Post-Migration Experiences, Cultural Practices and Homemaking

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Post-Migration Experiences, Cultural Practices and Homemaking: An Ethnography of Dominican Migration to Europe

BY

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This book is dedicated to my mother, Chitra Ramnath, who always gave me the freedom to follow my own path. Her wisdom is beyond all books or degrees. This book is also dedicated to my father, Eugène Dinmohamed, who carries his Caribbeanness with so much pride that, without knowing, he inspired me to do research on Caribbean migration and culture.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my great-grandparents and grandparents, who migrated from India to Suriname and from Suriname to the Netherlands, and created a home in unfamiliar territories.

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Acknowledgements

Since I was a little girl, I have been fascinated by the lives of immigrants. At home in Amsterdam, my father would watch *Migrantentelevisie* ('migrant television') on the local television channels where immigrant groups in the Netherlands broadcast their own programmes. We watched to see programmes about Suriname and Surinamese people in the Netherlands, and I was always captivated by the immigrants' stories of their experiences in the Netherlands. Later in life, I was drawn by the Caribbean and Caribbean cultures. I always wondered why, despite being born and raised in the Netherlands, I could not feel at home there. When one would apply the widely accepted indicators of integration to me, my scores would be good and I would be declared a successful immigrant (in my case, second generation). How, then, to explain my lack of feeling at home? Are we, in our labelling of integration as 'successful', forgetting to take into account other factors and realities? It is with these questions in mind that I embarked on this research project. My aim, in addition to advancing the scientific debate, was to provide answers to a very personal question.

I thank several persons for inspiring, guiding and motivating me to do research. During my first year as a social sciences student at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, courses in anthropology and about the Caribbean fascinated me. Anthropology lecturer Carel Roessingh was the first person to inspire me to become active in research. After getting my master's, during my years working as a researcher in Curaçao, the themes of migration and immigrants became really meaningful to me. Around then, I decided that I wanted to become an expert on the lives of immigrants. I am thankful to my then-boss at the Central Bureau of Statistics, Mike Jacobs, for when cleaning off his bookshelf, throwing a book at me saying, 'Look at this, it might interest you'. It was an anthropological study about the migration experiences of Dominican immigrants in Puerto Rico. That's when I knew: I wanted to study migrants from the Dominican Republic and their processes of finding a way in a new society.

A couple of years later, I crossed paths with Ruben Gowricharn. I thank him for introducing me to the concept of home as a perspective through which to examine immigrants' experiences. I thank Jan Rath for always reminding me that this is *my* research, thus instilling in me a sense of agency and strength. He also encouraged me to be myself in what, for me, was the uncomfortable world of academia, by being himself, including when 'the Afrikaanderwijk came out', as he expressed it.

My loved ones also played a part in my writing of this book. I thank everyone who supported me emotionally, financially and intellectually in Europe and the Caribbean (especially in Suriname, Curaçao and the Dominican Republic). *Dank je wel, dhan ye baad*, *gran tangi*, *masha danki* and *muchas gracias* to all of you who understood when I said I did not have time to meet up in those months of research and writing. You kindly responded, 'Just finish the thing, that is what's important now'. Another point: doing research without funding was a challenge. Wanting to finish the research in this life, but also having to earn an income posed serious challenges. However, these also proved an opportunity in disguise, as they showed me how many people were willing to offer support. The financial support of friends and family enabled me to concentrate on my research without having to worry about paying the rent or buying food.

While this book is a product of my own hard work, there is one person who always saw my intellectual capabilities and pushed me to explore them. That is my mother, Chitra. Without her, my path would not have been laid out, and I thank her for that. Then, there is the one person who encouraged me when doing the research became challenging. That is my sister Jane. She put me back in touch with my deep desire to do research on Dominican migration and brought back the sparkle that let me continue. Then, of course, without food you cannot function. Sometimes when trying to meet deadlines or being simply lost in my writings, my father, Eugène, would send me a message, *Heb je al gegeten?* ("Have you eaten?"). When I answered, 'I don't need food. I'll be at university until I die', he would soon be on his way to me with a meal. And Zorina, my little sister, thank you for inspiring me by being who you are, you strong warrior person.

Then there are my dear Dominican people. I thank Gladys Carrasco, who introduced me to so many Dominicans in different parts of the Netherlands and of different walks of life. And my respondents! I am indebted to all of you and all the other Dominicans I met on my journey in trying to understand Dominican migration and culture. Without your willingness to share your stories, I would not have been able to write this book. Without your love and warmth, doing the fieldwork would not have been as much fun. I also thank Françios Bérénos, Luz Teresa Mena Decena and Miguel Rodriguez Castro for always receiving me with so much love in San Pedro de Macoris and in their home. *Muchas gracias por su amor y calor*.

Through the stories presented in this book, I came closer to answering my own questions about home, and, as such, this research brought me home. Readers, I hope through this book you can smell the Dominican flavours and feel the Dominican *ambiente*.

Sabrina Dinmohamed

Chapter 1

Introduction: Dominican Immigrants, Cultural Practices and Homemaking

1.1 Dominicans' Homemaking Through Food Practices

At the Starbucks in Rotterdam Central Station, I spoke with 40-year-old *Bryan*, who had been living in the Netherlands for the last 20 years. He spoke of his childhood in the Dominican Republic, his mother's insistence that he come to the Netherlands, and the difficulties he had encountered in building a new life there. He told me about his accomplishments and where he considered to be home and shared thoughts on Dominican culture and its importance in his own life. In fact, he said, he cared little about Dominican cultural practices, which he considered narrow-minded. At the same time, he thought that if he had grown up differently and lived in better economic circumstances in the Dominican Republic, he might have different memories and miss the country and its culture. As it was, he equated the Dominican Republic with poverty, which he had no desire to recreate. Of his food memories, he said, 'You just had to eat whatever was put in front of you. Otherwise, you'd stay hungry. Some days, for example, my parents had no money to buy food. They gave you whatever they could'. Though *Bryan* loved Dominican food, he did not need food to create a sense of home in the Netherlands.

In Afrikaanderwijk, a neighbourhood in southern Rotterdam, 54-year-old *Sandra*, who had also lived in the Netherlands for 20 years, spoke lovingly of the Dominican Republic. She specifically mentioned how important Dominican food was to her. She consumed it every day and often went to Dominican restaurants. Even after so many years in the Netherlands, and having previously lived in Curaçao and Sint Maarten, she maintained Dominican food customs. For example, during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), she made *habichuela con dulce*, a sweet bean dessert that in the Dominican Republic is prepared in every household and shared with family and friends. It is not a dish to eat alone, *Sandra* told me. You make it, she explained, 'and call everyone you know and say, "I have *habichuela con dulce*. Are you coming to pick it up, or shall I bring it or send it to you?" ' *Sandra* had continued this practice in the Netherlands and also fostered by the proximity of other Dominicans.

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At a restaurant in western Amsterdam, 36-year-old *Valentina* described her love of Dominican food. As a student living in what she described as the predominantly 'white' suburban Amstelveen, she would travel on the weekends to the Bijlmer, one of Amsterdam's more multicultural neighbourhoods, to buy cooking ingredients. On these trips, she took a grocery trolley to a specific area in the Ganzenhoef neighbourhood. The many Surinamese and Curaçaoan stores there made it easy to obtain yucca, plantains and specific condiments to prepare her favourite dishes. The unavailability of these products nearer to her own home thus did not prevent her from continuing to make Dominican food. After graduating, she said she left Amstelveen and chose her current residence for its proximity to products for Dominican dishes.

These stories, drawn from my research on Dominican migration to the Netherlands, reveal several aspects of immigrants' attachments to cultural practices from their country of origin and creation of home after migration. *Bryan*'s story demonstrates that cultural practices from the country of origin do not necessarily evoke feelings of home. Pre-migration circumstances – in his case, poverty – and personal preferences are also meaningful and influence the importance of Dominican practices after migration. Immigrants have different attachments to social and cultural practices from their country of origin. Some may feel no need to recreate these in their new context after migration. *Sandra*'s vignette suggests the importance of co-ethnics in maintaining traditions. Her work, social life and cultural activities kept her in contact with other Dominicans. Also, she lived in Rotterdam, which has a large concentration of Dominicans. Proximity to other Dominicans made it easy for her to keep up Dominican traditions. *Valentina*'s vignette demonstrates her determination to continue making Dominican dishes even though her 'white' neighbourhood's shops lacked the necessary ingredients. Receiving contexts undoubtedly affect the practices immigrants bring from their countries of origin, and immigrants have various ways of dealing with the differences they encounter.

These points illustrate the central argument of this book: there are different forms of creating home after migration, and immigrants' homemaking practices are influenced not only by their individual characteristics, choices and preferences but also by the characteristics of their context. This book is about Dominican immigrants, their relationship with cultural practices from the Dominican Republic and the role these cultural practices play in creating home post-migration. I explore immigrants' settlement processes, the way they position themselves in the new society and how they root and create home after migration. Thus, moving away from questions of integration, this book focuses instead on stories of immigrants' daily lives and practices on a micro-level.

1.2 Homemaking as an Alternative Lens for Exploring Immigrants' Settlement

> Oh my children I will surely return, do not blame me if I have left you alone. I want to build many things for you that I have dreamed of in my life. I would like to go back, but I can't, I have goals to achieve (Translated by the author).

In this bachata song, singer Frank Reyes tells the story of a migrant who feels guilty for leaving his children behind in the Dominican Republic, but he wants them to know he has done this to secure them a better future. In the meantime, he struggles with daily life, missing his family and the town he was born in.

While doing my research on Dominican immigrants in the Netherlands, I stumbled on a newspaper article quoting Rotterdam's then-deputy mayor Bert Wijbenga who stated that the Dominican community was 'headed in the wrong direction'. He expressed 'concern about their socioeconomic position' (Liukku, 2020) and went on to suggest that research was needed on what he saw as a problematic community. I paused over the article, stunned. How could he be so unnuanced in his statements? The Frank Reyes song and the deputy mayor's words seemed to come from two different worlds. At that moment, I appreciated how very necessary my research was, particularly the specific approach I had adopted, seeking to understand the community from within by exploring its members' attachments and emotions. The question that weighed on me was, how can we better understand immigrants' settlement and incorporation processes?

1.2.1 Attention to Emotions and Micro-level Experiences

Studies of settlement processes have applied several concepts to understand and describe the positions of immigrants in the receiving society. The concepts of integration and assimilation, for example, are often used to explore and understand immigrants' participation in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres. They are also used to assess the 'success' of immigrants' settlement and participation. But what is successful migration, and who decides when and if it is achieved?

Some migration scholars have criticized previous work as too focused on how well immigrants participate in various spheres of the receiving society, while bypassing other aspects of immigrant experiences. To better understand immigrants' struggles, attitudes and attachments, they argue, three elements should be brought into the study arena: emotions, experiences on a micro-level and the meaning of daily practices (Boccagni, 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2017; Philipp & Ho, 2010). While I do not reject existing approaches to studying, describing and explaining immigrants' post-migration life, I agree that these are insufficient to grasp their settlement experiences. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2017) suggests that focusing on everyday practices, materiality and the meaning of place may shift our theoretical understanding of migration experiences away from simply integration, assimilation or transnationalism towards a perspective that acknowledges the right to make home. After all, as immigrants navigate their new environment, they not only deal with practicalities such as getting a job, finding housing and learning a new language but are also confronted with the absence of familiar places and social and cultural practices. Even if these were taken for granted before migration, they may become significant, if not essential, in the process of managing migration and putting down roots in a new place. I too have found that studying daily practices, like those surrounding food, places, materiality and emotions, is valuable for delving into how immigrants – and specifically, the Dominicans in my research – find their way in the receiving society.

The concept of home seems appropriate for treating these underexposed aspects of the immigrant experience. According to Boccagni (2017), viewing migration through the lens of home is useful because it illuminates the bases of migrants' belonging and identification with place. The concept of home has been used to study immigrants' attachments and rootedness, especially their emotional attachments. Lam and Yeoh (2004) present the concept as offering an important clue to where the roots of migrants are anchored. Wiles (2008) argues that both home and the idea of home structure the experience of migration, and that discursive and material aspects of the country of origin form a framework for everyday life as migrants. These provide a way of establishing the self and the group, as well as a sense of belonging, and of demarcating who belongs and who is excluded. According to Phillip and Ho (2010), the concept of home, furthermore, enables exploration of attachments to the country of origin and receiving society. They state that 'migrants' subjective homemaking experiences are just as important as objective labour market performance indicators in providing an understanding of migrant settlement outcomes' (Phillip & Ho, 2010, p. 81).

What home exactly is cannot be unequivocally described, as it has different dimensions and exists on different scales. It has emotional and psychological components, for example, but is also linked to geographical place, a physical dwelling, social relations and materiality (e.g., objects, furniture). Various researchers provide definitions of home. Després (1991), for one, defines it as security and control, a reflection of one's ideas and values, a relationship with family and friends, a centre of activities as well as a refuge, shelter of privacy, indicator of personal status, material structure and place to own. More than a decade later, Mallett (2004, p. 62) raised the question of 'whether or not home is (a) place(s), (a) space(s), (a) feeling(s) and/or an active state of being in the world', suggesting that it all depends on the situation.

Scholars have also challenged the idea of home as a bounded, stable and closed place. According to Blunt and Varley (2004, p. 3), home must be understood not just as a fixed, delimited location, but as

> traversing scales from the domestic to the global in both material and symbolic ways and located on thresholds between memory and nostalgia for the past, everyday life in the present, and future dreams and fears.

While home is difficult to define, scholars have posited its main constituting elements as specific emotions related to places, persons and objects such as familiarity, security and a sense of community (Boccagni, 2017; Duyvendak, 2011; Hage, 1997).

1.2.2 Immigrant Homemaking and Differentiation in Post-migration Practices

The first argument advanced in this book is that immigrants have different relationships with practices from their country of origin and are not orientated only on the country of origin in making home. But what exactly is making home or

homemaking? One definition is daily practices rooted in time and space with the aim of creating a domestic sphere (Bhatti & Church, 2000). Another is social practices in and around the house (Dayaratne & Kellet, 2008). Moreover, homemaking is considered a fundamental activity that anchors an individual in the world within the universe of the space, things, people and events in which they exist (Bachelard, 1964, cited in Dayaratne & Kellet, 2008). Homemaking, thus, has several dimensions including the material, social and personal. Examples of material practices are building a dwelling and furnishing or decorating its interior. Social practices involve relationships with other members of the household, while personal practices relate to individual self-expression within the home.

International migration causes detachment from familiar places and activities and, in the receiving context, a search for new attachments and new relationships with people and places (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002; Boccagni, 2013, 2017; Nowicka, 2007). Thus, while transforming a space or place into one that feels comfortable and safe is an activity that both non-migrants and immigrants engage in, it is different for immigrants. The uprooting that accompanies migration means that immigrants may, in a short period of time, lose familiar elements in their daily lives including attachments to people, places and things. The uprooting from everything that was once familiar and the settlement in a different geographical, social and/or cultural environment may compel immigrants to recreate what they left behind and lost. No doubt this also depends on whether what was left behind is something the immigrant *wants* to recreate. It is worth emphasizing that some may migrate because they do not feel at home. This has received less attention in the immigrant home literature but is elaborated on in the upcoming chapters.

Scholars have tried to understand what is at the core of homemaking for immigrants. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (2017, p. 15), homemaking is about creating places of belonging, 'where people seek to transform the physical surroundings in ways that they find agreeable and that will support their utilitarian purposes of social reproduction and restoration'. Hoffman (1989) calls immigrant homemaking 're-creating soils of significance', in which the affective qualities of home cannot be separated from the concrete materiality of rooms, objects and rituals. This is a useful conceptualization, as it connects emotions and practices. Petridou (2001, p. 87) underscores the importance of meaning stating that immigrant homemaking is about 'the dynamic way in which everyday practice makes the home meaningful to those who inhabit it'. Boccagni (2017) refers to the ordinary interactions through which individuals try to appropriate and make a place meaningful, personal and secure:

> What I propose to frame as homing … is a range of *spatialized social practices through which migrants* – as exemplary of people who went through extended detachment from their earlier homes – *try to reproduce, reconstruct and possibly rebuild meaningful home-like settings, feelings and relationships*. (Boccagni, 2017, p. 26, italics original)

Boccagni (2017) calls attention to home as a process, naming it 'homing'. This refers to people's potential to attach a sense of home to their life circumstances in light of their assets and the external structure of opportunities. This book elaborates on these assets and opportunities, as well as the interplay between them, to provide a comprehensive picture of immigrant homemaking. In my research, homemaking encompasses social and cultural practices inside the home and outside (in communal and public spaces). These practices may evoke feelings identified in the home literature as elements of home. Maintenance of practices from the home country is not an absolute, but can change as immigrants' relationship with the country of origin and the receiving society evolve.

One limitation of existing studies on immigrant homemaking that stands in the way of a nuanced yet comprehensive understanding of homemaking processes is the tendency to focus on how practices from the country of origin are recreated (Dinmohamed, 2023). This in itself is not surprising, as Duyvendak (2011, p. 31) observes:

> [Immigrants] are not acquainted with the particularities of the places they have come to live in, and not necessarily interested in them for they do not help them feel at home. When they establish home away from home, immigrants often recreate places that look and smell, at least to a certain extent, like the places they left behind.

However, whether immigrants always strive to recreate what they left behind is an open question. Do they have a homogenous wish to recreate familiar practices from the country of origin? If so, how can we make sense of *Bryan*'s food practices, which are not orientated to the Dominican Republic? Brubaker (2002) has criticized the idea of an ethnic group being internally homogenous, externally bounded and perceived as a collective of totally similar actors with common purposes. Rather, he argues for a more nuanced understanding, moving beyond groupist assumptions and towards empirical investigations of the circumstances under which people do (or do not) feel and act as members of specific ethnic/racial/national categories. Pursuing this line of inquiry, I wondered how this might be reflected in practices after migration. Moreover, immigrant homemaking studies do not always clarify what feelings are evoked by practices and whether they are indeed feelings of home. Duyvendak (2011, p. 42) suggests that while home studies have examined the 'harder' context of place, the emotional side has been neglected:

> [T]he emotion of feeling at home attracted less interest than the object of the feeling, the place qua place. This neglect of emotion-as-emotion appeared to suggest that 'feeling at home' meant and was experienced by everybody as the same thing.

Before considering all practices from the country of origin as homemaking practices, more must be understood about the relationship between practices and the feelings they evoke.

The Dominican community in the Netherlands is an ideal subject to explore differentiation in homemaking practices. Indeed, in my dealings with some Dominican immigrants, I noticed a negative attitude towards other Dominicans. They avoided socializing with co-ethnics who, they said, acted 'too Dominican', referring to practices such as consuming only Dominican food, talking loudly and seeming unmotivated to progress in life. These opinions of Dominicans about other Dominicans in the Netherlands clued me into differentiation in practices. I learned that there were Dominican immigrants whose practices were indeed orientated towards the Dominican Republic, but also others who, while they felt Dominican, had no urge to perform 'typical' Dominican practices, to return to their country of origin or to socialize exclusively with other Dominicans.

1.2.3 Contextual Embeddedness of Immigrant Homemaking

The second argument put forward in this book is that immigrants' homemaking practices are influenced not only by their own individual characteristics, choices and preferences but also by characteristics of their context. Context is important to consider because immigrants bring practices from place to place, with each place having its own unique characteristics. A few scholars, mostly from the field of housing studies and architecture and design, note that factors such as spatiality, regulations, construction norms and availability of products for purchase in the receiving society may affect or suppress immigrants' attempts to transform the spaces they live in into meaningful places to which they can relate (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2011; Hadjiyanni, 2009). As such, Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen (2012) explored the extent that immigrants could identify with Danish housing, and whether Danish housing allowed immigrants to arrange their houses (and thus their homes) according to their own wishes. They found that preferences regarding housing and interiors depended on the residents' country of origin and what they were accustomed to, leading them to conclude that Danish housing codes limited immigrants in arranging their homes to their satisfaction. Beyond material restrictions, homemaking is affected by social and cultural conditions. According to Meijering and Lager (2014), language and social structures (e.g. people's coldness or warmth) affect Antillean migrants' sense of home in the Netherlands. For these migrants, the individualist nature of the Dutch people and society is an impediment to their feeling at home. How material and socio-cultural conditions lead to negotiations in practices and feelings of home as well as how these negotiations affect feelings of home, warrants greater attention. In the case of *Valentina*, this would mean asking what challenges, besides the limited availability of products for making Dominican food, stand in the way of her preferred food practices. How does she deal with those conditions and do they affect her feelings of home? The small size of the Dominican population, and its limited social and cultural infrastructure in Dutch society, present an interesting context in which homemaking takes place. How does such a relatively small community – with no visible cultural infrastructure, at least not seen by the untrained eye – create or recreate food practices and stay connected to their customs in a society that differs so markedly from their

country of origin. The situation in the Netherlands is a sharp contrast to that in Puerto Rico, Spain and neighbourhoods of New York City, all of which have well-developed Dominican infrastructures.

The existence of a co-ethnic community in the receiving context is considered to play a role in making home. Some studies point to the role of co-ethnics, as part of the receiving context, in providing amenities, such as restaurants, grocery stores, bakeries and cafés (Philipp & Ho, 2010; Wiles, 2008). Co-ethnics also enable recreating ways of socializing. This socializing occurs within the domestic space, but also outside it, in communal spaces. Boccagni (2013, p. 283) found that immigrants' 'homemaking symbols and practices were not necessarily circumscribed to their dwelling places'. Homemaking outside the house, according to this author (2013, p. 283), involves 'ways of staying together and consuming leisure time in the public space: football matches, picnics, religious or cultural events, or the simple "hanging out" together'. Being with co-ethnics makes it possible to inhabit space and time in a familiar way (Boccagni, 2013) or to recreate social activities, the homeland or forms of recreation that immigrants were used to in their country of origin (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2017; Meijering & Lager, 2014). While the role of co-ethnics in homemaking has been touched upon, it remains unclear how and whether the opportunities provided by co-ethnics evoke feelings of home. For example, in the case of *Sandra*, what food-related opportunities did other Dominicans provide? And did such opportunities evoke feelings of home? Delving into the lifestyles of Dominican immigrants allowed me to explore how homemaking may unfold beyond the home. In this community, like many non-western European communities, there is no sharp public–private divide; that is, where the home starts and ends is fluid. Home in the Dominican Republic is not only inside the house but also outside, with others. Considering this community, I could explore how certain activities normally associated with the home might unfold in communal or public places, presenting these sites as shared open-air homes (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2017).

In sum, a singular focus on immigrants' recreation of the country of origin in homemaking and lack of regard for the context in which this takes place leads to a simplistic picture: that people migrate and transplant their practices in post-migration life without challenges and negotiations. I argue that there are many different forms of creating home after migration, some of which do not involve recreation of practices from the country of origin. The ways immigrants create home after migration are influenced by a variety of factors. On an individual level, they are influenced by pre-migration and post-migration factors, as well as personal changes not necessarily related to migration. In addition to individual characteristics, choices and preferences, immigrants' homemaking practices are influenced by characteristics of their context, including the co-ethnic community, if such exists, and the wider receiving society. These components of the context both facilitate and obstruct practices and feelings of home.

1.3 Why Food Practices?

Food is one of many practices that immigrants bring from their country of origin. Previous research has examined the food practices of immigrants in relation