Fish Out of Water

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Panel: Sense of Place
As a child growing up in the late 60s and early 70s in the south of England, I could make little sense out of where I was and why I was haunted by feelings of not belonging. It wasn’t until I was in my twenties that I discovered where my birth parents were from – Guyana and Jamaica. Because of this the themes of dispossession, difference, dislocation and place are strongly embedded in my writing.

It is of great importance to most people to have a sense of place. Of belonging. This sense of belonging to a place can be strengthened when one moves, by one’s own will or by force, to a new and different location.

I spent almost one year abroad when I was twenty-one. I travelled through Egypt, Sudan, India and Nepal. Maintaining a relationship with such huge areas of the planet was an emotionally exhausting way to live, but being so far away from home helped me to put the past into some kind of perspective, as well as the place which I had considered to be “home”.

Whether or not my first impressions of the new places were accurate, there was often a sharpness to them. An edge to everything. A vividness. A purity. Being an outsider, a stranger, can provide insights that local inhabitants do not have, because of the ability to compare.

Likewise, I found that I viewed “home,” or the place from which I had set out, under a new light because I was seeing it from a distance – from a different perspective. Then after time, my original home, which I had not really thought of as a home, but rather as a place where I lived, I came to view though rose-tinted spectacles. It appeared more homely.

Similarly, with the passing of time, events can come into sharper focus. Past events, the confused maze of a childhood, can become clearer, sharper, more beautiful or uglier, too.

Our first impressions of a new place are often coloured by a desire to find greener pastures than those from which we set out. This is succinctly put in The Promised Land, a short story by the Senegalese writer, Sembene Ousmane, that I read just the other night. The main protagonist, Diouana, has arrived in France from Dakar for the first time:

Her eyes took everything in and she gazed in wonder and admiration. Her mind became filled with these first impressions. How beautiful it was! Africa now seemed no more than a sordid slum.

But after a while in France, Diouana felt very different, and homesick. She became:
… immersed in memories. She compared her native bush to this dead brushwood around her. What a difference between these trees and her Casamance forest, so far away! Her memory of the village and the communal life there made her feel more cut off than ever. She bit her lip and deeply regretted having come. A thousand and one details flashed through her mind as she looked back at the past. She became aware again of the present, of the reality of her life in France, where she was doubly a foreigner, and her mind hardened.

The desire to conjure up and capture the mood and essence of one’s original “home”, or starting place, often becomes stronger the longer we are away from it, and finally the grass can become greener back home. And yet, when one returns, home is no longer home because over the course of time it has changed. For me now, there is no “place” that I consider home. Instead, home is something I carry with me.

How do I approach creating a sense of place in my own writing? My second novel was born not only out of historical research but also out of a visit to a country I had not been to before, and my first encounter with a particular house. The house is Greenwood Great House, a former home of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s family in Jamaica, where my father now lives.

Walking into Greenwood Great House was like traveling back in time. I knew I wanted to write about the place. The way in which the property had been restored to its full grandeur evoked an atmosphere of the past, and memories of first seeing those spacious rooms are still very sharp and clear.

Can one obtain an authentic sense of place through visual materials, internet research, films, photographs and/or slides or portraits? Yes, but nothing beats the experience of actually being there with the people, experiencing the way light falls, seeing the depth of misery, or the anger and sadness, and freedom in their eyes. Traveling to new places, physically “being there” and interacting with the people, can take one through the looking glass into something approaching the experience of the local people, and to finally make common cause with them. Few visual materials can truly convey the irritation of being pestered by mosquitoes, the smell of jacaranda blossoms, or can sustain the sense of walking in someone else’s shoes.

Flannery O’Connor says in ‘Mystery and Manners,’ “Fiction operates through the senses, one reason that people find it so difficult to write stories is that they forget how much time and patience is required to convince through the senses…” The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with what can be seen, heard smelled and touched.

Places are shaped by, cared for, or abused, carved and sculptured by their inhabitants. The essence of the inhabitants is rooted in the land and on
the ground on which they tread and survive. I strive to create characters and focus on bringing them to life by trying to evoke moods and feelings through the senses – sight, sound, smell, taste, touch – to create a sense of place. But as David Lodge says in The Art of Fiction: “Effects in fiction are plural and interconnected, each drawing on and contributing to all the others ... description in a good novel is never just description.”