

“Home Sweet Home”
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Perhaps somewhat foolishly, I signed up to deliver my Lowell speech just six days before my thesis is due. When I realized, I convinced myself that this was still a good idea: it would give me a way of distracting myself, to think about something other than my thesis for once. With that in mind, I’d like to start by telling you an unrelated anecdote... about my thesis research.

I spent last summer interviewing expatriate migrants in France, learning about their identity, their belonging, and where they call “home.” It was a topic I chose for logistical reasons: my social studies focus field is European migration, I desperately wanted Harvard to pay for me to spend a summer in Paris, and speaking only English plus patchy French meant that high-skilled British migrants in France seemed like the only sensible topic. That said, as I spoke to these individuals about both the difficulties and pleasures they face as Brits living abroad in France, I realized that I was potentially one of them: they were describing my present, or perhaps my future, as a Brit living abroad in the United States.

This was quite an unsettling feeling. Here I was, a 21-year-old international student, talking to a 45-year-old mother of three about how she used to be just an international student who went to France for college, and the next thing she knows she’s fallen in love with the country, fallen in love with a man, and is married with kids, and is now a French citizen. “How did that happen?!” she tells me. “I’m sure the same thing could happen to you in America.” I was a little jolted by this, thinking that surely I couldn’t be so careless with my future as to suddenly become a middle-aged American parent without realizing it. But deep down, I knew she was right.

You see, when I came to Harvard from my rural town in England, it was a decision about, to be totally honest with you, where I would enjoy my time at university the most—socially as well as academically. Perhaps what would look good on my resume.

I certainly didn’t expect to find a new home; I was perfectly happy with the one I already had.

Another interviewee in Paris told me that “I don’t think I could go back to live in the UK, because after living abroad, you’re always something more. I don’t think I could reduce myself to less again.” After having lived in a foreign country for 4 years now, I realize she is right. Even if you’ve moved only 10 miles down the road, with a new place to call home, you’re always something more.

Because I could never go back to living in my small town in rural England. I don’t feel at home there any more. While some part of me loves nothing more than going back and spending time with my friends and family, eating proper food and drinking proper beer and speaking proper English, there’s always something missing now. Another part of me yearns for the cosmopolitanism and diversity of American cities, the theatre of American politics, Dunkin Donuts and Chipotle. Because the irony of loving my time at Harvard, my time in America, so much, is that in finding a second place to call home, I realize that I am never truly “at home” in either. There is not a single place on earth that I could live without missing one, or the other, or both.

Now, utterly riddled with this sense of insecurity about my future, and indeed my present, I’ve been forced to write a 120-page thesis about the troubled identity of high-skilled British migrants abroad, fully aware that if I replaced the word “France” with the word “America” throughout, it would essentially be an autobiographical work.

Over the course of writing those 120 pages, I’ve wrestled with all sorts of issues. I have found some academic answers to sociological questions, but I’m no closer to resolving that personal dilemma: how to belong when you are more than any one place. But perhaps that is beyond the scope of this study.