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WHY THE BEST FURNITURE GOES TO THE HOUSE YOU CAN'T LIVE IN¹

Daniel Miller

Mrs Stone² first came to settle in South London in 1956, and to her house in Stuart Street in 1958. The house has the feel of one long inhabited by a family. It has lost any pretension to an architectural or decorative style; rather, it echoes back the intense network of family relationships of which Mrs Stone is now the apex, having twenty-three grandchildren and, while we were visiting her, her first great grandchild. The house is occupied by two main classes of material: Either books, music and pictures that relate to her Christian faith, or an abundance of photographs and cards that represent her extended family. While Mrs Stone talks to us at length about weddings, holidays and trips to Jamaica and the doings of her grandchildren, her second husband sits in the corner. Having suffered a stroke he is severely limited in his ability to communicate. But although he cannot talk he can certainly understand, and there is a breadth to his smile, an enthusiasm to his supportive nods that has become an integral part of the warmth of this friendly living room.

For the birth of her first two children Mrs Stone returned to Jamaica where her own mother supervised the arrangements. Then she did not return for over a decade and her next four children were born in London. After that she started to visit Jamaica on at least an annual basis and has now made some thirty return trips. In 1987 she decided to return permanently to Jamaica, to a house she had built in Christiana, one of the coolest and highest sites on the island. Many of the original migrants from the

island, some of whom settled in Stuart Street, had also returned around that time. But Mrs Stone was not alone in her experience of the failure of this enterprise. In her case it was a result primarily of the difficult relationships she experienced between her first husband and his relatives in Jamaica. Eventually in 1991 she felt she had had enough, and with a single suitcase and a few clothes she left her husband and returned to the house, which fortunately they had not yet sold, in Stuart Street.

One might think that that would be enough, and that the project of making a home in Jamaica would have ended with this failure. But Mrs Stone could not abandon this ambition for a home in Jamaica. Since 1991 she had been to court in dispute with her husband over both the house in Jamaica and the one in Stuart Street. In 2005, when the case was finally resolved, the first thing she did with the money she received was to build another house back in Jamaica. Almost everything about this project spelled out the word contradiction. One of the foundations for the relationship Jamaicans feel between home and homeland lies in the tradition of family land as opposed to personal or private ownership. That is, land was always jointly owned by the extended family, all of whom retained rights to that land, which could therefore not be sold. Yet the money for building this new property came from what is now a very common practice in Jamaica of splitting up family land into individual ownership and, in Mrs Stone's case, selling all but the three lots she retained for build-

ing her own house and potentially others for her children. In this manner the long tradition of family land (Besson & Momsen 1987) is finally coming to an end.

Mrs Stone had recently been to the Ideal Home exhibition where she had fallen in love with some expensive Italian furniture which she purchased for her new house in Jamaica. Yet her house in Stuart Street is entirely furnished with very modest materials that nowhere match the standard she expects for her Jamaican home. This division between the place where people expect to make a living and the place they expect to spend it, goes back to earlier generations. Her own father had worked in the United States before the war and with that money created a middle-class lifestyle in Jamaica with a farm and so many cattle that Mrs Stone claims one could 'bathe in milk'. She fondly recalls that, even when going around the farm, he would sport a massive diamond tie pin and his velvet hat. So she in turn, having made her living in London, can only imagine a fine house as something belonging to Jamaica.

Mrs Stone describes the house she has just been building:

The two lounges, one is upstairs and one is downstairs and three en-suite (bedrooms). You just go into your bedroom and that's it, everything is in there, your bathroom and stuff. The ground floor has the master bedroom and the en-suite and the powder room. It's got space. You can put what you want where you want. Then there's a garage as you can see, there's a door that takes you right in front of the garage into the house there. Then you get a kitchen, a long kitchen there and one upstairs.

This is the house for her new Italian furniture, just as her father had a glass-topped table and a fine roll-top sofa they would put out under the mango tree for him to relax on. Her main memory as a child is the endless polishing of the fine silverware. By contrast, the ornaments in her house in Stuart Street are generally inexpensive and functional.

Yet there is another contradiction. Mrs Stone cannot match this continuity of commitment to the

house itself with any personal commitment to actually living there. For one thing, given her husband's circumstance, she is well aware of the advantages of the National Health Service. As she says: 'You can't get it nowhere, you can't get it in America. Here is best.' But there is also her own personal affection for England, notwithstanding the prejudices she suffered from during her early years. She knows full well

I can't give up England... I think it's because I spent all my other years in England so it's not so easy. ... I'll have to come back here. So everything is just going to be running back to Britain, running back to my home, to my mother country, that's what it is you know. Yes, run back to my mother country!

As a result she has now built a house in Jamaica, but is quite unclear what to do with it. She says:

Oh yes, I've got to be buying stuff to get. When I was up there, because we went up there, the person who was looking after the house told me that the house is sort of nearly finished and everything and what do I want to do with it because it has to be occupied. Because people might just... you know. So he said what do I want to do with it. If I wanted to rent it. And I said 'no, I don't want to rent it' I want to go in my house. So I'll have to take care of that.

In the end Mrs Stone decided that her brother could live in it. So, for now, she is in the slightly bizarre position of paying the electricity and the taxes on the house but with no particular prospect of actually living there.

There is not a single object in the house in Stuart Street that I can recognise as having come directly from Jamaica. Mrs Stone explains that it would be pointless having souvenirs, given how often she is there. Furniture only ever travels in the other direction. Mainly what she brings back and distributes amongst her family is Jamaican food items such as tamarind balls which, even if you find them in London, are really not the same as the homemade ones

from Jamaica. Food seems a more personal and appropriate mode of remaining Jamaican. For her son's wedding she arranged a special Jamaican caterer in London. Even the wedding cake was split between an English-style tier and two Jamaican-style tiers. The only material objects she says she misses are the certificates of all her previous qualifications: school exams, naturalisation papers and secretarial courses. Her husband never returned these to her from that first house in Jamaica. Such certificates tend to be seen as hugely important, whether people from the Caribbean are living there or here. In parallel with the house itself they are the material evidence for one's life, its achievements and the sense that gradually over the years one has become a more substantial person, a person of substance.

So Mrs Stone is living in one home, but feels strongly the pull of two other ideal homes, one in Jamaica and one in heaven. She is always aware that beyond the everyday secular life there is another place where one's heart and soul must dwell. Although her living room in London has plenty of books and music, not one of these is secular. Similarly all the decorations on the wall that are not family photographs are religious images. Mrs Stone plays the organ at her local church and many of her family attend church every Sunday. When the new house was finished in Jamaica the most important task was to organise for its blessing. This was arranged in Jamaica through the local church and returnee residence association. She played the organ and fed around forty guests for a ceremony which inaugurated the house as a proper, that is blessed, house.

To understand this it helps to see that Mrs Stone and her story of failed migration is part of a much wider process that was recently studied in a PhD by Heather Horst on the topic of Jamaican migrants returning to their homeland. If Horst's work were to be published with a frontispiece it would have to be one of the graves she showed me in rural central Jamaica. The grave in question took the form of a miniature concrete house complete with doors, windows and gables. It looked more like something to put dolls inside than to signify a corpse beneath. Some of these graves are surrounded by the style of ironwork

identical to that which surrounds actual houses. She interprets these graves as marking the end of a long journey (Horst 2004).

For most Jamaicans the project of building a house is not a one-off single act. Traditionally, most people could only afford to build their own house in stages. As money accumulates one might lay a foundation for a new room, or complete the tiling of another. Building the home of one's aspirations is often a life's work. The house was always the primary mode by which life itself was marked as a progression.

For example in our recent project on the impact of mobile phones on low income Jamaicans (Horst & Miller 2006), Horst and myself lived in the house of a family of a taxi driver, in a district called Portmore, built as a dormitory overflow from the capital of Kingston, and now probably the biggest urban development project in the Caribbean with over 200,000 people already settled there. Each person is given a very minimal residence set in a small plot of land that extends from the front and side. The idea is that a new resident can start with this basic unit and over time, if they have the means, they can expand. To walk around Portmore today is an extraordinary experience. In the most recent settlements you can see these basic quad buildings. If you walk around the earlier settlement you can also sometimes spot the small initial buildings. But quite often these are almost hidden, at the centre, of what has now become a two-story mansion with Greek columns, balustrades and balconies. In many other cases one can see all the stages between these two, with half built additions of various sizes, waiting to be completed. This shows that the transformation is neither sudden, nor accomplished at once. As a family gains resources, they start, add to and finally complete each additional component until eventually if they are sufficiently successful, they end up with something more like a mansion despite its extremely modest beginnings.

This close association between life and building a home is obviously complicated when a Jamaican migrates to London. The move creates an ambiguous relationship between home and homeland. Most migrants I have interviewed intended to return to

Jamaica at least in retirement – an intention often reinforced when they experienced a disconfirmation of their initial assumption that they would be fully accepted as English. In many cases when the time finally comes to retire from work they do indeed decide to return to Jamaica. Well over 20,000 have made this trip. But if they do return to Jamaica they face a second, even more unexpected, rejection. In general Horst (2005) shows they tend to migrate, not back to their original district of origin, but to an upland, relatively cool area of central Jamaica that seems somehow more English. Furthermore, returned migrants have developed an affection for certain elements of English life such as an English-style garden and forms of behaviour that keep them ambivalent about who they are. This is in turn a reflection of the reception they receive from those who remained in Jamaica. They too see these returned migrants principally as ‘English’ and may worry that with their greater wealth they will lay claim to land and authority at the expense of those who remained behind. Now finally characterised as ‘English’, the returned migrants may feel they are no more at home in Jamaica than they were in London.

These two paths come together as returned migrants attempt to create their sense of homeland though building their dream retirement home. One of the principal incentives behind the initial migration to London was that it would become a means to afford the kind of home they aspired to but could not expect to construct on local incomes. The primary form of re-location in Jamaica is through building and furnishing. Their settlements in upland central Jamaica are now full of houses that most Jamaicans instantly recognise from both their scale and style as a ‘returnee’ house. So in the first instance the project of returning to the identity of Jamaica through re-settlement is generally a failure. Horst found in her study that many of these returned migrants increasingly spend their time going to, or being involved in, the organisation of what become highly elaborate funerals. It is only in death, interred beneath these miniature models of the perfect house, and interred in the earth itself, that the final return to Jamaica is successfully completed: a return blessed by deep re-

ligious faith in another final return to another place of origin, that is heaven itself.

You don’t need to be a migrant with a second home for this project of home building to have its pathos and failures. A wonderful evocation of the place of the home in the objectification of people’s lives in Trinidad and the often somewhat pathetic results of this struggle emerges in V.S. Naipaul’s novel *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), where the primary theme is remarkably similar, in that Biswas is also principally driven by this same life project of building his house, and yet somehow this house is never going to be the substantial structure he envisages in his head. The novel is set in the same town of Chaguanas as my original research and an analysis of Naipaul’s themes played a major role in that analysis (Miller 1994: 164–168).

So the imperative to build a home has a very particular power in Caribbean societies. Indeed the cosmological significance of this act is evidently even greater than the Christianity to which people in the region are normally intensely devoted. In general in the Caribbean a couple is derided if they choose to marry before they can afford to establish their own house. Even if this means that initially children are born out of wedlock, contrary to the teachings of the church. The imperative to materialise ones relationship in a house overtrumps the constant exhortations by the church to marry first. It is this cosmological imperative that explains the actions of Mrs Stone. Even if she can’t actually live there, even if she really doesn’t know what to do with it, or what will become of it, Mrs Stone has no choice but to build her second house in Jamaica and it is this house, rather than the one she lives in, for which she buys her beautiful and expensive furniture.

Notes

- 1 A much more extended version of this paper will appear as *Material Culture, Migration and Tragedy* in Paul Basu (ed.), 2008, *Migrant Worlds, Material Cultures*, special issue of *Mobilities* 3(3).
- 2 The story of Mrs Stone comes from seventeen months’ worth of fieldwork on a single street in South London, carried out jointly with a PhD student, Fiona Parrott.

The topic of our project was a concern with how people used their attachments to possessions and material culture as supportive when they had to deal with episodes of loss such as bereavement, divorce or the ending of relationships. I am hugely indebted to Fiona Parrott who was the primary fieldworker on this project. Mrs Stone appear as portraits in Miller 2008.

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