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Abstract

Many Third Culture Kids (TCKs) struggle to answer the commonly-asked question: *Where are you from?* In this autoethnographic essay, a continuation of my earlier exploration of TCK experience (Hopkins, 2015), I confront my concept of home in reference to psychological research by Jerry Burger (2011), exploring the phenomenon of adults returning "home," to place(s) that were important in their early lives. Like Burger's subjects, I describe my experience of returning to visit, after over two decades away, the remote village in Senegal where I spent many of my childhood years. Following Tessa Muncey's (2010) methodological lead, I structure my account using "snapshots," both photographic and video, of my childhood life and my return visit. These snapshots, accompanied by my narrative and analysis, illustrate elements of my concept of home such as roads, language, food, and trees. My perspective on these elements provides insight into what "home" means to me.

Keywords

TCK, Third Culture Kid, Concept of Home, Concept of Self, Snapshots, Senegal

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Many Third Culture Kids (TCKs) struggle to answer the commonly-asked question: Where are you from? In this autoethnographic essay, a continuation of my earlier exploration of TCK experience (Hopkins, 2015), I confront my concept of home in reference to psychological research by Jerry Burger (2011), exploring the phenomenon of adults returning "home," to place(s) that were important in their early lives. Like Burger's subjects, I describe my experience of returning to visit, after over two decades away, the remote village in Senegal where I spent many of my childhood years. Following Tessa Muncey's (2010) methodological lead, I structure my account using "snapshots," both photographic and video, of my childhood life and my return visit. These snapshots, accompanied by my narrative and analysis, illustrate elements of my concept of home such as roads, language, food, and trees. My perspective on these elements provides insight into what "home" means to me. *Keywords: Autoethnography, TCK, Third Culture Kid, Concept of Home, Concept of Self, Snapshots, Senegal*

First Words

Sigutumaas

Sigutumaas was one of my first words, in Jola, the language I learned as a toddler. I do not remember exactly who taught me that word—maybe Aida, our housekeeper and my nanny, who sang me to sleep and picked me up when I fell over, trying to take those early steps.

Sigutumaas: Vultures. They would congregate near the *abattoir*—the slaughterhouse. *Abattoir* is not Jola, but French, the official (colonial) language of Senegal, the country where my family lived when I was a child. Jola is one of the six languages indigenous to Senegal.

We would pass the *abattoir* while driving from the town, Bignona, where we bought supplies, to the village, Sindian, where we lived. You can see the *sigutumaas* and the *abattoir* in a home video my parents took when I was five years old: https://vimeo.com/385007793. You can hear my parents talk about the birds and the building, and me.

I do not recall the smell the of dying and dead cattle, though it must have been strong. The *sigutumaas* would wait their turn to pick the bones, though it is hard to imagine there was much left after the butchers stripped the carcasses.

Meat was a valuable commodity. Chicken was rare and beef rarer—less frequently available, that is. You had to cook beef as thoroughly as chicken unless you wanted a severely upset stomach. I remember once a cow died from choking on a mango, and we naughty boys spent the next several days feeding mangos to other cows, hoping for more meat.

The building, the *abattoir*, has appeared in my dreams for years—not an object of fear, exactly, but of a dreadful intrigue. A place of death, but also of nourishment, in a way.

***

May 2017. More than twenty years have passed, and for the first time since I was a teenager, I am passing the *abattoir* on the road from Bignona to Sindian. Some things have changed. Now the *abattoir* is abandoned, an empty shell without the slaughter to sustain the scavengers (see Figure 1). No more *sigutumaas*.

Figure 1

Note. Photograph of *abattoir* on the road between Bignona and Sindian (May 2017).

Other sights have changed less. Now I look from side to side, absorbing the landscapes that I have been able to see in my memory, just by closing my eyes, at any time since I left Sindian in the mid-1990s. I take a video with my iPhone: https://vimeo.com/385006209. It is eerily similar to a later portion of that same home video my parents took on this same road almost three decades ago: https://vimeo.com/385008487.

Hours ago, I was astonished by the change in the road from Ziguinchor, the region's capital city, to Bignona: no longer potholed (or land-mined, as it had been, for a sad stretch), but freshly paved, smoother than many in Pennsylvania, where I now reside.

The road from Bignona to Sindian has changed very little. In the home video from 1989, my mother commented on how nice the then-new road was. Yet, even then, it was, in her words, "a bit bumpy," and it is still a rough ride. Our taxi rattles so hard that the door falls open, almost off its hinges—you can see that at 27 seconds into the iPhone video.

We are moving slowly, so even if I had fallen out, I probably would not be hurt, much. We pull over, and the taxi driver, Salbador, spends some minutes securing the vehicle, wiring the door shut. We proceed. The distant past and the immediate present blend—memory and moment, then and now: https://vimeo.com/385008831.

All around us is *karambak*, the bush. Scattered, squatting scrub. Taller trees, palm, and baobab. We pass small groupings of houses, donkeys, goats, cows, and a few mopeds, bicycles, and a truck or two.

There is another abandoned building: a mosque. It appears that the mosque was never occupied. I remember, as a child, passing its skeleton and wondering when it would be finished. In Senegal, it is not unusual for construction projects to be suspended when the builder runs out of money. Sometimes work resumes when the funds are available, and the project eventually is completed. Obviously, this one never was. I doubt it ever will be.

As we approach the half-hour mark from leaving Bignona, I know Sindian must be near. There is a small bridge before our house, one of the first on entering the village. I used to race my bicycle over that bridge, keeping a wary eye out for the crocodile that (I was told) lived underneath. When we cross the bridge, I know we are almost there.

As you might be able to tell from the photo (see Figure 2), from the furrow of my brow, the clench of my jaw, and the forced calm of my clawed hand, I cannot remember a time when I have felt so much anxiety, and so much anticipation. I am going home. Right?

Figure 2

Note. Photograph of author during drive from Bignona to Sindian (May 2017).

Background and Methodology

This essay is a continuation of my autoethnographic research on the experience of being a Third Culture Kid (TCK). Anthropologists John and Ruth Hill Useem coined the term "Third Culture Kid" during their work in India in the mid-20th century. David Pollock and Ruth Van

Reken wrote extensively on the phenomenon, popularizing the abbreviation "TCK." Their enduring definition: "a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture…build[ing] relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 13).

The TCK experience has become more recognized in the twenty-first century, perhaps because the TCK identity is more common. As constant improvements to communication and transportation technology bring geographically distant communities ever closer together, cultural boundaries are crossed, blended, and blurred. Stark distinctions fade, and it becomes harder not to think of many people as TCKs. For example, United States President Barack Obama, born in Hawaii to a Kenyan father and an American mother, may be the most famous TCK, but globalization has created many more, beyond the missionary kids, military brats, and children of diplomats and business people to whom the term first applied. Not surprisingly, interest in the TCK experience has grown, both in the mainstream media (Rathore, 2018; Mayberry, 2016), and in scholarship (Abe, 2018; Davis et al., 2015; Kwon, 2019; Lijadi & van Shalkwyk, 2017; Lyttle et al., 2011; Melles & Schwartz, 2013; Moore & Barker, 2012; Rounsaville, 2014; Smith & Kearney, 2016). It is reasonable to expect that interest to grow further, and to hope for more research to be conducted.

One question, often asked but probably never fully to be answered, is how TCKs experience the concept of "home." An essential element of Pollock and Van Reken's definition of TCKs is that while these individuals live outside of their parents' country of origin, they "usually expect at some point to return permanently to live in their *home* country" (2009, p. 17, emphasis added). Pollock and Van Reken call this return "reentry," and while they are not explicit about how they define "home country," they also use some more precise terms like "passport country" or "country of birth." In the recently updated third edition, Pollock, Van Reken, and (David's son, Michael) Pollock (2017) further complicate the concept of home with more recent research and reflection: "Traditionally, a *sense of home* (and thus of identity and belonging) is attached to physical place" (p. 114, emphasis in original). Since TCKs often associate that sense of home with the place(s) where they grew up, rather than the place(s) they or their parents were born, the concept of home is complex and difficult to define.

In an essay called "Coming 'Home,'" I reflected on my experience of reentry, leaving Senegal and transitioning to life in the United States—my passport country (Hopkins, 2015). Born in the U.S., I grew up in Senegal as the child of missionary linguists, spending occasional seasons stateside for furloughs. I left Senegal in 2001, just after graduating from high school and just before turning 18. Since then, I have lived either in the United States or, for a few years, in Europe. I have returned to visit Senegal only a few times; at this point in my life, I have spent more hours out of Africa than in. I may, likely, never live there again, yet it is still hard for me not to include Senegal in my concept of home.

Pollock and Van Reken (2009) do not significantly address the prospect of TCKs returning to the "host" culture(s), the place(s) where TCKs grew up. Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock (2017) seem to hint at that possibility during their definition of the concepts of home and self as connected to place: "Perhaps this [place identity] is one of the most stabilizing anchors of all as it remains a place to return to even as adults" (p. 114). I have been able to find no published research focused on that experience of returning to the place(s) that, during their childhoods, many TCKs called home. But many adult TCKs do make those journeys.

At the end of "Coming 'Home," I referred briefly to my (then) latest visit to Senegal, in 2010, and my feelings (at that time) of having "moved on, or moved forward, or moved away, or something" (Hopkins, 2015, p. 8). Apparently, at that time, my feelings about the place where I grew up remained ambiguous, since I was not then able precisely to articulate those feelings.

In this essay, I will reflect on the experience of visiting Senegal once again, in May 2017. More specifically, I will illustrate how TCKs grapple with the concepts of home and self by recounting my experience returning to the place where I spent much of my childhood: Sindian.

Sindian is a small village located in a region of southern Senegal called the Casamance. Sindian is populated predominantly by farmers who grow rice and peanuts, and who live mostly in mud-brick houses with roofs made of thatch or, for the wealthier, tin. There is limited electricity, and even less running water.

My parents built a house in Sindian the year after I was born, and we lived there, on and off, until 1994, when we had to leave the region because a small war was intensifying. The war has since ended, or at least the conflict has calmed enough that in 2017, after 23 years away, I felt it was safe to go back.

As in my previous research (Hopkins, 2015), I will examine my experience using autoethnography. Autoethnography is a form of qualitative inquiry that combines personal reflection, artistic representation, and academic research and analysis to study the self in relation to social/cultural context (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis & Bochner, 2000, 2016). That is, an autoethnography is a work of both art and science to connect individual with group experience, to find and to show how a person is similar to and different from the others around them. Because of its blending of the personal and the scholarly, autoethnography provides a perfect medium for my inquiry into how my experience of home may be affected by my TCK identity.

To frame my own experience and to illustrate how I fit into my social/cultural context, I will refer to other scholarship, especially the work of psychologist Jerry Burger. Burger (2011) studied the phenomenon of returning home: revisiting houses or important places of one's childhood, especially the formative years of 5-12. He identified recurring themes in his research subjects' accounts, and he proposed three main reasons for people choosing to return home: (1) searching for connection between past and present, (2) looking for growth through current issues, and (3) hoping for healing from unfinished business. The first was the most common motivator; Burger (2011) wrote that over 40% of his research subjects "described the trip as an opportunity to establish a psychological or emotional connection with their past" (p. 46). While I can easily imagine TCKs returning home for growth or healing, connection was my strongest motivator.

Burger's subjects expressed a sense of disconnection from their past; for them, returning to their childhood homes was an attempt, in a way, to return to their past, to re-experience familiar senses, to remember and reflect. It was a way to better and more fully understand themselves, since, Burger (2011) asserts, for many people homes are "an extension of their self-concept. Put another way, the places where we live become a part of who we are" (p. 19). Disconnection from places in the past is fundamental to the TCK experience—the basic definition of the term includes that separation, suggesting the strong possibility of a loss of the sense of self-concept.

Not everyone shares the same concept of home, or the same value of identifying with particular places. For example, Kate Russell (2011), in a sociological self-study, suggests that TCKs struggle to fit into their environments, even long after childhood:

> I have come to realize that the hypersensitivity to my surroundings that I experience is due, in large part, to the defining and redefining of the self I have experienced moving from place to place. According to Fail et al. (2004), an ever-changing environment can alter third culture kids' perceptions of belonging and identity. (p. 31)

Russell's perspective is echoed in Anastasia Lijadi and Gertina van Shalkwyk's (2017) research on TCK place identity construction. Lijadi and van Shalkwyk (2017) begin by proposing a simple definition of "home" as "the place where people grow up, providing them with a sense of origin and creating a sense of continuity" (p. 121). They then complicate that definition for TCKs whose "high mobility lifestyle might cause these individuals to feel confused about which place to call home" (p. 121). Lijadi and van Shalkwyk's research shows that instead of a single, specific place, TCKs may identify home more in terms of themes of desire for senses of stability and belonging. If those desires are met, the place(s) where they are met is less important. They conclude: "for TCKs, a place called home is anywhere and everywhere" (p. 127).

It is worth noting that Lijadi and van Shalkwyk's research subjects were TCKs who had lived in more than three countries—not at all an uncommon experience for TCKs. However, my family was based almost exclusively in Senegal, and while we made regular moves within country between city and village, for the most part, my mobility was not as high as some other TCKs. Perhaps that is why, for me, home was neither limited by location, nor independent of location.

So, if not exactly *where*, then *what* is home, for me? What constitutes my concept of home, and how has it contributed to my concept of self? This essay attempts to articulate some response, if not any absolute answer, to those questions.

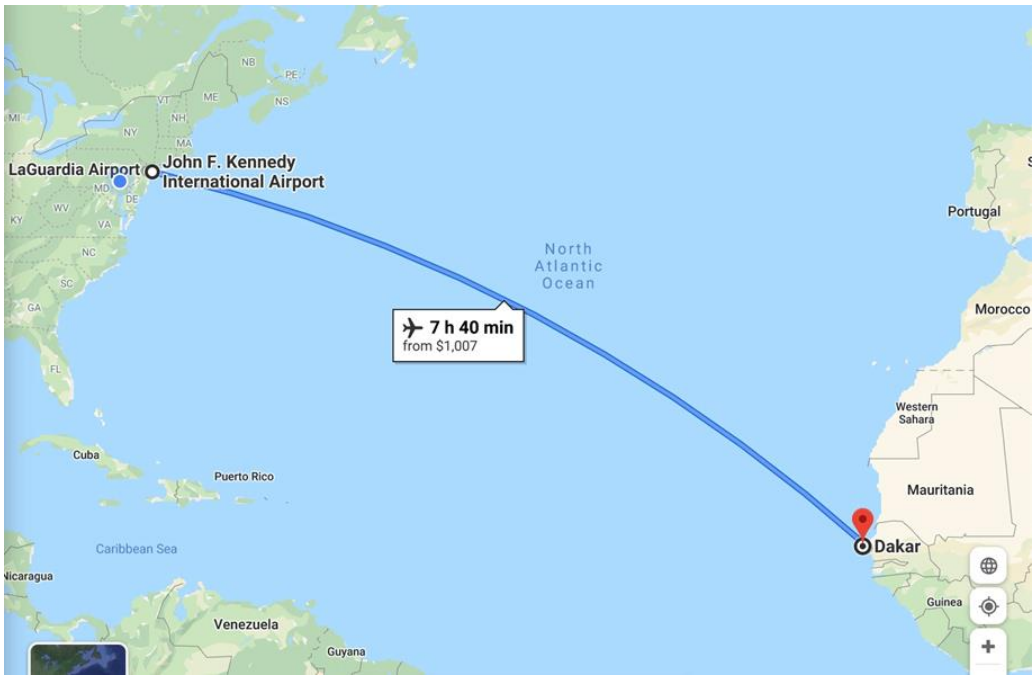
My methodology draws from the work of Tessa Muncey (2010), who advocates the use of "snapshots" in autoethnographic accounts. These snapshots "capture episodes of life like stills in a film; they convey the skeleton of a life without the flesh and consciousness of the being" (2010, p. 57). Autoethnography relies on memory for data, and, as Burger (2011) notes: "time is a relentless enemy of memory. Each year more details fade from our mental pictures" (p. 11). Many years have passed since I lived in Sindian, and my memories have indeed faded. So, I will use snapshots to trigger, supplement, and structure my memory and account. Specifically, I will use photographs and home video recordings, which can capture and portray experience vividly.

For autoethnographic purposes, it is important that snapshots be meaningful, not merely decorative. My methodological process involved reviewing old family photographs and home videos and picking moments that connected explicitly with my experience returning to Sindian—documented by new photographs and videos. I wrote narratives about both the old and the new memories these images prompted. Following data analysis guidelines recommended by Heewon Chang (2008), I looked for patterns and recurring themes. I found several that helped me structure my narrative and analysis, elements that acted as touchstones for my concepts of home and self: language, roads, food, and trees. Throughout, the resonances and contrasts between memories and media created an overarching theme of change: what has changed—in Sindian and in myself—and what has not, and how those changes reflect my concepts of home and self.

On the Road(s) Again

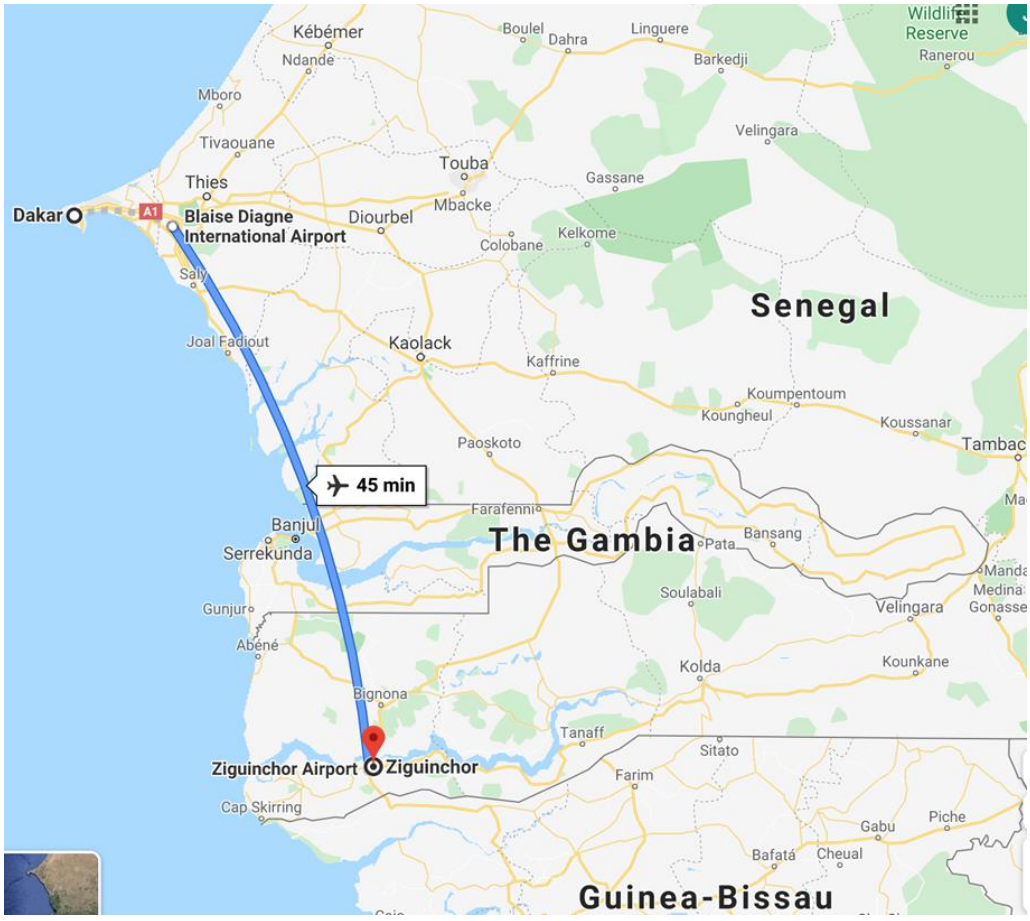
Back to May 2017. Now, how did we get from Pennsylvania to this remote road between a small town and a smaller village in West Africa? Figures 3-5 illustrate the geographic journey, providing some sense of the distances and times of transportation: flights from JFK to Senegal's capital, Dakar, and then to Ziguinchor, the capital of the Casamance region, followed by the drives described earlier from Ziguinchor to Bignona to Sindian. But beyond maps, what brought us here?

Figure 3



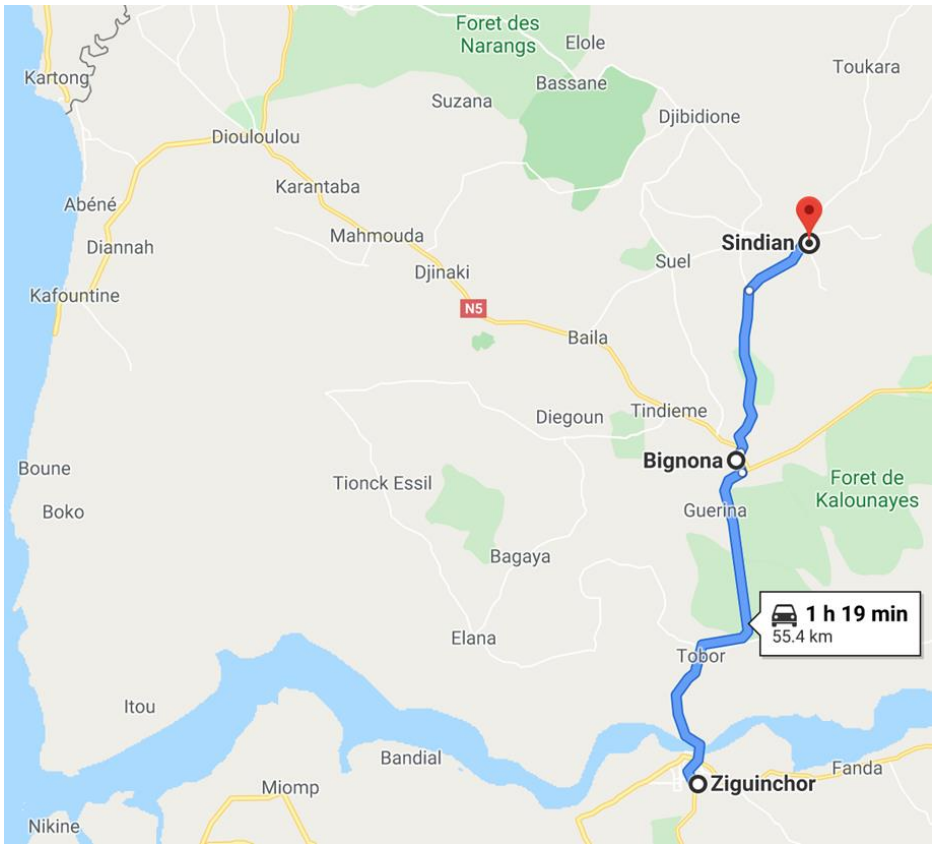
Note. Map showing flight from JFK airport to Dakar, Senegal.

Figure 4



Note. Map showing drive from Ziguinchor to Bignona.

Figure 5



Note. Map showing drive from Bignona to Sindian.

Sidebar: Definition of Terms: *we* and *us*

Under the umbrella theme of "connection" as a reason for returning home, Burger (2011) includes not just seeking an individual, internal connection of one's own present and past, but also the possibility of sharing that connection with someone else. That someone, according to Burger's (2011) research, is likely a significant other—a spouse or close friend. I traveled to Senegal with Hayley, then my girlfriend/almost fiancée, now my wife.

Burger (2011) describes the psychological concept of self-disclosure, the sharing of aspects of one's self concept that make one vulnerable. Often one's childhood is included in those aspects:

> If we think of a childhood home as an extension of the self, then sharing a visit to that home also can be seen as an act of self-disclosure. Showing someone close to you where you used to live— and sharing the stories and memories the visit evokes— is a powerful way to reveal an important part of yourself. (p. 55)

Like many TCKs—and non-TCKs, for that matter—I do not go out of my way to share my childhood experiences with every new acquaintance. However, with those close to me—certainly including Hayley—I do like to talk about how, and where, I grew up. Even if they have never been to Africa, they might be able to imagine my experiences. They may better understand my concept of self. Hayley, it happens, had spent a college semester studying abroad in Mali, the country sharing Senegal's western border, so she already had some sense

of the experience. But we both knew how valuable it could be to visit Senegal—and especially Sindian—together.

Burger (2011) writes about a young man who brought his girlfriend to his hometown across the country and proposed to her there: "*She had to see my past and not just hear about it*, he said. *Then she would really know who I was*" (p. 63). I felt no absolute necessity for Hayley to visit Sindian to understand me fully, or to test our nuptial compatibility, but we both recognized this trip as an opportunity for "a powerful way to reveal an important part of [my]self" (Burger, 2011, p. 62).

As it happened, I was planning on proposing marriage during our trip to Senegal, if not necessarily in Sindian. Hayley expected the proposal, but she did not know precisely when—or where—it would come. Ultimately, I decided not to propose in Sindian—there were too many other strong emotions to process—but, for simplicity's sake, I did introduce Hayley to everyone we met there as "*ma femme*," my wife. While technically untrue in that moment, I had confidence it would be accurate soon enough.

Anyway, *we* had landed in Ziguinchor mid-morning. Our plan had been to take a taxi to the city *gare* (depot) and from there find transport—probably in a "sept places," or seven-seater station-wagon bush bus—to Bignona, the town nearest to Sindian.

Though that entire trip is only around 55 kilometers (see Figure 5), I thought that would take as long as the rest of the day, depending on when the "sept places" would depart and how often it might break down along the way. We had booked a room in an *auberge* (inn) in Bignona, and from there we expected to arrange a trip to Sindian the following day—ideally in another "sept places," though the option of donkey-cart was not out of the realm of possibility.

We couldn't have known that, in fact, we would be in Bignona within two hours of landing in Ziguinchor and arriving in Sindian just a few hours after that. Transportation in the Casamance has vastly improved, apparently.

The first taxi driver we met on exiting the airport, Salbador, ignored our request to go to the *gare* and instead asked us for our final destination: "*Vous allez où*?" He probably expected us to be heading for Cap Skirring, a popular beachside resort in the region. He looked puzzled when I said Sindian—no beach there, not a tourist destination at all. However, he did not hesitate and offered to take us first to Bignona and then on to Sindian, that same day, if we wanted. He named his fee. We agreed.

Salbador asked if anyone in Sindian was expecting us, and I had to answer no. I had no contact information for anyone. I did not know who might still be there, anyone who had known me and my family. I did not even know if Aida were still living in Sindian—or living at all, for that matter—I had lost touch with her years ago, along with everyone else from the village. But I told Salbador, I had lived in Sindian years ago, and maybe someone there would remember me. They will remember, he said immediately: "*En Afrique, on n'oublie jamais*." In Africa, one never forgets. I nodded.

As already mentioned, the roads from Ziguinchor to Bignona proved amazingly smoothly paved. We passed the mountains of peanuts, freshly harvested and waiting for export. We crossed the long causeway spanning the Casamance River. We surrendered our passports, slightly nervous to be examined by soldiers at a military checkpoint, but we were quickly cleared and progressed without further incident. In Bignona, we checked into our astonishingly well WiFied and air-conditioned auberge—named, fittingly, *Kayokulo*, the Jola word for "resting." And we started the drive to Sindian.

I described that drive at the beginning of this essay, alongside an earlier trip, but now I want to go even further back in time for yet another view of the same road. A silent home video shows what the road looked like in 1984: https://vimeo.com/385010548. Notice anything different?

This was the road during the rainy season. In Senegal, when it rains—roughly June to October—it rains hard, and the rain often floods the roads, making them difficult, or impossible, to pass. I remember many trips either slowed, stalled, or altogether aborted due to floods. I remember getting out of the car and standing by the side of the road, watching my father try to coax our Renault station wagon either through a puddle of unknown but daunting depth (as in the video), or over a bridge fashioned from little more than corrugated metal slats and some (hopefully solid) wooden planks.

Now, however, in late May 2017, the road was dry, dryer than the bones that no longer littered the ground around the *abattoir*. Granted, it was not quite yet the rainy season—we had planned to try to avoid the flooding—but it looked dry even for the dry season. Also, there were alarmingly fewer trees than I remembered. A certain degree of deforestation might be expected, given expanding populations and industry—in that home video from 1989, my mother mentioned turning trees into paper—but I guessed at another reason. A little research confirmed my suspicion that climate change has had an impact on the Casamance, as on the rest of the planet, increasing temperatures and decreasing rainfall (Boslaugh, 2012). In a review of reports of almost 400 climate stressors in the Sahel region, Epule, Ford, and Lwasa (2018) found that Senegal experienced the third highest number of climate stressors, like droughts.

Looking out the window of Salbador's taxi, as much as I recognized from my childhood, I pondered how much had changed. It was hard to imagine that this view could be anything like as green as 1989, much less 1984, even when the rains would begin in a few weeks. As we drove, I grieved the loss of the trees. I could relate to Burger's (2011) observation about research subjects whose returns home had been upsetting due to drastic changes to, even destruction of important places: "If people see places from their past as part of their self-concept, then the loss of a home or a schoolyard as they remember it is also a personal loss" (p. 65). Of course, climate change has had myriad effects, most negative, and many much more damaging than anything I could feel in these moments. Millions of climate migrants and refugees have lost their homes entirely due to global warming, and many have lost lives (Rosane, 2019). TCKs feeling sad while returning to places they grew up is of comparatively much less significance. But it still hurts.

Some TCKs may not even be able to return to places rendered completely inaccessible or prohibitively inhospitable. Others may mourn the altered landscapes and absent communities, as droughts and floods destroy environments and drive entire populations away. At the risk of sounding preachy, I might point out that perhaps TCKs' grief at these changes may spur them to support efforts to ameliorate the devastating impacts of climate change. One can hope.

In any case, as we passed the (reduced) *karambak* on either side of us, bouncing down the dusty road, the minutes ticking by, I wondered how much our house might have changed. Would I even recognize it? Would it even still be there? Burger (2011) writes: "Miles of highway allow time to process the mountain of memories and emotions generated from seeing the old home and neighborhood" (p. 76). Indeed.

Arriving and Greetings

I teach an undergraduate course on autoethnography, and I wrote the following passage during a class exercise, attempting to model thick description (Geertz, 1973) for my students by describing my arrival in Sindian:

> We pulled in and parked in the shade of the tree that isn't there anymore. We cut it down years, decades ago—I remember them taking turns hacking at it with an axe, then pulling it over, crashing to the ground. I remember swinging

> from that tree and observing the cracks in the concrete foundation that the roots caused—the reason it had to fall. The cracks are still there wider and sharper now. Maybe they weren't able to remove all the roots. The house is still standing, but it is much aged (Who am I to judge? I'm bald and fat, and only one of those is not my fault). The walls are dirty, and there are cracks there too. There are posters—political figures? religious leaders? —on the walls. The *bougainvillea*, my mother's beautiful flowers, are gone. My basketball hoop is gone—the outline of the frame is still stenciled into the wall though. This is where I lived for the first ten years of my life.

Four photographs—two from my childhood, two from 2017—illustrate the details etched in the text (see Figures 6-9): the tree, the *bougainvillea*, and the basketball hoop all gone; the appearance of posters and cracks.

Figure 6

Note. Photograph of author in front of house in Sindian (ca. 1986).

Figure 7

Note. Photograph of author's brother in front of house in Sindian (ca. 1989).

Figure 8

Note. Photograph of house in Sindian (May 2017).

Figure 9

Note. Photograph of house in Sindian (May 2017).

It had changed. It had aged (like I had) and (also like me), age had taken a toll. The harsh environmental conditions and the likely lack of resources for upkeep make that toll unsurprising (I am referring now to the house, not to myself—I have no excuses for my own deterioration). Mostly I was just relieved that it was there, and that I did recognize it, instantly.

What followed the parking of the taxi must be described, despite the cliché, as surreal. Remember, neither I, nor any member of my family had been in Sindian for more than 20 years.

I got out of Salbador's taxi and walked across the yard to where the neighbors were sitting. I noticed that I recognized the chairs—white-painted metal frames with yellow and orange striped plastic cushions. I used to sit on those exact chairs, and I disliked how the cushions felt against my skin. I saw a Snoopy stuffed animal on the ground. I am pretty sure there is a picture of me with that same toy in my crib.

I greeted the man who stood to greet me. "*Bonjour*," I said, nervous to speak in Jola, falling back on my still solid(ish) French. "*Je m'appelle Justin*." But he stopped me. *"Oui, oui, fils de Brad et Elizabeth*." Son of my parents. He remembered. Salbador had been right. And though I hadn't recognized him at first, I quickly realized this was Sagboté, the eldest son of the man who owned the property on which our house was built: Tonton Soly, I called him; he was Aida's husband, and a kind of surrogate grandfather to me. I had heard Tonton Soly died more than a decade ago, but now his son shook my hand, and we exchanged a proper Jola greeting.

"*Saafi*," Sagboté said, and he called me by my Jola name: "*Sitapha Badji*" (I was named after the carpenter who built our house, whom I had followed around, waving my own blue plastic hammer in admiring imitation).

"*Kasuumaay*," he said, another part of the greeting, meaning an extension of peace.

"*Kasuumaay keb*," I replied, returning the wish for peace, and peace *only*.

"*Kati sindaay*," he asked: "How are those at your home?"

It did not occur to me at the time, but in describing it later, it struck me that Jola distinguishes between the words for house—*eluupey*—and home: *sindaay*. So does English, for that matter, but some languages do not. French, for example: *la maison* can be either. If, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would have it, language shapes one's perception of the world, and especially the ways that young children make sense of abstract as well as material phenomenon, I wonder what effect it would have on a child—like me—to learn a language, or languages, that make that distinction between home and house, concept and space, as opposed to blending the place and the idea into a single term.

Now, however, we all sat—I felt the familiar and uncomfortable scratch of the knobby plastic cushion through my sheer Columbia shirt—and talked. I barely knew what we were talking about. I was looking around me as much and as hard as I could, taking everything in.

Sagboté was speaking in both Jola and French, switching effortlessly from one to the other. Salbador was translating a fair amount of the Jola into French, which I could follow more easily. I wondered what Salbador must be thinking about all this. When we told him we were going to Sindian because I had lived there years ago, I suspected he must have thought we had spent a few weeks there, or maybe months, like Peace Corps volunteers. He could not have known the extent of our lives in the Casamance or anticipated our reception. Even I could not have predicted that.

In any case, Salbador seemed to have joined our party more fully than one might expect a taxi driver to do, and I was grateful for his presence, and especially for his linguistic skill. Born in neighboring Guinea and raised in the Casamance—so a TCK himself—Salbador was fluent in several languages, including Jola, which was helpful, since I had lost much of my own command of that language.

That was a hard loss to realize. Language can connect with concepts of self and home in powerful ways, perhaps especially for TCKs. Because of their frequently high mobility, TCKs are often (though not always) fluent or at least functional in several languages, and researchers have found that multilingualism is an especially important and valuable part of many TCKs' identity (Kwon, 2019; Tannenbaum & Tseng, 2015). Indeed, Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock (2017) assert: "Acquiring fluency in more than one language is potentially one of the most useful life skills a cross-cultural upbringing can give" (p. 175).

I was among the TCKs who could comfortably claim multilingual status. In addition to and alongside learning English, I learned Jola, from Aida, and Tonton Soly, from carpenter Sitapha, and from the village children. I was fluent, or as fluent as a toddler can be. Later, I learned French, the official (colonial) language of Senegal. The fact that my parents were professional linguists, working on language development and translation, must have reinforced the value of my multilingualism.

Sadly, that value has not endured as much as I would have liked. When we left the village, I had few opportunities to practice my Jola, and most of it is gone. Not unlike my grief for the change to the Casamance terrain, I bemoaned my own lack of effort in maintaining my multilingualism. At least my French remains—if a tad *rouillé*—and I could keep up with the conversation that way, with Salbador's help. Also, I had reviewed some Jola vocabulary and phrases before the trip, so even while internally I shook my head at my own loss of linguistic skill, outwardly at least I could nod and murmur *ee*, *jajak,* and *malegen*—yes, it's good, and true.

One thing Sagboté told me that I understood clearly, without translation, was truly good news—perhaps the best possible: Aida was living in Sindian. I was elated, beyond words in any language, that I would see her, here and now. Sagboté said someone would walk with me

to her house, in another part of the village. That reunion was among the more emotionally intense experiences of my life, but, bluntly, I do not feel able to describe it in detail at this time. I hope and expect to tell that story in the future, but I cannot do it justice now, and I will not try to do less.

Our House

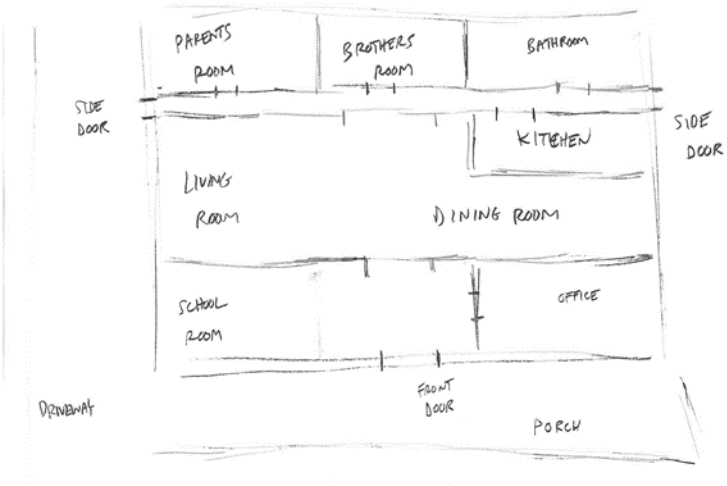
Before going to visit Aida, Sagboté offered a tour of our house. It was a gracious invitation, but it was one I would have asked for, even at risk of rudeness, if he had not offered. I ached to see the inside of our house.

To be clear, I have called the house "ours" not in terms of legal ownership, but in the sense that my family lived in it. The house was built on Tonton Soly's land, with his permission, and always with the understanding that it would be his or his heirs after twenty years. No-one could consider it now to belong to anyone but Sagboté. I certainly do not.

But most of my earliest memories are in this house. I learned to read and write in this house, and to count, and if my counting is correct, it is still the single house in which I have lived longest. It did not and does not *belong* to me or my family, yet it will always be mine and ours, somehow.

Burger (2011) describes the experience of some of his research subjects struggling to remember details about their childhood houses. Several, for example, could not draw the floor plans of the house from memory. I grant that our house's floor plan might be smaller and simpler than many, but immediately after reading that passage, I sketched that plan (see Figure 10).

Figure 10



Note. Sketch of floorplan of house in Sindian (2019).

The sketch can be confirmed, partly by referring to home videos—like the one below, filmed during construction (https://vimeo.com/385011579) and partly by my own walkthrough of the space while accompanied by Sagboté, Salbador, and Hayley (see Figure 11). It must, however, be corrected in one aspect—the kitchen ran the length of the dining/living room, not limited to a corner thereof.

Figure 11

Note. Photograph of author in kitchen of house in Sindian (May 2017).

Like the exterior, the interior had changed, aged. The toilet bowl was gone, and the tile in the kitchen cracked. The brown linoleum on the floor had been peeled away. I stood in the doorway of the bedroom in which I had slept more nights than in any other bedroom in my life (see Figure 12). I remembered how hard it was to fall asleep under the mosquito net that not only kept malaria at bay, but also augmented the heat, already almost unbearably thick and heavy at times, as this home video documents: https://vimeo.com/386558775. There was still a mosquito net in the room, and I wondered whether it and the bedframe were the same I had slept under and on, but out of politeness, I did not ask or look more closely.

Figure 12

Note. Photograph of author's childhood bedroom in Sindian (May 2017).

Familiar Tastes

We—Hayley, Salbador, and I—sat on a mat in the living room and ate a meal provided by Sagboté (see Figure 13). Jola culture highly prioritizes hospitality. Guests—even, as we were, wholly unexpected ones—are welcomed and *fêted* and fed. Within half an hour of our arrival, we were given a bowl of rice, cooked in oil and tomato sauce with small pieces of vegetables and chicken. It is a variation on one of the staple Senegalese recipes: *Thieb*, which literally means "rice." *Thieb* is eaten from a large, shallow, communal bowl, from which each person spoons their portions. It is simple, and delicious.

Figure 13

Note. Photograph of author eating on floor of living room in Sindian (May 2017).

We ate until we could not eat anymore. I would have stopped long before I did, both from fullness and to avoid consuming what might have been the allotment for Sagboté's family's evening meal. Sindian is certainly not the most underprivileged village on the planet, but most people there are relatively poor, and margins are thin. To stop and leave uneaten food, though, would be rude, as Salbador reminded me, urging me to keep eating.

As we sat and ate, I remembered other meals in that room. Home videos show two such: https://vimeo.com/385012034 and https://vimeo.com/386547802.

In the first video, taken in 1991 when I was eight years old, my family sat in almost exactly the same space where Hayley and Salbador and I sat in 2017, but on chairs—on one of those very same lawn chairs now in the yard outside—and around a table.

Another, shorter video from 1994 shows the same space. Same chairs. Same arrangement, except my brother and I have switched places. The dish was different: *durangue*, a peanut-based sauce, and my favorite of the Senegalese staple meals.

If you listen carefully to the 1991 video, when my mother says this is our last day in the village (for that year), you can hear me say: "Good." There were ways in which I preferred city life to living in the village. At least in the city there was a chance of electricity and running water. My brother was always happy to hunt (and eat) palm rats with the village children, but as I grew older (and undeniably less adventurous), I wanted to read more and more. It was challenging to read by candle or kerosene lamp.

I never ate the palm rats with my brother, but another way in which I preferred the city was the food. Maybe unsurprisingly, meals—the preparation and consumption of food—can be closely linked with the concept of home, and thus of self. Marta Rabikowska (2010), researching the culinary attitudes and practices of Polish migrants to England, asserts: "Food in its very sensual dimension serves as vehicle for the recreation of the abstract meaning of home through material involved activities" (p. 378). Rabikowska observes three recurring attitudes towards food: "orthodox," the strict adherence to tradition; "porous," the preference for tradition but with some openness to difference; and "alternate," the active embrace of the different.

After some consideration, I think my family's practice fit best into the porous category, but closer to the border between porous and alternate. Specifically, we usually ate a Senegalese meal at midday, but in the evening, we tended towards more Western fare. This practice was dependent on availability of ingredients—Western staples like cheese and pasta and even bread could be hard to come by, even in the city, and more so in Sindian.

Tastes in the family varied. My brother might have eaten the Senegalese rice and sauce every meal of every day, if he could. I preferred hamburgers and macaroni. It was not that I disliked *thieb* or *durangue*. I just got tired of them and wanted variety—especially of the less healthy variety. When we would return to the city, or to the United States, I gobbled up super-concentrated sugar snacks and Happy Meals™.

Here is another change, this one more satisfying than the shrinking forests, the deteriorating house, and my missing Jola. Now, all grown up, I prefer natural ingredients and bold flavors to the bland, processed chemicals and high-fructose corn syrup that constitute so much of American diets. I shake my head at my youthful tastes and nod along with Shakespeare's Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*: "Doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age" (2.3.229-231). Not only have I lost (most of) my taste for Twinkies and Big Macs, but now I also take every opportunity to enjoy Senegalese cuisine.

My changing preference and practice make sense and carry significance, according to Rabikowska (2010). Migrants—and TKCs can be considered migrants, in some ways—often carry complex and conflicting thoughts and feelings about how to eat in their host culture: "Being polarized between estrangement and acceptance, the double narrative of a migrants' identity is unavoidable, while the ritualisation of their practice aims at both eliciting particularity and staying the same" (p. 396). I can relate to that polarization, that antithesis of estrangement and acceptance, but for me, as maybe for other TCKs, the dynamic is yet more complex. As TCKs, the double narrative of migrants' identity is further complicated, at least triangulated rather than just polarized. As adult TCKs returning to the host culture of childhood, still another position/perspective should be added for a potentially dizzying crystallization.

Let me try to clarify. As a TCK, while I accepted and enjoyed the food local to where I lived, which became (maybe, for me, overly) familiar, I preferred the American flavors that were enticingly strange to me, despite where I had been born. As an adult, I live in the U.S., accepting and enjoying the food there, but I also crave the tastes of my migrant(ish) childhood.

Let me illustrate further. When we did visit Aida later that day, she asked us what she could cook for us on the following day. I said *durangue*—my favorite. As Aida prepared the meal, we—Hayley, I, and still with us, Salbador—sat in the shade and snacked on mangoes and beignets. The beignets were crisp, freshly fried, the mangoes cut right from the tree above us. Both were delicacies of my childhood, and I have sought for comparable tastes in my travels, finding few: a popular pastry in Iceland, adequate approximations of the fruit in Florida.

We also drank tea, or *wargaay*. Jolas make tea through an elaborate if informal ceremony, as culturally distinct and significant a ritual as that practiced in, say, England, where I have also lived—though there I prefer the ales to the tea. Over several hours, Jolas brew a series of three increasingly sweet cups. Each cup is artfully aerated by pouring back and forth, producing the bubbly head that helps cut the strength of the taste of the black tea, textured with loose steeping leaves (see Figure 14). I savored that texture and taste, basking in the physical heat and the warmth of memory of many cups of *wargaay* and bites of beignets and mango.

Figure 14

Note. Photograph of making tea in Sindian (May 2017).

The tea, the beignets, the mangoes, the meal—all contributed to a sense described by Rabikowska in her study: “Between the material place which was left behind in the past and the present materiality of a life of a migrant there is a space of everyday rituals filled with old memories and contemporaneous habits that transform a place into home” (p. 396). As a child, I identified the material place of Sindian as home, partly through rituals and habits like *wargaay* and *durangue*. Returning to that place—and those rituals and habits—reaffirmed a sense of home, a sense that had strengthened through the years, despite, or maybe because of, distance.

That sense was further reinforced when Aida served the *durangue* in a white porcelain dish with blue flowers on the side (see Figure 15). I knew that dish. I have other pieces from

that same set in my own kitchen cupboard in Pennsylvania. I occasionally eat breakfast on the plates. So, my (now) home in America connects with my (then…always?) home in Africa in a remarkable and explicit manner.

Figure 15

Note. Photograph of meal in Sindian (May 2017).

Final Reflections

Autoethnographers do not seek authoritative conclusions through their research. The genre is not suited to producing the generalizations other forms of research seek. Rather, autoethnographers hope that the data they present—whether their own stories or information found in other sources—will resonate with readers, reminding them, perhaps, of their own experiences, and encouraging them to seek for further perspectives.

Thus, throughout this account, I have not attempted to impose my own perspective. I certainly do not assert that my experience can represent all other TCKs' concepts of home or self. Instead, I have observed how my personal experience, especially when framed by research conducted by Burger (2011) and others, *could* connect with the broader social/cultural context of TCK life. It is for other TCKs—or non-TCKs, for that matter—to reflect on their own experiences and to consider which, if any, parts of my account might resonate with their lives. Surely, all people can recognize changes from childhood in their concepts of self and of home, and maybe the elements I have described (language, roads, food) may resonate with them, whether or not they have ever traveled outside of the country or culture into which they were born.

I wish to finish this essay by returning to something I mentioned when describing my arrival in Sindian in May 2017. Burger (2011) observes an unexpectedly recurrent theme in his research: strong emotional attachments to trees:

> Without any prompting from us, person after person mentioned trees. Many described the trees that grew in their neighborhood park or that filled the mountains near their former homes. But more often, they identified a specific tree or grove of trees that they had treasured as a child. (p. 57)

When I first read this passage, sitting at my desk in my office, I started crying. Even copying and pasting the quotation from Burger, I still tear up. Apparently, I am among the many (56% of Burger's research subjects) who have powerful memories of trees and their association with home.

Now, I am no arborist. I admire the aesthetics and respect the functions of trees, but I spend relatively little time thinking about them. I know that my favorite tree is the baobab: the national symbol of Senegal, representing power, peace, and wisdom. I know I am mildly allergic to willows. But I cannot identify the species of trees outside of my work window. The only reason I know what's in my own front yard is because before Hayley and I bought the house, a tree surgeon told me that those Norwegian Pines are healthy and shouldn't need to be cut down. My point is, I am not the kind of person one might expect to react so strongly to Burger's research.

But there are two trees in particular that stand tall (pun intended) in my memory of my childhood home. One of these trees stands *only* in my memory. As I described, that tree grew too close to our house—just a few yards from the front door—and the roots began to break the concrete patio. Eventually, the foundations would have been destroyed, so we had the tree cut down. We videotaped that event: https://vimeo.com/386547330.

At the time, I was sad to no longer have the swing we had hung from the tree's branches, but it was exciting to watch the cutting and the felling. I was not allowed, like Tonton Soly, to climb up on the just-fallen trunk, but there was a sensation of communal accomplishment, victory, man over nature. Or some such nonsense.

Arriving in Sindian in May 2017, I felt, as I feel right now, the absence of that tree as a deep loss. Is it coincidental that we cut the tree down not long before we left the Casamance? Of course it is, but I realize how my feeling manifests Burger's (2011) invocation of trees as symbolic of permanence…or the lack thereof.

More permanent is the second tree: enormous, broad-trunked, and near the edge of the plot of land on which our house was built, so posing no threat to any building's foundations. Growing up, I had not the foggiest idea, or curiosity, about what kind of tree it was, but I asked my mother to ask a friend who happens to be a prominent Senegalese tree expert. After scrutinizing the photograph I sent, he said it was *Khaya senegalensis*, or dryzone mahogany: "an evergreen tree with a widely spreading, rounded crown, a very important and valuable timber" (Fern, 2020, August 30).

Pre-teen TCK me would have said never mind the crown or timber—the breadth of the trunk and the knobby protrusions that bulged near the ground made it an easy and enjoyable climb. Burger (2011) mentions the accessibility of trees as a feature pleasing to many children.

As our taxi approached Sindian, I hoped that the tree would still be there—almost as much as I hoped our house would. Thankfully, both were.

Not surprisingly, like the house, the Khaya senegalensis looked a little smaller than I remember, but it is still enormous. Probably wide enough even for adult TCK me to climb, but I restrained myself, not wanting to look too ridiculous, or to risk an injury. Instead, Hayley took a picture of me touching the trunk (see Figure 16). Now I kind of wish I had climbed it.

Figure 16

Note. Photograph of author and Khaya senegalensis, Sindian (May 2017).

But just before leaving Sindian, I also took a picture of the tree, with Salbador's taxi in the background (see Figure 17). I pinned the latter picture to the wall by my desk at work. Every day I can, and do, look at it and remind myself of, yes, home.

Figure 17

Note. Photograph of photograph of taxi and Khaya senegalensis (2019).

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