Citation:
Swanson, Kate. 2014. Where is home? An autoethnography of academic migration. Pages 27-40 in *Transnational Borders, Transnational Lives. Academic Mobility at the Borderlands.* Rémy Tremblay and Susan Hardwick (Eds.). Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec.

Where is home? An auto-ethnography of academic migration

by Kate Swanson

Many years ago while living abroad, I wrote to a friend to tell her that I would be coming "home" soon. In her response she asked, "where is home?" I have thought about this question for many years, as I have moved from Canada, to Ecuador, to Scotland, and to the United States. Is home where the heart is, as embroidered sofa pillows sometimes declare? Is it where you store your personal belongings? Is it the place where you were born? Or is "home" perhaps a more portable or fluid concept and something that travels with us as we move. As Anzaldúa describes: "I am a turtle, wherever I go, I carry 'home' on my back" (1999, 43).

I note that my spatial imaginary of "home" continues to shift as I move from place to place. As I relocate, I carry my cultural baggage and package it to create a representation of "home," imbued with personal emotions and feelings (see Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Throughout this process, I continue to wonder: when and how does a new place transform to become this ideal representation of "home"? In this chapter, I use the auto-ethnographic approach suggested by Butz (2010) to reflect upon the concept of "home" and tease out some of my observations pertaining to life as a recently translocated Canadian in the United States. In what follows, I discuss my migration

experiences and reflect on some of the differences that I have encountered, especially how I perform my Canadian identity in America.

I was born and raised in Southern Ontario, Canada and lived there for the majority of my life. The geography of my youth included rolling hills, expansive tobacco fields, maple-beech forests, and the meandering Grand River. Over the last decade, I have spent little time living in my nation of birth. In pursuit of academic opportunities, I have lived in four different countries and eight different residences. I spent a year and a half living in Quito, Ecuador for my Ph.D. research; I spent almost three years living Glasgow, Scotland as a post-doctoral research fellow; and at the time of writing this, I have been living in San Diego, California working as an Assistant Professor for almost three years. This final move has been the most surprising to me. Growing up in Canada, I never imagined that I would end up living in the United States. Even when my older brother, who is also an academic, secured a job at a private university in the U.S., it did not occur to me that this could be my path. If I am honest, I felt some sympathy for Canadians who were "forced" to take jobs outside of Canada, away from the oft-perceived land of milk and honey (more on this later). I recall watching Michael Moore's *Sicko*, a vicious condemnation of America's healthcare system and demanding that my partner never allow me to apply for jobs in the United States. Yet, here I am.

In academia, we often have little control over where we end up living. For junior scholars, going on the job market is exciting and terrifying, and almost feels like playing roulette. For Canadian scholars, landing that elusive job at "home" can be especially difficult due to the limited number of academic positions available in Canada. For this reason, many end up relocating south of the U.S./Canada border to find opportunities in

the United States, where colleges and universities vastly outnumber those found in Canada.

Now that I am becoming settled in the United States, however, I am surprised by how happy I am living in a place I never expected to end up in. Growing up in Canada, we are often raised to be prejudiced against the United States. I believe that some of these prejudices stem from the fact that we are inundated with American media and culture north of the border and yet, conversely, Americans know little about Canadian life and culture. And this hurts. Perhaps to boost our national pride, we re-circulate stories about the "dumb Americans" who accepted Canadian Tire money in Alabama, or some other southern state in the U.S. We watch Rick Mercer's satirical comedy *Talking to Americans* mock Americans and their ignorance of Canadian geography and culture. After moving to the U.S. I found it necessary to step back, reflect, and let go of some of this cultural baggage and try to re-interpret American culture more critically. As I discuss later, I believe I have made some progress in achieving this goal.

San Diego, California was not a place that I knew very much about before I was offered a faculty position in this southern California metropolitan area. I imagined the city to be similar to Los Angeles, with endless traffic and thick smog. Due to my own ignorance, I did not realize it is often ranked as one of the best places to live in the U.S. (and now that I live here, I can understand why). The main things that influenced my decision to accept the job offer in San Diego were the collegiality of the department, its location on the U.S./Mexico border (very convenient for my research, which focuses on urban geography, migration and marginality in Latin America), the Mediterranean climate, and the physical geography, with oceans, mountains and deserts nearby. Having

lived abroad in Scotland for three years, I knew that I wanted to come back to North America so that I could be closer to family – or at least within driving distance. I had also been somewhat traumatized by the weather in the west of Scotland during my residency there. Glasgow is a wonderful city but, to say the least, suffers dire weather. It rains almost every day, the clouds appear to brush the tops of buildings and winter days are dark and dreary. I recall looking at weather charts measuring annual sunshine hours for Glasgow versus San Diego. Glasgow was in the range of 1200 sunshine hours a year, whereas San Diego was in the range of 3000. Given that my job offer arrived close to the shortest day of the year, when there are fewer than seven hours of daylight, diffused through low, thick, damp clouds, my decision was not difficult.

However, immigrating to the United States was still challenging, especially for my partner. I immigrated on an H1-B visa, which is designed for skilled professionals. When we moved to the United Kingdom, my visa allowed my partner to immediately acquire a work permit, and as a software developer he was quickly able to find work. But this was not the case in the United States. Instead, he was granted an H-4 visa, which categorized him as a "dependent spouse." The result was that my spouse had few rights in the United States. He became entirely dependent upon me, both legally and financially. Not only was he unable to work, he also could not get a Social Security Number (SSN), a bank account, a car loan, a credit card, and we could not place anything under his name (the only exception was the cable company). Without a SSN, we discovered that life is very difficult in the United States. This experience gave us some insight into the struggles encountered by undocumented migrants who reside in the U.S. This is an issue of great concern to me since a central part of my research explores the lives of indigenous

Ecuadorian migrants, many of whom have begun embarking upon the treacherous migration route to the United States. When they arrive in the United States, they face insurmountable bureaucratic and logistical obstacles, yet they continue to come, inspired by dreams of a better futures for their children back home. The many challenges my partner faced also provided us with new insights into how the spouses of many documented migrants have been forced into a dependency situation for years. For instance, as I searched web forums for help on how to navigate the H1-B and H-4 immigration process, I discovered many forums for educated Indian women who were forced into positions of domesticity while their husbands worked in California's high tech industry. Within our first year of living here, an NPR program investigated the struggles faced by the wives of H1-B visa holders, and many women called in to explain their woes. Yet, there was no mention of how difficult it might also be for husbands, since the majority of H1-B visa holders are men, perhaps making our situation somewhat unique (see Banerjee, 2006). It would seem that the H1-B visa system is based upon the imaginary of a nuclear family with one breadwinner (generally male), an imaginary that is no longer viable.

In an interesting spin on domesticity, it turned out that I arrived for my new tenure-track job six months pregnant. The fact that my husband was unable to work in the United States ended up being a benefit to us (except financially), given the limited maternity leaves offered under federal and state law. Due to his forced domesticity, my partner became a full-time stay-at-home dad. Technically, I was eligible for six weeks of leave, plus two additional weeks of accumulated sick leave. I recall quite clearly that had I returned to work within eight weeks of my son's birth, I would have been going to work

and teaching classes with a total of three hours of sleep a night. This is outrageous in a nation that prides itself as being one of the most advanced economies in the world. However, because my son was born at the end of the winter semester, I was able to combine the winter break with my maternity leave to extend it up to a slightly better twelve weeks. Due to a very supportive department chair, I was not required to return to the classroom at the end of my leave to teach what remained of the spring semester. This meant that in my first year as a tenure-track assistant professor, I was able to spend much of my spring and summer semesters working at home and taking care of my newborn child. Having my partner at home on top of this, allowed me to actually function, and complete my book manuscript revisions, continue to advise students, and keep up with my other responsibilities at work.

One of my closest friends in Canada had a baby the day after I had my son, which gave me a direct point of comparison regarding maternity leaves in Canada and in the United States. My friend in Canada was an elementary school teacher who was able to stay at home on partial pay for one year. She received 100 percent pay for the first six weeks, then $468 per week from the federal government. She then chose to take an additional year of unpaid leave, with a guaranteed job upon her return. In comparison, another friend who resided in San Diego, was required to return to her classroom when her newborn child was only 8-weeks-old. She often went to work in tears and came close to quitting her job altogether, despite the years of education she had invested into her career. Another San Diego friend, also a highly-educated teacher, decided to quit her job after the birth of her second child because her meager teacher's salary would not cover the expense of two children in full-time daycare. An additional complication is that most

daycares in the U.S. do not accept infants until they are six months of age, yet many parents are forced to find caretakers for their children when their maternity leaves end after six to eight weeks. For academics, this can be particularly difficult given that many end up working far away from family and have little familial support. Most must hire nannies to care for their young infants or else quit their jobs altogether. Having a child in the United States as a professional woman is a different undertaking than having one in Canada, and therefore there can be no doubt that the U.S. system can make it more difficult for women to be as successful as their male counterparts. Of course, fathers have significant struggles as well (see Aitken, 2009), but the act of carrying and breastfeeding a child is a tremendous physical endeavour that saps many women of strength and energy, and can make it difficult to keep up. In order for the United States to prosper as an advanced economy and continue to attract (and retain) skilled professionals, they must reexamine their parental leave policies to accommodate the reality that both men and women must now work if families are to survive economically.

Which brings me to another topic of concern I have faced as a resident of the United States due to my career and my new role as a parent – the quality of K-12 education in the U.S. As a parent in the United States, I worry about the American public school system. I grew up in a city where I was able to walk to my local public school and was enrolled in an excellent French immersion program, which taught me to be bilingual. Access to high quality public education is more complicated in U.S. cities than in my childhood "home" in southern Ontario. Given California's ongoing budget crisis, education is on a downward spiral in the state. In fact, California's public school system now ranks 44th out of 50 states in terms of K-12 spending per student and the state ranks

50th in the nation in terms of student-teacher ratios (Kaplan, 2010). Because our local public school is rated very poorly, we will be forced to try to find a better school for our son. Through a lottery system, we may have the opportunity to enroll our son in a decent public school or charter school located some distance from our house. Or, we may end up shuttling him across the city to a private school, as many other middle-class parents choose to do. Yet, to do so would cost us between $11,000-$24,000 per year for an elementary school education. This concerns me greatly. I am also worried about what this means in terms of my son's exposure to diversity. Class and race continue to segregate schools in the United States, and private schools remain vanguards for the privileged. As Wise (2003) argues, white privilege in the United States is as invisible as water is to fish. By embedding my son within a private school system, I fear this will accentuate his class privilege, and render his white privilege invisible to him, too.

Since I am employed at a state university, I can also see how white privilege plays out in the United States at a more intense level than in Canada. San Diego State University (SDSU) is a state school, meaning that the majority of our students come from regional public schools. As such, due to chronic underfunding, the quality of their education has often been poor, at least as compared to my experiences teaching undergraduates at publicly funded universities in Canada, namely the University of Toronto and the University of Guelph. Moreover, San Diego State University has one of the most diverse student body populations in the nation. By the latest count, the majority of our students are individuals who identify as people of colour. Forty percent of our students self-identify as white, approximately thirty percent identify as Mexican American or Hispanic, and the remaining thirty percent identify as Filipino, Asian,

African American, among others. In addition, some of our students are from extremely impoverished households and are granted access to the university through the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which funds students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Every semester I teach a large introductory Human Geography course with approximately 80-110 students enrolled and in this class there are always a handful of students funded through the EOP. The majority of these students are Afghani or Somali refugees, or first generation Mexican Americans. Some of our Mexican American students lead truly transnational lives, as they reside in Tijuana, Mexico and commute across the border daily to attend university, subjecting their bodies to daily surveillance and inspections (see Bejarano, 2010). Commuting across the border for a better education is not uncommon in San Diego and some students have been doing this for their entire educated lives. A smaller percentage of our students are undocumented residents, meaning that they have no legal papers to be in the United States, even though many have lived in the U.S. since they were very young children. Teaching in this environment has provided me with a host of new insights into some of the powerful emotions and lives that are deeply affected by immigration debates in the U.S.

Because of my current proximity to the Mexico-U.S. border, my large introductory human geography course focuses intensely on migration, particularly undocumented migration from Latin America. I ask students to write papers tracing their families' migration paths, with instructions to tie into debates pertaining to undocumented migration to the United States. What I have learned is that ties to Mexico run deep in San Diego for many of my students. Some have grandparents or parents who regularly commuted across the border (with and without papers) to work in California's

agricultural sector. Those without papers crossed through the desert, and some came close to dying along the way. Some families have been torn apart by restrictive U.S. immigration laws, as mothers and babies were left behind in Mexico for years. Others describe how it took their families up to twelve years to obtain legal permanent residency in this nation, due to a series of confusing, difficult and expensive bureaucratic hurdles. We talk about these issues at length in my class in an attempt to understand why people are willing to migrate to the United States illegally, and put themselves through elevated risk to do so. All of this makes me realize just how privileged I am to be a Canadian in the United States. While I described our immigration process as relatively difficult and quite expensive (with lawyer fees, paperwork fees, and premium processing fees, the entire process cost approximately $7,500), we managed to get our permanent residency cards, commonly known as green cards, within less than a year and a half. I recognize that this is a privilege many Mexicans do not have, even though some live a mere twenty miles, or 32 kilometres, away from our campus on the other side of the U.S./Mexico border.

Teaching students from the U.S. military is another significant difference I encounter as an educator in San Diego as compared to Canada. Currently there are over 1,200 war veterans studying at SDSU out of approximately 35,000 total students enrolled at the university. We also host a Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, where students receive full scholarships or partial funding to attend university in exchange for a four-year period of military service post-graduation. Furthermore, a large number of our students are children of Vietnam War veterans or have parents who work for one of San Diego's three military bases. This means that the military presence on our

campus is strong. In fact, once or twice a week, a number of my students come to class in uniform, as required by the ROTC program. On my bike ride across campus in the morning, I sometimes see military students training on the university green. This is not something I experienced in Canada, and was rather unnerving to begin with. My politics are left of centre and I became very self-conscious of how some of my classroom critiques, including critiques of the military, would be received by this type of student body. Yet, what I have learned is that my military students add a tremendous amount to the classroom. For one, they often bring a different perspective to the classroom and allow us to have a more balanced discussion surrounding controversial issues. The war veterans in the classroom have also had life experiences that I cannot begin to fathom and have a level of maturity beyond their years. Last semester I had a student who spent 14 months in Iraq. His experiences, I think, allowed him to interpret the world more critically and he excelled in the class. Many of our students are in the ROTC program out of financial necessity; without this program, they would have no way to pay for college. I recently learned that my father, who was also from a low-income background, was in a similar University Reserve Training Program (URTP) when he was a student at McMaster in Hamilton, Ontario in the 1960s. Like many of our students, my father was the first person in his family to attend university and the URTP program helped him do so. Having soldiers in the classroom pushes me outside of my comfort zone but also allows me to provide these students with perspectives that differ from those that they might receive through their military training. They also push me to consider perspectives that I may not have considered otherwise.

As a Canadian in the classroom, I am very aware of my own identity. Admittedly, my knowledge of American history and politics remains limited and at times, I stumble through my own ignorance. But when it comes to global knowledge, it is my students who stumble. It is this lack of global knowledge among students in the U.S. that feeds stereotypes pertaining to American ignorance. On the first day of my large introductory class, for example, I ask students to take out a blank sheet of paper and draw a map of the world in order to begin a discussion about global issues. Admittedly, this is a difficult exercise since getting the scale correct can be challenging. Some students perform this task spectacularly; however, many fail miserably. Part of this failure can be explained through the fact that the majority of publicly funded high school students do not take geography courses. This is quite different from my high school experience in Canada where geography was a core subject. American students have tremendous knowledge of American history and politics (with 1000-page plus textbooks), but they learn little about the rest of the world. Another explanation is that it is very difficult to learn about the rest of the world while living in the United States. The education system and the media are very insular and ethnocentric. For instance, I have lived in the U.S. through two Canadian elections. After the first election, I went to the front page of the *New York Times* to read their interpretation of the results, only to find nothing mentioned at all. Instead one of the main headlines read, “Nancy Reagan Breaks Hip.” During the second election, I surveyed my 80-student class the following day to ask how many had heard about Canadian events. Approximately five raised their hands, all of whom were sitting next to one another in the front row (questionable perhaps?). In my classroom, I turned this into an opportunity to discuss why it is so difficult to learn about the rest of the world while

living in America. The reality is that you have to go out of your way to discover what is happening beyond U.S. borders. You cannot simply turn on the news on the television or radio or read the headlines of your local newspaper. Instead, you have to dig to find alternative and international news sources. This oft-cited American ignorance also affects Mexico, the neighbour to the south. In the U.S. we learn little about what is happening across the nation's southern border, other than sensationalized reports concerning drug cartel-fueled beheadings that traumatize the American masses. This, of course, does nothing to help the anti-immigrant sentiments brewing in many parts of the United States. It seems to me that American ignorance of the world is perpetuated through an insular national focus and learning about global events and geography requires significant effort on the part of individuals. For this reason, I am no longer as quick to judge individual Americans for their lack of global knowledge, since after living here, I understand more clearly how this can happen. In fact, I fear that I too, am becoming more globally ignorant than I once was after only a few years as a resident of the United States.

Despite this lack of global knowledge – or perhaps because of it – many of my students have a real passion for learning. Students at SDSU seem to be deeply engaged with the social and political issues we cover in class because these issues *matter* to their every day lives. Many of them understand marginality, oppression, and poverty because they have experienced these issues first hand. Beyond refugees, undocumented migrants, and EOP students, in my three years at SDSU I have taught homeless students, former slum residents, and students terrorized by gang violence. My class material can delve into these difficult topics and pull from students' experiences to create rich classroom

discussions. Having such a diverse student body also helps foster critical thinking skills, since students must learn to discuss these issues across personal and political differences.

Living in the United States has also reinforced my national identity as a Canadian in unexpected ways, and I have become quite aware of how I perform this identity. I note that I am quick to announce to people that I am Canadian, particularly to other ex-pats. This is likely because as a Canadian, I am often indistinguishable from Americans. Americans assume that I am from somewhere in the North, but they are never certain just how far north. Canadians struggle to put a finger on what defines us as being "Canadian," and so we most often define ourselves in opposition to what it means to be an American to accentuate our subtle differences. For example, we spell certain English language words differently, but not consistently, mixing both British and American spelling. We call our mothers, "Mum" but spell it, "Mom." We put more trust in our government than Americans, and for this reason, may be more willing to contribute tax dollars. We believe in universal healthcare and are, arguably, less individualistic than Americans. A key part of our identity is also tied to our prowess at hockey, perhaps one of the few sporting events we win international recognition for. These differences, however subtle, are used to define a sense of Canadianness that attempts to separate us from our American neighbours to the south.

Increasingly, I find myself drawing upon Canadian stereotypes to define myself, and my family members. For instance, on Halloween we quite ridiculously attempted to dress our two-year-old son as a "Canadian," wearing a toque, flannel shirt and wielding a Team Canada hockey stick. Realizing that we were too far from the Canadian border for anyone to "get" his (seemingly hilarious) costume, we modified it to a "lumberjack," and

replaced his hockey stick with a chainsaw (a toy chainsaw, I might add). Upon seeing our son's Halloween photos, an English friend asked me whether we might be going overboard to promote our Canadian identity in the United States. My response was something to the effect that when you are drowning in a sea of Americana, you wag your flag as much as possible. Could it be that the longer I spend away from "home," the stronger my symbolic attachment to my homeland becomes? Or perhaps because I grew up trying to assert my differences from Americans, my desire to distinguish myself from all-that-is-American is accentuated now that we are living in the U.S.? Although many of the differences are subtle, there are also very deep historical differences between Canada and the United States that shape the texture of society, government and approaches to philanthropy and charity. I note that the longer I have lived in the United States, the more I have become aware of these differences.

In the introduction to this chapter, I speculated on when a new place becomes "home"? Now that I have lived in San Diego for three years, I do not think that this place has become "home" just yet, even though the quality of my day-to-day life is excellent. I continue to hold onto an imaginary of Canada as the "land of milk and honey," even though I recognize that this is an imaginary that is deeply flawed. We are all indoctrinated by our nations and it can be difficult to see beyond this indoctrination to recognize the shortcomings of our own homelands. Like many transnational residents, I realize that I may be recasting and reimagining my homeland differently to accommodate my nostalgia for "home" (see Blunt and Dowling, 2006). I also recognize some of the ways I perform my Canadian identity to accentuate my difference from Americans, largely due to the cultural baggage of my upbringing. Yet, after only three years living in

San Diego I have already developed a deep attachment to this place, partly due to its beauty, but also due to the strong social connections and friendships that I have formed. As Massey (2001) notes, it is the crisscrossing of social relations and the spatialities of daily lives that help construct how we understand places, and perhaps how we then transform these places into “home.”

References Cited

Aitken, Stuart C. 2009. *The Awkward Spaces of Fathering*. Aldershot: Ashgate Press.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1999. *Borderlands/ La Frontera.* San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Banerjee, Payal. 2006. Indian Information Technology Workers in the United States: The H-1B Visa, Flexible Production, and the Racialization of Labor. *Critical Sociology.* 32: 425-445.

Bejarano, Cynthia. 2010. Border rootedness as transformative resistance: youth overcoming violence and inspection in US-Mexico border region. *Children's Geographies*. 8: 391-400.

Butz, David. 2010. Autoethnography as sensibility. Pages 138-155 in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Geography*. D. DeLyser, S. Aitken, S. Herbert, M. Crang & L. McDowell (Eds.). London: Sage.

Kaplan, Jonathan. 2010. Race to the bottom? California's support for schools lags the nation. *School Finance Facts June 2010*. Sacramento: California Budget Project.

Massey, Doreen. 2001. 'Living in Wythenshawe' in I. Borden, J. Kerr, J. Rendell and A. Piraro (eds). *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Wise, Tim. 2003. Whites swim in racial preference. *ZNet*. February 23 2003.