

John Western, A Passage to England (1992)

for a small minority of them the unproblematic segmentary system seemed to apply just as it did once for me: that is, "home" was this house on this Ilford street; then, London; then, Britain.

Having come to live half my life away from Britain, however, "home" for me is no longer unproblematic: it is as likely to be "Syracuse, New York" as "England." "It depends on the context" is no longer a straightforward matter of scale, of telescoping, but an admission of uncertainty and ambiguity. "Syracuse, New York" isn't a nested geographical subset, or smaller component, of "England." It's a rival. And this is what is implied in "It depends on the context" for nearly all those of the immigrant generation who used the phrase. There is London, and there is Barbados, and the one isn't a constituent of the larger other, but rather a contender with it. Contrast this to the eleven of the British-raised generation, only one of whom felt enough uncertainty to use the phrase "It depends on the context"—and she had come to England at age twelve; all the other ten said "London." These various themes will now thread through the detailed information to follow.

What, then, of "home"? The largest single response was "Barbados," given by just over half of both the immigrants and the Barbados-born young. Three of the twelve immigrants in question immediately specified—and by that I mean in the same breath—that that answer really depended on the context, and two of these three said that if it was in practical terms that I was asking, then London was "home." None of the British-born considered Barbados "home," not even Max Springer, who was prepared to denote himself both a "foreigner" and an "immigrant" (but also "black British"!). Although up to half the interviewees seemed to consider Barbados "home" in some more or less untrammelled way, "untrammelled" does not, however, mean that they necessarily felt this home was immediately available to them. Frank Springer said in reply: "Barbados. But, um, I know the majority of us aren't going to get back there; though 90 percent of the West Indians in London talk about going home, it's a myth, an illusion."

Austin Pilgrim replied "Barbados" immediately, and then added,

Even if I'd've loved to call England home, with the early hostility we've received, at least we've had Barbados to fall back on. After twenty years and more I'm still called an immigrant. And that policeman: what kind of newspaper I should buy, what kind of car I should have!

The Pilgrims take the *Guardian*. Apparently one day a policeman—and I cannot now remember the context, I've forgotten the precise story—had stopped Austin and asked him where he'd got that newspaper: "I sup-

As with identity, so with "home." The segmentary system discussed in the previous chapter applies here too. For example, "home" for me is, or *was*, a certain house on a certain Margate street; then, the Isle of Thanet; then, my county Kent; then, my country England—depending on the context. And later (only once I started living in the New World), I realized I was coming to identify myself at a yet more general scale—as one for whom Europe was home. Similarly, for many interviewees, "It depends on the context" was the response given to the question about home, and

pose he expects me to read the *Mirror* or the *Sun*," harrumphed Austin. Such annoyances do not, however, stop Austin from fully assenting to the label "Londoner," and also even to the local label of "south Londoner."

The car story is something of a cliché in matters racial in Britain (like the Prejudiced Neighbor of earlier accommodation-hunting years). The Pilgrims' Car Story occurred while I was getting to know them, in February 1988. A principal joy of Austin's life is his vegetable garden in the allotments that adjoin the back of the Pilgrims' house, but whose main gate and road access is round three sides of a square via quiet local streets. Marie recounts the tale, not omitting to draw her preferred moral regarding return to Barbados even before she gets to the pith of the story itself:

Austin likes to work late in the afternoon on the allotment. There're not many people about to bother him, he can unwind from the strain of the day. Anyway, yesterday something happened and John, I think it's the last straw, I think we know we want to retire and to go back home to Barbados by the end of 1989. He drove around to the far entrance to the allotments, left the car [a late-model Volvo station wagon in excellent condition] there. When he'd finished on the plot, it was dusk. He went back to the car and was just sitting in it, with the heater on, to warm up. A policeman comes up, taps on the window, starts asking him questions: "Whose car is this?" "This is my car," he says.

"Ho," he says, with a disbelieving smile. He keeps on questioning him. Austin's very calm, you know what he's like. Good job he's not one of those hot-headed young fellas, they carry a knife like I carry a handbag. That's a quiet little dead-end street with just a footbridge over the railway, it was getting dark, he could've done him in, nobody would ever have found out.

I was really astonished to hear this last Agatha Christie-like scenario issuing from the mouth of Marie Pilgrim, who is one of nature's own keepers of the flame of moral rectitude. "Was it a young, inexperienced cop?" "No, I don't think so. Not particularly. Twenties, maybe thirties. He wasn't a youngster." When I next saw Austin and asked him about it, the insult was still rankling. If he wasn't furious, he was doing a marvelous impression of a man much exercised by fury.

Successful businessman Colin Jemmott had a similar story of being closely questioned for no apparent reason at Gatwick Airport as he waited about for his wife to return from a Sorrento vacation—it turned out they suspected him of being a drug-smuggling pickup man. There was also his really nice flashy car, a BMW 635. I'd get stopped once a month. Police check. I got to carrying my driving license⁸ and even the

receipt of sale for the car in the glove compartment. They were always polite, *cool* though. At the end they would say, "Have a safe journey, sir." Bah! I had to get rid of it. I got a second-hand Datsun. . . . Oh, it's such a waste of time. I get trouble at the banks cashing checks too.

And one midday Gladstone Codrington came round to have lunch with me at the London School of Economics Senior Common Room and he was *fuming*. The young teller at the nearby National Provincial bank had asked for confirmatory identification with such time-consuming, meticulous thoroughness that Gladstone sensed insult: "I'll write to Lord Booth their chairman, I know him from the ad hoc committee. . . ." Chip on the shoulder? I caught myself silently and uncharitably wondering. Whether yes or no, his time was certainly wasted. So was that of the others previously mentioned. And it does not happen just once. Were it to have happened to me, and then again, and then once again, wouldn't I begin to suspect I was beginning to be told something, perhaps that because of my blackness I wasn't to take it for granted that this place was my home?⁹

"It depends on the context" was, among the immigrants, the second most common reply to the question about "home." None of the British-raised feel it necessary to introduce this qualification at all, except for Barbados-born Paula Farley's half mention; the British-raised do not feel Barbados to be home. Of the immigrant generation both John and Amelia Simmons, apparently soon to return to Barbados, still felt they wanted to provide that qualification—that Britain was home as well. When you use the word "home," John Simmons, of what are you thinking?

A very very very good question.¹⁰ When I says "home," it varies. If I'm *bere*, I mean Barbados. My land of birth. In another breath I say home is where I spend my working life: London. It's a . . . er . . . dilemma. . . . When I say this, West Indians here immediately know what I'm talking about.

Of what are you thinking, Amelia? (Amelia who was pleased to fully assent to the label of "Londoner").

My place of birth, and where I'm planning to spend the rest of my days, to return to my birthplace.

When I'm in Barbados, I say to one of my friends, I'm going back home tomorrow. I don't say I'm going back to England.

No, I'm going back *home*, because I live here. I've spent more of my years outside it [Barbados].

The third most common reply is "I've got two homes, Britain and Barbados." (None of the British-raised say this, only members of the im-

migrant generation.) But with this one could lump other replies, such as "Barbados is my second home; London comes first" or "fifty-fifty" (with five mentions from the immigrant generation, but only one—Trevor, Jr., who came to London aged sixteen—from the British-raised). Furthermore, a little reflection leads me to think that these various replies are all saying much the same thing as the "It depends on the context" category already perused. They're saying, "I'm equivocal." So, were I to combine these "equivocation" categories—and I speak here of the immigrant generation but *not* of the British-raised—the single resultant category would by far outweigh those who had unconditionally said "Barbados," by a margin of at least two to one.

Alternatively, approaching it in a slightly different way, that of individual by individual, I find that only *four* of the immigrants have given a truly unconditional "Barbados" reply for "home": Austin and Marie Pilgrim, Edward Pilgrim, and Frank Springer. Really, their number is five, but Edith Simmons's undoubted home is not Barbados but Jamaica. Looking at each of these five in reverse order, we may first note that Edith is married to an Audley Simmons who does not sound totally put out when he says, "I got two homes now" and "I may never get back there." Furthermore, Audley's Barbadian "there" is not her Jamaican "there," so Edith's chances for a successful, settled return to the Caribbean place of her choice seem uncertain.

We have already heard from Frank Springer about his dilemma concerning return. He knows how proud Joan is of her Ilford house, how content with it. She had said to me,

What am I thinking about? "Home" is some place where I could be happy, whether it's here or Barbados doesn't matter. Where it's happy, warm, you can have friends come into, can do what you want, can have a laugh and a joke and play a few records or something. In many ways this is more my home, we've worked, saved, got this place, made it what we want it to be. Ours. The Barbados one was my *parents'* home.

Frank also knows how eager Joan is to watch her grandchildren grow, which means staying in London. Indeed, I remember Catherine Brathwaite, Trevor, Jr.'s wife, saying how powerful a "guilt trip" was played by some of the British-born generation in order to induce their immigrant parents to stay on in Britain: "You deprived us of the enjoyment of our own grandparents by bringing us up on the other side of the Atlantic from them, and now you want to do the same to *our* children here by running off back to the Caribbean yourselves!" Yes, Frank seems semiresigned to not getting back to Barbados.

Unlike Frank Springer or Edith Simmons, Edward Pilgrim does not have to take into consideration the possibly contradictory preferences of any spouse. But there are constraints of a different kind being weighed in his mind. As more than one excerpt from our conversations has indicated, he is extremely concerned about having sufficient means to retire to Barbados in the proper style. It is quite possible that he may never gather the substantial sum he feels he needs before he has the confidence to give it a go.

That leaves us with Marie and Austin Pilgrim. My money's on them. After John and Amelia Simmons, I reckon they will be the next to retire in the approved style to Barbados. It is utterly clear that Austin has never relinquished his strong Barbadian pride, and that Marie is eager to return. When I spent a long evening with them in May 1989 our came the detailed and impressive architect's drawings of the house they are planning on a parcel of her family's land, high above the rugged Atlantic coast¹¹ of Barbados: built-in garage, two stories, arches and iron grillwork for thorough airflow, low brick walls with pergolas around a patio-atrium. Austin was even talking of taking their Volvo with them. And their son Nigel, the young black Londoner par excellence, is himself pretty sure that his parents will soon make the move. So is Nigel's great friend Derek Gill, who—in talking about his own father Tony who "really doesn't know whether to go or to stay here, he really doesn't"—asserted "whereas Austin Pilgrim would go tomorrow if he could." The Pilgrims will thereby achieve what so many Caribbean migrants to Britain must have fantasized about, but which so few, relatively speaking, have actually managed.

Most of the discussion on "home" thus far has been focused on the migrant generation. Now we come to the British-raised. As already noted, three of the five born in Barbados called it home, but they were clearly outweighed by those eight who specified—four with, and four without, reservations—that London was home. Max Springer furnished, not surprisingly, one of the most matter-of-fact replies. For him, home is instrumental to wealth, he'd happily move home to be wherever the money is:

Home? 9^B Ash Grove, West Green, Tottenham.

You can get bogged down in stuff that doesn't matter—like my dad going on about "Do black stars on TV get a fair crack of the whip?" All I want to know is: What information do you need to earn more money? I'd like to be rich . . . but anonymously, not famous. That way you can enjoy it better. I might think about moving to America—I've got relatives all over the place there: Texas, Mississippi, New York. I met 'em in Barbados and there in the U.S.

Three others of the British-raised, like Max, just mentioned their present London address for "home"; they expressed no confusion. (Charles Eastmond was the only one of the immigrants to simply give his address.) A couple of the British-raised qualified their answers by noting that "in *practical* terms, London is home." Another three introduced a somewhat stronger, or at least a differently based qualification, the gist of which was that "the house in London is home, but not the country." (The words are in fact those of the only immigrant to offer this reply: Bulle Eastmond. In the light of the preceding reference to Charles, it seems once again that spouses do influence the others' independently volunteered opinions.) Recall too from chapter 8 that when asked where they would like to live, only two of the British-raised (both Barbados-born) mentioned Barbados, whereas all of the eleven other responses, except one, were for London. These young black Britons whom I met seem mostly to be sanely looking the practicalities of life—Where is one to live? Near here? Near the London job?—straight in the eye.

Their parents, perhaps projecting their own anxieties, sometimes verbalize concern about their British-born children's alleged lack of belonging.¹² Trevor Brathwaite, Sr., fretted: "I'm scared for the children. We have roots in Barbados. You know what I mean. They don't have anything—just this place [Britain]." His son Trevor, Jr., may have accorded himself five different identity labels—"middle class," "British," and "Afro-Caribbean" (full), plus "Barbadian" and "immigrant" (partial)—but this to me seems to denote not confusion but a firm grasp of reality. And Trevor, Jr., muses in return: "My parents' generation are all mixed up about this. [He holds up two fingers.] Which is home? England or Barbados? For me, it's here. The young have no doubt." A month or so later I was talking with Trevor, Jr., and Catherine again. Trevor, Jr., said:

"Home is here. England. These four walls. When we go to Barbados, we go to Barbados in the West Indies. I'm half-and-half, but my kids are British; my wife's 99 percent British."
 "Somewhat less," demurs the elegant Catherine [but who, as on p. 209, had already claimed herself to be "English"].
 "This is the foundation for the kids," insists Trevor. "It's no good hankering after a place five thousand miles away. I wouldn't go in the next five years."