

# Back to Nepal: A Canadian Perspective

Wayne Johnston  
University of Guelph

## Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between place and memory, and how the past and present interact with each other when we return to a place of personal significance. While there is a focus on people from Nepal and their experience when they have returned to Nepal it also draws on my own experience having been in Nepal eleven years ago and returning in 2018. It attempts to put these personal experiences in the context of the literature on place affiliation, memory and returning home.

Much of my thinking on these themes has been informed by the work of Dylan Trigg and, in particular, his book *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*.

Each of us is held captive by a series of memories, which in their intensity and depth return us to a specific place and time. Consciously or otherwise, the places we inhabit and pass through come back to us in the present, sometimes affording a sense of familiarity in the midst of uncertainty. At other times, disturbing the source of everyday existence. However cryptic these memories are, they nevertheless attach themselves to us, just as we attach ourselves to the places in which those events occurred. Yet from the childhood house to the city square, from the attic to Antarctica, why some places become more central in our memories than others remains a source of mystery. Notwithstanding the idiosyncrasies of human memory, which is as much prone to selective remembering as it is to selective forgetting, the question of how we can begin to decipher the memory of place is at the core of this book. (Trigg 2012, xv)

## Overview of interviews

There are approximately 10,000 Nepalese Canadians. A little over half of them live in Ontario. This paper was informed by five informal interviews conducted with Nepalis currently living in Canada. Each interview was about one hour in duration. The interviews focused on one or more return visits to Nepal.

Some of the questions included the following:

- Can you talk about visiting places in Nepal that brought back memories for you?
- Were there smells, tastes, sounds or sights that triggered memories?
- Did you observe changes from when you lived in Nepal?
- Have you been back since the 2015 earthquake? If so, what impact did you see on the places that are meaningful to you?
- Do you feel your time in Canada has affected how you perceive Nepal?

The interviewees, identified only by first name, include:

- Bhaju was born and raised in the Bhojpur District and educated in Kathmandu. He left Nepal in 1991 and has made return visits three times.

- Krishna was born in the Baglung district and spent his early years there before migrating to Chitwan. He received his education in Pokhara. He left Nepal in 2000 and has been back many times, most recently in 2016.
- Nima grew up in a village called Phera in the Solukhumbu District. As a young adult she worked in Kathmandu. She left Nepal at age 22 and has returned many times.
- Niva grew up and lived in Kathmandu until she migrated to Canada in 2013. She has made multiple return visits to Nepal.
- Tejendra lived in Chitwan until he left Nepal in 2007. He first returned in 2014 and has been back many times since then.

## Ten Cities: The Past Is Present

This paper is related to a creative literary project I have been working on called *Ten Cities: The Past Is Present*. In this project I am revisiting ten sites in each of ten cities that have had a formative impact on my life. I document these site visits with writing that could be described as creative nonfiction, postcard stories or prose poetry. The visits are further recorded with drawings. In the writing and drawings I am exploring the relationship between memory and place as well as the dialogue between past and present. In each of the ten cities I also present the results of my work in a literary performance event.

1. *New York City*: I lived in New York City off-and-on from about 1998 to 2004. I was working for the United Nations through that time period. My event there took place at Dixon Place on 8 June 2017.
2. *Toronto*: I lived in Toronto from 1986 through 1994 initially working for the Hockey Hall of Fame and ending up at the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University. My event there took place at Theatre Passe Muraille on 22 September 2017.
3. *Accra*: I was in Accra in 2006 setting up a resource centre for the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Ghana. My event there was part of the PagYa Literary Festival on 21 October 2017.
4. *Geneva*: I worked in Geneva during the summers of 1990, 1991 and 1992 in the United Nations system. My event there took place at ImpactHub on 8 April 2018.
5. *Zagreb*: I was in Zagreb in 1994 working for the Humanitarian Expert Group on Refugees and Victims of War. My event there took place at Booksa on 13 April 2018.
6. *London, Ontario*: I lived in London from 1968 through 1981. My event there took place at the TAP Centre for Creativity on 23 May 2018.
7. *Ottawa*: I lived in Ottawa initially in 1985-86 and then again from 1995 to 2002. My event there took place at the Arts Court on 7 June 2018.
8. *Kathmandu*: I was in Kathmandu in 2007 working as a volunteer for Fair Trade Group Nepal. My event here will take place at Quixote's Cove on 28 July 2018.
9. *Iqaluit*: I worked in Iqaluit off-and-on from 1995 to 1999. I worked for the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board. My event there will take place at the Visitors' Centre in March of 2019.
10. *La Paz*: I spent time in La Paz in 2015 researching how mobile technology could be used to facilitate data gathering during field research. My event there will take place at MagicK Cafe Cultural in June of 2019.

## Returning home

Tingting Elle Li and Bob McKercher explain how the concept of home can have a very different scope depending on the subject's perspective.

While much of this work is informative, the spatial context of what constitutes 'home' is rarely delineated and, as a result, little work has been conducted examining the behavioral patterns of home return tourists. Yet, reading the above works suggests researchers tend to define recent migrants' 'home' in narrow spatial terms as representing their home community. Alternately, studies of individuals with longer migration histories reveal that 'home' is conceptualized at a more generic or national level, which may or may not include the specific community of origin (Hughes & Allen, 2010). In addition, individuals with disrupted migration patterns who cannot lay claim to a specific ancestral home community, such as descendants of former African slaves and much of the Jewish diaspora, view the idea of 'home' as an amorphous, symbolic, and mythic space (Levitt & Waters, 2002; Safran, 1991). Regardless, all still claim some type of 'home' attachment to these places. (Li and McKercher 2016, 360)

The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate how profound the experience of returning home can be, whether the focus is on the nation as a whole, a city or a rural setting:

When I first landed in Nepal, as soon as I get off from the airplane, I feel like, oh, I'm in my birthplace now. I'm in my motherland now. It's a different feeling after seven years. So when you are going back to your home country... I put my forehead on the ground when I first got off from the plane. It was a very spiritual, emotional feeling towards your home country, towards your motherland.

- Tejendra

When I'm in Kathmandu I want to go to Patan, always, because it feels like home. I'm not born and raised but we have an ancestral home in that area which is a five generation gap but still it has a sentimental attachment.

- Bhaju

I was there forty years later. I flew in by helicopter. My brother flew me. We went there for our 25th anniversary. I was just balling. I was just crying. The air is so pristine. There was no road. This was 2007. And the people were just the same. Nothing had changed. Of course the young people have left, the old have died, but some of the ones that I knew were peaking from the windows.

- Nima

## **Place as the source of memory**

Most of us have a catalogue of memories that have been with us for a long time and we take it with us wherever we go; however, when we visit a place from our past we often discover memories that we didn't know we had. Visiting places from our past is quite literally a voyage of self discovery.

Researchers such as Maria Lewicka (2008), and Raymond, Brown and Weber (2010) have studied manifestations of place attachment. Lewicka looks at the relationship of place attachment to place identity with a particular focus on the granularity of the attachment. Does place attachment tend to be stronger for a neighbourhood, a city, a region or a nation? Raymond, Brown and Weber analyze place attachment in the contexts of personal identity, the social community and the natural environment.

Trigg provides a compelling statement about the critical role of place in human memory.

This book is about places. More specifically, it is about the memory of places that human beings inhabit and pass through. As bodily subjects, we necessarily have a relationship with the places that surround us. At any given moment, we are located within a place, be it in the hallways of universities, the cockpits of airplanes, or lost in the forest at night. Over time, those places define and structure our sense of self, such that being dis-placed can have a dramatic consequence on our experience of who we are, and even leave us with a feeling of being homeless in the world. Equally, the memories we acquire of the places we inhabit assume a value that is both immeasurable and vital. Without the memory of places, memory itself would no longer have a role to play in our conscious lives. (Trigg 2012, 1)

Interviewee Krishna describes his love for place even when he can no longer identify any specific connections to the place.

Always when the name Baglung comes that touches me more than any other places so there is a kind of sentiment. Even though I have nothing there now. No one is there. But I still love and remember Baglung.  
- Krishna

## **The past is present**

The past is in constant dialogue with the present. What we know about ourselves and our world is based on past experience. Every new experience we have is comprehended by how it relates to our personal catalogue of past experiences. Equally, our past experiences are in a constant state of evolution as we reassess them based on current experience. The past and present perform a duet of harmonies and counterpoints.

Trigg indicates that it is the process of engaging with our past that builds our sense of self.

[...] imagination defines the experienced reality of memory, such that our sense of belonging to the past depends on not only remembering how things were, but constantly reworking that memory in the present. (Trigg 2012, xxvi)

Langenbacher, in discussing the graphic novel *Maus*, indicates that present experience cannot be divorced from the past.

*Maus*, jarring and ambiguous throughout, is ultimately opaque regarding the success of enlightenment. Rather, the knotting or crosscutting between past and present reveals the captivity of the present by the past and the simultaneity of identity and nonidentity. (Langenbacher 2003)

In his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut suggests that we can opt to experience any moment in our personal past as much as we experience the present.

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadoreans can look at all the different moments just that way we can look at a

stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. (Vonnegut 1969, 26)

## **Ghosts inhabit place**

When I walk into a room I encounter not only the people and objects that populate that room today; I also encounter the ghosts from the past that inhabit that room in the form of personal memories or psychic deposits.

Most of our impactful memories are of interpersonal experiences. Rarely do we have impactful experiences in isolation. Consequently, when we return to places that have had a formative influence on us, those places are populated by the ghosts of those people we interacted with in those places in the past. We see them standing or sitting where they always did. In fact, we communicate with them as we always did. These ghosts force us to be at once the person we are as well as the person we used to be.

The following quotes from Bell delve deeper into the role that ghosts play in the loci of memory.

What I am describing is, I believe, a common feature of the human experience of place, for both modern and traditional peoples. The point of this essay is to argue that ghosts - that is, the sense of the presence of those who are not physically there - are a ubiquitous aspect of the phenomenology of place. (Bell 1997, 813)

Ghosts are much of what makes a space a place. [...] Somebody's office is some body's office, and we sense that body's spirit there even when the body is not. (Bell 1997, 815)

I have been primarily drawn to the ghosts of place as a way to describe a central aspect of the social experience of the physical world, the phenomenology of environment. Such experience arises in part from the social relations of memory, and the memory of social relations. But the ghosts of place should not be reduced to mere memories, collective or individual. To do so would be to overlook the spirited and live quality of their presence, and their stubborn rootedness in particular places. (Bell 1997, 816)

A crucial aspect of how we experience the person is our sense that the person has an animating spirit, a ghost, within. We also experience objects and places as having ghosts. We do so because we experience objects and places socially; we experience them as we do people. Through ghosts, we re-encounter the aura of social life in the aura of place. (Bell 1997, 821)

In so many places in those islands, I can feel my own presence as a child, even though that child is no longer physically there. The ghosts we sense in places, in other words, may also include our own ghost, the ghost or ghosts of our own past lives. (Bell 1997, 823)

Maddern, in her investigations in the abandoned Ellis Island, understands the psychic deposits that can be left behind in a place with a rich history of intense personal experience.

For Mary then, the walls of the ruined landscape are almost conscious agents 'speaking for themselves'. For her the ruined landscape produces certain sublime and uncanny sensations of being haunted in which she becomes particularly aware of her own self and its relationship to what she sees as a record of the 'human drama' that surrounds her. (Maddern 2008, 366)

Interviewee Nima acknowledges the role of ghosts in her young experience.

I always say the only fear I had was of my own wrong-doing because my grandparents always said bad karma always haunts you, comes back to you if you do bad things to people. And of the ghosts because they believe in ghosts still. Those were the two things I was afraid of.

- Nima

## **Culture and religion**

Culture is a concept that is closely tied to the idea of home. We tend to think of culture as being aligned with ethnicity. From this perspective it may transcend personal experience. I may identify as part of an ethnic group that has more to do with my heritage and family lineage than personal experience. To some degree I feel at home with my ethnic background. Our self-identification with culture is multi-layered, factoring in the country where we live, the region within that country, the city, our neighbourhood. For each of us, the priority of those domains will vary. The priorities themselves may shift depending on the context. My concept of home is different when I am an expat in a foreign country from when I am attending a community event in the city where I was born.

Interviewee Niva talks about the role that religious festivals play in her sense of home. Her memories are rooted in Kathmandu Durbar Square which was severely damaged in the 2015 earthquake.

Durbar Square is so important to me because of the Indra Jatra festival. That is so dear to me. I like the crowd and the Lakhay dance and all the other forms of dancing that happens there. The whole environment is so nice. And we are Newars and we are more into cultural things and so Indra Jatra is so huge for me. I have the whole video so every year in Indra Jatra I see it here, I show it to my daughter. So it is so dear to me. The whole procession starts from Durbar Square and it's not there. So that was sad.

- Niva

Bhaju explains how his sense of culture derives from his ethnicity and language which is not shared by all Nepalis.

One thing we learned from our ancestors there is that we are the first nation of Nepal. Kathmandu Valley was actually inhabited by our nation. There are three cities: Patan, Kathmandu and Bhaktapur. Our ancestors are from Patan. My fifth generation great, great grandpa moved from Patan to Bhojpur. Our culture is so different from today's Nepalese culture. We have everything our own system like food, dress. My mother tongue is Newari. If I go to Kirtipur, I become foreigner. Somehow the same language, we cannot communicate properly. It's very hard to understand. They find it hard to understand me and I find it hard to understand them. I have to speak another language which is Nepali. Currently government-run, constitutional language. Same thing with Baktapur. Conversation is difficult.

- Bhaju

Nima recalls the special cultural phenomenon of her rural Sherpa background.

We grew up in an extremely fearless, trusting, very honest environment. Everybody knew everybody and cooperated. I was never made aware that a stranger was a threat. It was never in our culture to ever think that. More importantly the stranger had to be invited in to feed them. I remember as a kid we would have travelers and they would come by and nothing was charged. You just provided them with what they needed. You provide them the food or whatever they need, shelter. You made sure they were well looked after. We had one of the oldest monasteries. It belonged to my grandparents' family lineage. Even that was all dilapidated because it costs money to upkeep. They had a lot of old antique stuff inside the monastery. I had a lot of old memories there. People used to gather there once a year. We would fast for three days and then they have this feast, a lot of prayers. I remember those as a kid.

- Nima

## Memory and sensory stimuli

If you merely think about a place from your past that has had an impact on your life, you can remember details of what happened there. But if you physically return to that place you can find yourself immersed in the past. The sights and sounds and smells of the place thrust your past experience into the present. The relationship between smell and memory is particularly intriguing. I find it almost impossible to remember a smell but a smell, once experienced, has the ability to awaken memories that would otherwise remain dormant.

If you were to ask me what my grandmother's house smelled like I would not have been able to tell you. But the day I encounter that smell in a totally unrelated environment I recognize it immediately and I'm transported to my grandmother's house and all the memories of that place. My grandfather who lost his sight and both his legs to diabetes puts his hands on my head to determine how much I've grown. I spend hours delving through my uncle's collection of true detective magazines. All the memories of that place are triggered by the chance encounter with an aroma.

Trigg discusses how the sense of touch can be a powerful conduit for memory.

Nostalgia occupies a precarious line between the lived experience of the past and the augmentation of the memory through the dynamic activity of the imagination. That materiality assists in this augmentation means that felt experience is forever on the brink of unreality, a dream that refuses to end and instead has eloped into the "real" world. Moreover, that we are made aware of this persistence of tactility often by surprise demonstrates the role touch plays in bringing out the layering of memory traces. (Trigg 2012, 202)

When faced with the prospect of returning to a place that was torn apart by war, Vietnam veteran Kenny understands that the smells and sounds of that place are likely to trigger memories and strong emotions.

"I'm sure that those smells, you know, when you go somewhere there's certain smells and sounds that are going to trigger feelings and emotions. I'm not really sure what to expect," said Kenny. (Yarr 2018)

## Nepal changed

When we return to a place that was significant in our past we are often shocked to see how the place has changed.

Returning to a place after a long period of absence, we are often shocked by both the small and the vast changes, effectively alerting us to the radical indifference places have to the sentiment we apply to them. (Trigg 2012, 2)

Maddern points out that the shock may be from what we expect to see but is no longer there.

The tension here is one of absence and presence, the tension between materiality and the immateriality. This is a tension in which that which is seen to be missing assumes an importance at least equal to (if not more important) than the historical artifacts that remain. This is a tension between the discursive and the figural, between that which is easily perceived and that which is not – a space that ghosts inhabit. (Maddern 2008, 370)

Bhaju decries the loss of cultural continuity in Nepal's history.

The Saha Dynasty came in Kathmandu and grabbed the power. Everything changed. Our mother tongue, our nationality, our culture, everything. Kathmandu now is just like a global city but if you go to Patan... All things in life gradually disappear, culture. Patan there is more continuity.  
- Bhaju

Krishna talks about evolution of infrastructure in Nepal.

When we migrated from Baglung 36 years ago, in order to come from Baglung to Chitwan... It is about 200 kilometers distance. At that time there was no road from Pokhara to Baglung, not any kind of road. Not even a very muddy road where you can run the tractors. No road at all. So when we migrated at that time we had to walk from Baglung to Pokhara. So it is about a three day's walk. So you had to walk through many streams, rivers. There were no bridges. What I still remember is the same river I had to cross 22 times. That was the situation 36 years ago. My first return back was after I completed my highschool when I went back to visit my grandma. Even at that time there was no road but they had started construction from Pokhara. At least there was a track for five or ten kilometers. You feel more comfortable walking on those tracks because before you had only footpaths. Then I went after a few more years and at that time there was a lot of change. Now the road went near to the capital of that district. The road reached to the bottom of the Kali Gandaki River but then you had to climb up to go to the capital of the district. Then again you had to walk another two hours to my home. So now the road takes about three hours where before it was three days. It means now when you start in the morning from your house in the Terai you can be in the evening at your grandma's place.  
- Krishna

Picking up that theme of developing infrastructure, Nima expresses concern about what can be lost in the process.

Today it's not as remote but it was then. But it's beautiful, just stunningly beautiful. That's what got me really crying. And I also began to weep for the changes that are coming. There is a pureness that is going to be compromised with roads, with development. If you're really in an ideal world somebody will put a lot of money and really plan with extreme care. We can maintain it. But now the commercial road is going through there and people in the village don't have a clue. They've never been exposed to it. Nor is there a government strategy to save these beautiful places. Those things concern me and worry me and make me weep.

- Nima

## 2015 Earthquake

When we discuss change to places in Nepal it's hard to look beyond how the 2015 earthquake destroyed or transformed so much of what was cherished by Nepalis.

Nima poignantly discusses the trauma of the earthquake as it impacted her family home as well as more public sites with sacred meaning to her.

I went to look around Kathmandu Durbar Square. My maternal uncle's house is just behind that area. I grew up mostly in my maternal uncle's place. For ten years I was there. More there than my home. My home is just in Kalimati behind the vegetable market. My maternal uncle's house, it was destroyed. Completely came to ground. It was an old house, century old house. My grandmom was there. She could not come down quickly. They lived in the top floor. They don't even remember how they came down. I could not go there. I could not. My aunt went there and she fainted. I went to the beginning of the aisle but then I could not enter. I could not think how I would react to that so I did not go inside. Because I had already seen the other places and I was already so sad. So wherever we go we have to pass Durbar Square area. So it really brought me to tears when I saw everything down. It was so bad. Especially the Khastamandap and the white palace behind it. That literally brought me to tears. Those were the landmarks. So when I was small that was the place where we would go to buy the vegetables and all. We used to go with them, every time the same places. We also used to go feed the pigeons. We used to go to a momo place there, just behind Durbar Square. We used to go a lot there. This time I went, I went there after earthquake, right? Everything has changed. The shops are different now. The houses were not there. They changed their shops. It was difficult for me to find the momo place.

- Nima

Nima talks about the trauma endured by her family during and in the aftermath of the earthquake. It was very challenging for her to monitor developments remotely from her home in Canada. She discusses the economic challenges of the recovery process especially in the context of governmental instability. Nima was not the only interviewee to discuss how the hardship was exacerbated by the Indian blockade. While Nima continued to worry about her family and other Nepalis, she felt they had actually moved on with their lives as they really had no choice but to cope and adapt.

Once I was there it was as if nothing had happened because people had moved on. People don't always share their pain, display their pain. Of course everybody had their challenges. But they're very resilient in that sense. They've had to deal with so much. The

worst thing with the earthquake was the blockade from India. All this economic hardship. If it happens in America they have a problem dealing with this and it's a country with a lot of money. So Nepal, with that scale of earthquake and government having gone through such turmoil, an unstable government. It's constant rotation. People who are waiting for the government will be waiting forever. My family lived outside every day. You have to say what part can you do and what part you can't. Otherwise I would be vegetable. I was glued to the TV. People living in Nepal had actually moved on. I always felt it was my duty to fix everybody. Death sometimes is probably easier than living because of what happened. Living is hard.

- Nima

## **Conclusion**

Nostalgia can be a strong motivation behind the desire to return to places from our past; however the experience can be disruptive. While nostalgia causes us to long for that place we used to inhabit, the process of discovering first hand that the place no longer exists, at least, not in the way we once knew it, can create a chasm that we know we can never cross. We can never be reunited with a place that no longer exists. If we never return we can indulge the belief that only geography separates us from the place we love. If we return and find the place transformed we realize that space and time are insurmountable barriers.

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