing decisions on their own. Mary Barclay was a lone parent in her early thirties when she bought her council flat in the late 1980s. She had been actively considering a permanent return to the Caribbean for some time. Mary was concerned that the timing of a permanent return would impact adversely on her daughter who was still living in the parental home, and had not as yet established an independent housing career. Moreover Mary went through a period of ill health and job insecurity, which not only made her less confident about her ability to carry out her plans for a permanent return, but also threatened her ability to maintain her mortgage on her council flat:

I had to do everything by myself and I hated it at times…a lot of my friends had partners so at least they were able to share the risks together..my daughter was beginning to establish herself and the last thing that she needed was me taking a big gamble by putting everything into one basket by going back to the Caribbean for good (Fieldwork interview: Mary Barclay – London).

The second informant, Sarah Lloyd considered herself to be financially secure since the death of her husband and has been living alone for some time. She is close to her daughter who she relies on for support but feels that were she to reconsider her decision to remain in the UK, multiple residence rather than a permanent move would be the safer option for her:
It’s hard for me to just up sticks and go back to Jamaica by myself at my age, I’m not a spring chicken… it would be different if my husband was still around, at least we could plan together…I have my daughter here (Birmingham) and I rely on her a lot… if I keep this place at least I have the choice of coming back if it doesn’t work out… I love going back home when I can and I like the life I have here as well (Fieldwork interview: Sarah Lloyd – Birmingham).

A number of informants who had already established multiple residence or were seriously thinking of doing so had ruled out the possibility of returning to the Caribbean on a permanent basis. This was largely because they had accumulated sufficient housing equity throughout their homeownership careers to have the option of retaining the UK home and have enough financial resources to invest in a second home in the Caribbean. Moreover the strength of kinship networks established in the UK were powerful influences in their decisions to establish multiple residence:

We had extended the property that we have in Dominica a while back… we were lucky because we’ve paid off our mortgage and this house is worth a bit of money… it means we have more choices to do things that we could only dream about when we first moved to England… yes we thought about going back for good but we have the children and grandchildren here and we’d miss them… we also have lots of close family back home as well so we’ve got the best of both worlds (Fieldwork interview: Ezra Gunford – London).

I have everything I need… I have a house here (London) that I paid for and a little place back home that I can spend time whenever I want… I have my pension and a bit of savings and I have my family around me here and in Jamaica (Fieldwork interview: Nemiah Albert – London).

**Risks associated with return migration and housing investment planning**

The single asset network framework enabled me to identify some of the risks associated with return migration and housing investment planning in the Caribbean. I found evidence that weakened kinship networks in the Caribbean and the quality of these relationships particularly with relatives who had a share in family land were playing an important role in housing investment decisions. Many informants were reliant on family and other social networks in the Caribbean to be their ‘eyes and ears’ on family land they shared. This land also formed the focus of potential financial investments in realising a return. These issues were more acutely felt when undertaking return migrate planning on a restricted budget:

I get a piece of land in Jamaica a while back… I share it with my brother… we plan to build a little place on it the two of us… we talk about putting our money together… things go wrong at the start… he very unreliable and in the end the whole thing fall through… I still angry about it because I waste a lot of money that I couldn’t afford to lose (Fieldwork interview: Sonny Browne – Birmingham).

In the past when I was looking to go back the cost was an issue if I had to be honest… a lot of people think that because you planning to go back home you’re rolling in it (laugh)… its just not true in every case… look at me, I was a single mum struggling to make ends meet in a reasonable job… yes I inherited a bit of land from an aunt in Grenada and my original plan was to build a modest home on it… things didn’t work out because of family disputes over who owned what and I gave up… in the end a friend persuaded me to look at building something in Barbados… I went out there and found something in my price range, but it was still more than what I would have spent if I was able to build on the family land in Grenada (Fieldwork informant: Mary Barclay – London).
Concerns about the rising cost associated with developing family land, building material, the hiring of builders, solicitors and other professionals featured strongly among informants. Several complained that since agreeing some of these costs at the start of the project, they escalated over a relatively short period of time:

I hired this guy who was recommended to me by a friend who went back a few years ago. I went out there to meet him and we talked about what I wanted and the sort of building materials I wanted him to use, you know the usual thing... in the end he gave me a quote, I looked at it and though oh that’s fine and said yes go ahead with it... a few months later after I got back to London I received a call from the fella, he said that he would have to adjust his quote, I said what do you mean we agreed earlier, he said that the cost of building material had gone up and that he had no choice but to put up the quote... he said that he had said the same to a lot of people like me... I asked him what the problem was, he said that there’s a lot of people moving back to Dominica from England and places like Canada... what can I do I didn’t feel I had any choice (Fieldwork interview: Daniel Charles – London).

We had no idea how much it would cost us to build a second home in Dominica... you get a rough idea from people you know who gone through it before but every case is different... we were surprised how much some of the building costs went up even after we agree the amount... it was very frustrating... its a lot worse now because more people like us are building second homes in the Caribbean... all this does is push up the cost of things for everyone (Fieldwork interview: Ezra Gunford – London).

These comments, which were typical of many of the views expressed by informants, hinted at some of the adverse affects of increased housing investment activities among returnees.

There were other factors impacting on housing investment decisions in Caribbean housing markets it was important to draw attention to. The timing of some of the fieldwork interviews coincided with Hurricane Ivan, which swept across parts of the Caribbean in September 2004. This was followed shortly by the Asian Tsunami that devastated large swathes of the Indian Ocean coastline on Boxing Day that same year. These events had extensive coverage in the international media. Several informants commented that these natural disasters and wider concerns over climate change were increasingly feeding into migration plans and housing investment decisions in the Caribbean:

I feel very sorry for the returnees, those people who have retired and sold or used proceeds from their property to build homes for their retirement because the damage has been so extensive... to find the money to repair will be huge source of problems for those who had total devastation or no hope of rebuilding... its very likely that they might have to return to the UK (Fieldwork interview Mary Barclay - London).

Yes it’s a real tragedy, I know a lot of people out there who’ve been hit hard... it made me think about my own plans to go back to Dominica... I decided long ago that I’d build a generator and install a water storage tank just in case... you never know (Fieldwork interview Daniel Charles - London).

**Discussions of Findings**

This section reflects on the findings in relation to the literature and the questions raised in the introduction to this paper. The findings provided important insights to the way that homeownership status, access to housing wealth and other networks have provided new opportunities for UK based Caribbean elders embarking on return migration activity and housing investments in the island of origin.
Housing wealth as the key financial asset in funding return migration strategies

My findings revealing the various stages of return migration planning from those who had already established multiple residence, to a permanent return (see Table 1) had a direct impact on the scale of disinvestment in the UK housing market. The strength of kinship and financial asset networks in the UK and Caribbean were important influencing factors in this process. The decision to sell the UK home created anxieties within family relationships in the UK for some interviewees. One of the main anxieties facing interviewees was the potential fallout if the return proved ‘unsuccessful’. Would they be able to re-join the housing ladder having ‘burned bridges’? Who would accommodate them if they needed to somewhere to stay?

Although my study did not explore the precise financial mechanism by which informants were able to release equity in their UK home when investing in Caribbean housing markets, my findings do nonetheless confirm that housing wealth provided the critical financial resource enabling many of these informants to activate return migration strategies. The landmark studies of return migration among Caribbean and other New Commonwealth groups referred to earlier in this paper (Dahya, 1974; Anwar, 1979; Thomas-Hope, 1992; Byron 1994), although making no direct references to housing wealth, acknowledge the importance of the UK housing market in realising the return to the country of origin. My findings not only confirm this link between return migration planning and the importance of homeownership status and the housing market, but also go further by making explicit connections with housing wealth.

Linking family land and second homes in facilitating the return

The life history accounts presented in this paper also provide important insights to the role of family land that had been inherited by many of my informants since their arrival to the UK. This played an important role within return migration planning and housing investment decisions of UK housing wealth in Caribbean housing markets. In my original study, I referred to these as transnational inheritance (Joseph, 2007). The literature on Caribbean return migration has made continual reference to family land (see Byron, 1994; Besson and Momsen, 2007; Byron and Condon, 2008), however this literature has not been considered within the second homes literature as it relates to overseas housing market (Centre for Housing Studies, 2005; Gallent et al, 2005; ODPM, 2005; Oxley et al, 2008). Nor has it considered the experiences of ethnic minority homeowners from a migration background. My findings suggest that further work is needed to integrate these various strands of return migration and housing literatures with the second homes literature. Moreover, although beyond the specific focus of this paper, there are opportunities to develop links with the inheritance literature which has tended to ignore overseas land assets that might be available to ethnic minority groups from a migration background (Rowlingson and Mackay, 2005).

Housing wealth leakage and transnational housing markets

So far my analysis has focused on micro perspectives around housing consumption activities of a small sub-set of housing consumers; ethnic minority homeowners from a migration background. This section steps back to reflect on some of the broader implications of these findings from a theoretical perspective in relation to our understanding of the workings of global housing markets, and on some of the possible policy implications.

My findings, using mainly qualitative methodology provided important micro insights to the way that housing investment decisions, or what I described as housing wealth leakage, from the UK housing market took place. I developed this notion of housing wealth leakage based on the work of Kemeny and Thomas (1984) who discussed the scale of ‘capital leakage’ of housing wealth into non-housing spending. This notion of housing wealth leakage into different forms of consumer spending has been well established since within the UK literature (Smith, 2005a). Rather than focusing on the use of housing wealth into non-housing consumer spending I have developed the term to incorporate spatial flows of UK housing wealth into housing markets and other forms of investments overseas. Some of these other forms of investments that support kinship and social networks through intergenerational exchanges in the Caribbean by my informants (i.e. remittance,
loans etc) are not considered in this paper, but are discussed by the author in greater detail elsewhere (Joseph, 2007).

My findings revealed that housing markets in the Caribbean provided important investment opportunities for many first generation interviewees embarking on return migration. These investments as discussed earlier tended to be into family land inherited by informants since their arrival to the UK. The flow of capital and people in this way has created what I have termed transnational housing markets (Joseph, 2007). My conceptualisation of this phenomenon is built around the literature reviewed on the second homes market (ODPM, 2005, Gallent et al, 2005). Although the study was limited in its scope in terms of its sample size and focus on a small sub-set of UK homeowners investing in Caribbean housing market, my findings do however suggest that return migration activity may be a key driver of overseas second homes activity in the region. There are a number of policy implications flowing from these findings. The micro perspectives gained from informants taking part in this study, suggested that housing investment, particularly in neighbourhoods where return migration activity was greatest, have created overheated housing markets characterised by rising cost of building construction and other related costs. This findings mirror Byron’s (1994) account of return migrants on the island of Nevis and more widely in some of the second homes literature which looks at its impact on sub-regional housing markets in the UK and across mainland Europe (CML, 2001; Centre for Future Studies, 2004; ODPM, 2005). An important caveat to make when presenting this aspect of my research is that it was beyond the scope of the original study to quantify how much of this could be attributed to return migration activity or whether there were other factors (i.e. tourism) in play.

My findings, revealing investment patterns of UK housing wealth into housing markets in the Caribbean through the process of return migration, led me to conceptualise this phenomenon as ‘transnational housing markets’ (Joseph, 2007). These are particular forms of housing markets created through the process of return migration and investments in land and property to meet the housing needs of returnees. The conceptual underpinnings used to describe these flows of return migrants and capital is based on two developments in the literature. The first of these is the notion of transnational social space (Basch et al, 1994; Portes, 1996; Portes et al, 1999; Pries, 1999). The study of transnationalism covers a wide range of phenomena (Basch et al, 1994; Portes et al, 1999; Goulbourne and Chamberlain, 2001; Ramji, 2006). This literature posits the notion that transnational migration processes have taken on a new quality. Pries (1999) argues that this convergence of geographical and social space is driven not only by global migration trends, but by a number of factors that incorporate political change, transnational corporations, information technology, worldwide consumption of cultural activities creating new global markets, and international tourism. These all contribute to networks of globalised transactions of data, goods and human resources. Global migration form an extensive and enduring new social linkages that forces a rethink of our understanding of the relationship between geographic space and social space (Pries, 1999).

There are a number of different perspectives to transnational social space, which provide opportunities for me to develop the notion of transnational housing markets. Basch et al, (1999) focus on social, economic and political networks that migrant communities interact and are embedded in. I have developed this notion of networks by building on return migration trends and by combining this with the need for migrants to access housing on the point of return. The single asset analytical framework discussed earlier suggest there is a range of asset networks (i.e. social, kinship and financial) that all play an important role in facilitating the return. Housing wealth accumulated through the UK home ownership has created powerful financial leverage into housing markets in the Caribbean for many of my informants.

The second development in the literature that has influenced my conceptualisation of transnational housing markets is within the housing market literature itself. There have been important
developments within the housing literature that have focused on the contributions from other social science disciplines in better understanding the workings of housing markets. The study of housing markets has tended to be dominated by economic perspectives, particularly in the way that they perform, how investment decisions take place and their wider implications to the economy (Barker, 2004). More recent contributions to this literature have argued that by incorporating micro perspectives from ‘non-economic’ disciplines, we can gain new understandings of the workings of housing markets (Smith, 2005b). My conceptualisation of transnational housing markets and the role of global return migration provide further opportunities to build on this discourse.

Conclusions
This paper has synthesized a wide range of academic and policy literatures in gaining a better understanding of the experiences of ethnic minority homeowners who have been largely ignored. The theoretical framework and the fieldwork findings provided opportunities to explore the paper’s central thesis, that homeownership status and housing wealth accumulated from UK housing wealth provided opportunities for Caribbean elders to engage in housing wealth consumption in the island of origin within the context of return migration planning. The lack of robust quantitative data on the profile of those engaging in second homes activity enabled the study to use qualitative methodology to gain in-depth, micro perspectives on housing wealth leakage and a better understanding of global housing markets used by return migrants. Although the focus of this paper has been on first generation return migrants, most of whom are in their retirement, the return migration literature suggests that there is a much younger cohort emerging from this group. This would suggest that further empirical and theoretical work in this neglected field is warranted.

References


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