

# Photography and the Concept of Return: A Personal View

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*Abstract:* As a photographer of the immigrant experience, the yearning for return to a homeland has been a central theme of my research. In this paper, I explore both my personal and collective experience of displacement and uprooting (*Not Paved with Gold*), the annual return to Canada of temporary migrant farm workers from Mexico and the Caribbean (*Harvest Pilgrims*), and the metaphorical return of Italian immigrants to a spiritual homeland through the annual re-enactment of the *Via Crucis* on the streets of Toronto's Little Italy (*Ritual*). The paper poses the question of whether the immigrant, having abandoned his homeland, can truly return to it.

*Keywords:* immigrant experience, uprooting, return, homeland, farm workers, *Via Crucis*

Documentary photography, by recording and preserving a moment in time, has the force to propel one into a continual state of return. Looking at a photograph of a familiar place or person is often an emotional process that transports us across time, to a place that exists only in that time, indeed to a place that the camera has "frozen in time." The photograph thus represents the metaphorical concept of *nostos*, the ancient Greek notion of the hero returning home.

Photography and immigration have concerned me for much of my professional life. The concept of return is a major theme in my documentation of immigrants, one which I have explored from at least three perspectives: a) the displacement and uprooting of my own life as an immigrant; b) the annual return to Canada of temporary migrant farm workers from Mexico and island countries of the Caribbean; and c) the return of immigrants and non-immigrants alike to a spiritual homeland represented by the annual procession of Good Friday in Toronto's Italian community.

I trace my lifelong interest in immigrant culture to childhood experiences in the town of Maierato, Calabria, the place of my birth and the place from which I emigrated not once, but twice: first as a seven-year old to Canada; then immigrated back to Italy for a period of time, and then "re-emigrated" to Canada once again. It is a place to which now I return as an estranged former resident, or expatriate.

On the kitchen wall in my Calabrian home in 1959 there was a poster of a sleek ship steaming out of New York City harbour: the *Queen*

*Frederica* was a 21,000-tonne, Greek ocean liner, one of many such vessels that plied the North Atlantic Ocean between "America" and the Mediterranean Sea in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, transporting hundreds of thousands of people from one world to the other. The poster had been given to us by a travel agent, a small gesture of kindness to a family of prospective immigrants. It was an aerial photograph that depicted an idyllic scene of a white ship, its two black-tipped funnels spewing out white plumes of steam in front of the Statue of Liberty, and it almost seemed as though Lady Liberty herself were wishing the ship a safe journey, *buon viaggio*. (Fig. 1) The water was silky and smooth, hardly disturbed



Fig. 1. *Queen Frederica* in New York harbour. Postcard, collection of the author.

by the graceful, gentle ship, whose only traces were sinewy slices of the surface of the water, temporary and ephemeral. There were no other pictures on the walls of the house, save for the requisite religious cards of the saints, which made the brilliant poster even more dramatic, a tangible confirmation of our impending departure to everyone who visited.

In the town, there was an undecipherable feeling of a virtual sense of migration, something almost palpable that you could reach out and experience deep in your imagination. It was what everyone talked about in the tiny piazza, by the public fountain where women washed the laundry, and in the shoe repair shop where farming men gathered on rainy days when the fields were soggy and unworkable. We, the children, talked about immigrants and America with our own kind of childish expertise on the way to and from school, and in the labyrinth of narrow alleys of the ancient town where we played games of hide-and-seek. Everyone knew someone who had left the town or emigrated: a grandfather, an aunt, a brother, a neighbour. Talk of migration consumed our days and nights. The anticipation of leaving, of the inevitable drama of the final goodbye, *l'ultimo addio*, that was played out amidst tears and loud sob on the stoops of houses with crumbling

old stucco walls, was heavy. The ritual of final goodbye was called "*despedida*" in Calabrian dialect, a word of Spanish origin which were reserved for funerals and departing immigrants, for the passage into immigration was a truncation from village life, the termination of a way of life and therefore not unlike a kind of dying. The prospect that you would never again see your loved ones or friends was gut-wrenching, as depicted in the iconic photograph by Manuel Ferrol, "*Despedida de emigrantes*," of a Spanish father and son in 1957 (see Ferrol 1957).



Fig. 2. *Despedida de emigrantes*, La Coruña, Spain, 1957. Photo by @Manuel Ferrol. Used with permission. (*España ayer y hoy*, exhibition catalogue, 179).

But the other side of the phenomenon of migration, the return home, was only spoken about in hushed tones. The realization that sometimes things did not work out in America—that the streets were not always paved with gold, as the mythmakers exhorted us to believe—was treated like any typical secret in a small town. We children didn't understand the reasons why anyone would return from America, nor did we reflect on it very much. The excitement in my life was that *my* ship was definitely coming, for after all we had a picture on our kitchen wall to prove it. I was one of the fortunate ones. No one asked: "who was the *Queen Frederica* bringing back home this time?"

What did it mean to return? I would learn soon enough, for after

only two years in Canada, I, my mother and two of my siblings returned "home" to Calabria, while my father and eldest brother remained in Canada. It was not the *Queen Frederica* that transported us this time, but a newer, more powerful ship, the *Leonardo da Vinci*, the star of the Italian line. The return for me, as a child of nine years, was wrought by dismay and incomprehension. It was 1961, and in the two years that I was absent from Italy, I had lost the ability to converse in Italian. Customs, rituals, and protocol were peculiar to say the least. I was discriminated in school by being disqualified for the free breakfast program because I had a father in America, and presumably my family would have enjoyed certain economic advantages. Worst of all, I and three or four other schoolmates in a similar predicament were singled out as being "different," who didn't understand the ways of the town. I had returned "home," or had I, really? To return home meant being treated as a social outcast.

Two years later we would emigrate to Canada for the second and final time, by sea again, on the now familiar *Leonardo da Vinci*. After the ritualistic and harrowing second *addio*, filled with a multitude of tears shed by relatives and friends, we left the town with virtually all of our belongings except furniture. The last image of Italy that still lives in my mind, like a photograph never taken, is of my grandfather Domenico Spanò standing by the wharf in the port of Naples, in the middle of a huge crowd, waving goodbye first with a handkerchief then by swinging his walking stick rhythmically back and forth in the air. As the ship slowly sailed further and further away the "photograph" never taken became blurry in the thick mist, and was soon replaced by memory.

Returning to Canada was a repeat experience in displacement. Now, I spoke no English, as my adopted language had been displaced by my mother tongue. I was a "new" Canadian. My Italian grades were not recognized and I was placed one grade behind in school. But children are resilient, and I acculturated quickly, mastered the language, and as all new Canadians from non-English speaking countries, I learned to function in two languages. I learned to live in-between two culturally distinct worlds: the world of the street and school in English, and the world of family life and home in Italian (or more accurately, Calabrian dialect). The phenomenon of migration is intrinsically a phenomenon of departure and arrival; one cannot exist without the other. An immigrant travels from one world into the other every day.

Many years later, in the course of documenting my own community, concentrated in and around Toronto's Little Italy in the 1970s, it would become increasingly apparent that the idyllic American dream created by the murmuring voices in the streets of Maierato was more fantasy than reality. Unlike *nostos*, the return home for those hapless individuals who were not able to "make it" was neither heroic nor glorious, but shrouded in failure, resignation, and shame: they were failed immigrants. When an elderly Italian confronted me and asked why I was taking pictures of him and his friends playing *bocce* in Toronto's Earls Court Park and I offered in reply something vague about documenting the lives of immigrants, he

admonished me to "record the truth," to never forget that the sacred dollar amounts to nothing but pain and suffering. *Il santo dollaro non è altro che dolore*, he said quietly and slowly, almost in a whisper, as if to underscore the primacy of this "truth."

Later, when my photographs of Italian immigrants in the 1970s (Fig. 3, 4, 5) were published as a collection, I called it *Not Paved with Gold*, to counter the myth that I had heard so often in my childhood, and

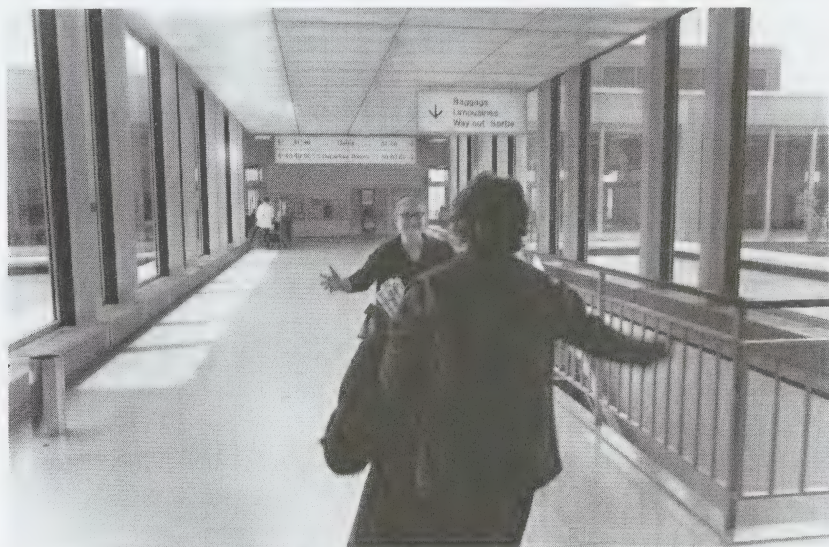


Fig. 3. Sisters meeting after twenty-five years, Toronto International Airport, 1973. (*Not Paved with Gold*, 21.)



Fig. 4. Fourteenth floor of Harbour Castle Hotel, waterfront, 1973. (*Not Paved with Gold*, 34-35.)

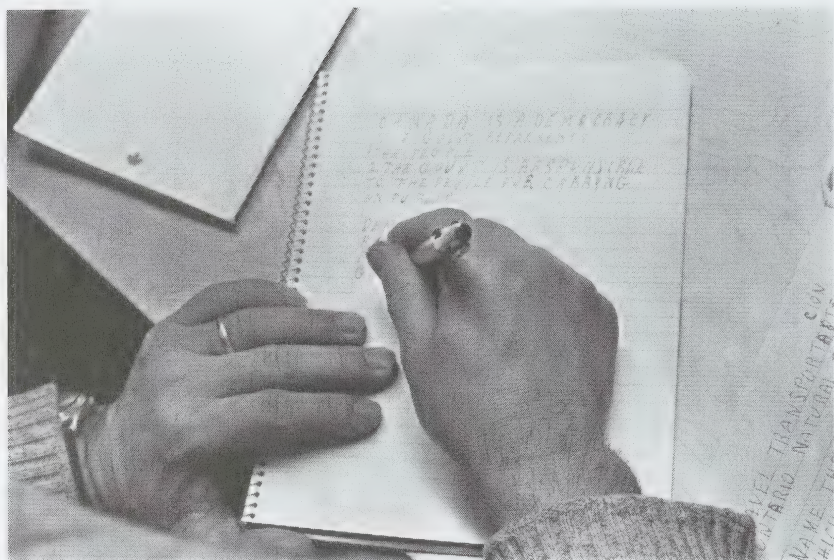


Fig. 5. English lesson for unemployed immigrants (ESL class), West End YMCA, College Street, 1973. (*Not Paved with Gold*, 21.)

recalling my own return back to Italy as a child, the result of the economic uncertainty in Canada at the time of my first migration in the late 1950s. My family discovered first hand that the streets in "America" were not paved with gold. What we held as an unassailable truth had in only two years turned into a delusion. For many the practicalities of having started a new life in Canada, coupled with the financial burden of debts incurred for the sea passage itself, the possibility of returning home was not even considered. Their homecoming if any, would be realized through the memories distilled in family photographs. Just as the traditional family album became a locus of homecoming for the collective community, so would the creation of a photographic record of this same community provide me with the means to reclaim my own identity.

But the question of constant arrival and departure is best exemplified in the lives of migrant seasonal workers. This was a phenomenon that profoundly affected Italy in the 1950s and 1960s through the continual departure and return of "guest workers" to the more industrialized countries of Europe: Switzerland, Belgium, France and Germany. In *A Seventh Man*, John Berger writes of the sense of utter and absolute anxiety that grips a would-be immigrant from southern Europe, including the south of Italy, who has let it be known that he will soon leave his village and emigrate:

One day he says he will leave. Until he said it, the decision was not really taken. When he has said it, it is known. The village knows... Until he said it, he had not decided... He says good-bye to everyone. He leaves nobody out. He has known the village all his life. The intensity with which he feels this, at the moment of leaving, is almost as great as the

force of his will... To say good-bye is to submit to the will of heaven. Who knows whether he will return triumphant or defeated?... He gives instructions about the land, the house, the well, the animals, as if in a few sentences he wished to re-perform the daily activity of years. (32-33)

The anxiety is deep and visceral despite the fact that the departure will one day be reversed, as guest workers did not have the option of permanent immigration.

In modern-day Canada, I explored a similar phenomenon involving migrant guest workers from Jamaica and other countries of the eastern Caribbean Sea and later, Mexico, referred with typical Canadian politeness as "offshore workers." (Fig. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10) Since 1966, when a handful of Jamaican workers first came for a summer sojourn to harvest tobacco in southern Ontario under special temporary visas, migrant



Fig. 6. Delfina Vale Gutiérrez, a Mexican migrant farm worker, thins the apple crop by removing the imperfect or excessive bunching of fruit. Whitby, Ontario, 1995. (*Harvest Pilgrims*, 52.)

farm workers have become a permanent feature of the economic and physical landscape of Canadian agriculture. By 2004, the number of migrant farm workers had increased to 20,052; by 2013 it had reached 41,700. (*The Status of Migrant Farm Workers in Canada*, 10) The vast majority come to Ontario, where they arrive and depart year after year with regularity, like migratory birds who fly between Canada and the home regions of the migrants. In *Harvest Pilgrims* I wrote of how migrant farm workers literally live between two worlds. A pilgrimage, usually associated with a religious context, is about returning to the same place on a regular basis. In "An Imaginary Letter to a Migrant Farm Worker," I reminded Fermín, an imaginary worker from Mexico:



Fig. 7. Manuel González greeting his sister Beda on his return home from Canada. Monte Prieto, Guanajuato, Mexico, 1993. (*Harvest Pilgrims*, 67.)



Fig. 8. On their first morning in Canada, Mexican workers are taken shopping for food and supplies. St. Catharines, Ontario, 1987. (*Harvest Pilgrims*, 72-73.)

You are like a harvest pilgrim: you return to the same area, often to the same farm, year after year, in an annual pilgrimage. You live between two worlds: North and South. Like the *golondrinas* (swallows) you migrate north every spring, and return home every fall. (25)

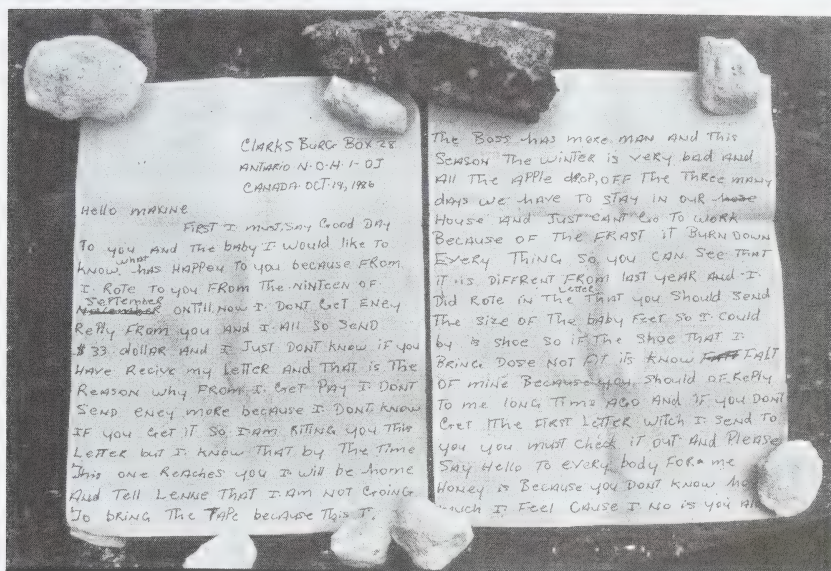


Fig. 9. Part of a letter From Tony Peart to his wife, Maxine. Photographed in Aboukir, Jamaica, 1998. (*Harvest Pilgrims*, 90.)



Fig. 10. Stanley Rollston, who works as an apple picker in Thornbury, Ontario, with his family at home in Clonmell, St. Mary's Parish, Jamaica, 1998. (*Harvest Pilgrims*, 88.)

In this case, the pilgrimage is purely economic in nature, defined by a formal contract, and the site of the pilgrimage is the workplace. Given their status as guests, the workers live a secluded life on the farms where they are employed, and rarely venture outside the confines of their workplace (the farm) except for weekly trips to the nearest town to purchase groceries. They eat and sleep beside their work. They are not permitted to travel freely within the country, they work for minimum wages, pay taxes to both their host country and home country, and contribute to employment insurance programs of the host country even though as non-residents they cannot ever be in a position to draw a benefit, and in most provinces they are prevented by legislation from organizing into a union. Ironically, they perform a task that is essential to the well-being of Canadians—they grow the food we eat. Yet, when they return home each year, they find that they belong a little less in their communities. Their children have grown up in their absence, their higher status and economic gains draws envy from the townspeople who remained behind, and they feel like outsiders who have outgrown the village life of their youth as a result of having traveled and seen some of the world. They spend the winter months in a holding pattern for the spring migration to commence.

But one day, their annual pilgrimage of spring migration will come to an abrupt end. Unlike a permanent immigrant, a guest worker can easily become redundant, and may not be invited again to work in the promised land of Canada. In the above-mentioned letter, I also implored Fermín not to become

upset when your old friends in the *rancho* [village] don't seem to understand your point of view sometimes, and make you feel like a stranger in your own home... They mean well, but they're right after all. For your home was in Canada. Ah, Fermín, sometimes you're so tired that you forget where you really are, just like old Manuel. Remember him? His children grew up and he wasn't there half the time. He was too busy working, travelling back and forth... Then one day the boss didn't call him back. He was too old, the boss said. '*Ya no rinde, el Mexicano*' (The Mexican isn't worth [your] while anymore.) (27)

The triumphant return home at the beginning of the annual cycle of migration turns into inevitable defeat with the realization that the migrant cannot ever hope to belong in the host country. In the process, and in the gamble for a better life for a period of 10, 20 or 30 or more harvest seasons, he has been left in an undefined place in between two worlds. His ultimate homecoming is thus bittersweet.

If the pilgrimage of workers to their work site exemplifies the notion of physical return to the place of work, then the pilgrimage of worshippers in the Good Friday procession in Toronto's Little Italy exemplifies the concept of return to a spiritual homeland. (Fig. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15) The more than 100,000 people who convene every year in the streets of the historic neighbourhood that has been home to successive generations of Italian-Canadians are not merely gathering to perform a

social function as they would in a piazza in a village. Rather, in this linear North American version in the form of College Street, they are in search of a spiritual homeland which fulfills both the need for a sense of nostalgia borne out of tradition, and the reaffirmation of family memories and tales that are told and retold.

The spiritual component of Good Friday is the fundamental basis



Fig. 11. The Bier and the Cross in front of St Francis of Assisi Church, Grace Street, 1971. (*Ritual*, 57.)



Fig. 12. Women in shrouds known as the Pious Women, Grace Street, 1999. (*Ritual*, 101.)



Fig. 13. The eastbound streetcar catches up with the procession, College and Beatrice Streets, 1980. (*Ritual*, 71.)



Fig. 14. Veronica displays the veil with Jesus's faces imprinted on it as the Pious Women fall on their knees. College Street, 2015. (*Ritual*, 175.)

of this street event, for it is a commemoration of the *Via Crucis*, the passion and death of Jesus Christ, one of the most sacred days in Christianity. It is a day of mourning and atonement, an unusual phenomenon for a street event that resembles a secular parade. The atmosphere is funereal, as the procession slowly winds its way in the streets



Fig. 15. The ritual of Good Friday ends with the devotion of *l'ultimo addio*, as the faithful line up to say one last prayer and touch the statue of Cristo Morto, 2009 (*Ritual*, 186.)

with representations of Stations of the Cross and other biblical scenes in the form of statues, banners, and live re-enactments accompanied by brass bands playing funeral marches and mournful dirges. There is a feeling that something sacred is about to take place in the open streets against the backdrop of gentrified homes and garish commercial storefronts. For in its purest form, the re-enactment of the *Via Crucis* is an act of both personal prayer and collective worship.

I have been photographing the procession for five decades. It has given me a ritualistic return to a place and time where I can travel in my mind to childhood days of similar processions in Calabria. As Marco Giomini has observed,

Il ritorno è un luogo dello spirito, dove si assommano tante vie, coerenti e contigue. Il ritorno è anche un luogo fisico, dove centinaia di esperienze compongono un sereno mosaico logico di ricordi, di gioie e di nostalgie. (*Nostos: quadri di un ritorno*, 9)

In the course of my documentation of the Good Friday event, I became a participant and observer, and as such, my methods of documentation and research, according to the theories of Ted Palys and Chris Achison, involved “extensive time (e.g. months or years) in a setting trying to understand some aspect(s) of the setting from the perspective of those in it.” (203) Further, I am in a unique position of being both an insider, in terms of belonging in the community, and an outsider in terms of being an artist representing my community to mainstream Canadian culture, occurring through publications in various art magazines, gen-

eral interest periodicals, and *Ritual*, the book and subsequent photographic exhibition of the same name.

My relationship with the procession is therefore complicated by the constant juxtaposition of both personal perspectives and professional objectives, a situation which necessitates a constant cycle of metaphorical “goings and comings,” a form of departure and return achieved by stepping inside and outside the moment that I am photographing, almost at the same time. The notion of *nostos* for me rests in the photographic encounter—that moment when the rapport between the subject and myself is established and then immediately interrupted as I remove myself from the intimacy in order to capture it with my camera. Over time, the ritual of Good Friday in the streets of Little Italy has become like my own ritual of photography, one that also enables me to return to a place of the spirit.

The concept of return is universal in the immigrant experience, whether it is manifested through nostalgia for the homeland, as in the case of permanent immigrants; the annual cycle of return migration in the case of guest workers; or the return to a spiritual homeland through religious processions. As a chronicler of immigration, I have documented not only the immigrant experience of disparate communities, but I have also been able to discover that my personal sense of *nostos* is simultaneously nestled within both the medium of photography and the phenomenon of immigration.

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