

The Color of Home

By Linseigh Green

LINSEIGH: This is Linseigh Green with “The Color of Home,” an audio portrait from the Fall 2018 “Talk to Me” radio class.

ANTHONY: I guess I kinda look at it this way:

ROBIN: Well, I define home . . .

BARRY: Home. Home, home, home.

ROBIN: . . . as a feeling.

WILHELMINA: Home is where your family is.

ANTHONY: I look at my mother’s current home as being home.

BARRY: Mom’s house.

ROBIN: Laughter.

BARRY: My house is home too. I’ve been there twenty-seven years.

ROBIN: Warmth.

WILHELMINA: Like we still think of 2112 as home. You know. Because that’s where the family would always come for Christmas and Easter and whatnot until the grandparents passed away.

ROBIN: Memories.

BARRY: I’ll always have two homes. The one that I currently live in and this one.

ROBIN: Fun.

BARRY: If I move down out of the state or whatever, and I came back to Westbury, I’d still consider it home because of the people I knew and the relationships and my involvement in the community.

ANTHONY: I guess I'm so far away from Westbury that I don't look at Westbury as much as home as I used to. So I look at Muttontown more or less as home.

BARRY: Maybe I'll consider Westbury home as in a spiritual manner.

ROBIN: Love.

WILHELMINA: But home for me now is here. Cause this is where my family was raised.

ANTHONY: And then my home here. My wife and I got married, we moved into this home. And we've been in this home ever since. And we've had our daughter here.

ROBIN: That cannot be transmitted anywhere else.

BARRY: And call it home for that reason.

ROBIN: That is the only place that's home for me.

LINSEIGH: Home. It's so familiar we tend to forget it can be entirely foreign to someone else. And it's so quotidian that we forget just how much it informs who we are, who we become. I'd set out to create a quilt of hometown stories that spanned geographical and ethnic space. A young Romanian woman who immigrated to Georgia as a child. A woman who didn't understand racism and American cultural imperialism until she left her insular hometown in Jamaica. But in some cases, I started to find patterns that revolved around not only the geography of home, but the color of it. I was left with two stories—one from the North, one from the South—about racialization of real estate, crossing the line between the familiar and the alien, how memory withstands the erasure of space, and the phantom of people's hometowns that they still have draped around their shoulders.

First, let's take a trip uptown.

LINSEIGH: Wilhelmina's grandparents immigrated from Barbados at the turn of the twentieth century. Her grandfather, a mailman, put their home in their daughter's name. She was only one year old.

WILHELMINA: Harlem was family. We had a brownstone with my grandparents, and then my mother, father, brother, sister and, cousins lived upstairs on the fifth floor. Next door my grandmother's sister and her husband bought that brownstone. That was the only family I knew that lived like that. You know there were two houses, side by side, five stories, filled with family.

So you went between your home and the church. All kinds of games, teams, and whatnot. Basketball, baseball, and whatnot, yeah. And religious classes, choir, piano. And you played outside in front of your house, but you didn't go around the corner to play. That wasn't allowed. You played right in your immediate neighborhood.

You know how they talk about a village? You didn't dare do anything outside of your home that you didn't want reported back to your parents.

I can't imagine growing up anywhere else. Where else could I have grown up?

Oh my goodness gracious, there are more other people, white people in Harlem than the blacks, you know! Because they came and bought up all of the brownstones, you know, they were very inexpensive you know. The way we had family there; it's no longer the same.

You had a strong sense of self in Harlem. These were some strong black people in Harlem. And they let you know you were special. And you didn't have anyone telling you you weren't special until you got outside of Harlem. And then you began to see some of the feedback from the rest of the world. But in Harlem, you had a strong sense of self. A lot of good black people building you up and telling you "you go girl," you know. "You're good, you're bright, you can do it."

I really didn't get that negativity till we got married. And that summer, we went traveling to Virginia because your grandfather was his family came from Virginia. And for the first time ever, I experienced racism. Signs that said "no niggers allowed." Which stunned me at the time. We went to Luray Caverns in the Shenandoah National Park. We were allowed to go on the tour with the group, but when we came back to the picnic area we couldn't sit at the picnic tables. "No blacks allowed." And when I had to use the bathroom and they had a beautiful bathroom there for the tourists to go in—my sign said the washroom where they had the buckets and the sink—you know the cleaning sink—and the mop and a little toilet. That's where I had to use the bathroom, you know. That was the first time: 1956. The summer. And at that time, I told my husband, brand new husband, "I will not be back down here!"

But I hadn't experienced it before then. Except when we were looking for apartments. And a lot of apartments were in two-family houses in the brownstones, very nice areas. And we would go looking. And your grandfather was fair skinned. He would go the door and ring the bell. And they would say, "Oh, come right in—lovely apartment!" And when I got out of the car and went with him, all of a sudden, cousin Sue in five minutes was gonna be taking that apartment and it was no longer available! Looking for an apartment, you know, or traveling into the south, that all of a sudden it hit, you know. This is what the rest of the world thinks you are.

Do you see where I'm living now? In this white exclusive area here? It was an ad in the newspaper. And I called the realtor and set up the time and everything before he saw me. And then it just happened that it was an elderly lady here. And she just wanted out before the snows came again. And she didn't care who bought the house, you know! I said to myself, "I'll be back. You got rid of me this time, but I shall return." Okay? And I did! I did! What I want, I will get. Okay? I wasn't ready for you last time, but I know you now. And I will take care of it. I came back.

ANTHONY: We moved there in '71.

LINSEIGH: This is Anthony, Wilhelmina's eldest son. He was thirteen when his family left their familiar, predominantly black blue-collar neighborhood in Westbury.

ANTHONY: When we moved into Muttontown, it was all white. That was a shocker in itself. The land we had was much bigger. We had two acres of land, versus a small plot of land. The house was bigger . . . And then the way a lot of these kids lived. They had in-ground swimming pools in some of their houses, their families drove nicer cars than we did. It was a little bit of a culture shock. Most of the people there were fairly well off. Their fathers—'cause most of the mothers were stay at home—they owned companies or they worked for NBC . . . Whereas my parents were just schoolteachers and assistant principals. So I was probably the only one that had parents that had normal jobs, I guess, where you just go and get paid, whereas with everyone else, they had their own businesses.

The house we bought was a fixer upper. Because an older couple lived there, so we had to work hard to get our house to look good. I was kind of ashamed because our house didn't look as good as the others. We had tall grass because they didn't cut the grass, the exterior looked a little

worn, whereas the other houses looked pretty much pristine. Beautiful manicured lawns, they had landscapers come by and take care of everything. I just felt like, “Euh, our house looked terrible in comparison to some of these others!”

I felt welcome, Wade felt welcome, but my brother Barry might not have felt as welcome.

BARRY: It was sticker shock for me because I went from probably a mixed classroom in third grade to being the only black person in my classroom. And so that was something to get used to.

LINSEIGH: . . . And this is Barry.

BARRY: Your first day of school walking into those—mid-year too, it was February, so—when I first walked into the classroom, I was kind of ashamed of it—but I cried. I must’ve cried in front of all these kids.

But it was good at first. I had a certain group of friends that lived here in the neighborhood, so they were on my bus. After those first two weeks, then they started making fun of me. ’Cause I was different.

LINSEIGH: . . . And then there were some other things the family had to get used to.

ANTHONY: My brother Wade was waiting outside for a bus. Just standing outside, I think he was eleven years old or something like that, and someone called the cops saying a black kid was robbing the house. Apparently a cop car stopped by, and they asked my brother questions. My brother said, “I’m waiting for the bus.” Well one cop stood with my brother while the other went to confirm with my mother that that was the case.

WILHELMINA: One lady to the back of us that wasn’t too happy at all.

BARRY: As racist as can be.

WILHELMINA: The children would hear her saying—because she was very loud. She still is very loud. You know—“Don’t bring them here and whatnot.” But. She fell in love with your father. Cause she had a piano. And she would invite your father in to play the piano. She got to know the family behind her. Rather than just looking and saying, “Oh my god, what do we have moving in here?” You know?

BARRY: I guess it was probably her first exposure to an African American family. Especially moving over right next door. Or right behind them. We were the first one, definitely in this immediate part of town, if not the entire village.

LINSEIGH: What was a move driven by spite for one was a complicated transition for the others. But for Wilhelmina's children, Muttontown eventually became home. It still is. Both Barry and Anthony say that had they not experienced such a demographic paradox, they may not have learned how to navigate spaces that are diverse, or where they view themselves as different. They appreciate their ability to understand what it's like to live on both sides of the fence, and it's left them with empathy.

BARRY: Overall, this was the best place growing up. Summertime in the backyard. The parties that mom and dad would hold every year. Bunch of us kids swimming, having a good time, volleyball. I look forward to that day every year. And I was depressed the day after that party. Knowing it would be a whole year before we'd have a party again. That was probably the best—on a second Sunday in July. One of my most memorable moments. Always. That'll always be home.

LINSEIGH: Anthony eventually moved to Georgia, where he met his wife, Robin. They frequently speak of how the worlds they come from are so different, but the undercurrents of the disconnect share a similar makeup.

ROBIN: Lynwood Park became a town when a white lady bought all the property in Lynwood park and she said that for a hundred years only black people can purchase the property. My granddaddy helped to build the house that we lived in.

When I first moved into our house in southwest Atlanta, I was four years old. When we got there, I discovered that we had about three and a half acres of land. In our yard we had orchards of apple trees, peach trees, pear trees, plum trees, we had a scupadine organ, we had strawberries as well as blueberries, and I loved picking blackberries! I would pick so many blackberries that my mom was able to make blackberry pies. We would pick the fruit from the trees and my mom would make fresh peach pies and apple pies, and we would eat the pears until we would just hurt our stomachs.

Our property was right next to a railroad track. Trains would come by maybe every six hours or so. The train did shake the house but barely. We would have candy in the tables in the living room, and they would always rattle. We stayed there for so long until it became very soothing.

At the time, it was my grandmother who lived next door to us, and then a white family that lived next door to my grandmother. But two or three months after we moved to Boulder Park, the white family moved out. And it was considered as white flight at that time . . .

The Cranes lived next door to my grandmother. My parents would invite them to come over and have cookouts with us, and everybody always got the exact same meal. But because there were six kids in my family, the few times that we were invited to their home for cookouts, their children would get barbeque ribs and steak, we could only have hotdogs because we were told that there were too many of us. There was another neighbor that lived up the street. They had a son whose name was Mack Jones who played for the Atlanta Braves around the same time that Hank Aaron started playing for the Atlanta Braves. And I was just very impressed that we had a professional baseball player that lived in our neighborhood.

All of the neighbors in my immediate area always looked after the kids. This was before neighborhood watch became a thing. The neighbors were mostly elderly people. And they always looked out the windows or sat on the porch when it was time for us to come home from school. There was always somebody watching. There was one set of neighbors that would sit on their porch and watch every single day and speak to us as we passed by. But if we didn't speak loud enough, our neighbors would call our parents and tell our parents that we would not speak to them as we were walking by their house. If the neighbors complained about us, we would have to apologize or we would get a spanking. Our parents would go outside and get a switch. Some people call it a stick—or a limb—that you get from a tree. And you could smell the freshness of the switch.

I was told by people that Atlanta was different. It may have had something to do with Dr. Martin Luther King living in Atlanta at the time. And fighting for the rights of the people. Dr. Martin Luther King's nieces and nephews attended the same elementary and high school that I attended. After high school and college, I worked for the Atlanta Department of Corrections and at that time, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s son worked with me.

I attended elementary school with Hank Aaron's son, and his name was Hanky Jr. And I was still able to keep in contact with him because my best friend dated Hanky. So that's how I became friends with Hank Aaron Jr. And Maynard Jackson's children were at Southwest High School at the same time that I was there. Also Andrew Young's children were in the same high school when I was there . . .

It most definitely shaped me to be the person that I am. I lived in an all-black area—not predominately black—it was an all-black area. I always felt just comfortable, at home, being around other blacks. After marrying, my husband and I moved to a predominately white area. It was very uncomfortable for me. And I always told my husband, “I wanna go back to the hood. I wanna move back to the hood.” My husband grew up in a more diverse area. He would just tell me, “Well you go on, but I'm gonna stay right here.” There were no blacks in my cul-de-sac. I didn't know any blacks in the area, period. When I went places, it was just mostly white people. There were about ten; if ten black families that lived in the subdivision that consists of over three hundred homes. And I very seldom ran into them. There were all black people at my school, at my church, at the mall . . . We would go to a theater that was for blacks only . . . I just grew up around black people.

The neighborhood is not the way that it was when we were growing up. People are not putting any care into their properties. To me, the city of Atlanta still feels like home, but I would not want to move back to Boulder Park. Not unless I felt safer. Right now, there's a lot of crime. It's very disappointing. I can see that they are going to gradually change that neighborhood. Because when I go by, I see that a lot of the houses that have been removed. It's just an empty lot. The neighborhood is going to be gentrified. I think that erasure is in the process.

LINSEIGH: A hometown isn't necessarily a place we get to return to. But however we define it, it shows us how the molding of who we are, how we take in the world around us, is informed by space. And with every transition, every instance of culture shock and adjustment, we wrap it around our shoulders and carry it with us as we move through the present.