(Un)Bound: Documentation and home-making across national borders

Swarthmore College
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Senior Honors Thesis
Submitted: May 2015
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Abstract

This thesis explores legal/documented immigrants in the United States, and how they perceive ‘home’ and their identities in light of their mobility and changing locations. In particular, I am interested in the relationship between meanings of home and documentation, examining questions such as: How do citizenship papers shape feelings of belonging and attachment to a particular country? How do Green cards and passports influence one’s mobility and understanding of home?

Drawing on studies of flexible citizenship, nationalism, post-nationalism, and liminality, my thesis analyzes the narratives of five immigrant women and explores how they define and view home. It argues that home is best understood as a continuous process of making and remaking that is shaped by multiple forces and discourses. This process is informed by specific histories and socio-economic structures, yet it is not fixed and is open to constant transformation. Analyzing documentation as a form of legal capital that both enables and limits mobilities but that can be converted into other forms (including social, cultural, material and symbolic) of capital, I trace how ‘home’ is constituted by reworking memories of the past and recalling sensory experiences of the immigrants’ home country and/or city and negotiating the social and economic realities of their current positionalities as workers, parents, permanent residents and citizens.
Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to
Natasha Mehta,
A fellow home-searcher, and my partner in all things ‘home.’

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and guidance of a variety of people. Firstly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Farha Ghannam, my four-year advisor, my mentor and my home away from home. Without Professor Ghannam’s continuous advice and support, this thesis wouldn’t be where it is today, and indeed I would never have felt comfortable pursuing such a personal topic that I am truly passionate about. It was Professor Ghannam that first taught me that academia and scholarship can be found anywhere, and that ‘home’ and passports can be both an emotional engagement and a scholarly study. Furthermore, I would like to thank everyone at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Swarthmore College: from Christie Scheutze, with whom I took my first class in the department and realized that this was the department I wanted to major in, to Sarah Willie-LeBreton, the Chair of the department who has supported around 40 different students through their simultaneous angst and thesis-associated fear, Maya Nadkarni, who taught me what an academic challenge really looks like, and how not to be afraid of it, and the wonderful Rose Maio whose smiles and chats always made working on my thesis in the seminar room worthwhile.

I’d like to thank my friends and peers at Swarthmore College, who have heard me typing into the night, who have supported me as I hit a block after attempt four at the same chapters, and who have shaped my thought processes and personal life since day one at college. In particular, I would like to mention Elena Holtkotte for Skyping with me across continents and
being one of the biggest supports and helps in thinking about ‘shopping for homes’, home-searching, and what it means to be displaced.

Of course, without my family, and the mere fact of my heritage, my upbringing and my surrounding environment, this thesis and the way I conceive of ‘home’ would be literally non-existent. My parents’ support and understanding of my tenuous, yet strong and deep, relationships to Egypt and India, and now the US, has left an indelible mark on this thesis and my life.

Additionally, I'm very grateful to the Nationalities Services Center in Philadelphia and the wonderfully strong, thoughtful and fantastic participants I was fortunate enough to interview. Without them, the richness and detail that I am most excited about with regards to the stories I was able to tell, would have been impossible. I hope that I have done your remarkable stories justice, and am so grateful for the openness with which you shared them with me.

And, finally, I would like to thank all the donors to The J. Roland Pennock Fellowships in Public Affairs, whose financial support made my summer of thesis research possible.
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Introduction: Uprooted Homes

“Homeward bound,
Home, where my thought’s escaping,
Home, where my music’s playing,
Home, where my love lies waiting
Silently for me.” (Simon and Garfunkel, 1966)

“I left three days ago, but no one seems to know I’m gone
Home is where the hatred is,
Home is filled with pain and it
Might not be such a bad idea if I never, never went home again.” (Gil Scott-Heron, 1971)

When thinking about topics as controversial, contested and emotional as ‘home’, it is important to consider my personal background to indicate the various biases and complexities that this notion triggers when I tackle it. As someone with a multi-cultural background, I have grown up mobile in the most inherent way possible: constantly moving between countries, indeed continents, flying between spaces from the time I was 2 weeks old. The meaning of ‘home’ has always been of particular personal and, eventually, academic interest to me. Furthermore, as someone with a different legal citizenship than that of the country in which I was born, raised, and consider ‘home’, the concept of documentation as it relates to personal identity is an issue that I would like to closely consider. I was born and lived most of my life in Egypt, and have been studying for the past 4 years in the US; neither are countries that appear on my passport unless you delve within its pages and find the visas and stamps. The idea of a passport as “identification” greatly interests me, as a method of controlling borders and how people view themselves and consider their attachments to places. My movement across borders is shaped by this document, a document that I have a tenuous relationship with, issued by a country I have never lived in, and hardly know. Movement, the ability to move- mobility- are ideas that are extremely well researched and discussed by many scholars and academics before
However, the post-modern conception of mobility as permitting fluid borders, a greater transnational world and fewer limitations can be complicated and contested when thinking about regulation of mobile bodies, state-imposed identities, citizenship, gender and class (to name but a few identity-qualifiers). What I would like to focus on in this thesis is the interplay between mobility and home, rootedness and displacement, stability and fluidity, and how increased but regulated and controlled mobility complicates and contests traditional understandings of ‘home.’

I explore notions of ‘home’ in an increasingly globalized world, and the struggles and triumphs faced by immigrants and transnational subjects. The tensions and relationships between home as national identifier versus as belonging, home as the physical structure of a house versus as an imagined construct, and home as an individual creation versus as a social configuration of family and filial connection will be salient points of exploration in this thesis. I will analyze how homes are formed and what they can represent when the superficially perceived structured and rooted nature of the house is called into question, as immigrants face competing attachments to multiple physical, imagined and remembered locations.

This thesis argues that home is best understood as a continuous process of making and remaking that is shaped by multiple forces and discourses. This process is informed by specific histories and socio-economic structures, yet it is not fixed and is open to constant transformation. Analyzing documentation as a form of “legal capital” that both enables and limits mobilities but that can be converted into other forms (including social, cultural, material and symbolic) of capital, I trace how ‘home’ is constituted by reworking memories of the past and recalling sensory experiences of the immigrants’ home country and/or city and negotiating the social and economic realities of their current positionalities as workers, parents, permanent residents and citizens.
Studying Home and Documentation

In this thesis, I explore the narratives of five legal/documented immigrants in the United States, and how they perceive ‘home,’ given their mobility and the changing documentation they carry. In particular, I look at the relationship between meanings of home and documentation, examining questions such as: How does movement, travel and immigration contribute to understandings of a traditionally rooted, placed concept like ‘home?’ How do citizenship papers shape feelings of belonging and attachment to a particular country? How do Green cards and passports influence one’s mobility and understanding of home? These are some of the questions that I hope to tackle while analyzing the stories of my interlocutors and how they view and establish attachment and belonging to the multiple national and urban spaces they navigate.

Drawing on studies of identity, nationalism, and citizenship, I will explore how movement across borders enabled, transformed, and shaped subjectivities and collective identifications.

In looking for subjects to interview for my research, I was not interested in a specific ethnic or racial community, believing that a range of immigrants of various countries of origin would enrich my work. Thus, in looking for participants, I had a very open target demographic. I applied for and secured permission to start my research at the Nationalities Services Center (NSC)\(^1\) in Philadelphia, and, using a combination of personal contacts and the NSC, I identified 5 women willing to participate in my research. My methods for finding subjects at the NSC was through attending ESL classes offered by the center, and being introduced as a researcher working on a senior sociology/anthropology thesis. At the end of the class, the teacher would leave me 5 minutes to quickly address the students. I usually introduced myself, my project, and my target demographic (naturalized citizens/Green Card holders), and provided people with

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\(^1\) An immigration service that provides legal and social services to immigrants in the community

\(^2\) Refer to the appendices for a copy of interview questions

\(^3\) Do not have access to original text

\(^4\) I refer to the city as Mumbai, its current name, but whenever I quote Gaia or Shahnaz in the coming chapters, the
copies of a Recruitment Information sheet. People who were interested in participating had the opportunity to contact me for further information and then, via email or phone, to set up a time to talk. In addition, I used a combination of methods to interview personal contacts that fit the target demographic. I reached out to a few friends and family members with whom I have had conversations about immigration or ‘home’ (or both), and explained that I was writing my thesis on similar subjects. Depending on the individual, I reached out via phone-call, text message or email, based on my personal relationship to them and my knowledge of their comfort levels with various forms of technology. If interested, I then sent them more information; the recruitment information sheet, the consent form, and answered any questions they may have raised while expressing interest. We then set up a time to talk, during which they emailed me scanned copies of their consent forms, and we had an audio-recorded Skype conversation. My interviewees are therefore a combination of previously known individuals and strangers: two of the women were contacted through the support of the NSC, while three were contacts I reached out to through other friends or family members. The women I interviewed are all at various points in their lives and trajectories of their immigrations. There is a clear limitation associated with the small number of women I was able to interview; it was difficult to find women at the NSC who were in fact Green Card holders or naturalized citizens, and not people who were in the middle of filing their paperwork to attain a Green Card. The majority of people taking the ESL classes were, in fact, non-US citizens, and non-Green Card holders, either studying English in order to take the exam to apply for a Green Card, or to return home and pursue other goals with the added skill of English proficiency. There were certainly more than 2 women, however, who did identify as American citizens or Green Card holders, but I chose not to pursue them specifically, in order to ensure that the process was entirely consensual.
Generally, all the women seemed very comfortable talking to me throughout our conversations. There was little difference between the subjects that were personal contacts and those who I found through the NSC in how open individuals were in talking to me, and I had a comfortable working relationship with all of them. Indeed, even for the subjects I did not originally know, there was a strong interest in the conversations and I was baffled by being “thanked” for the opportunity to interview and talk to them about their experiences.

Despite my interviewees’ apparent comfort with my work and with their participation, in order to protect their anonymity, I have decided to change their names in this thesis. However, the countries of origin are accurate, to help contextualize each narrative and ensure a traceable logic in their stories and their references to cultural events, histories, or specific political contexts. The five women I interviewed identify as remaining somewhat attached to their country of origin, and are emotionally invested in conversations about “home,” “nationality,” and “belonging.” In the order that their narratives will be told in this thesis, we have: Yasmine and Gaia from Egypt and India respectively, Marianne from Poland, Zaynab from Iraq and Shahnaz from Egypt (where she spent her childhood) and India (where she spent her adolescence). Marianne and Zaynab were the women contacted and interviewed through the help of the NSC, while Yasmine, Gaia and Shahnaz were women that I personally contacted.

After identifying the women willing to participate in my work, I went through the consent process and proceeded to interview them in third-party sites chosen by them. The interviews I conducted with these women lasted a minimum of one hour, and sometimes took longer. While I began each interview with a list of pre-determined questions\(^2\), I was very open to the organic nature of the conversation, and allowed the participants to take the reigns of the

\(^2\) Refer to the appendices for a copy of interview questions
conversation and narrate anecdotes and stories that they found relevant. In conversing with them, I followed their leads and asked questions based on stories they had already shared with me, and only returned to my sheet of questions as a way to link different themes together, or if it seemed like the participant was ready to change the topic of conversation. The interviews were semi-structured, to allow my interlocutors the space to express their feelings and thoughts in a flexible way that captured their own experiences. For each interviewee, I aimed to learn about more than just the practicalities of immigration. I attempted to learn as much as possible about their memories and (potentially constantly changing) feelings about home over time, using narrative-based interview and life history methodology. My goal was to document their unique stories and to allow their voices to inform my analysis and conceptualization of home. In an effort to reflect their voices as accurately as possible, I have used italics when quoting the women in order to express their own emphases on certain words or ideas.

There were of course some limitations to the research I was able to conduct. To restate: I only interviewed a limited sample of people and my work is not indicative of great trends or representative of a population; it serves only to analyze and tell the stories of 5 specific women. I was initially hoping I would have the opportunity to re-interview the participants at least once or twice over the course of my research, however, due to time constraints, the participants were unable to meet me more than once in the short span of time during which I was conducting my research. Therefore, all my findings are limited to a single conversation I had with each participant (with the exception of Zaynab with whom I met twice), and so further reflection was out of the question; participants did not have the opportunity to rethink some of their ideas, and I was unable to gauge if their opinions and feelings were indicative of that one particular day and time, or a broader perspective on ‘home.’ However, I did attempt to keep the line of
communication open with the participants, and Shahnaz felt the urge to email me with some of her follow-up thoughts upon further reflection on the ideas we were discussing. Considering that only 2 women from the NSC responded to my attempts to recruit participants from my work, and that I contacted both husband and wife pairs when contacting family members to include more participants, and only the women responded, it is worth exploring the gendered bias of my work. Why were only the women willing to participate in this study; is ‘home’ a topic identified closely with the woman, the feminine, and domesticity that men traditionally expect and believe themselves to be apart from? Despite limitations, the depth of the interviews allowed me the opportunity to address my key questions in a productive way. My position as a fellow woman, despite not technically being an ‘immigrant’ to the US, allowed me to really tap into the knowledge shared with me by the participants.

‘Home’: From a Safe Haven to a Tool of Exclusion

Existing literature on ‘home’ has addressed various changes in how it is looked at and conceptualized over the past few decades. From looking at ‘home’ as rooted, bounded and localized within physical structures, to unpacking ‘home’ as symbolic, created and imaginary, and finally to thinking about home as fluid, shifting and unbounded. While there is a vast existing literature regarding immigration to the US, exploring the contestation of ‘home’ is the main purpose and anchor of my thesis, and therefore I will focus on the literature on ‘home.’

‘Home’ as Spatially Bounded and Rooted in the Family

Throughout the past few decades the definition of ‘home’ and its academic salience has grown. Literature surrounding the idea of ‘home’ began in rooting the concept in a specific
localized space, often linking the ‘home’ to the physical structure of the ‘house,’ and relating it to the location of family. In her review on “Understanding Home,” Shelley Mallett shows that home can be used to refer to: “(a) place(s), (a) space(s), feeling(s), practices, and/or an active state of being in the world...[and is] conflated with or related to house, family, haven, self, gender, and journeying” (2004:62). The word ‘home’ has roots in the Anglo-Saxon word _ham_, which means “village, estate or town”, and this term was thence used by the rise of the bourgeoisie in England to “promote a form of nationalism and patriotism aimed at protecting and preserving their land, wealth and power” (Mallet 2004:65). Furthermore, home became a descriptor to define a sense of ‘domestic morality’ to protect property, women and children. Thus, in thinking about ‘home’ as derived in the English language, and specifically in a white, Anglo-European, American, Western culture, we see home as “a physical structure or dwelling, such as a house, flat, institution or caravan” (Bowlby et al _in_ Mallet 2004:65). It is important to note that in my work the relationship between how home is defined within Western thought and how it is defined by 5 women from overseas may diverge at times; despite the fact that these women have not been isolated from Western-influenced meanings of ‘home’, it may have competing definitions given the array of positionalities the women interviewed occupied.

Aviezer Tucker notes home can be used to represent identity and one’s “subjectivity in the world” because it can be a “space where people feel at ease and are able to express and fulfill their unique selves or identities” (Tucker 1994:184). Alternatively, however, Appleyard and Goffman emphasize that “the social perspective tends to interpret the home as a “statement” of identity expressed through a shared symbolic language...the home may indeed represent a socially desired identity rather than any depth of character” (Dovey 1985:38). Although Appleyard and Goffman differ with Tucker in what they argue individuals are actually
representing in the decoration and physical use of their house, the three scholars are united in their argument that the home is a space in which individuals represent themselves – whether a desired representation of self or an accurate self-representation. In this way, home is intrinsically tied to identity and self, through emotional environments, cultures, geographies, times and places, and how individuals find themselves in relation to all of these ideas.

Furthermore, a more traditional approach to ‘home’ as house, is its connection and definition as rooted in the family, which indeed has transgressed through the decades and remains a popular trope in modern representations of home in the media and beyond. ‘Home as family’ is linked to the dichotomy of the public and private spheres, and the ways in which the family is considered the key social unit that can be found in the private sphere within the physical structure of the house. As Kimberly Dovey writes, this dichotomy is emphasized through the representation of home as a refuge for safety and familial comfort, to be contrasted with the “imposing”, less defined ‘outside’ (Dovey 1985). As stated in Mallett’s review, “the private realm of the home is typically understood as a space that offers freedom and control, security and scope for creativity and regeneration. It is an intimate space that provides a context for close, caring relationships” (2004:70). The theorization of the public/private spheres and how they relate to the home is an exceptionally important aspect of how the home is defined. Furthermore, the distinction of public/private in relation to ‘home’ is crucial in thinking about the gendering of the ‘home’, and the consignment of women to the private sphere of the home. The way the public/private spheres (and thus, home) are gendered is problematic, as it ignores the place of class, race, ethnicity and sexuality in thinking about the home as a site of subversive action and resistance [by identities that are marginalized in public spaces].
Similarly to thinking about the house, gender, and the private sphere, the family is a crucial social unit through which to think about the creation of a ‘home’. Some “traditionalists” claim that the “link between home and family is so strong that the terms are almost interchangeable” (Mallett 2004:73). Mallett explains that critics find that this notion of home privileges Western ideals as it is “premised on the white, middle class, heterosexual nuclear family” (2004:74). However, based on the findings of my research, family plays an important role in distinguishing ideas about home. In the context of the women I interviewed, family is not limited to the nuclear family and the ‘small social unit’ that is privileged in Western ideals, but is extended to include wide networks of filial connection in the communities the women left behind. This important representation of family and home is based on the idea of home as an emotional concept, and the impossibility for my interviewees to disentangle their emotion and sentimentality about home with the extended network of relatives and loved ones they have in their various, contested, multiplicitous home(s).

Tucker references previous scholarship to identify and conceive of home “in terms of concentric circles. These circles represent an aspect of existential experience that include: house, village or town; family; social environment; professional environment; the nation; civic society; the civilization and; the world. Each is equally important and must be given its due although some may be more important to people at different times in their lives” (1994:182). These circles can help us to understand the different levels of the meaning of ‘home’ and particularly how they overlap and build from and upon each other in order to fully flesh out and play with this contested idea. However, I suggest thinking of these categories less linearly via concentricity, which implies a specific ordering of how and when these notions of home build, but instead to think of each version of ‘home’ as constantly growing, overlapping, diverging, and of different
sizes and shapes. There should be no fixed center implied by the circle, and instead shifting feelings and the contextual nature of what we mean when we say ‘home’ in different situations should be reflected in our visualization of this concept. In this way, at certain times and in certain contexts of a person’s life, one shape can move and be privileged over another, instead of the fixed linearity in which “the world” always includes “house” or “family”, and sometimes “family” could appear more important and more all-encompassing than “civilization.” Furthermore, someone who has remained in their hometown throughout their lives may not think about their relationship to the nation-state, but may privilege the microcosmic home over the macrocosmic, universalizing idea of the ‘home’ as nation-state or as political unit of belonging.

The Imagined and the Remembered

At around the same time period in the early ’90s, and in conversation with these constructions of ‘home,’ Doreen Massey challenged the physical boundedness of the home by introducing the link between ‘home’ and an individual’s perception of what a home can and should be, or what a home once was in their memory. The role of childhood and memory is inextricably linked with the socially constructed notion of what the ideal home looks like. This emphasis complicated other conceptualizations of ‘home’ at the time, by moving beyond the physical and into the realm of the imaginary. This conceptualization challenges the assumptions about ‘home’ as primarily structured and material.

Massey writes about the link between home and memory, arguing that there is “not a single simple ‘authenticity’ – a unique eternal truth of an (actual or imagined/remembered) place or home – to be used as a reference either now or in the past” (1994:119). This link between memories and current realities, past and present, remembered and lived add a temporal
dimension that is lacking from conceptions of ‘home’ as house. Massey suggests that memories can themselves be essential in creating a new home as “the identity of place...is always and continuously being produced...the past has to be constructed,” referring to bell hooks’ work to argue how memory “serves to illuminate and transform the present” (Massey 2013:171). Thus, homes can be made and remade, and one is not confined to the house in which they are born.

Tucker argues that every house is not a home and that “home is not merely where we happen to have been born or reside” but in fact combines several “single-level homes, such as an emotional home, a geographical home, a cultural home” and is therefore necessarily closely connected to an individual’s personality and sentimentality (1994:181). The symbolic nature of home is a reoccurring theme within literature, with Tucker suggesting that “most people spend their lives in search of home, at the gap between the natural home [conceived as the natural environment conducive to human existence, i.e. access to water] and the particular ideal home where they would be fully fulfilled” (1994:184). While Tucker and Massey attempt to unpack the physical notion of a home, the imagined and remembered home are still physical desires – the home that an individual is searching for remains a localized, physical place, and the home that one constructs in memory is also still a real, physical place that existed (albeit in a different form) at one point in time.

The Unbounded and Delocalized

In introducing the conceptualization of the ‘home’ as related to but also possibly separated from the physical house, it is important to think about the role of mobility in challenging the idea of home as physically bounded and necessarily rooted in a specific location. Literature surrounding ‘mobility’ is vast and varied – scholars have written and theorized about
social, physical, economic and political mobilities. Social mobility refers to the movement through the social hierarchy, including changes in social capital (Oxford Bibliographies 2011, Bourdieu 1979), while physical mobility is defined as geographical movement, including extremes such as “forced relocation of large groups of people” or simply “taking vacations” (Palispis 2007:174-5). Additionally, economic mobility refers to changes in material wealth and economic status, and political mobility to the ability to attain higher office within political structures (Francis et al 1994). All of these mobilities are important when considering immigration, because they can each be used as descriptors as to why a person immigrates, and how they gain the capital (social, political, cultural or economic) in order to do so.

Mobility and migration are two major forces that challenge the single, localized physical house as the main conception of home. In thinking about the possibility for multiple homes and multiple points of belonging, Michael D. Jackson asserts that “home is where one hails from... but it also suggests the places one has camped, sojourned and lived during the course of one’s own lifetime” (Jackson 1995:122). Furthermore, physically leaving a place and staying in a place are linked to notions of location, dependence and independence, thus referring to a representation of home as “a spatial and relational realm from which people venture into the world and to which they generally come to return” (Case 1996 in Mallett 2004:77). Home does not only imply origin, but also destination, according to Ginsburg, and is defined through the “basic trait” humans have in conducting “home-searching” (Ginsberg 1999:35, Tucker 1994:186). Dovey argues that travel establishes home by defining its boundaries referring to Margaret Mead’s autobiography in delineating how the home can be defined as Mead’s “place of stability, order, and identity throughout a life of travel” (Dovey 1985:46).

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Crucially, Sara Ahmed explains that home as a clearly defined, bounded space in opposition to travel and encounters with the “strange” is overly simplistic, ignoring the importance of how travel can define home, and how home can define travel. Ahmed problematizes the view of home as a fixed, familiar space in contrast with the ‘away’ as strange and inhabited by strangers. She writes that “there is always an intimate encounter at stake between natives and strangers...homes do not stay the same as the space which is simply the familiar. There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitance” (Ahmed 1999:340). This understanding of home is in line with Douglas’ identification of home as “located in space, but [it is] not necessarily a fixed space...home starts by bringing some space under control” (1991:289). Indeed, Rosemary Marangoly George also argues for a definition of home as multidimensional and existing on multiple planes/axes although it is typically represented as “fixed, rooted, stable – the very antithesis of travel” and explains that distance itself can act as the very measure of a “home” (1999:2).

Furthermore, with the entry of mobility into the theorization of ‘home,’ the salience of ethnicity, national roots and the nation-state also begin to complicate and transform the definition of home. Tucker argues that “the assumptions that the land of our birth is for some reason our home, or that our home is determined by our ethnicity...are based at best on misunderstanding of language, and at worst, on deliberate misuse of it for justification of morally questionable political decisions” (1994:186). This undermines the stereotypical notion of home as rooted by claiming that people are not rooted, and that we are “all the descendants of immigrants...[and that] the fact that we are born with legs and intelligence opens to us ever new spatial and intellectual horizons,” specifying the human as an inherently migratory species (1994:186).
However, this thesis will complicate Tucker’s findings by identifying the issues at stake when individuals themselves are burdened by connections to their country of origin, due to the creation of the nation-state, the meaning of citizenship and the ways these concepts have curated the desire to ‘belong’ to a greater community. I will look at what happens when language is a barrier, when ethnicity does breed connections and emotional attachments: thus asserting the idea that while Tucker’s notion of home as primarily emotional holds validity, geography and national sentiment can and do breed emotional connection and a desire to place oneself.

This idea of being an outsider, a marginal or in a state of being betwixt and between resonates with Carol E Kelley’s ethnography of five women and their ‘search for home’ as she views ‘home’ as a political tool of exclusion. Kelley (2013) refers to ‘home’ as a necessarily political concept used by governments to punish people by sending them “home” and to prevent border crossing and retain exclusive communities in order to promote the idea of stable and linear identities: thus introducing ‘home’ as a political tool of exclusion. Kelley argues that even in a globalized environment, although the ability to be mobile is more intense and frequent than ever before, the desire to belong and be rooted remains, and becomes something that is sought after and chased. She further identifies that even when one’s citizenship changes to reflect an immigration, the feeling of foreignness and mis-belonging can remain. Thus, the use of ‘home’ by the nation-state in order to politically exclude and to reify the boundaries that exist between nations will also tie into my work in thinking about the production of the outsider, marginal and a liminal state.

Kelley further argues that each of the women she interviews was “seeking somewhere solid to stand – a base that they could hold on to and make their own,” stating that although all immigrants’ stories begin with “the focal points of leaving and arriving, [yet] the everyday
moments that culminate into the transition and turning points in their lives are the deeper narratives that need to be heard” (2013:156). Thus, in her ethnography, Kelley finds that home is a contested notion that cannot be localized, but exists in retelling one’s stories, as this retelling helps create agency over one’s life, and consequently “each retelling...is a key part of the process of bringing an immigrant home” (2013:156). In this way, Kelley introduces how immigrants create ‘home’ temporally through moments and stories, therefore assuming fluidity and contestation in how it is defined.

Home Vis-à-vis the Nation-State

It is interesting to note that the majority of the literature I was able to find is from the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps because attempting to define ‘home,’ while still important and explored by some scholars, appears to lose its centrality in the new millennium. Transnationalism seems to gain more tract in thinking about immigration and mobility. Thus, in grounding my thesis, I turn to Aihwa Ong and Arjun Appadurai whose scholarship, along with Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, form the basis of the conceptual framework I will be using in my thesis. I draw on their work on nationalism, modernity, and flexible citizenship to inform my analysis of ‘home’ and account for the multiple forces and discourses that shape attachments to specific spaces and feelings of belonging to certain communities or nations.

In anchoring my thesis on the themes of ‘home’ and ‘mobility’ across national boundaries, nation and nationhood will be important concepts. Benedict Anderson’s modernist approach to nationalism in *Imagined Communities* will be an important theoretical framework when thinking about the creation of the nation-state as an “imagined [limited and sovereign] political community” (Anderson 1991:6-7). A nation is an imagined community because an
individual will never know all of their fellow members, but nonetheless subscribe to an image of communion; it is limited because there are finite (if elastic) boundaries to the geographic territory that makes up a nation; it is sovereign because it (can) allow for religious pluralism while maintaining the freedom to self-govern and self-determine (as a “free” nation); and finally, it is a community because despite inequalities and exploitations, there is a conception of “deep horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1991:7). Thus, as an imagined community that creates a sense of comradeship and belonging, nationhood is crucial when thinking about the meaning of ‘home’ and how a home can come to be associated with a territory, despite, and indeed because of, the emotional and sentimental attachments individuals create to this imagined community. Yet, the hyphen between ‘nation’ and ‘state’ (nation-state) has been redefined by growing flows of peoples, ideas, images, and products across the globe.

In his attempt to understand the impact of global flows on culture and politics, Arjun Appadurai pays particular attention to how they change the role of the nation-state. Appadurai’s scholarship in this field explores notions of mobility, globalization and immigration in order to express the salience of the ‘imagination’ in giving individuals and groups the ability to become ‘modern’. Appadurai anchors his work in an exploration of modernity, discussing migration and global movements (both physical and digital) as actions that are at the core of practicing elements of modernity. “This mobile and unforeseeable relationship between mass-mediated events and migratory audiences defines the core of the link between globalization and the modern...imagination, viewed in this context, is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (Appadurai 1996:4). Thus, Appadurai argues that the imagination has come to be a social force and a “collective, social fact;” a concept that will
play a major role in this thesis in thinking about the roles of memories and imaginations of home(s), especially when an individual moves away from their home (whether that be their house, their family, their nation, or in this case, all three). Appadurai’s demonstrated relationship between mobility and imagination creates an interesting perspective with which to begin looking at ‘home’ and ‘mobility’ in tandem, thinking about Appleyard and Goffman’s theorization that the ‘home’ can be just a space that expresses an individual’s aspired social identity, and how this desired social identity morphs and changes as the relationship between mobility and imagination shifts with immigration. Appadurai ventures that the tension that exists between diaspora, mobility and a deep desire to remain connected to homeland results in our postnational, deterritorialized world, and the US in particular, being a space for a “diasporic switching point”: “The United States, always in its self-perception a land of immigrants, finds itself awash in these global diasporas, no longer a closed space for the melting pot to work its magic, but yet another diasporic switching point. People come here to seek their fortunes, but they are no longer content to leave their homelands behind…” (1996:172). Appadurai argues that “the idea of the nation flourishes transnationally. Safe from the depredations of their home states, diasporic communities become doubly loyal to their nations of origin and thus ambivalent about their loyalties to America” (1996:172). Appadurai thus concludes that it is perhaps time to “rethink monopatriotism, patriotism directed exclusively to the hyphen between nation and state, and to allow the material problems we face…to define those social groups and ideas for which we would be willing to live, and die” (1996:176). He states that deterritorialization is inherently linked to mobility and flows of people, products, capital, ideas, images and discourses, and “affects the loyalties of groups…[loosening the holds] between people, wealth and territories” (Appadurai 1996:49). Thus, in the postnational world, loyalties to the nation-states are weakened
and questioned as individuals are mobile and maintain loyalties to specific groups, (imagined) communities, and people through the advance of technology. Furthermore, Appadurai emphasizes that the role of the media is central to the postnational imaginary; there are no attachments to specific territories, and culture is unbounded and unattached to places. Instead the media allows individuals to be culturally attached to places, ideas and peoples from around the world. The homeland is partly invented, only existing “in the imagination of the deterritorialized groups,” thus also introducing imagination as a social force (Appadurai 1996:49). Appadurai suggests the Queer Nation as an example of postnational patriotism, in which “bounded territories could give way to diasporic networks, nations to transnations, and patriotism itself could become plural, serial, contextual, and mobile...Patriotism – like history – is unlikely to end, but its objects may be susceptible to transformation” (1996:176). Appadurai’s work will inform my thesis when thinking about the ability to be ‘doubly loyal,’ (or multiply, in some cases), and to challenge the ideal of ‘monopatriotism’ and the ways in which communities are necessarily tied to their countries of origin. Appadurai summarizes the complexities and contradictions when thinking about homeland perfectly by explaining how, “Displacement and exile, migration and terror create powerful attachments to ideas of homeland that seem more deeply territorial than ever. But it is also possible to detect in many of these transnations...the elements of a postnational imaginary” (1996:176-7). However, the cases depicted in my thesis also reveal a salience of national boundaries, and the importance that my interviewees attach to documents and their countries of origin, that also inform feelings of attachment and detachment from the US; Appadurai’s theorization of a postnational world therefore seems hasty, and ignores the political realities that support the eminence of the nation-state.
Unlike Appadurai, Aihwa Ong rejects the argument that the nation-state is losing its power, and explores instead how it is reinventing itself in light of recent economic and political changes. In *Flexible Citizenship*, Ong explores the split between "state-imposed identity and personal identity" which comes to the forefront when individual subjects have the opportunity to be mobile and activate their opportunities to be transient, temporal and belong to dual (or triple, or indeed multiple) communities (1999:2). Ong further claims that a passport does not signify loyalty, citizenship or any of the ideals imposed by the nation-state, but that it increasingly symbolizes a "claim to participate in the labor market" (1999:2). Ong's scholarship on flexible citizenship and the necessary mobility that makes this type of citizenship possible focuses on neoliberal ideals, and the classed nature of flexible citizenship as only available to the relatively elite, and juxtaposes the differences between what she defines as the "immigrant" who crosses borders in order to access a particular state and its opportunities and remain there versus the "transnational subject" who does not depend on the boundedness of the nation-state (1999:19). In thinking about passports as a form of identification, it is essential to start with considerations about the formation of the nation-state, and the formalization and normalization of political communities and how they impact individual identities. As Ong describes in her introduction to 'Flexible Citizenship,' passports realign people's identities, removing some human agency required to produce and negotiate political meanings behind identities. The passport as a tool by the nation-state imagines and produces individual subjectivities, by creating a personal attachment to a greater political community based on where you are born or the passport you carry. When considering immigration, are immigrants' identities automatically impacted by a change in the passport they carry? Does this indicate a "split between state-imposed identity and personal identity"? (1999:2). Ong argues that the passport signified a "claim to participate in
[the] labor market,” thus introducing her subject matter of the “flexible citizen” and the transnational identity, discussing “parachute children” and the attempt to have children with passports in countries like the US, allowing for future economic success, and enhancing mobility to gain job opportunities (1999:2). In thinking about Ong’s views that a passport acts as a means to an end, I look at how (in this case) the passport or Green Card can represent so much more than being a tool to garner economic and social capital, and has multiple roles as both tool/instrument and emotional symbol. Instead of this tool being only something allowing immigrants to succeed financially, it can also be a mechanism to allow them to cast their own identities in the limelight and gain the ability to return ‘home,’ a manifestation of symbolic and emotional attachment and ties to a country, and a tool to regulate and control access to states beyond certain sets of borders.

James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, on the other hand, emphasize that increasingly under conditions of globalization, specific cities rather than nation-states produce loyalties and secure access to important rights and resources. Holston and Appadurai (1996) examined how “cities remain the strategic arena for the development of citizenship…with their concentrations of the nonlocal, the strange, the mixed, and the public…defamiliarizing [the] enormity of national citizenship” (Holston and Appadurai 1996:188). An example of this is how one may have been raised in New York City and feel more comfortable and at ease (‘at home’) in other major cities around the world rather than rural America, or indeed feel more attached to the city rather than the nation-state in which the city lies. In this way, the definition of citizenship is changing; in a postnational context one can be a citizen of a city, and belong to an urban setting without necessarily belonging to the greater nation-state (for example, a citizen of New York but not the US).
Finally, “liminality” is an additional concept that will be considered and reflected upon within this thesis. Liminality is perhaps the most significant concept that captures the state of being in transition and the noticeable lack of being rooted emotionally or physically within a place during this period. Victor Turner introduces this concept in describing the process of being “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” during rites of passage, and are therefore “neither here nor there” (Turner 1969:95). If we extend this definition of liminality to include those instances outside of ritual processes and rites of passage, in which an individual enters the liminal phase only to exit and be reintroduced to the community as an adult (for example), we can see how globalization and immigration allow for individuals to feel a somewhat constant sense of liminality, of feeling disconnected or doubly connected to many nations, to many places, or to many homes. Indeed these transformations one feels as a result of immigration can be explained by Farha Ghannam’s work on urban mobilities in modern Egypt. Ghannam refers to Turner’s point that liminality can be regarded as “a realm of pure possibility” in order to argue that “mobility, a state of in-betweeness, has both spatial and temporal aspects that generate possibilities for the transformation of bodies and identities” (Ghannam 2011:792).

Additionally, Turner adds the concepts of “outsiderhood” and the realm of the immigrant experience. Turner explains that “As well as the betwixt-and-between state of liminality there is the state of outsiderhood, referring to the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of any given system, or being situationally or temporally set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system” (1974:232-33). Turner also introduces the “marginal” who is “of two or
more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another” (1974:232-33). Both the marginal and the outsider are crucial categories that challenge the constant state of being “betwixt and between” when thinking of immigrants’ stories, while the feeling of being ‘neither here nor there’ deeply resonates with the conception of liminality.

Furthermore, the notions of social, cultural and symbolic capital will be pertinent in this thesis. Pierre Bourdieu refers to social and cultural capitals to distinguish between the types of advantages and privileges one can hold, and indeed strive for, beyond the material/economic. These forms of social and cultural capital can refer to access (or lacks thereof) to education, language skills and how one uses their body, for example (Bourdieu 1984). Additionally, the role of the passport as symbolic capital reoccurs throughout the narratives that follow. Bourdieu refers to symbolic capital as “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability” (Bourdieu 1984:291). He views prestige and honor as “denied capital, recognized as legitimate, that is, misrecognized as capital…which, along with religious capital, is perhaps the only possible form of accumulation when economic capital is not recognized” (Bourdieu 1990:118). Bourdieu recognizes that symbolic and material capitals are inherently linked, and that it is often impossible to differentiate between the two, as one results in the other, specifically conceiving of symbolic capital as a form of credit, resulting in symbolic profits (1990:120). Thus, I will be looking at how the role of the passport and citizenship of specific countries is used and negotiated by some of the women interviewed as a form of symbolic capital.

In addition, I have decided to introduce and explore the concept of ‘legal capital’ in order to fully analyze documentation and the passport as material objects that represent a set of
meanings and relationships to different institutions that can be converted into material, cultural, social and symbolic forms of capital. Bourdieu defines capital "as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form" (1986:81). He further highlights that "the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices" (Bourdieu 1986:81). Bourdieu also advances his definition of capital by stating that "it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory" (1986:81). In this sense, if we take it to be the reformulation of economic and cultural capital into its legal iteration, we can then see how legal capital can refer to one's legality, status and relationship to the nation-state, and how this set of relationships exerts its force on one's place in the social world, thus translating into relationships with economic and social institutions. Legal capital is intertwined with cultural capital, as one must have the ability to understand bureaucratic and legal schema and institutions in order to fully accumulate and convert their legal capital. Thus, I look at how documentation and passports symbolize the intersection between material, cultural, legal and symbolic forms of capital and form the basis of a greater hierarchy of nation-states via the value given to their travel documents. Thus, not all passports are equally valued and some have more symbolic and political effect in facilitating mobility and access to resources while others might be much more limiting.
Roadmap

The four main chapters of this thesis will tell the stories of 5 different women and their experiences as immigrants to the US. Each chapter will include a reflection of the greater themes and concepts that inform my understanding of the narratives, and the conceptual links between the women’s voices and the greater body of work I am analyzing. Finally, I will conclude by analyzing the five stories against each other, comparing and contrasting the different chapters and stories told by each woman, and bringing in the literature discussed above to explore their experiences through a theoretical and scholarly lens, and reflect on the insights gained in this project.

Thus, the first chapter tells the stories of Gaia and Yasmine, two women from entirely different regions of the world, who were both able to enter the US with a Green Card, and subsequently applied for American citizenship shortly after being eligible for it. Both women have now spent more time in the US than in their country of origin, and are comfortable referring to themselves as ‘American.’ Yasmine is from Egypt, and is currently in her early 20s. She arrived in the US with a Green Card when she was 11, gaining US citizenship when she was 16, which was her parents’ ultimate goal. Yasmine, unlike some of the women to follow, refers to herself as American in the immediate moment, and only fully explains her background to people when she gets to know them a little bit better. Gaia, originally from India, is currently in her 50s, and first came to the US as a newlywed in her early 20s. She, like Yasmine, also entered already having a Green Card, because her husband was a Green Card Holder. She applied for and secured American citizenship 8 years later. Gaia tends to waiver between how she identifies, depending on who she is speaking to, sometimes introducing herself as Indian and sometimes introducing herself as “from Maryland.” Interestingly, she will rarely say that she is “American”
but will specify that she is from Maryland.

Chapter two will move on to Marianne’s story, who has spent her adult years in the US, and spent a bulk of her time resisting the pressure to become ‘American,’ and refusing to acknowledge the US as her only home. Marianne ultimately became more comfortable in the US and started viewing her relationship with the country differently after having children born in the US and thusly having American citizenship, also forcing Marianne to become more familiar with American institutions and participate within them (through her sons’ schools, for example). Marianne is a middle-aged woman who immigrated to the US illegally when she was 11 years old, but has held a Green Card since she was 17, and eventually gained US citizenship in 2005. She is originally from Poland, and still introduces herself as Polish when meeting people for the first time, considering her identity as distinctly non-American.

Chapter three will tell the hard and harrowing story of Zaynab from Iraq, who never chose to immigrate to the US. Her relationship with belonging in the US is perhaps the weakest given the circumstances in which she left her hometown of Baghdad, and the relatively short amount of time she has been in the US so far, thus providing for an extreme contrast between the circumstances of the immigrations described in the first chapter and in the third. Zaynab is the most recent immigrant to the US, having moved to Philadelphia in 2008, in her late teens. Her family was receiving death threats in Iraq, and they fled to Amman, Jordan where they lived for 2 years before seeking UN resettlement. They eventually gained refugee status to enter the US. They were immediately issued with Green Cards, and five years later her whole family gained US citizenship. Similarly to Marianne and Shahnaz, Zaynab finds it really tough referring to herself as “American”, battling with identifying as American and as Iraqi, especially since she has not revisited Iraq since she first left.
Finally, the last chapter explores Shahnaz’s story, who is from Egypt and India. She was born and raised in Egypt, although she retained Indian citizenship, and then returned to India for college when she was 15, while her family remained in Egypt. She came to the US as a student pursuing a Master’s Degree in her early 20s, and then transitioned to a work permit when she gained employment with a consulting firm, finally filing her papers for a Green Card. Although now eligible for US citizenship, she and her husband (also in a similar position, and also from India) have both stalled on taking the decision on whether they would like to file for citizenship. Shahnaz doesn’t acknowledge any specific place or nation as ‘home,’ instead drawing on her experiences within each time period of her life to construct her childhood and her definition of ‘home.’
Chapter 1: Home for vacation: liminality as a site of potentiality

"From my brow bursts the sword of light
And from my hand springs the river's water...
The people's hearts are my identity.
Go, take my passport away from me.
(Mahmoud Darwish, year unknown. Translated by A.Z. Foreman)

Although Yasmine and Gaia are two women at different stages of their immigration in the US, at different ages and from different backgrounds, there are striking overlaps in how they each conceive of home. Both Yasmine and Gaia entered the US with Green Cards, therefore already planning to immigrate – although Yasmine immigrated as a child, and so the decision was less active on her part, as it was her parents who informed her of their decision to remain in the US. In comparison to the other women who follow in the next chapters, their arrival in the US was relatively free of controversy and legal difficulties, possibly easing them into their transitions to their new ‘homes.’ Yasmine and Gaia refer to their countries of origin as ‘home,’ but treat them as places to visit, to holiday in, for a short period of time. This gap between their countries of origin as vacation spots and their (often reworked) childhood memories of it as ‘home’ makes it difficult for them to imagine living there now.

Both women arrived in the US as Turner’s ‘outsiders,’ and were transformed into ‘marginals’. This prominent feature of immigration that Yasmine and Gaia talk about – and that will be reasserted and spoken about in subsequent chapters as well – is their identity as the ‘marginal’ and how they are liminal subjects, in a space of in-betweenness, straddling two cultures. They are caught between trying to adopt positive features of their host culture and retain cultural morals and viewpoints from their countries of origin. Yasmine focuses a lot on feeling forced to lead a “double life”, in order to assimilate to her surroundings, and still fulfill the societal and familial expectations from where she came, while Gaia instead struggles with
questions about how to raise her sons, uncertain about what value system she wants to raise them with. However, Yasmine and Gaia’s stories also reflect an eventual shift in their standings vis-à-vis society, as their status as marginal is also transformed into something different – perhaps as they become ‘insiders.’

These stories reflect the joys and struggles that Yasmine and Gaia have been dealing with since they first moved to the US; from the excitement over the size of supermarkets and the organization of traffic, to the loneliness of being away from extended family networks that they were raised with, and which had been an integral part of their childhoods.

Yasmine: From Outsider to Marginal

Yasmine moved to the US when she was 10 years old, with her parents and sister, and is now in her mid-twenties, working as a statistical analyst for the Philadelphia School Board. The reasons her family immigrated are vague and uncertain; Yasmine’s parents applied for Green Cards soon after they got married, following her uncle’s immigration to the US, intending to hold on to the Green Cards if they ever needed them, and to provide their daughters with better opportunities. So when Yasmine first came to the US, it was for a summer vacation, because they “had to come to the US so that they would keep [the Green Cards]...you have to be in the US for a certain amount of time, so that you can keep the visa, [otherwise you risk it] going away or something like that.” Thus, Yasmine and her family came to the US for the summer, and the following summer they vacationed in the US again, for similar reasons regarding being able to keep their Green Cards. However, a week before the family was supposed to fly back to Egypt, where they are originally from, Yasmine’s parents decided to just stay in the US, because her “sister was at an age where if we had gone back to Egypt, she would start, like, where she would
have to get summer tutoring and be in school year-round, um, so we wouldn’t have been able to come back to the US, because we weren’t gonna come and leave her there [the following summer].” Yasmine’s father was the only member of the family to return to Cairo in order to get some of their things, and then Yasmine’s parents enrolled her and her sister in school, “and that was pretty much it!”

For the two summers that Yasmine’s family had visited the US, they had spent their time in Philadelphia and Boston, staying with family each time. Therefore, when they decided to remain in the US following their second summer vacation there, they knew that they wanted to be in either the Philadelphia or Boston areas, as they had become somewhat familiar with them and thought it important to be around family. Her family decided to look at public school systems, and try to pick the better one, but finding them relatively equal, Yasmine explains that her dad “just kinda gave in, he was like, you know, let [your] mom stay with her family [laughs].” as her mother was keen on staying in Philadelphia to be around her uncle, while it was Yasmine’s father’s brother who was based in Boston.

It was a big surprise for Yasmine when she found out that her family was not planning on returning to Egypt at the end of their summer vacation. “It was really sad, and it was kind of, it was weird, because it was at the time period when internet and computers came to Egypt, right, so it was kind of like you’re still starting out with that, but then it wasn’t popular enough that like everybody had it. So there wasn’t really a huge means of communication for me to keep in touch with my friends from Egypt. And we were also like pretty young, so it was very much like, we’re young, and Internet wasn’t that popular really, so even if we did have it…not everybody had it. So it was very much like cutting ties with your old life in a way.” Furthermore, Yasmine asserts that the language barrier was extremely tough for her, as she didn’t speak any English other than
what she had learnt from one English class, with conversational basics: “I went to a French school when I was in Egypt, so I spoke French fluently, um, but I didn’t speak English. I took like maybe one English class, it was like right when I was starting in my French school, but maybe like ‘hi’ and ‘bye’ was pretty much all I learned from that class.” This was an isolating experience for Yasmine, whose parents spoke English having gone to English-medium colleges in Egypt, and whose sister spoke a higher level of English as she had advanced through more English classes at school. Furthermore, since she lived in a pretty affluent suburb of Philly, there “weren’t that many English second language speakers...so I went into 5th grade, which was elementary school, and they didn’t have an ESL program there. So, I didn’t take any ESL my first year. So I went to school, and my teacher...put – because I spoke French fluently and French is kind of close to English – he put up French words [around the classroom]...like they gave me a deck of notecards and it had the picture of whatever it was and the French word and the English word underneath it, so you could kind of learn. And there were English and French words posted all around the classroom, so it’s kind of like, you sort of know what I’m saying. Or I could point to things at least, to have some means of communication.” In order to help Yasmine learn English quickly, her family also stopped speaking in Arabic or French to her at home, forcing her to speak in English, which Yasmine found really difficult, as this also added to her feeling out of place, away from home, and feeling like an ‘outsider.’

Additionally, Yasmine found it extremely difficult to make friends, which also impacted her feeling of isolation in the US. “Kids when you’re that young are pretty mean, it’s not like we were young enough for them to be really nice, or old enough that they understand better. It’s the age where they’re actually like, really mean. Like obnoxious, brat, mean kids! So it’s not just the language barrier, it’s also like they’re very different cultures and very different styles, and ways
that you carry yourself, between the two cultures…even though we came for a vacation, it wasn’t like you got to meet other people. We were just hanging out and doing touristy things. It wasn’t, you know, really understanding the culture in any way. So having that and the language barrier makes it really difficult to make friends and to hang out with people.” For the first year, Yasmine pretty constantly felt as though she didn’t belong. “I couldn’t understand people, so challenge number 1, I like literally sat in class and just kind of tried to understand everything the teacher was saying, but in recess or whatever, if you can’t communicate with someone, you can’t be friends with someone, and I’m sure, well I can’t be positive, but I’m pretty sure kids would be like, making fun of me. [Of] what I’m wearing. Because there’s this random person in the classroom that they didn’t grow up with, because all these kids have been there since like, the first grade, right. So this random person coming in, obviously looks different from everyone else, because it’s the suburbs…very American, very white…so you look very different, you’re not communicating with anyone, and you’re kind of sitting there [staring] blankly at a wall…” Furthermore, Yasmine dealt with much of her difficulty at school completely independently, not wanting to be a burden on her parents. “You can sense how much stress your parents are under, the whole situation really. Even though you’re really young, you wouldn’t think really, that you’d notice that, you actually kind of really do notice that, and you can feel it, you know.” The stress Yasmine perceives her parents as having been under is tangible, as she is visibly harrowed just remembering it. Yasmine remarks that “this was also right around the time of 9/11. Like after we moved, 9/11 happened. Which is another like, big thing, which I personally never felt any discrimination from…but I don’t know if my parents did, and I can definitely see that happening and being a thing, but I, thankfully, was shielded from that.” However, Yasmine doesn’t remember ever actively thinking about returning to Egypt, or thinking that her life would
have been easier if they had just gone back: “Part of me wanted to go back, but I also knew that wasn’t an option at that point, so it was kind of like when you know something isn’t an option you don’t really consider it, or think about it any more.” To reiterate, Yasmine mentioned that when she first came to the US she missed people a lot. “Your support network is a big thing. Um, especially with how close family is there [in Egypt]. We literally went to one of my aunt’s or uncle’s houses like every other night, you know, and you just go and hang out until it’s late, and it’s kind of like whatever. And that’s definitely something huge that I miss. Um, I don’t know actually. I don’t know if there was like, besides the support network and the familiarity that you have with a place, and kind of the language [anything I missed really]. I think because of the way that I moved here, and what I had to deal with right away, because literally school started the week after, I never really had time to miss things...” Yasmine was so busy being thrown into a new life that she felt that she didn’t have the time or luxury of looking back into an old one. Looking back on the events of her immigration, Yasmine now thinks that this was “kind of good” because it meant she was less emotional and upset, saying that she “learned a lot from the experience,” but maintaining that “it’s not something I would wish upon people.”

When the family first revealed to Yasmine that they would not be returning to Egypt, they were staying at Yasmine’s uncle’s house in the Philadelphia area, after which they got an apartment in the suburbs for a while, finally moving to a house also in the Philadelphia suburbs. As mentioned earlier, Yasmine’s father went back to Egypt after their summer, just to bring back everything he was able to that the family would need, so that he wouldn’t have to make multiple trips. “He brought back important paperwork...a little bit of clothes...so yeah, important paperwork [mainly], like you know, identification kind of stuff, birth certificates, marriage certificates. Um, he brought back a few albums [too], I think, or a few pictures that he could
find...that’s pretty much it.” The prominence of the documents considered most important to bring to the US with him reflects the importance of documentation in the formation of legal capital. However, the move to the US wasn’t quite as simple as remaining in the States after a vacation; Yasmine does mention that at the time that her family left Egypt, her grandmother was living with them, and leaving her “was a pretty big deal.” Yasmine thus never had a chance to really say goodbye to her. On top of Yasmine’s grandmother, most of her family remains in Egypt, including lots of aunts and uncles, and “the rest of the extended family.” Reflecting my positionality, I was surprised by how Yasmine speaks about all this rather comfortably, not seeming sad or upset by having to leave so much family behind as I initially expected, although she uses the word “sad” frequently to describe the events surrounding leaving her family behind, possibly indicating a disconnect between what she thought she should have felt versus what she actually felt. Perhaps her age at the time of moving, the suddenness of the move, and the immediate fears and challenges (for example regarding language) shaped her feelings about Egypt. Yasmine describes what she missed about Egypt indirectly, expressing how she felt about America instead, starting with talking about what she thought was incredible about America and ending up discovering that they were things she actually didn’t like: “Grocery stores were pretty awesome, like the candy sections, like the aisles and aisles of candy was pretty cool. I’m trying to remember...I think just like, having clean air, not just clean air, but just like how clean the streets are, also [breaks off], well this is not [what I liked, actually]. This is more like, what I didn’t like, but how empty it felt. It felt like nobody was living here.” Yasmine explains that she wasn’t just moving across cultures and spaces, but even the geography of the kind of area they moved to (the suburbs) from Cairo (a huge, major city) was startling. In the suburbs, “everything closes at like 8 or 9. Um, even when you’re walking around there’s just barely anyone around,
Yasmine’s parents always had the long-term goal of gaining US passports for themselves, but more importantly for their daughters, and so while they did end up living in the US, that wasn’t necessarily what they were aiming for. Reflecting Ong’s flexibility as a reason for immigration, Yasmine says that the point of applying for the Green Cards was to eventually gain American citizenship so that they could “have it in case we ever wanted to come, and be here.” They therefore applied for American citizenship “right when they could” about 5-6 years after having gotten their Green Cards. They waited the bare minimum amount of time required to file their applications, because Yasmine’s “parents didn’t want to go back to Egypt until they got their American passport, because they were scared that something was going to happen and they wouldn’t be able to come back and it would ruin the whole thing.” However, Yasmine believes that once they did actually decide to stay in the US, they weren’t seriously thinking about going back to Egypt for more than just a visit, citing her parents’ desire for flexibility for the sake of their children. “I can’t say for a fact, but I’m pretty sure it was always like, this is our new life, and they’re gonna stay here forever. Just because of opportunities. And, like, thinking back on it, it’s such a big deal for them to do that, because they were both doctors in Egypt, and they had pretty great lives, you know, like, very well-off, didn’t have to worry about anything, all of their family and friends are there. And they just literally picked up and moved, and it was just like this is it, and had to start whole new careers.” For Yasmine’s parents, although a relatively impromptu decision (at least from the perspective of Yasmine; it is possible that they had planned this immigration and just not mentioned it to their daughters), it was a huge life change – it wasn’t as though they were going to easily be able to adapt to the US. They were no longer
able to practice medicine because given their age it wasn’t “feasible” to go through the schools required “to get the equivalency and then do residency.” It was a mega-upheaval of the lives they were used to leading in Egypt, and yet their perception of the opportunities available to them and, more importantly, Yasmine and her sister, in America, far outweighed the difficulties they knew they would have to face. Therefore, when Yasmine’s American passport came, it was something she was prepared for and excited about. But rather than the passport indicating a personal identity shift, Yasmine was just excited at gaining the freedom to travel: “…my parents wouldn’t let me travel before getting my American passport because they were worried about me coming back to the US. I’m not even saying like traveling anywhere, I mean even just going back to Egypt and visiting family...No [I hadn’t been back at all], my parents did not want to go back until we got our American passports, so we waited. Well, my parents did because of different things, and special circumstances, but um, they didn’t want me and my sister to go back. So it was kinda like freedom in a way, to go back – home – in a sense...I hadn’t seen them [family] for like 6 years.” Even the assumed symbolic nature of the citizenship ceremony was lost on Yasmine, who felt that even though “it should mean more...it just didn’t...it was kind of like ‘great, I can go back and visit family [now].’” Through Yasmine’s story, we can see the repeated relevance of American documentation signifying the right to return home. “I never had closure, because it was a spur of the moment kind of move, I never got that closure – and I really wanted that closure. Because when you’re younger you remember things the way that you remember them as a kid, right? They’re very different from what was, right? But then you always have those old memories in your mind, and I never got to close that chapter of my life, moving here...so getting my American citizenship was in a sense the beginning of getting closure, of like my past life. Or not past life, but like, that chapter of my life.” Yasmine specifies
afterwards, that it was not American citizenship that she felt strongly about, but the passport. Perhaps due to the weight her parents placed on the idea of having an American passport, combined with knowing that once she had it she could finally go to Egypt and gain some closure, but it was the travel document, and the ability to be mobile that Yasmine felt most strongly about, as opposed to what citizenship meant for her relationship with America.

Emphasizing why she felt strongly about “closing that chapter of her life,” Yasmine explains “I always felt like I was living this double life since I had moved here, right. Because again, life is kind of hard, but then it’s who can you really talk to about it, in a way? Because your family life is obviously really stressful in a sense, and a lot of things change within that, based on the move, and the whole family structural thing changes, and my sister came in like 10th grade, right, so it was just before she was applying to colleges, and it was super stressful. So my parents really focused on that, in a sense, for good reason, but it was very much like, for me, it was like okay, I can’t, you know, really share what my life is like...And then as you grow older with the cultures...they’re so different, they’re nowhere near each other, there are always like these cultural clashes, and it was very much like always living with that culture clash, but not being able to share about it...so then it turns into this double life that you live. And I had never reconciled that double life at all, until [breaks off]...I think I finally felt less tense, or like, more okay, once I was able to go back and kind of close the last chapter of my life, and be like, this is the new me.” Additionally, Yasmine explains the connection (or lack thereof) she has to her Egyptian passport, as a dual passport holder in the midst of attempting to “move on” from her country of origin; “I think my parents always emphasized an American passport more than an Egyptian passport, and that was always the focus, kind of since we’ve been here, and since this whole thing happened [referring to moving to the US permanently]. So I don’t think...I never
grew up with it being like ‘Oh! It’s great to have that’ [referring to her Egyptian passport]. Like right now, my parents definitely want me to have it, and they keep renewing it for me. Mostly because when I go back [which has been twice so far], I can’t access anything unless I have that Egyptian passport, like I can’t get the identity card unless I have the passport, and all of that.” So aside from Yasmine’s American passport easing her travel and her Egyptian passport allowing her benefits when revisiting Cairo, she doesn’t think of either passport as something that specifically affects her identity or how she thinks about herself.

Yasmine can’t remember how old she was exactly when she got her American passport, but imagines she must have been around 16, after which she finally had the opportunity to go back to Cairo the summer after her junior year of high school. The whole family went back together, in order to attend a family wedding. However, Yasmine felt ambivalent about her trip to Cairo, unsure of whether it was a homecoming, or a vacation. “...we still had our apartment there, so we went back and stayed in our apartment...the way you remember things is different from the way they actually are. So when I went back and was looking at things, it was like ‘Oh! I remember when that was bigger, or that was smaller,’ or like you know, ‘this wasn’t like this before!’ And obviously things change over 6 to 7 years. So at first I think it felt like, I [got] to sort of go home, and like see family, and like be surrounded by all of that. Because obviously here [in the US], you don’t get to see them as often. But I think once I got there, and stayed for a little bit, it felt like a vacation. Because after that, when you hang out with family, right, they kind of take you on day trips, and make you feel special in so many different ways, and buy you gifts and take you on trips and all of that. They free their schedules, because you are on holiday, in a way. So that makes it feel more like a vacation than a home.” She refers to her Egyptian passport in a quick aside about visiting the Pyramids, “I’m not really a tourist, but I am a tourist.
It’s a weird thing [refers to getting Egyptian rates to visit the Pyramids while laughing]. It’s crazy, right? That’s one of the reasons I still hold onto my Egyptian passport!” The trip redefined Yasmine’s spatial and temporal connections and shaped how she positioned herself vis-à-vis the US. For Yasmine, “home became the place, you know, like wherever you are and wherever you go back to” (emphasis my own). She adds that it may have been easier for her to start thinking of the US as home because of her age, explaining that her parents “still, to this day, sometimes say ‘home’ as in Cairo, you know?” Yasmine calls her house in the US ‘home,’ but also says that this is a challenging notion, that it “is home, but it’s not home, if that makes any sense at all.” Yasmine attempts to explain this confusion by talking about how “it’s a place where you go, and right now it’s obviously the comfort place, because I’ve been here for a while now, it’s a place I can rely on, because we’ve established this place here, and my parents aren’t going anywhere. But it’s also not my full home; like when you think back on your childhood, that’s not what you remember, and that not the place where all your memories live. It’s not where you’ve always grown. Like I’ve grown a lot since being here, but it’s not everything...I don’t know if it’s because of the move, or just growing up, but as a person, you can kind of know when you’ve changed as a person, and I changed a lot once I moved here. And part of me kind of thinks [of] everything before that as not really like, who I am, in a way anymore. Everything before that [the move] is a part of my life, yes, and I’m glad I had it, but I wouldn’t really consider it me, or like, my home, or anything pertaining to what I am today...[Egypt] obviously had influences on me, just the culture in and of itself, for example, but it’s not [breaks off]. It’s weird, right, it’s not what I would off the top of my head say that’s who I am.” Here, we see Yasmine’s loyalties to Egypt ‘loosen’ in a similar way to how Appadurai formulates the deterritorialized subject, with double loyalties or indeed no loyalties to a specific nation-state, but instead to more specific
people, places or memories. Furthermore, it’s clear that for Yasmine her identity, what she relates to and feels similar to, are strongly connected to the emotional and physical space that she considers home. In an attempt to try and put a firm answer to where she considers herself from, Yasmine says that when answering the dreaded “Where are you from?” question, with someone she doesn’t know at all, she will always answer “Pennsylvania. [Or] suburbs of Philly, actually…but then if I get to know someone a little bit better, or you know, they’re actually interested in more than that in a sense, then I can tell them that I grew up there [Egypt].”

For Yasmine, it was growing up in America, finally becoming comfortable with the language, changing how she dressed or spoke, hanging out with American friends, changing her behavior or attitude toward certain things, “or at least understanding more of where everyone else is coming from,” that all facilitated a gradual process by which Yasmine was able to feel more welcomed and a part of American society. It was this process of *embodying* being American that helped Yasmine physically feel more at ease. Yasmine’s sense of being American was magnified when she visited Egypt for the first time, and noticed how differently she had grown up in comparison to her cousins and friends in Cairo, thus also solidifying her position as fluid and betwixt and between two places. “I always feel very torn about it, because it’d be like ‘Oh I’m Egyptian’ [one day], but ‘I’m American’ [another day]…parts of you are telling [you] different things! It sounds like I have multiple personalities [laughs]. So I always felt kind of torn, and I still kind of do, but not as much anymore. So I think going back and realizing that I don’t belong there anymore, and just thinking about things, and you think about things very differently once you move here, in the sense of like, being politically correct, and the things that you say, or don’t say, or what you wear or don’t wear, you know, all of that stuff, and going back and being like ‘oh! That’s what it used to be like!’ Because I thought of it so differently, because
the more that you stay in the US, the more it becomes normal to you, but in your head you’re still like ‘Oh, but I’m Egyptian, that’s normal, it is what it is!’ So I think, yeah, that had a huge impact. To be able to go back and be like wait, this is not really who I am anymore...I’m more American than anything. And then people comment about how Americanized you’ve become, and all of that stuff. And people start speaking to you in English, when you’re in Egypt. Because you don’t look Egyptian anymore...they can tell, in a heartbeat, that you don’t live here!”

Yasmine’s embodiment of Americanness became her way of mediating her relationships with both Egypt and the US, and became her way of evidencing her changing relationship with America versus Egypt. Growing up in a less conservative environment, and then being unable to see eye to eye with her family in Egypt on certain issues, also made Yasmine feel more apart from Egyptian culture as a whole, and made Egypt seem more foreign to her. “I remember, so my cousin live[d] with her parents until she got married, and that’s the normal thing there, you stay there till you get married and then you’re your husband’s problem! [laughs]. It’s the truth! And she was like, in her mid to late twenties or something, which is not old, but still, you know, old enough to support yourself, and I was just thinking about it and when I went back I was like wow, I’m very much ready to go and leave and go to college like 5 or 6 hours away.” Yasmine was unable to see how she inhabited certain social norms and the bodily language and conduct that made other people view her and treat her as an ‘American,’ thus further building on the separation Yasmine felt between herself and Egypt, despite her initial excitement at “going back home.”

Yasmine does feel ambivalent towards the US, though. When she speaks about Egypt it seems that she remembers how difficult she finds it to fit in there, but then when she starts thinking about her experiences in America, she also remembers some of the fundamental
differences between her ideals and American culture. This results in a stalemate, as Yasmine cannot really answer what she identifies most closely with, feeling stretched between two “buckets.” “I mean I don’t really [breaks off]. I wouldn’t necessarily say that I belong here, in a sense, either. I think I can live here, and be happy here, and sort of belong, most of the time belong [pauses]. But I wouldn’t say it’s one or the other. I would say that it’s *neither at this time* [emphasis my own]. I have, at this point in my life, I have no problem picking up and moving to Europe, if the opportunity presents itself, and if I have like, family there, or someone to support me.” Interestingly, Yasmine specifically identified feeling that *neither* the US *nor* Egypt feel like home anymore, rather than *both* of them starting to feel like home. Yasmine knows that she would never pick up and move back to Egypt, unless for a temporary period of time, a year, perhaps. “Mostly because of like, well, political and economical situations, but also, I don’t feel like that culture works with me. Or with who I am today. I just wouldn’t be able to deal with that at this point in my life...In a way [I feel unattached]. I mean I do feel quite attached to the US. Like I studied abroad in London and when I came back it was like ‘oh! It’s nice to be back,’ you know?” The connections she has formed in the US separate from her parents, through school and college, have caused Marianne to feel more attached to the US than Egypt. “But it’s mostly about the people, more than the actual place...But again, as I said, if I get a job offer in Europe, like tomorrow, and it’s a good thing for my career, I would move there in a heartbeat.” Yasmine doesn’t think the idea of a ‘home’ “matters that much. In a sense, like I was saying earlier, here, the US, feels like 70% home. Like when I call home, it’s the US...so I guess in a sense if somebody is like, where is home? I would say Philly, right. But I wouldn’t say that’s my full home...[and] I don’t think that’s really that big of a deal for me at this point in my life.” Yasmine refers to the familiarity of places and memories when she is thinking about home, and
how these are both closely entwined with both the US and Egypt. Although perhaps her familiarity with Egypt has lessened, she has the family there to make up for that. “You hang out at someone’s house, there’s all this food that you get, and you know, you bring down the basket for someone to put the food in, and you bring it back up from the balcony…it’s like, crazy! And just sitting there and listening to music and belly dancing, and eating, it’s just like [pauses]. That kind of more sense of family, and like family community and gathering, is more than anything what makes [Egypt] feel like home.” Yasmine is quick to add though, that “You are what you make yourself in a sense! You take the parts that you like, and from the experiences you’ve had, and it becomes this new you! Like I consider myself a mix of both cultures…It’s kind of like a combo. Because there are parts of the Egyptian culture that I love, and that I think are great and awesome, there are other parts that I don’t want anything to do with. And the same with the American culture.” Thus, Yasmine introduces the idea of home feeling more like a spectrum. Referring to feeling like the US is “70% home” from earlier, she talks about how she thinks of it as the “most homey place” but not 100% home. “I think every place can be your home, right? It’s just what percent do you feel at home, in a sense,” Yasmine explains.

Yasmine concludes by saying that despite everything, despite finally getting the closure she was seeking, despite discovering that she didn’t quite fit in in Egypt anymore, she continues to grapple with and attempt to reconcile her ‘double life.’ “There’s always that conflict, and I feel like there’s always gonna be that conflict, there’s always gonna be that kind of double life in some way…but it’s gotten better…it’s definitely gotten so much better since I’ve started college right. But it’s still definitely something I’m still working towards, and I think it has a lot to do with the fact that I am part of an Egyptian church, and I go there on a regular basis. So you always have that kind of nagging – not nagging – but that part of your personality that’s always
keeping you, and people reminding you what they consider proper, or not proper, or correct, or not correct...But I think I’m getting better at [it]. At least when I’m by myself, and not with family or with certain people from my church, I am getting a lot better at actually have one life. And it’s made me a lot happier I would say."

Gaia: From Marginal to Insider?

Gaia immigrated to the US from Mumbai⁴, India, where she was born and raised, at a much older age than Yasmine; Gaia was in her early 20s when she first moved to the US. Her immigration occurred upon meeting and marrying her husband in India, who was based in the US and had a Green Card. She’s now been living in the US for 26 years, and has been in the same town in Maryland since she left India. Her husband had ended up settling down in the US a few years before meeting Gaia, having had a choice between joining his family’s business in Egypt, or moving somewhere else and starting something new. He wanted to pursue a Master’s degree in the US, and upon graduating decided to stay on in the US and started his own business there. His brother already lived in the US, and with family in the US and his eagerness at being able to build something new in the US, he felt that moving to America made “good sense.” He then returned to India, and lived there for a year, which is when he met Gaia. Gaia says that before getting married, she was aware that in agreeing to marry Jay, she would be moving to the US, as that was where he was based and had started his business. Gaia says that this knowledge certainly impacted her decision-making, as she was extremely nervous at the prospect of leaving India, a country that she “loved”, but decided that she wanted to marry Jay regardless, as he was the man that she had fallen in love with. Once she made the decision, besides being nervous,

⁴ I refer to the city as Mumbai, its current name, but whenever I quote Gaia or Shahnaz in the coming chapters, the city is identified as ‘Bombay,’ which is what both women knew the city as before they immigrated to the US.
Gaia says that she was generally okay. “I would definitely miss my country and miss my family. Other than that, I was okay,” she remembers. Gaia had never been to America before, though, and so the first time she came to the US, it was as a resident. Gaia’s husband moved shortly after they married for work-related reasons, while Gaia had to remain in India in order to apply for and obtain her Green Card. As a spouse of someone with US residency, she was eligible to enter the US as a permanent resident, although the process took 2 years, during which her husband traveled between India and the US to spend time with her and to continue with his work in Maryland.

When Gaia arrived in Maryland, her main support system consisted of her husband and his brother, and her father-in-law as well, who split his time living with his two sons. Like Yasmine, Gaia was first struck by the cleanliness when she arrived in Maryland, “it’s amazing. It is [strikingly different]. I guess, the traffic [too], how organized it was...first thing, as soon as I got down from the airport, I was like, ‘wow...’” But Gaia’s amazement at the organization of the traffic also came alongside her frustration at her lack of independence as she attempted to gain her American driver’s license: “…driving. It was on the other side of the road!” Gaia found this, along with linguistic differences among her major challenges. Although a fluent English speaker, she had learnt British English, and English in India also has certain turns of phrases and words that don’t exist in American English, “back home you said ‘zed’ instead of ‘zee.’ [It was a small thing] but when I used to go to the stores, or go out, I used to still say ‘zed’ and people would look at me as if I’m crazy.” However, Gaia concedes that if these were her major challenges when she first moved to the US, they weren’t too bad. Gaia refers to the way she was raised in Mumbai to express why she thinks it was easy to adapt to the US, because “you’ve seen movies, you’ve seen stuff, you’ve read books, you’ve met people from all over, so culturally it wasn’t so
much of a shock for me.” Here, Gaia attributes her ease of acclimating to the US to the cosmopolitan nature of Mumbai, with its varied population and open access to Western media, fashion and taste. What Gaia was unprepared for, however, were American social customs, and how American communities and families functioned. “I had neighbors, when I moved in I remember they had a 16 year old son and an 18 year old daughter, and we were just introducing ourselves, we got friendly with them, and the next [thing] I know the son is asking ‘hey mom, can you please lend me $10? I promise I will return it back to you tomorrow.’ [His mother responds] ‘are you sure? What guarantee do I have?’ ‘Mom, I promise I’ll get it back to you.’ And I remember the next day I was sitting on the porch with the mom, and she says ‘honey, where’s my $10?’ I have never seen something like that! For us, back home, family is like [pauses] if I asked for 10 rupees or $10, I was not asked to return it...so like...culturally those things were the shock...still it intrigues me! I still can’t- like Arjun [her son] will say ‘hey mom, I’m going to return the money to you,’ when he actually comes with the money I will refuse to take it! [Stuttering] I-I-I- you’re my son! I’m not going to take your money! Why would you even ask me?...When we need to do it [referring to saving money, or having money returned] we’ll tell you to do it, but don’t even come and tell me that. We are family. This is not dad’s money, your money, my money – it’s all our money.”

Mirroring Yasmine’s belief in how she now holds on to the “best of both worlds” referring to both American and Egyptian cultural customs, Gaia was very particular in how she raised her two sons; she always had to choose between instilling an Indian value or an American value in them. “I wanted them to have the best of both worlds. I didn’t want to be like ‘you’re an Indian, and you have to follow these rules.’ I gave them good advice. You sit them down, you talk to them, you tell them that they’re allowed to do what they want within their limits. ‘You’re
not American, so there are certain things you follow and certain things you don’t. You have to be open with us. If you want something come and ask me, I’m your friend as well as your mom,” which Gaia refers to as a more American rather than Indian attitude towards raising children. Although, Gaia adds, “they had the restrictions that they needed,” while remaining open with their parents about anything they were doing. However, Gaia does indicate some hesitation about whether she thinks they retained Indian roots, saying that “I tried, I don’t know if I succeeded or not [hesitates] maybe they’ve become more Americanized than Indian. But at least they have their values. They know – like if there’s any Indian festival, they’ll actually say ‘hey, it’s Diwali, let’s do [celebrate] it.’ Or if any elders come – any one! – they still bow down to them pagai lag, like literally bow down to them- like really?! And they sit down, and try and talk to them, and try and make conversations in our own language. Which I’m shocked by. So there’s something that I may have done right [proudly]. Something that I may have not [though]…But I try to instill both cultures. I didn’t want them totally this or that.” For Gaia, difficulties in raising her sons reproduce and challenge a particular cultural notion of Indianness that she is trying to materialize. One of Gaia’s biggest regrets is that she feels like her sons don’t understand, or haven’t had the opportunity to experience, what it means to be part of an Indian community. The relationship between an individual and their extended family is touched upon by both Yasmine and Gaia, who asserts that she thinks her sons lost out on “the family or the gatherings, the close knit family, you know? The grandmas and the grandpas getting together and how you sit on occasions, and grow up with that. And out here – none of my boys actually have any idea what that was like. Sometimes I regret it. I wonder if I had pushed more, or if I had myself had more Indian friends, they would have [breaks off]. But in school, they went to private school, and unfortunately none of the private schools here had any Indians, they were all Americans…I don’t
know, I still feel that if, that family, whatever [hesitating and stuttering], they still have family
here but I don’t know how to explain it. You know, knowing more about Indian culture you
know, like right now also I feel that – although probably in India it’s become like that too – but
things like, oh [breaks off]. I think they’ve become more selfish. I don’t know if selfish is the
right word [though]...that’s how they’ve been raised. ‘Me, myself, and I.’ I mean that’s also the
coming generation maybe, more than the culture [itself].” Gaia is struggling a lot with
articulating her thoughts, her biggest difficulty apparently being in attributing certain values as
‘American’ or ‘Indian’, aware that she has been away from India for so long, that it’s possible
those values and India itself has also changed. Gaia can’t tell whether or not the differences she
sees in her sons being raised are generational or cultural; most likely, they are a combination
thereof. Again, like Yasmine, memory and time plays a huge role in Gaia’s perceptions of what
she associates with her country of origin, and whether or not those perceptions still hold true.

Gaia ended up gaining American citizenship in 1996, about 8 years after she first arrived
in the US, while Jay received citizenship a year or so before her. Gaia’s reason for applying for
US citizenship was entirely pragmatic, reflecting Ong’s theorization of flexible citizenship as
purely a means to tap into the labor market: “if you’re doing your own business it helps with
some of the tax reforms and stuff” – although she remains a little vague, and seems unsure
exactly what benefits she is entitled to with US citizenship versus permanent residency.
Interestingly, the ability to vote, and political engagement in general, is not cited by Gaia as a
reason for wanting to become American; either this type of political engagement played no role
in Gaia’s decision, or over the years and within the bounds of our conversation, she has taken it
for granted. When gaining American citizenship, she was forced to give up her Indian one, as the
Indian government does not allow for dual citizenship; an added emotional and physical
document change that Yasmine did not have to face (although other Egyptians still viewed Yasmine as American despite her Egyptian passport, which is only a visible marker in certain contexts), perhaps indicating why Yasmine has a less articulated relationship with her Egyptian passport. Gaia describes the feeling of changing her passports as “weird,” stating that she “felt sad” when it was happening. “It felt weird...but otherwise, it doesn’t enter [pauses] my thoughts, like, ‘oh I’m a US citizen [now], and not an Indian citizen.’” Regardless of the passport she holds, whenever asked where she’s from, Gaia unhesitatingly responds “India.” To complicate this, though, Gaia refers to American people/things/events using the personal pronouns ‘we,’ or ‘us;’ “when you’re talking to friends, and sitting with friends – American friends – and they’ll say things like ‘our country...’ and I’ll be like ‘yeah I don’t know why it’s become like that,’ or ‘our country [referring to the US] is...’ Sometimes it comes out naturally, without thinking.”

This language has developed over time, Gaia says, as she has become more comfortable in the US – after all, as she remarks, she has been in the US longer now than she had lived in India, having spent more of her “conscious years” in the US. This opposes the literature reviewed earlier in which childhood memories are deemed the key to connect to ‘home.’ Gaia feels strongly that these attachments to the US, this type of language when thinking or talking about the US (specifically with other Americans), has occurred as a product of time, and not because of her citizenship. “Say I had a Green Card, and stayed a resident and not [become] a citizen. I don’t think my thinking would have changed. Even if right now, I had a Green Card, I wouldn’t think that this [the US] is not my country, or my home, [that] I’m not a US citizen, so this is not my home.” Gaia explains that she first started thinking of the US as home and that she belonged to an American community with the creation of her own family. “I guess after the kids were born, and they started going to school. Just me being involved with them and their school and all
their activities, and then getting into real estate, working at the retail store...” Generally, Gaia’s comfort in the US came as she began to make use of American institutions and services, and as she began to create and build a life for her family in Maryland, that could not be replicated or transported back to India. “It makes you feel more and more a part of it,” Gaia explains.

While Gaia does not feel that her American passport affected whether or not she felt at home or comfortable in the US, she does state that the change of citizenship entirely changed her experiences of travel. “Travel has become much simpler. Especially when I go to Europe, Canada, [or] any of the islands. Because you don’t need visas. You just show that you’re a US citizen. But when you go to India, then you need the visa...” Remembering the first time she had to apply for an Indian visa is interesting; Gaia explains how crazy and “weird” it felt, and that she perceived this as a personal flaw: “oh my god, I’m applying for an Indian visa – what the hell is the matter with me?!” However, when Gaia does arrive in India, she feels “so much at home” and as if she’s “back” and that she “belongs.” The process of applying for a visa in order to enter India has changed how she feels about traveling, not how she feels when she is actually in Mumbai. India now offers an OCI (Overseas Citizens of India) card, which is a multiple-entry, life-long ‘visa’ enabling holders to travel to India as often and for as long as they would like. Holders must be ex-Indian nationals, thus catering to the vast Indian diaspora. Gaia had been considering applying for an OCI card, but she says that travel of some form always came in the way, so she was never in Maryland long enough to start and finish the application process. At the same time, though, she’s also starting to doubt the necessity of applying for the card; “The family – you know, my dad just passed away. And mom is there but [gestures as if to acknowledge that eventually she, too, will pass away], if no one is out there, and nobody for Jay’s side is there either [pauses]. So I don’t think I’m going to go back ever. I mean, never say
never. But most likely no. Because both the boys would never go to settle in India...that’s you know, all the family I have.” Unlike Yasmine, who thinks about moving to Europe in the future, Gaia decidedly wants to remain in the US; however, they both are clear that they specifically do not wish to return permanently to their countries of origin.

Gaia used to return to India to visit her family and friends “every one and a half to two years,” although this has decreased of late as she has fewer remaining relatives in Mumbai (her sister now lives in Florida, and her brother in Egypt). She says if she still had family there, due to her sons’ new independence at college, she would have loved to travel a little more often, and go back every year. However, even though while in the US Gaia misses a lot about India, upon traveling to India she has recently discovered that she gets more frustrated with certain things, and misses a lot about the US, such as the traffic, the organization, and the ease of life. Here, Gaia interjects with a fond memory of her very first trip back home, during which she also begins to tear up, because the memory of it is so dear to her. Her first return to India was three years after moving to the States, for a similar special occasion as Yasmine’s first visit to Cairo: in order to attend her brother’s wedding. “Oh my God, it was one of the most joyous [breaks off], besides him getting married, but it was one of the most joyous days of my life. Going back home. Going to see my parents. You know, going to a familiar place because I lived there for so long. So you know, got down at the airport, and I was just ecstatic — oh my God! I’m home! Oh my God! I still considered that my home back then... And then things change. I guess once you start settling down, once you have kids, then things change. But at that time I still felt like I was back home — oh I’m so happy to be back home, with my family!” Gaia remarks that this initial feeling has completely changed for her now, when she goes back to India. “Current feelings. Hm. I like going back to India. I love to go back to India. Really feel happy, good to be there.
But after a month, maximum- maximum I would push it for a month- I just want to come back. Now, since you know, lived here, this is my home, I just want to be back here, be with everyone, in a familiar place.” Gaia refers to the readiness with which she prepared herself for moving to the US, and states that this is not how she feels at the prospect of going back to India permanently. “First and foremost, the kids are going to be here [in the US]. That’s a major thing. But besides that, also…back home…it’s very chaotic…I’m more peaceful here than [when] I am back home…I mean I’d love to go back home – for a short vacation. But if you tell me to stay there, I don’t think I’d be ready to do that. Because I feel like it’s too chaotic.”

For Gaia, the physicality of space, and her familiarity with that physical space, plays a huge role in how she conceives of home, in tandem with the growth of her social capital via the relationships and connections or bonds she has in a place. Although her relationship with relatives in the US (her brother-in-law and his family in particular as they are local within Maryland) is not entirely positive – “let’s not talk about [it]” – Gaia explains that making really positive friendships has contributed to the ease with which she settled down. Her first year in the US, she began to work at JC Penny, the retail store, where she met one of her first American friends. “Jenny. An American. And she was my mum’s age! But we became great friends. Her family was wonderful. She was one of my biggest supporters ever. I mean, I still talk to her. She…lives in New York state [now]. And my parents came down, and when Deepak [her brother], came down, we used to go stay at their lake house and go eat at her lake house, and she used to come here. We were like this [holds fingers crossed together to indicate closeness]. So anyway, any problems, any time, any tension, if I used to feel miserable, depressed, I used to call her up. She just knew. She used to come over, I used to go over. She really [breaks off], I worked there for a year, and then Arjun [her elder son] was born, and things got crazy. So she helped me
through a lot of that.” After this initial friendship, she was able to start building social capital, as she opened up to meeting more people, and met a lot of people through her kids’ daycare and her new job at a real estate agency. However, Gaia did make a concerted effort to make more Indian friends. “Had a good Indian circle in fact, I knew about 8 couples who had kids my kids’ ages too. But at that time, Arjun, Varun [her two sons] both were up to about 8 years [old], and we had these Indian friends and we used to meet every weekend, but the older the kids grew [breaks off]. All these friends had daughters. So you know, especially when your kids are young, girls flock together… and it used to get very frustrating for them,” eventually leading to her sons not wanting to meet them anymore, but meet their friends from school instead. At the same time Jay began to get busier at work, and only had one day off a week (Sunday), during which he didn’t want to have to go out and meet people, but rather relax at home. Thus, this social group began to disintegrate, and Gaia has mixed feelings about this. However, it seems that Gaia is defensive of the fact that she has few Indian friends or ‘connections’ now, as the nature of her social capital changes, and is quick to assert that she was surprised by the fact that many of her American friends share similar values, and seems to suggest that she needs to mention this to justify her majority-American friend group. From India, Gaia is closest to her cousins and one of her aunts, with whom she remains in very close contact, calling them at least once every 10 days. With her friends from Mumbai however, she says that the form and substance of the contact has changed— she uses social media like Facebook to see what they’re up to, and hear about their lives, but she talks to them personally rarely, although she attempts to call them at least once a month.

Although she says that she would now never stay in India longer than a month, on vacation, it isn’t necessarily because Gaia feels that she doesn’t ‘belong’ in India, or she feels uncomfortable there (despite mentioning that she does miss things about America, this remains
unrelated to her comfort in India), but rather because now when she thinks of family, she thinks of her husband and sons before she thinks of her cousins, aunts, uncles or extended family in India. The combination of her family and increased comfort with the physical space of her home in Maryland is what makes her think of America more as home. Her attachment to physical space is clear upon looking around her house, which I was able to visit during our interview. She has plenty of Indian decoration in the house, which she collected over the years as she traveled back and forth between the US and India. This decoration helps her space feel defined and personal, and emphasizes Gaia’s cross Indo-American sentiment, emotion and lifestyle. This is further highlighted when Gaia remembers her first house (in the US), just a few blocks away, which she remembers fondly. Gaia’s first house was decorated and furnished according to her father-in-law and sister-in-law’s wishes. Thus, while Gaia remembers “the house on Sandy Street” fondly, she refers to the house we are currently conversing in as her ‘true home’ “because [she’s] built it [her] way.” “[Here,] I’ve got my stuff. I’ve got the Indian photographs…I don’t know. It’s all that I wanted to do is in this house.” This reflects Tucker’s emphasis on the house as a space where people can “express and fulfill their unique selves or identities” (1994:184), and Appleyard and Goffman’s emphasis on the house as a ‘statement’ of one’s socially desired identity, as Gaia attempts to hold onto her Indian heritage while she becomes more ‘American.’

Gaia explains that she still calls India home, but that it might be because she doesn’t know what else to call it. It is her childhood, and also her ethnicity, which plays a large role in her feeling of belonging to the Indian community, despite not necessarily thinking of the country as home. “I still consider myself a true Indian…although I’ve gotten American citizenship and adapted to the ways of life here, I still truly believe that I am a true Indian or whatever. So it comes naturally to me to say [breaks off], I mean it is my home. I’ve been brought up there,
raised there…” Alternatively, when Gaia is in India, she sometimes realizes that she may have become ‘more American’ than she initially thought. She feels a disconnect sometimes, because of the need she faces to “adapt to the ways and means of this country. To fit in.” At the same time, though, she attempts to maintain her own [Indian] culture, and so she finds that attempting to mix and match between the two cultures often leaves her separate from both, a separation she feels most strongly in Mumbai. This parallels Yasmine’s assertion of the need to lead a “double life” in order to make the balance between her two worlds possible. Gaia hesitates and goes back and forth on what she is trying to say here. She seems personally unclear on what she is trying to say, and in expressing her sentiment, displaying the complexity and difficulty with which these conversations are had among immigrants. She adds that it’s “not that I feel less at home there,” just that her first thought of home is always the visual of her house in Maryland. To explain, Gaia mentions that if she were in a third country altogether, on holiday, say, she would be thinking of and missing the US, and referring to the US as home, not India. And it hasn’t got anything to do with America the country – “I went to Florida...Colorado, wherever, after those trips it’s like I’ve come back home. To Maryland. I feel great...no [it’s not anything to do with the country America]. It’s the physical place. It’s my home. This is my home.” The struggle both Yasmine and Gaia express in defining ‘home’ and negotiating their liminal state, illustrates my reinterpretation of Tucker’s visual depiction of home as concentric circles. As I explained in the introduction, I argue that ‘home’ is better represented by overlapping, fluid and diverging shapes of different sizes. This helps characterize Gaia and Yasmine’s definitions and redefinitions of ‘home.’

To further complicate and parse through Gaia’s perspective on home, she adds that the strongest she ever feels at home is when she is with her immediate family (husband and sons),
wherever that may be. Though she quickly dismisses this as she realizes that although “when all four of us are back in India, yeah, I would be really happy,” she feels strongly about when she actually returns to the physical space of her house in Maryland. There’s a lot of interesting rhetoric through Gaia’s conversation about home. She tends to refer to going to India as “going back,” and coming to the US as “returning.” There is an interesting linguistic play here, with both spatial and temporal implications, with the idea of “going back” also indicating a type of time travel, as she “goes back” through time, to a place of her past, but then “returns” to the home of her present. This is compounded with Gaia’s description of the ways in which she thinks about Mumbai as home; “…Reliving the past!...Going and visiting colleges, everything that we did, all our old sport, going shopping at the familiar places, and then going and seeing how India, or Bombay, has developed since I’ve moved out,” which, Gaia adds, is an incredibly different, “evolved” city from when she first lived there. Gaia adds that she feels like she can love Mumbai more now, because she sees the development as positive, and enjoys, almost as a tourist, going back to Mumbai to see those changes and remark on them, while the parts of Mumbai that remain from her past seem charming and beautiful because they are the places of her past (even though they may be decrepit, or unusable). In this way, Gaia gets the best of both worlds when she visits Mumbai; the things that she would ordinarily complain about are endearing and memorable, and the advances and ‘modern’ changes are ‘cool’ and exciting to see. “That [India] was a vacation for me. And this [America] is home.”

Interestingly, according to Gaia, she never thought of herself as an immigrant – rather this was something she began to realize over time. Perhaps this is related to her unique situation (as compared to the vast majority of immigrants to the US), whereby she arrived in the US as a resident and never had to worry about finding sponsorship or a way to remain in the country. “I
feel [immigration] has become more and more [of a conversation topic/debate] than what it was 26 years ago. All these immigration laws, and people talk about immigrants [more]. But when I moved here, I actually never ever thought I was an immigrant. Now, when we all talk, since I’ve become a US citizen, when we all talk about immigration laws and immigrants, and I said – wait! I’m an immigrant, too! It’s amazing. It’s amazing.” Gaia goes on to talk about how this might be related to the fact that for her, she was just a person moving country to be with her husband. What she was perceived as by others (an immigrant) was not necessarily on her radar. Gaia did notice being treated differently during moments, though, and refers to these as moments when the label ‘immigrant’ felt more appropriate for her. “Some people don’t care, some people care. But especially when I, I saw it more – [hesitate], not when I was working at a retail store, at that time everything was fine. Nobody even said anything. But when I joined a real estate company, that’s the first time when I met these customers, and they’re like [hesitates] – I actually got comments like ‘this is my first house, I’d rather buy it from an American [rather] than any[one] else’…And that’s when you realize, like wow, things are different. But now, once you get into the hang of things, now you don’t feel it. About 15 years ago, that was the first comment I heard, and that was the time that I knew that there was a difference, [when it was personally thrown into my face by someone else].”

As we can see from these narratives, Yasmine and Gaia have each grappled with a unique set of difficulties associated with moving to the US, whether it was differences based on the age they were when they immigrated, and their personal cultural ties to their countries of origin, or debates about how to raise Gaia’s children versus how Yasmine balanced her family’s expectations and social acceptance in the US. However, they both also clearly express difficulties surrounding making a choice about which cultural value to engage and when,
reflecting their interaction with liminal spaces and being betwixt and between. Both women’s stories reflect Ghannam’s concept of liminality as a space for potential and imagination, using their positions to borrow from each culture they are tied to, creating their perception of the ideal value system. As we will see in the next chapters, these ideas continue to be considered and referenced by the other women interviewed. However, their stories differ in that they came to the US under different circumstances and dealt with a more politically tenuous relationship to the US, by entering as visitors or students, and fighting in order to remain in the US and gain permanent residency.

In the following chapter, Marianne’s story will clearly exemplify notions of marginality and liminality, in both negative and positive ways. Furthermore, her story allows me to begin exploring and analyzing the role of sensory and tactile relationships to ‘home,’ and how Marianne articulates a different way for constituting ‘home’ that departs from its more traditional understandings, having struggled in different ways from Yasmine and Gaia, as she was undocumented for six years before she was able to gain the Green Card.
Chapter 2: Melting Pots and Diasporic Communities

“\textsc{I know they say you can’t go home again,} \\
\textsc{I just had to come back one last time...} \\
\textsc{Won’t take nothing but a memory,} \\
\textsc{from the house that built me.}” (Miranda Lambert, 2009)

Unlike Yasmine and Gaia, Marianne chose to remain a legal permanent resident for a long time before making the decision to apply for US citizenship; it took several years and a lot of coaxing from her mother before she decided to apply. The US passport symbolizes a distinct shift between her relationship with her country of origin and America, indicating why it has been such a tough decision for her to make. Inhabiting a domestic sphere and having children in the US has impacted Marianne’s relationship with American institutions – just as was the case with Gaia. Additionally, Marianne identifies the oppositional nature of her home-making in the US; America became more of a home when Poland started becoming less of a home. Furthermore, fascinatingly, Marianne places an emphasis on her relationship with more sensory and tactile relationships with Poland, including taste, such as how the memories and desires for foods have been able to impact her feelings as well as aural and visual representations of ‘home.’

Perhaps most importantly, like Gaia and Yasmine, Marianne emphasizes the dominant feeling of being “neither here nor there,” or, in scholarly terms, being “liminal” and therefore “betwixt and between two places.” Each of them has felt the hardships and the thrills associated with straddling two cultures, two homes and two communities.

Finally, Marianne speaks frequently of her access (or lack of access) to social and cultural capital, specifically asserting the importance of accents and language in determining whether she had enough capital to fit in with Polish communities in the US. Additionally, she refers several times to the importance of economic capital, and having access to cars, varieties of foods and clothes that were not available in Poland, and how this affected her popularity when
she returned to Poland over the summers. This is interesting to juxtapose with the discourse surrounding the capitalist ideals in the time period during which Marianne left Poland, given the ideological battles between communism and capitalism, and the US’ media presence as the ultimate democratic, capitalist, open market society.

**Losing Home**

Marianne moved to the US when she was 11 years old from Poland in 1988. When asked about whether or not she had been to the States before moving here, she responded hesitantly, stating that she had in order to visit. Her aunt and her uncle were already in the States and her father had come on a visitor’s visa in the early 1980s, and then overstayed his visa. At 9, she visited the US in order to see her family and visit her father. She had stayed for as long as her visa allowed her – a total of 6 months, and then returned to Poland. After that, she returned with her mother at age 11, assuming that she would be visiting the US for another block of 6 months in order to see her father and spend time with him. She comments that her mother had planned the immigration, and was very aware of the fact that they were planning on permanently joining her father by overstaying their visitors’ visas as well, but that this information was not communicated to Marianne. The plan to immigrate had been communicated to nobody else either – other than Marianne’s father. None of their friends or family in Poland were aware that Marianne’s mother was planning to remain in the US.

Marianne very clearly remembers all the reasons why her family decided to immigrate to the US. She said that although she was young, she was old enough to remember how the immigration took place if not the specific details and feelings behind them. She expresses the more ‘obvious’ reason for her family’s decision to immigrate: Poland’s political situation.
Poland was still under Soviet control. In her childhood she remembers seeing solidarity movements gaining ground, and seeing demonstrations begin against the Soviet order, but that her mother was unsure and uncomfortable with how long it may take for the system to change to allow for more livable conditions, or if change would take a long time. Like Yasmine’s parents wanting a better and more prosperous future for their children, Marianne’s mother didn’t want Marianne growing up in those kinds of conditions, under a Soviet system, because she knew that it was unstable, and she wanted Marianne to have the best and most stable education available to her because Marianne already showed academic promise. Additionally, the knowledge that half her family was already in the US also helped encourage her mother to make the decision, because it made her feel like she had a support system available to her. Marianne also refers to the American Dream as a concept that she remembers her mother buying into in some way. Therefore, Marianne states, the immigration to the US was very specific: her family was not just trying to ‘immigrate’ in order to get out of Poland, they also very concretely wanted to immigrate to the US, and not just anywhere.

Marianne became a citizen in 2005, so fairly recently in comparison to when she first came to the US. She laughs as she realizes that she was already a practicing attorney in the US when she filed her papers for citizenship. Marianne then walked me through the process of her immigration, and how she came to be in the US and eventually gain her citizenship. From 1988 to 1994 (6 years) Marianne and her parents were undocumented. As Marianne finished up high school, just before starting college, she obtained the Green Card, after applying through the NSC’s services as an undocumented immigrant. Marianne specifically remembers this time period as a time when she was trapped in the US and unable to leave and go home to Poland, because she wouldn’t be able to re-enter the US due to her illegal presence in the country. In
1994, Marianne left the US to go home for the first time in 6 years, as she had to leave the country in order to register for the Green Card. She had an interview slot set up at the American embassy in Poland.

Marianne remembers that she was “really devastated” when she first realized that her ‘vacation’ in the US was a permanent move. Like Yasmine, Marianne made no choice to leave her country of origin in order to come to the US; her family decided it for her, and she simply came along. She talks about how it was just a complete change from everything she had ever known, referring specifically to her strong relationship with her mother’s siblings and their children (her cousins). Specifically, she had one cousin who was roughly the same age as her (within a year apart), with whom she was particularly close. They lived in adjacent apartment buildings from the time they were born, so she and her cousin were in the same grade and would sit next to each other, go to school together, come home together. She expresses that her cousin was practically her sister, and that she felt physically “pulled” away from her extended family. As an only child, Marianne particularly valued her relationship with her cousins, and she felt like that was literally taken away from her. However, she says that her emotions were complex, because on the flip side the arrival in the US was also a reunion with her father, whom she had been separated from for a long while. She says that she was always a “daddy’s girl” and so the ability to be close to him again was extremely important. Fear was an overwhelming emotion in terms of making new friends her age. Marianne stresses that the language barrier was not the issue- she learnt English rapidly, and felt like she was pretty fluent within 6 months of schooling and living in the US. But she does say that as a new student at Catholic school she was bullied-although she adds that this is normal, and she was bullied the same way any other new student would have been. She says it wasn’t “awful” like some of the stories you hear about in the news.
today, but that it was still pretty bad and hard. Her mother pushed her up 2 grades, so she went from 4th grade in Poland to 7th grade in the US, and although the age difference was only 1 year between her and her peers, due to different education systems, it was still a stark difference: “I was playing with Barbie dolls and the girls were like wearing make up and kissing boys” was how Marianne described this visceral difference. Indeed, Marianne describes the turning point in occurring two years into her time in the US, when she met other Polish immigrants closer in age to her as when things got a little easier. Around this time she started high school, attending a special access public school for academically promising students. Marianne states: “And that was really the first time that I really felt like I was starting to belong. Before that, I definitely felt like a visitor.” When asked what brought on this change, Marianne identifies the fact that in her high school there were people from everywhere. In elementary school, she states that the Polish students she met had Polish last names, spoke Polish at home, but in school tried to push away their Polish identity to be as American as possible. She states that this group of Polish students saw people like her as a threat to their identity as American, and reiterates that this time was one of the hardest times for her. She “hated” that part of her life, and kept waiting to go home again. However, in high school she began asking herself questions like “Who am I? Am I American or am I Polish?” She says that although questioning herself in this way was difficult, it was the first time she started to belong to some kind of group, having met wonderful people she is still in touch with.

Thinking about those things that Marianne missed most about Poland when she first came to the US, it was clear that her connection to her family was the most important and the most missed. But at the end of the day, the most overwhelming feeling that Marianne missed was “comfort,” and more specifically, “the comfort of being home.” She also states that children
easily adjust to different environments and get used to things quickly, but that at the end of the
day, even as a child, the “familiarity of places, the ability to go to a store on your own and not
have to worry about where you’re going or getting lost” was sorely missed. She asserts that she
was always very confident and independent, but that in the US she just didn’t have the cultural
competence to be confident and independent: she couldn’t speak the language, she was talked
down to, she didn’t understand her environment. This translates directly to how immigrants often
lose part of their social capital when they immigrate to the US – even in instances when we’re
thinking about and discussing transnationality and high-class-status by citizens (including
Chinese Americans, according to Ong), because they are, for the most part, unable to enter
mainstream American culture (whether that’s the ultimate desire or not), because of their race,
ethnicity, language, cultural beliefs and/or morals. There is an inherent tension between an
immigrant’s desire to enter American society and their access/ability to do so.

Furthermore, Marianne specifies that as she grew up, and as she became more familiar
with her surroundings, and as those issues began to be surmounted as she became fluent in
English, familiar with her landscape, and aware of how to engage the new culture, the nostalgia
for home kicked in. Instead of missing visceral feelings of comfort, she missed intangible
memories: “the tastes of food, and certain smells, and certain landscapes.” Marianne talks about
the first buzzes of excitement of coming to a new place, especially a place like America at the
time of the Cold War, when the environment she was coming from was particularly difficult.
“There was always more here. You know?...We didn’t have supermarkets. And I lived in the
city! The capital city!...the first time I walked into Toys R Us my head was just spinning...have
fresh food all year round, that was to me crazy. To be able to like, not have to stand in line for
certain things...we didn’t have bananas...[and then,] things like that, all of a sudden were just
right there...the material things were the things that for me at the time, when I was young, were the things that I was wowed about...once that wore off, it was kind of just yeah...” Marianne falters, finding it difficult to identify things that currently make her excited about being in the US.

When asked specifically about her high school experience, and what made it easier for her to connect with her peers, Marianne identifies and emphasizes the common ground she and her peers shared in being ‘different.’ She says that she started meeting people for the first time who were neither from her (Polish) background, nor simply “American”. She made many more friends that were also immigrants, but from different places, or were of mixed racial backgrounds, or looked different than expected (specifically, she refers to a Puerto Rican friend who was ostracized from the Latino community because she had blonde hair and blue eyes and “looked white”). Marianne says it was easier when she started meeting people who were also dealing with questions of identity and had their own “issues.” She identifies these issues as being related to their “race, or you know, ethnicity, or their parents’ cultural background, or their own cultural background, and their own baggage...” She adds as an afterthought that it was also the type of school that parents specifically sought out for their kids; and so there was a very self-selective group of people who “were thinking about some things at a somewhat deeper level than some of the kids I went to my neighborhood school with.” When Marianne first met a group of Polish immigrant students at her new high school, she was “turned off” by them, perhaps because the feeling was mutual and she felt excluded by them – they felt like she had been in the US too long, and had lost her Polish roots and was too “American” for them. This is particularly interesting when juxtaposed with her previous school, in which she found that the Polish community ostracized her for being “too Polish.” Marianne expresses this with difficulty; feeling
unsure of herself and hesitating while remembering how difficult it was to come to the realization that she was excluded from both American and Polish groups, and was considered ‘foreign’ to both. She vacillates between expressing her sentiment about her background and the categories that other people placed her under; “to them my accent wasn’t strong enough, and I was just too Americanized, even though I wasn’t! Cos I wasn’t! I felt like I totally wasn’t! I felt completely not American, to all the Americans! But to them I wasn’t Polish enough!” Marianne chalks this up to the Polish immigrants groups coming in at that time as having gone through puberty over there versus in the States, and so they were in Poland during the time of a great culture shift during which young Poles didn’t want to be Americanized, and so when they immigrated to the States they tried to create their own “little Poland” and drink Polish beer, have Polish friends, speak only Polish, and listen to Polish music. Marianne identifies high school as a very formative time period in her life, as she went through puberty, started meeting boys and having “all those life experiences,” but asserts that even though she started having stronger friendships and relationships in high school to sort of replace the lack of family around her, she still felt like she “needed to go home. And [she] couldn’t do that until [she] got [her] Green Card.” The problem with this was that Marianne was a strong personality and never attempted to assimilate to American culture, and kind of followed the beat of her own drum. However, although she didn’t actively attempt to become American, she had lost touch with a lot of Polish popular culture, and her academic language skills had weakened facing dramatic shifts in her cultural capital – making it more and more difficult to spend time with a group of people for whom Polish identity and culture was of the utmost importance, and seeming or looking ‘American’ was criticized. She talks about this as her second “self-identity crisis, because [she] was like ‘What am I doing? Who am I? What’s going on?!’”
This tumultuous period in Marianne's life lasted until she was around 17, when she first started going back to Poland, after finishing high school, in 1994. By this point, Marianne reminisces that she had a pretty good set of connections with some of the people she went to high school with; some also immigrants, others not, but all linked by a mutual feeling of exclusion and ‘minority’ status. In her words, Marianne and her best friend bonded over this feeling – “She looked different, I sounded different.” But by the time she graduated from high school, she got a notification that her family’s green card documentation went through, and that she would need to go back to Poland to interview at the American consulate there. With the fear of not being able to return to the States gone since she now had a Green Card and would legally be able to re-enter the country, she immediately went back to Poland, without even waiting for a scheduled interview slot. Her return to Poland came along with her rediscovery of her roots, and of a place in which she felt she could belong. Ironically, although she felt at ease and like she had finally found a place to be herself in, she was still exotified by the local population, even though she doesn’t seem to see it this way. It was a feeling of being ‘special’ and ‘different’ that helped her gain some sort of cache with other teenagers: “it was amazing!...the boys thought my accent was cute...that was the first summer that I was like, wow like you know, this is like, this is me! This is where I come from!” From that summer onwards, Marianne went back to Poland every summer, for the whole period of time, from the end of May to the beginning of September when college started up again. She did a lot of her growing up in Poland, also having many of important life experiences there, from her first romances, her boyfriends, and her friends. She had a steady summer relationship with a boy, and for a few years they would write each other while she was away, and get back together when she would return to Poland. At this time, she was strongly considering applying to law school in Poland so that she could go back, partly
because she “was in love, obviously” and partly because she was excited to be in Poland again, more permanently. Looking back on that period of her life, Marianne is pretty sure that if it had come down to it, she isn’t sure that she would have been able to make the move back to Poland: “I was nervous, I was a little nervous about the language...using academic language [at law school] would have been tough[er]. But I was still willing to do it and wanting to do it, so I guess [pause], I don’t know.” She then identifies the reason that she decided to remain in the States as being completely related to meeting her current husband. Even after meeting her husband, she says that they always discussed their eventual return to Poland (he is also Polish), even after she graduated from college and entered law school in the US. She had planned to take the New York bar with the goal of being more “marketable” to an international firm that could then send her to Poland. For a long time her “focus was, you know, I love my home, I want to go back, I’m very connected to it.” She doesn’t dwell over the reasons why this never happened, seeming unsure and uncomfortable with why she never made the move to Poland herself.

Simultaneously, however, even though she felt instantly welcomed back and ‘at home’ upon returning to Warsaw every year, she did always feel “different” and there were moments when she reconsidered her ‘Americanness.’ She says that she always felt different because of the way she was dressed, the way she carried herself, but most of the ‘American’ behaviors or mannerisms she identifies are largely related to Bourdieu’s sense of embodied taste – related to dress, speech and monetary power (“I had more money to spend, I had...you know like, I was the one buying everyone rounds”) as opposed to identifying moments when she felt isolated culturally or in thought/emotion. At the same time, she says that the moment when she realized that she could belong in Poland was when the country itself began to diversify – she refers to the shock she felt when she first saw “this little old Chinese man reading the Polish newspaper” or
when she “went to the club and there was a bunch of black men clearly from Africa, and [her] first instinct was to speak English, and they couldn’t understand [her, because they spoke Polish].” The distance she had from Poland while the country was changing post-Soviet era, and the superficial differences between her and her friends/family back in Poland made it seem as if she was “visiting” Poland, as opposed to returning to Poland.

Marianne stresses how her constant desire to be connected to Poland has carried over to the present day. She is extremely nervous about her children not knowing Polish and ending up ‘American,’ and therefore constantly speaks to them in Polish, and wants them to want to speak in Polish. Thus, while her children force her to interact with American institutions, thus making her ‘American,’ Marianne is making her children ‘Polish.’ Furthermore, she places an emphasis on them understanding her “journey,” and wanting them to know “all that that means and all that that meant for [her]” whilst also wanting them to grow up in a diverse environment like she and her husband did – even though this environment was both the cause and the result of a lot of pain, confusion and difficulty for them both. Similarly to Gaia’s attempt to raise her children with both Indian and American values, Marianne wants her sons to be Polish without them being “surrounded by a bunch of Polish people that all look the same and go to church every Sunday” and expresses her awareness of the difficult line of the “dichotomy between trying to open them up to the rest of the US and giving them what the US has to offer in terms of diversity, but still trying to keep that cultural kind of…purity [no, not that, that’s the wrong word]…strength of like, the culture, in them.” Like Yasmine, Marianne’s relationship to Poland is also related to her deterritorialized position, and how she has attachments to both the US and Poland now, and is able to draw upon both of those attachments to raise her son. Her son didn’t speak a word of English until he started day care and had to learn the language to communicate with his peers.
and teachers, because his parents were determined that Polish be his first language. And now, "even if he plays, I ask him to please play in Polish, cos he’ll like talk to himself, you know? So it’s hard for me because I don’t want to be that crazy parent...yell[ing] at him for speaking in another language! But at the same time, I know what it’s like to forget it. To get to a place where you feel like you’re forgetting it.”

Language is extremely important to Marianne. She believes that it’s one of the strongest ties she has to Poland as she continues to live in the US. Unlike Gaia whose relationships with other Indians in the US quickly dissipated, Marianne lives in a Polish neighborhood, and expresses that her husband’s very strong ties to a Polish community helped her find a place within the US, with a group of good Polish friends with whom she feels comfortable only speaking in Polish. She has also taught her two children to separate out people based on whether or not they speak Polish – and to those who speak Polish, they are not allowed to speak in English. She also sends her older son to Polish school, in order to ensure that the connection to Poland remains – especially because he has not had the same “journey” that she and her husband have had, and so the connection needs to be a little forced. Clearly, she has realized that the US had given her something she considered positive (her exposure to a very real diversity), and she has become increasingly comfortable in that environment. Interestingly, her increased comfort in the US and her current ability to call the US ‘home’ is part of an inversely proportional relationship to her comfort in Poland. Although she stated earlier on in the interview that she couldn’t think of anything positive to associate with the US once the excitement of the physically bigger, the greater variety, the constant availability of products, Marianne clearly values certain aspects of her American experience. “When I started going back [to Poland] when I got older, I realized that, you know, I had a little bit of an idealized version of how things are over there, and
I couldn’t live there... if I had the money I would build a house and go there like 3 times a year with my family, because I have a very close family there. But to live there? And to work there? It would be hard.” While the sentiment is the same as Gaia’s, the reasons are slightly different; for Gaia moving back to India is not a possibility in her future because she has little to no family left there, as opposed to Marianne’s cited reasons of ‘work’ and daily ‘living’ being difficult in Poland despite having very close family there. Pinpointing the reasons for this, Marianne continues on to describe a specific example that epitomizes, for her, the reasons she couldn’t live in Poland again: “My husband and I were in line at the post office... 10 minutes outside of center city, but still considered part of the city [kind of like South Philly here] but [it is] its own kind of neighborhood... and there was a person standing in front of us, who was very clearly a man, dressed as a women. In a very sort of clumsy way, you could tell the person was trying to figure out for themselves, what they were doing. And she, I guess, got to the window, and the woman behind the glass, had a hard time figuring out what to call this person. What pronouns to use, which [pause], that part is fine. But then what really kind of [hesitates], got both of us upset, was like the reactions from the people. The sneering, the comments, just the rude, loud comments about, you know, appearance and things like that. And when we walked out we were just like we don’t realize the society we live in [referring to the US.] We criticize it all the time, until we go out of it, and we see how it is everywhere else. So you know, I felt that it [Poland] was just very, kind of backward in a sense.” Gaia and Yasmine share Marianne’s reflexivity in attempting to explain their discomfort with their countries of origin, or the reasons why they feel like they no longer belong. Marianne expresses the positives aspects of her immigration to the US dichotomously: those of the values she was taught in the US, and how they “opened up [her] mind to things, and made [her] understand different issues that would have taken [her] much
longer if [she] was in Poland;” and those of the “opportunities just to be [pause] free, you know?” More specifically, when she talks about freedom in the US, she enters the discourse surrounding the American Dream, and the fact that one can “go somewhere for a weekend when you’re 19, with a bunch of kids, you know?” She and her friends would “pile into 5 different cars, stop at Wawa, spend like, 40 bucks, getting like hot dogs, and sodas, and just like, go to the beach!...in Poland, if you had one friend who had a car you were lucky...[you are also just] able to get yourself a dress, or a pair of Levi’s [in the US] which over there [in Poland] is like 70 bucks and here is like 20. Things like that.” Marianne is clearly finding it difficult to balance between her love-hate relationship with her immigration. She is proud of her journey and the resilience that her immigration taught her, but she is also embittered about the processes that she had to go through in order to come out in one piece on the other side – something she is still struggling to do.

**The Right to Return**

In talking about the conflicting aspects of her immigration, Marianne also discussed the process of gaining her Green Card and eventually American citizenship, and the ways in which her changed documentation affected her relationship to both the US and Poland. While she was undocumented, her legal status in the US was in flux, and she was unable to leave the country for fear of being unable to return. Once she did obtain her Green Card, instead of creating a relationship with the US, and making her feel more visible as a documented person living within US boundaries, it just made her more anxious and ready to go home to Poland every year. “I would work all year thinking I was going to go to Poland in a couple of months...I don’t know how that would have changed me, if I hadn’t been able to go home then.” Her Green Card was
her ticket back home, as opposed to her ticket to legally remain in the US, becoming more about Poland than America. However, Marianne seems to forget the very real implications of her ability to travel to Poland once she had the Green Card: she was able to go home and she decided to leave the country, because she now had a right to return to the US. In a very real, visceral way her relationship to the US had changed. She could leave and come back without fear of repercussions, and without having to live with the fear of being deported – she had a right to the US and a certain type of claim on American identity/community/residence.

However, Marianne also consciously avoided applying for American citizenship for many years after having become eligible for it. She didn’t feel like she needed citizenship; she claims that this was a result of feeling like she “was already a citizen of [her] own country, and [though she] lived here [in the US], this was not [her] home.” She eventually went on to apply for American citizenship in 2005, a year after getting married in the US. Marianne’s mother had been pushing her to make the application because “she was like, you know you’re an attorney, you’re going to live here, you’re just going to have to do it,” to which Marianne would respond with groans and grumbles (and in fact did during the interview as well). Her parents are not eligible for citizenship because they don’t speak English, and are currently in the process of waiting for the English language waiver in order to be eligible – which doesn’t seem far off. Marianne explains that she doesn’t know exactly why she was so unwilling to apply for citizenship, but her mother kept shooting down her excuses: when Marianne said she’d get to it in due course, her mother asked what she would do if she had the opportunity to work abroad for a little while and missed her chance because she waited for too long; when she said it was too expensive, her mother offered to pay for it on her behalf. Ultimately, Marianne ran out of excuses, and therefore decided that it was time to apply for citizenship. Marianne also states that
by the time she was applying for citizenship, she was also very familiar with immigration law through her work as an attorney, and therefore said that she realized that there were sometimes negative consequences for people who were permanent residents who just “got unlucky” – but never elaborated on those consequences. It is interesting to note that while Marianne thinks her application for citizenship was mainly due to pressure from her mother, it also came at a time when she was more settled in the US than she had ever been before – she had been married for a year, had started a new life and a new family, and was on a successful career path. All of these factors must have had a subconscious effect on her final decision to apply for citizenship. A great example of Ong’s mobile, flexible citizen, she began weighing the benefits of an American passport versus her Polish passport; she and her husband loved to travel, and although Poland had joined the EU by the time of her application for citizenship, the process of getting visas to go to places was daunting, and the majority of her experiences with her Polish passport had been before Poland was an EU member. Thus, the idea of having a greater freedom to travel – a greater mobility – really encouraged Marianne to consider the benefits of American citizenship. Alternatively, however, her husband only very recently became an American citizen – about 2 years ago (2012). He had initially applied for American citizenship when he was 20, having entered the US with a Green Card because his grandmother was born in Chicago, but she had emigrated back to Poland after the Great Depression, and before World War II. After living through the war, after struggling in Poland, the family realized that they had a right to return to the US because the grandmother was an American citizen. So Marianne’s husband, his mother and his brother were eligible for Green Cards automatically, and were able to legally enter the US. Marianne explains that even though he had an easier time arriving in the US, and had fewer legal battles, he was still struggling with the same immigrant experience and the same identity.
struggles, although he was a little bit older when he arrived in the US than Marianne was when she first came over. After applying for citizenship, it was found that he had been charged with underage drinking in a park when he was younger, and therefore legal administrators and bureaucrats used that as evidence that he was not “a person of good moral character” and denied him citizenship. For years after this, Marianne’s husband refused to reapply for citizenship, because of what he called American ‘self-righteousness.’ Paradoxically, for someone who also struggled with applying for American citizenship, Marianne claims that she “begged him” to apply for citizenship, even though he continuously refused to do so. This begs questions about Marianne’s fraught relationship with the US and her identity – once she had gained citizenship, she wanted her loved ones to share the benefits of the legal capital that she was now able to enjoy. Suddenly her understanding of her self-identified struggles with American citizenship seems to have diminished: her document seems to have affected her identity more than she would care to admit. Finally, her husband promised to apply for citizenship if Obama won the elections in 2008, and then when Obama won, Marianne’s husband pushed it off for another 4 years saying he would apply if Obama was reelected. When Obama won the elections in 2012, Marianne left no excuses for her husband, she “did the application for him and … said there was just no choice, he just had to sign it.” And that was how Marianne’s husband gained American citizenship.

Marianne retains Polish citizenship as well, however, because both Poland and the US allow for dual citizenship. She asserts that there is no way she would have even applied for US citizenship if there was the possibility of losing her Polish citizenship. Her citizenship and documentation deeply affects how she perceives herself, which is why she is unwilling to let go of her Polish identity, “I feel like I’m losing my Polishness more and more through the time as
I’m living here, whatever that is. Um, and I feel like that’s something [the Polish citizenship] that’s a constant. It’s something I can pass on to my kids, it’s going to allow them to travel there, and see the family, I mean I still have a huge very close family in Poland. Um, so it’s like a bridge, y’know?"

When thinking about the long and arduous process for Marianne to apply for citizenship, she reminisces and affirms that even though it took her a long time to apply for citizenship, she says, it “had become home a while before [she applied for citizenship]...I can’t pinpoint exactly when it became home, and to be honest, I think I will perpetually not really think of any place as home. Unfortunately. Because I don’t know what my home really is. I don’t know if I retired if I want to go to Poland...[hesitates] I don’t know,” and at this point Marianne’s voice breaks a little, and she seems to acknowledge how difficult and personally wrenching reflecting on ‘home’ is for her. She genuinely seems confused about ‘home’ – not because she doesn’t feel at home in both Poland and the US, but because she can often feel excluded and not at home in both Poland and the US as well. Neither ‘home’ is free from tension and conflict. Even though she and her husband always had hoped to return to Poland together, and were “in the same boat of thinking like, that’s our home, we need to go back,” Marianne says that as time progressed, as she found herself at law school in the US (a moment she identifies as a breaking point, during which the possibility of going back to Poland diminished greatly), ‘home’ became more contested because it became clearer that Poland was quite possibly no longer as much of a home as they had thought it would be. “The more we went back together, the more we hung out with our friends, and the older we got, we realized that this was not what we know, what we left behind. Like what it [Poland] is not, is totally different.” This is met conversely with the fact that
at the same time, Marianne is “never ready to come back” to the US after a trip to Poland, but is unequivocally always ever ready to go back to Poland.

While home is uncertain for Marianne, she also believes that it’s possible “to feel at home in multiple places” and that it’s not necessary that her confusion over where ‘home’ is means that she is, in the emotive sense, ‘homeless.’ “The US is now a place where I’ve grown up and that I’ve known, and that has affected and developed me as a human being,” Marianne states, making the US very much a sort of home for her today. Alternatively, Poland is her space of nostalgia, it’s where her “childhood was spent,” and home for her is now a balance, attempting to find a “meeting [of] the two.” In a way, Marianne flits from her previous sadness to a little bit of excitement at the idea that she can pick and choose the elements of each home that she likes to construct her own version of an emotive ‘home’ in her physical space. For example, she says that she consciously chose to send her son to daycare in center city, away from her “very white, very Polish” neighborhood, allowing him to grow up in a more diverse environment and meet different types of people. This was a choice made by her when her son identified a black woman at a gas station as her friend Alicia, simply because Alicia is also a black woman – because he was not exposed to a variety of people with different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This exposure is essential for Marianne, and she says that she considers herself lucky to have had the experiences she’s had, and gone to the schools she’s attended. Thus, Marianne states that “home is definitely multi-faceted” – and is also heavily defined by and tied to “where the people [she loves] are.” At the end of the day though, while Marianne has learnt to value the things the US has given her, and the aspects of her identity shaped by being ‘American,’ Poland captivates her in a very particular and emotional sense. She claims to “miss Warsaw with [her] soul” and this nostalgia and deep sentiment is connected to the “certain cappuccinos in a certain café, or you
know, the way a certain city looks at night...[she remembers] driving on a bus, coming back from a party somewhere, and being at the back of the bus, and just seeing it like, go away as [she] was driving away, and [she] felt such a sadness.” The connection to Poland runs deep, and although intangible, it is extremely tactile and sensory as she remembers detailed specifics related to Warsaw. These experiences are very real for Marianne, and there’s a set of emotions that she expresses when talking about Poland that is never present when talking about the US – although of course, due to the role of nostalgia, I don’t know how different this would be if she were physically in Poland talking about the US instead, and the situation were reversed. But while Marianne says that “home can be many places,” she also feels very strongly that the “connection has to be strong for [her] to call a place home.”

Furthermore, there is a heavy tension in the fact that recently, her contact with Poland has become more and more distant. The more settled she becomes in the US, with the birth of her two children, with her career, with her husband, the harder it becomes for her to stay in touch with her family. Marianne says that although she describes her connections with friends and family in Poland as a little more distant, she adds quickly that they are “still in pretty regular contact.” Her cousin is her kids’ godmother, and sends Christmas packages to the family every year, and has also just adopted three children, and so Marianne sends her cousin her kids’ clothes that they’ve outgrown. She maintains that their contact is mainly via packages and presents, and then via phone. When she was younger she wrote a lot of letters home, pre-electronic age, and has saved a huge stack of letters from her ex-boyfriend from when she was a teenager. Although the increase in technology has increased ease of communication, the communication is less meaningful. Marianne says that, although not her first choice because of the less personal nature of it, a lot of her contact with friends is now via a Polish version of classmates.com, and that
Facebook has been wholly transformative in how she communicates with people from Poland. But the majority of people that she deeply cares about are her family, and she maintains contact with them over the phone.

However, even though her contact with people in Poland is less in depth and frequent than it used to be when she was a teenager, Marianne has a very strong connection to the Philadelphian Polish community, and while she values the diversity in her life, she says she wouldn’t feel “completely myself unless I have that connection.” Additionally, if the situation were reversed and she moved back to Poland, she would seek out non-Polish people. However, Marianne would not necessarily seek out other Americans, but specifically her experience of America, which is many non-Americans living together in America. Therefore, Marianne says that if she were to move back to Poland, she would probably seek a non-Polish community, regardless of whether or not the specific people within that community were American.

Before our conversation, Marianne hadn’t really thought about the notion of ‘home’ much. She spent more time thinking about whether she was ‘Polish’ or ‘American.’ She feels like she straddles two worlds: “I go back [to Poland] all the time but I’m not really like the people over there. I don’t speak the same slang...but here [the US] people don’t get it, they don’t get me.” Marianne wonders aloud about ‘home’ and reflects on the conversation we’ve been having, and finally responds that “my home consists of myself and my husband who had almost exactly the same experience I did, so we’re both, y’know, from the same country. But I also do have friends who are also from two completely different countries, like he’s from India and she’s from Argentina...it was the immigrant experience that brought them together!” Marianne elaborates that she feels that she has stronger connections with other immigrant than with people she went to high school with, or lived in the same neighborhood with for years. Because at the
end of the day, even though “there are differences obviously, depending on where you’re coming from, whether a rural or urban area, if there was conflict, whether they were fleeing a place, or whether you were coming for economic reasons or whatever...the experience itself is so similar for so many people.” To conclude our conversation, Marianne sums it all up with an anecdote about her son’s daycare where his best friend was called Gabriel, who is Hispanic, and whose mother speaks in Spanish to him, and then another “one of his friends is Chinese, and his mother speaks to him in Chinese whenever they’re together. And so it normalizes his experience for him, a little bit, but yet puts them into the same space and makes them kind of American but not American at the same time. So I guess as you get older, you start valuing all of the immigrant experiences that you’ve had.” In this way, Marianne opens up the idea of belonging to a greater community that straddles several communities, an ‘immigrant community’ such as Appadurai’s American melting pot that may exist, deterritorialized, anywhere in the world, and despite race, ethnicity or nationality, members all share one thing: their immigrant experience. However, as this thesis explores, the idea of a ‘universal immigrant experience’ is inadequate; each immigrant brings with them their own stories and their own sets of relationships to their countries of origin and their adopted countries. If ‘home’ is connected to where we feel we most belong, and if ‘home’ is connected to community, then maybe we can find ‘home’ anywhere and everywhere: displaced and untimed, as a process of inclusion/exclusion from communities, moving and inhabiting different spaces and connecting/disconnecting from different groups. But this ‘home’ depends on each individual immigrant experience, and can be defined and interpreted in many ways.

From Marianne’s story, it is clear the extent to which immigration, mobility, and documentation affect her identity and conceptualization of ‘home.’ Family-making is an
important factor for Marianne in thinking about her relationship to the US, as was the case with Gaia, and indeed both women have grappled with raising their children in American society while attempting to retain their cultural heritages. ‘Home’ is seen as something both impossible to reach and something worth striving for, as Marianne consistently goes back and forth between her definitions and associations of where ‘home’ is. However, ultimately Marianne seems able to reconcile her displacement, concluding that ‘home’ could be a memory, it could be a country, it could be a city, it could be a food, and that it could be felt at multiple times in multiple places for multiple reasons. Marianne’s struggles with her immigration are deeply rooted in various forms of shifting capital, and how this is perceived by broader communities. Finally, and most interestingly through this discussion, Marianne refers to a large “immigrant community” within which she imagines she would feel most comfortable and ‘at home,’ referring to Appadurai’s postnational imaginary through which immigrants find themselves belonging to diasporic communities to which they are ‘doubly loyal.’ Appadurai’s imaginary thus finds a point of intersection with the concept of ‘home’ when it is interpreted to be a community and/or space for belonging. In the next chapter, Zaynab rearticulates a relationship with the sensory and tactile notion of ‘home’ and memory. She also begins to emphasize a relationship and belonging to a specific city that we have begun to see mentioned by Marianne with relation to Warsaw, Yasmine with Cairo, and Gaia with Mumbai.
Chapter 3: Citizen of a city or a nation?

“I broke through the trees, and there in the night
My father’s house stood shining hard and bright.
The branches and brambles tore my clothes and scratched my arms,
But I ran till I fell shaking in his arms.” (Bruce Springsteen, 1982)

Zaynab’s story is perhaps the most difficult to write, simply as a result of the challenges she and her family faced in arriving in the US, having never chosen to leave their country of origin (Iraq), but being forced to for political reasons. Therefore, Zaynab’s difficult relationship with America is palpable through our conversation, as she has been unable to revisit Baghdad since she first left Jordan in 2008, and so, like Marianne, has some unresolved feelings about her abrupt departure from her hometown. Zaynab spends a lot of time thinking through her conception of home, and attempting to figure out whether or not she still feels connected to Baghdad, and in what ways. In certain ways, Zaynab’s story may contextualize her as Turner’s “outsider,” referring to her status as permanently outside of the structural institutions of Iraq, but also her somewhat voluntary and somewhat imposed status of being set apart from the American system.

Interestingly, for Zaynab the distinction between Philadelphia and the US is important. Reflecting Holston and Appadurai’s work, Zaynab’s process of home-making in the US is specifically tied to her relationship to Philadelphia. She continuously refers to her increased comfort in the US and her growing ability to consider having a home outside of Iraq as tied to her relationship with the city of Philadelphia, and how well she knows the physical space of the city. However, her relationship to Iraq remains strong, and she refers to having grown up patriotic, and being truly tied to the nation of Iraq. This raises an interesting question regarding what happens to people’s relationships with the nation-state when the state itself collapses. Zaynab is unique in this thesis through her refugee status and the way in which she came to be in
the US, and therefore her relationship with Iraq is particularly complex and specific. Unlike Gaia who refers specifically to Mumbai when reminiscing about India, and specifies that it is her house in Maryland that she considers home and not the US as a whole, Yasmine who refers to Cairo specifically when thinking about her roots in Egypt, and Marianne who refers to Warsaw, Zaynab focuses on the space of the Philadelphia rather than the US when considering ‘home’ post-immigration, but her memories of Iraq are more related to the nation.

Uprooted

I had two conversations with Zaynab; one as we walked through her neighborhood in West Philadelphia, just chatting and getting to know each other, as she wanted to learn more about my project. We ended up feeling very similarly about the importance of the topic and the work I was aiming to do, and our conversation spanned several hours, as Zaynab summarized her experiences in leaving her hometown of Baghdad, eventually arriving in Philadelphia and becoming a US citizen. Zaynab spoke very openly about her experiences, but it seemed clear that her sharing these stories was rare and that she didn’t often find opportunities to talk about them. This entire conversation was unrecorded, so from that conversation I have only included the impressions I recorded in my field notes. However, we had a second, more official, recorded interview at her apartment in West Philly a week later. Her apartment is comfortable, and is decorated with great care and attention. In her living room Zaynab has what she calls her small “Arab corner,” which has some cushions and a small rug, with a shisha and silver tea-set laid next to them. We sat at the countertop in her kitchen, as she made me a cup of mint tea and voiced that she was excited to talk again, although was expecting to have to repeat herself a lot from our previous conversation. It was an extremely warm and comfortable conversation, and
Zaynab, once again, was very gracious and open in sharing anecdotes from her childhood, resulting in a very rich, highly charged conversation. Zaynab’s arrival in the US was a product of a long journey and many difficulties that her family had to face along the way – all of which are important to understand in order to fully understand Zaynab’s story, and her emotional and physical connections to ‘home.’

In January of 2008, Zaynab arrived in Philadelphia, USA, in her late teenage years. Although Iraqi, her journey to the US was via Jordan, having lived there for 2 years between her family’s departure from Iraq and her arrival in Philadelphia. After the war in Iraq in 2007, once the civil war had begun, Zaynab’s family fled to neighboring Jordan. As Zaynab remarks, “things were getting a lot worse actually, than during the war. It was just very dangerous for ordinary people to be living their daily lives, really.” Zaynab explains that even though they perceived remaining in Baghdad as a difficulty, with possible dangers lying ahead, it wasn’t until her father, an engineering professor at the University of Baghdad, started receiving anonymous death threats that the decision to flee was set in motion. Initially, Zaynab’s family didn’t take the threats seriously, until two of her father’s colleagues at the university were kidnapped and murdered; a clear sign that the threats being received by educators were being carried through. The decision to leave came suddenly and urgently, as the family packed whatever they could fit into their car, to begin their journey to Jordan. Zaynab states that her family believed that the move would be temporary, “we thought we were going to be in Jordan until things calmed down [and then return home].” They chose Jordan because of it’s proximity, and the lack of visa requirements to enter the country as Iraqi citizens (the other neighboring country, Saudi Arabia, would have required a lot more paperwork before they were able to enter the country), added to
the fact that Zaynab had two aunts already there (as opposed to the also-neighboring Syria, where Zaynab’s family didn’t know anybody).

Once two years had passed, they noted that the situation in Iraq had not changed, and that they needed to accept that it was time to build a life somewhere else. Zaynab’s family could not consider remaining in Jordan, as it was so expensive, with few opportunities for Iraqis because of the already large refugee population and the local wariness of additional refugees. Zaynab’s father couldn’t find a job and Zaynab and her sister were unable to attend the university in Amman although they had both been enrolled in medical school in Baghdad, because they would have to restart their education, which would have cost her family a lot of money. Zaynab’s younger brother and sister, however, were enrolled in a middle school and high school respectively, which was an additional financial burden to the family, as they were not eligible to attend public schools because they were not Jordanian, and didn’t meet some other qualifications. Zaynab specifies that the unexpected nature of all these additional expenses was compounded by the fact that all their “savings were basically in Iraq...in houses, and apartments and cars...[they] were not thing[s] that [they] were able to finalize...it was very rushed.” At the time, Zaynab also had the additional burden of traveling between Amman and Baghdad in order to continue her education since she was unable to be in Amman itself. She remained enrolled at the university in Baghdad, and used to study in Amman using materials sent to her by friends, and then travel to Baghdad in order to take her exams. The fact that Zaynab continued to study in Baghdad shows just how deeply her family believed that they would soon be returning there. When it became clear to Zaynab’s parents that they would not be able to return to Baghdad, they decided to sign up at the UNHCR, “basically it’s the resettlement agency in the UN. Um, usually they place you randomly in some country, but we did specify that we wanted to go to the UK
because we had lived there before, and since my dad got his PhD degree there, we thought it would be a little easier... anyway, it was such a long time ago when they were there... but we still thought it would be an easier transition just because... when you have a degree from there it would be easier to get a job, or so we assumed. But it turned out that the UK at the time was actually not accepting refugees anymore.” However, Zaynab adds, the US was one of the few countries still open. “So”, in Zaynab’s words, “we signed up.”

However, Zaynab specifies that her family didn’t choose the US; when they realized that being resettled in the UK would not be possible, they were open to resettle basically anywhere, but it just happened that the UNHCR was only placing people in the US at the time. Zaynab remembers the procedure being very “intense” with multiple rounds of interviews with people asking “very personal, very intimate questions,” ultimately separating the family members and asking the same questions yet again, to verify that the stories being told are true. In an ironic sense, Zaynab describes that it was ‘fortunate’ for her family that they had had such a traumatizing experience, having to leave their family and lives in Baghdad behind. Throughout this time period, Zaynab continued studying for her classes at medical school and taking her exams in Baghdad, describing it as her “only option” because there was nothing else for her to do. Looking back on it, Zaynab laughs, critiquing her choices because of the dangers that were associated with it, but stating that at the time she must have just activated her “survival mode.”

Eventually, Zaynab’s family was contacted by the UNHCR, and they received their departure date, which was merely two weeks following the date they received approval for resettlement. In just two weeks, Zaynab and her family had to pack up the lives they had built for themselves in Amman. Their entire trip was planned out by the resettlement agency- the flights they would take and the dates they would travel, and therefore, in an effort to keep costs low,
they transited in “many different countries...[taking them] a good three days to get to Philadelphia.” In filling out their application, there was the option to name anybody you knew in the host country, and the agency would attempt to place you in the same state as them, otherwise families would be sponsored by an American family working with an immigration or resettlement agency to help them when they first arrive in the US. Zaynab happened to have an Iraqi friend studying in Philadelphia at the time as an exchange student, staying with an American host family. Zaynab reconnected with her via social media during her family’s application process to the UNHCR, mentioning that her family would be moving to the US. Zaynab’s friend, Fatma, suggested “that her host family could also host [Zaynab’s family] when [they came] in.” At the same time, Zaynab’s father had a friend in California, which was their other choice in naming a preference on their application. At this point, Zaynab and her family were “shopping” for the best potential relocation placement. Education has been an overarching and important theme for all the cases mentioned thus far, particularly Marianne and Yasmine’s discussions of schooling and their relationships to academic institutions and how Yasmine’s family specifically chose where to settle down in the US. Zaynab’s family also kept education in mind when thinking about their relocation, as they considered school districts and costs of living. Ultimately, they found that the North East had a greater variety of schooling options for higher education, and Fatma had a similar background to Zaynab’s family, whereas Zaynab’s father’s friend had been in the US for decades, and so Zaynab’s family felt that in Philadelphia, her friend would be a better fit for them in terms of knowing what it’s like to first arrive in the US. They ended up successfully receiving a placement in Philadelphia, and stayed with the host family Fatma suggested for 2 weeks.
Disconnected

This is the moment in Zaynab’s story where she changes from telling me about her relocation in a factual tone, to actually reminiscing and thinking about the moment she arrived in the US. “It was really difficult,” she explains, “The whole thing. It was just so foreign. I mean you wake up and everyone’s speaking a different language, it smells different, the food is different, the scenery is different. It was just so foreign...I just remember being very, very uncomfortable.” Zaynab remarks that for a whole year, this feeling of not belonging remained, exemplified in the physical action of opening her mouth and finding, to her surprise, that “nothing [came] out.” Zaynab says that “the [host] family would talk to [her] obviously in English, and [she] would understand them, and ...think that [she could answer], because [she] could hear the answer in [her] head, and then [she] open[ed] her mouth, and nothing comes out...it was just really difficult getting used to speaking a different language every day.” She had been accustomed to hearing English spoken to her; an avid fan of the American sitcom Friends, she was used to hearing the language and fairly comfortable understanding English, although in school they would only ever hear slow recordings of English spoken in British accents in order to learn the language, and so she was still most comfortable with the British accent and a slower tempo. Zaynab never had to speak it on a daily basis though, so she couldn’t say anything or respond to comments, although she imagines that a lot of this had to do with a lack of courage. Zaynab reminisces on how little she appreciated America when she first arrived in Philadelphia. “It was winter. It was snowing. I was freezing...even now when I travel to different countries where I know nothing, and I am not really exposed to the culture or country at all, the language, the food, any of it – I still don’t feel that same feeling that I felt when I first came to the US. It was just, everything felt so foreign. I felt so disconnected...I wasn’t fitting in this whole
picture...It was because I knew I was going to stay. I knew it’s not for pleasure, I’m not going somewhere to have fun and on vacation; it was...this is my country now. Except that it’s completely foreign.” Zaynab felt obliged to fit into a country that she didn’t understand or comprehend; from the fact that her host family had a pet dog (“why is there a dog in the house?!...That was one of the weirdest things [to me]”), to the “weird” smelling and tasting food. It wasn’t until the first spring that Zaynab begun to feel excitement at the potential of her new life; having never lived outside of a city before (her host family was technically in a suburb of Philadelphia, though Zaynab often refers to it as Philadelphia), she was overwhelmed by the beauty and the “colors, and birds everywhere and squirrels!...for the first time, I was like oh my god this is so beautiful, I’m so happy here. I can see myself living here.” Furthermore, Zaynab was struck by the library system, and the fact that she could just go in and take out whatever books she wanted, after having been raised in a country where “books were basically censored or banned...other than textbooks I never really had any; my grandfather would sneak some books to me,” she laughs, “he was a writer...my grandfather’s ‘library’ was the only library I’ve ever known before coming here.”

Alternatively, of course there were things Zaynab missed tremendously about Iraq, and even Jordan from her two years there. Zaynab says that at the beginning it was mostly people: “I was really glued to social media all the time, and just following what my friends are doing, what’s going on. I felt very much still living that life through social media. But a little while after I started making my own friends here, it really became about missing the closeness of that community in general. Because we were completely isolated...we had neighbors and friends that would come over, but it was just not the same. We always had family around, whether it was my aunt in Jordan, or my grandfather in Iraq.” In sum, Zaynab and her family were not used to the
concept of a ‘nuclear family’ and were uncomfortable with the number of homes around them that had just couples, or parents with their kids, as opposed to having your uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents all around pretty constantly. “Other than [people], the food...never tasted as good as home. You know the fruits and veggies? It took me a while to get used to the fact that they didn’t really taste like real veggies and real fruits!...And of course I would miss you know, where I grew up, just speaking Arabic in general, just hearing it. Of course I still did that with my family, but just to go out and not have that...I missed it...I was constantly listening to Arabic music and listening to Arabic shows online, when I first came in...I was in denial. I didn’t really wanna believe that I was in a different country away from my friends and hence the constant texting and social media with my friends, and like I said, TV shows.” Like Marianne, Zaynab is specifically flagging the importance of her sensory relationship to Iraq: the taste of fruits and vegetables, the sound of Arabic and feeling of speaking it; these are particular gustatory, aural and oral specificities that relate to her feelings about Iraq. This sensory connection links Zaynab to the nation but detaches her from the state. As the nation-state is pulled apart by economic, political, and sectarian conflicts, the hyphen between the nation and the state is greatly weakened. It’s apparent through Zaynab’s comments that her acclimation period to the US was particularly tough, having been uprooted and sent to a country that she didn’t choose, without any of her closest community members with her (other than her immediate family). Zaynab also adds that the feeling of community is something that she misses more now, as her family recently moved away to Texas for a job opportunity, while she remained in Philadelphia where she had found a job, and was hoping to apply to medical school.

Zaynab says that she “did a lot of fussing in the beginning,” describing this coming from a place of patriotism that she says she had grown up with unlike her family, complicating
Holston and Appadurai’s idea of being a citizen of a city, as, with Iraq, she is also tied to the nation, although with the US (which is defined more easily as a nation-state), she is only tied to Philadelphia: “...different from my family because I was very, I guess, patriotic. I mean this sense of being an Iraqi was real strong to me. I loved home, I loved the country, I felt very strongly about a lot of Arab issues too, like the Palestinian issue is something that I was very, very invested in... close to my extended family, my grandfather was like another parent to me.” For her, the idea of ever leaving home was “just absolutely ridiculous” and she says that only the fear of losing her family tore Zaynab away from Iraq. She says the beginning of her time in the US was difficult; she would argue with her parents, and blame them for bringing her family to the US, and became very rebellious, answering her parents concerns with “You better start expecting it, this is what’s gonna happen. Now we’re in America! This is what you wanted!” (playing into an image of Americans as rebellious and engaging in activities not acceptable in Iraqi society).

Zaynab and her family entered the US on a visa, or what Zaynab refers to as an “employment card” proving their legal status, although Zaynab can’t remember the specifics of the type of documentation they received. They were also able to obtain social security numbers within the first two weeks of their arrival in the country, as part of the refugee resettlement process. However, Zaynab describes that “one of the ‘perks’ of being a refugee is it’s all laid out for you. You come in, after a year you get a Green Card, and it’s made so much easier than if you’re coming here illegally or on a student or work visa and wanting to be an American citizen. Because that’s already an agreement with the government, you come in to become an American citizen... [for] political refugees that’s the way it works... and [after you get the Green Card] after 5 years you get the citizenship and an American passport.” Therefore, becoming an American
citizen was not a decision that Zaynab made for herself, and nor was it a decision her family made on her behalf. Zaynab therefore states, “I absolutely don’t feel American, not at all. I mean, yes I am by documents and on paper, but I don’t feel like I’m American. I can’t say that I’m unhappy about having an American passport, it definitely gave me access to traveling that I wouldn’t have had with an Iraqi passport. Plus, I still have my Iraqi passport, I didn’t have to give up my Iraqi citizenship, which actually would have made me feel a lot weirder and more differently if I had to do that…nothing changed…it just basically made my life easier.” However, Zaynab doesn’t vote, because it doesn’t feel right to do so, as she doesn’t feel like she’s “part of this country” really. It’s important to compare this to her political engagement in Iraq – a lack of political participation in the US is not due to a personality trait for Zaynab, or because she’s uninterested in politics, but really because she feels that she is not American and therefore cannot participate in conversations about American politics, or use her ‘voice as a citizen’ to vote. For Zaynab’s first couple of years in the US, she still clung onto a feeling that “whatever [she] was doing, [she] was doing it to get the skills required, and go back home.” However, at some point, Zaynab describes “feeling like you don’t necessarily belong to that country anymore…everything changes, the country, the people, you start feeling distant from your family. It almost stops feeling like home. Not because the US is feeling like home, it doesn’t. It still doesn’t. But also home as in Iraq, stops feeling like home. I feel like if I go back now, it’s going to be a foreign country to me. It’s going to be very different. The neighborhoods where I grew up are different [in] the pictures that I see, it’s completely different. People have moved on…I probably won’t recognize [my cousins] if I see them… I don’t see how I’d fit in and where I’d fit in in all of that.” Zaynab is grappling with the idea that her memory of her home and the reality of what it is now are very different, and that she herself is completely different,
and that, frankly, spatial distance from a place makes a difference. She discusses her value system and the things she has learnt through her experiences in Jordan and the US, which are values that she doesn’t share with some of her family and friends from Iraq. As such, Zaynab talks about how she is grateful that through the struggles, she now has some things that she wouldn’t have been able to otherwise. She feels that she can be more secure and open with her identity, despite it not necessarily aligning with traditional values; and yet at the same time she is unsure if this is just a part of growing up, and whether she would have reached this point even if she had remained in Iraq. She does attribute the ease of this to being in America though, “you can be yourself, you can think for yourself, it doesn’t have to be the whole society thinking for you.” She further emphasizes gaining privacy, which she believes is lacking in Iraqi culture. She firmly dismisses Iraq as her home, stating that “it was my childhood. I had to leave the country at 18... I was a baby!” Zaynab admits that she sometimes wonders if she had the choice, would she have picked moving to the US? She still doesn’t have an answer to that question, because “there are a lot of great things that I’m grateful to have had after I moved, but there are very invaluable things that I can’t say I was happy to leave behind.” Zaynab lacked choice and agency in the decision to immigrate, similarly to both Marianne and Yasmine, Zaynab doesn’t have the comfort of knowing that at the end of the day, she actively chose a new home (though in many other cases even this active choice is rife with struggle and nuances), and therefore feels both rejected by her old home, and unable to feel placed in her new one. Zaynab further explains that she perceives her parents as also not wanting to return to Iraq, but for different reasons. For them, it’s simply unsafe. With the added burden of now carrying American citizenship, her parents would risk being targeted again. Here, the passport and documentation they carry signals their foreignness and their privilege, and their assumed support for a country that is hated by
many in Iraq. The passport plays a significant symbolic and legal role as both an instrument of inclusion (to the US) and exclusion (from Iraq) for Zaynab. She also refers to their ability to “access everything” in America, and having certain comforts that they have now grown accustomed to, that they would not necessarily be able to give up.

However, this attitude toward the American passport is also juxtaposed with Zaynab’s strong feeling of being better treated as American when traveling. “To say that we were treated like crap, is an understatement, when we had the Iraqi passport, traveling from one place to another. Especially when we got to the American airport. We were just completely patted down…it was just very humiliating. When I had an American passport…in Nepal, I only got the visa as it was going through [in the Nepali airport itself, as opposed to in advance], it was like a 2-minute thing! And then I was transiting through Turkey…planning to stay there for a day…so my visa, I had to apply online. It took 20 minutes to get, and when I was coming back, and you know you get admitted, I just passed through! From Istanbul back to the US, they were just like ‘okay, go in.’ They didn’t even look at my stuff! You know…[I don’t truly feel a difference in being American] but how people feel about me [now that I’m American]: absolutely [there is a difference]!”

Culture Shock

Following Zaynab’s time with their host family upon arriving in Philadelphia, the resettlement agency was basically out of their lives; since they had chosen a family in the suburbs as opposed to within Philadelphia where most of their buildings and centers were, Zaynab’s family was expected to make do on their own. They had chosen to stay there because Zaynab’s younger siblings were still in school, and the public schools in the suburb were
superior to those in the city. However, even with the absence of the resettlement agency, Zaynab says that she and her family are indebted to various groups and individuals without whom their transition to life in America would have been impossible, in particular the aid of the Quaker Friends Committee. Zaynab’s host family also helped them find a house to move into, helped them open bank accounts despite not having credit histories within the US, and walked Zaynab’s father through every step of the process. The host family would drive Zaynab’s parents from open house to open house, until they found one that they were able to buy (“they didn’t know what else to do, I mean, that’s how it works in Iraq – you just buy a house! You don’t rent!”).

Once Zaynab moved into the new house, she says that within weeks the whole place was furnished, just due to massive amounts of help they were able to gain from the Friends Committee, the Lutheran Church organization, and various other individuals. Families lent Zaynab’s family their car until they were able to buy their own, putting them in touch with friends and contacts within their county; “they completely took care of us.” Zaynab’s entire home was built by the aid of these various groups of people, and, ironically, Zaynab laughs that “when we were basically able to stand on our feet, they disappeared! Like they were just there to help us! They’re gone! We don’t even know what happened to them!”

Although her family received a lot of help, Zaynab says that the transition was “absolutely difficult” for her parents in particular. Zaynab herself had enrolled in college in the Philadelphia area shortly after arriving, and the rest of her siblings also had school through which to meet people and make friends. For Zaynab’s parents, however, “they were so isolated…even when they were able to meet people it was just so difficult. They didn’t know what to do or how to interact with people. [Laughing] I remember, this is really funny- now it’s funny- at the time it wasn’t! It was 9 o’clock…we’re just watching TV and [my parents] are like ‘Oh Karen! Let’s
check on her.’ Karen is the lady who hosted us... so they were like ‘oh let’s check on her! Let’s see what’s going on!’ Because you know, Arab families do that all the time, they just call their families and friends to check in on them, no matter what time it is. So [her dad] calls, and then she called back [a little later, saying] ‘Oh my God, what happened?! Is it an emergency? What happened?! Do we need to come?!’...[eventually when she found out there was no emergency] she was like ‘Aly, no one calls at night just to say hello.’” Zaynab uses this anecdote to explain how lonely her parents felt in this foreign culture so different from what they were used to. A similar funny anecdote that Zaynab then feels excited to share, about the foibles of mismatched cultures and her family not understanding American cues, is from when they first arrived at their host family’s house. “The day we got in, it was night time, and so she [Karen] made dinner and she offered, and she was like ‘Oh please help yourself’ and we’re like ‘oh no, no, no, we’re good.’ And of course that’s what you say! You say that 300 times until people start shoving food into your mouth! [laughing] I mean, this is what we thought is gonna happen because this is what happens in Arab gatherings! So we said no thank you, we don’t want any- so she said okay! And she starts packing the food and putting it in the fridge! We hadn’t eaten a good meal other than like, airport food, for like 3 days! And we were like ‘is she serious?! Is she putting that food away?!’ And we’re like looking at each other! [continues laughing] So we go to bed, starving, and we wake up in the morning, and she’s like ‘alright, who wants breakfast?’ And we were like ‘I WANT BREAKFAST!’ [laughs] We learnt our lesson! Talk about culture shock!”

With all of these funny anecdotes, and Zaynab’s upbeat and open nature, it seems like she has, albeit after a long while and after a lot of struggle, begun to feel ‘at home’ in the US. However, her increased feeling of being ‘at home’ in the US doesn’t necessarily match her own interpretation of what ‘home’ should be, perhaps indicating a contrast in how the word ‘home’ is
used compared to being ‘at home’ in English, versus within Iraqi culture and/or different languages. Zaynab is comfortable in Philadelphia now, and while she (as mentioned before) is certainly aware that she may not be able to reintegrate into Iraqi society if she tried, she feels that “home is where you grow up.” For Zaynab, home is entrenched in the memories of her grandfather’s house in Baghdad, the house where she grew up, even though “it’s not [her] house, it’s not the house that [she] lived in. It’s just that constant [hesitates] place where you never changed.” She continues talking about how important her grandfather’s house is, saying that “I never had that except at my grandfather’s house. I know where it is, I know if I go there it’s still gonna be there, I know my family is still gonna be there. Yes, they might be different, but they’re still family. And I will still have those memories that I had growing up in that house and [hesitates, starts crying. Stops after a minute or so and continues talking] It happens. Every now and then. I was actually thinking about a date, a palm in my grandfather’s garden. That got me today. The weirdest things [laughs], you don’t know what’s gonna get you. [Dries tears]. You know, things like that. You know the ins and outs, you know where everything is, which is something that I never had. I had to constantly move from one house to another, from one city to another, but that [her grandfather’s house] was constant. It had always been…since I was born until today, it’s still where it is. Nothing changed.” Zaynab’s feelings and attachment to home are extremely timed, and related to change versus rootedness and sameness, and it is clear through her difficulty in detailing her grandfather’s house the different role that memory plays for each woman. The reason her grandfather’s house is so important to her, and why she thinks of it as home above and beyond Baghdad as a city, or her apartment in Philadelphia, is because even as she continues to move, within the US or eventually, if she were to ever leave and live somewhere else, all of these places would change and continue without her; however, her grandfather’s
house, to her, will always remain. At the same time though, Zaynab complicates this idea of
fixity, by also adding that she has started to think of Philadelphia, the city, as home; very
importantly, she regards it as the city she knows best as an adult, that doesn’t remain just in her
memories, and that she continues to know. She takes a deep comfort in that, after she travels and
comes back, she’s “like [sigh] home. …I really know everything about Philadelphia. Everything
there is to know about Philadelphia, which is not something I can- I can’t even say that about
Baghdad or Amman. Because even when I lived there I was a teenager, or a child, and I
depended on my parents fully to get around.” It was this sense of independence and standing on
her own feet about a year ago which introduced the idea of Philadelphia being a home to her as
well as her grandfather’s home and Baghdad at large. Zaynab can pinpoint this change; “I would
say it was just about last year… when I got my own place… I lived on my own, and I had to get
around on my own, and I got lost a few times and I spend some quality time: just me and
Philadelphia! [laughs].” It’s this that makes Philadelphia feel more like home than Exton (the
suburb she first moved to in the US) ever did. Zaynab never felt comfortable with the lack of
diversity, the isolation and the lack of young people around, and therefore never really got to
know it, compounded with the fact that she moved to college soon after. She has also begun to
form loyalties to a city, as Holston and Appadurai (1996) articulate in their work, as a city (as
opposed to a suburb, or nation-state) can be a specific space that can produce these attachments.
This is similar to how Yasmine construes of the differences between the Philadelphian suburb
she moved to and Cairo, and her initial reaction and shock at being in such a place after the
reality of living in a vibrant, densely populated city.

Since moving to the US, Zaynab hasn’t been back to Iraq once, most likely due to
political turbulence and issues of tight security, although she states that she has been attempting
to make plans to go for a while. “I’ve actually been meaning to go, or thinking about going to Erbil, in the north, in Kurdistan. [A friend] and I are actually thinking of going there. So we’ll see if that actually happens.” However, Zaynab doesn’t have any plans of visiting Baghdad, but she doesn’t think that this bothers her, because she feels that it is simply not possible, and that although different, visiting Kurdistan would be familiar and she would have a chance to be surrounded by food, Arabic, etc, and so she would still “get that feel for it [home],” but is also not sure about what it would feel like once there; “I mean I would be so happy to be able to go to at least Erbil, that I wouldn’t be thinking about how it’s going to feel to be so close but not being able to go home. But I’m sure I’ll feel [weird about it] if [the trip] actually happens.” On top of this, Zaynab doesn’t even know who she would meet in Baghdad. As mentioned earlier, with the increase of relationships that she formed in the US, she lost contact with some of her friends and relatives in Baghdad. In addition, “people moved on. It became a lot more difficult to know where they are and get a hold of them...I tried talking to my cousin, we’re the same age, we grew up together, and now she’s married and has a kid...lives in Bahrain...it felt so off. And I know if we were living together this whole time, or in the same area, of course she would have changed and of course I would have changed, but we would have been together, changing and knowing. It would have been smaller steps, not all of a sudden like you’re talking to a different person...she felt like a stranger.” In addition, being able to remain in touch with her grandfather (whom she’s very close to) became more difficult as “he just could not understand the concept of Skype, and it was strange to him. And also his hearing got a lot worse, and so speaking on the phone wasn’t always a good option either.” She also describes her changed relationships with her friends and relatives as a natural by-product of her immigration. As Zaynab says, making specific references to transformations in social capital and how that is expressed through the
habitus, “Immigration is a really tough thing to deal with. It really changes people in different ways. There’s just so much pressure to just become more American. You feel like you don’t know how to fit in, there are all those people who speak in a certain way, and eat in a certain way, and socialize in a certain way, and there’s of course a huge pressure to become like that, too... but I did not feel like that was an option for me. I still feel very strongly about my roots and where I came from... of course I change in my own way, I just wouldn’t consider myself American in a lot of my ways.” Zaynab’s perception of the pressure to become ‘American’ through immigration and when accepting the US as a new home is reminiscent of Marianne’s initial isolation from the various Polish communities she tried to connect with—whether because she was perceived as ‘too’ American, or because she perceived them as ‘too’ American— and Yasmine’s struggle with the language barrier and fitting in when she first moved to the US. Finding community in the US is a step many immigrants take when they first arrive in the US, in an attempt to find similar people with similar stories. Zaynab used to be a part of an Arab cultural organization, and taught a summer camp there, as part of an attempt to reconnect with an Arab community, but then felt caught up with a lot of ‘drama’ and ‘issues’ due to how close she became with the group, and found herself happier farther away from them, attending events but otherwise keeping her distance. Her parents had also reached out to Arab communities when they first arrived, one in particular that lived in the suburbs as well; but her family found them extremely religious in a way that they couldn’t see eye to eye. Again, they enjoyed meeting them every now and then, but “couldn’t keep up with them on a daily basis.” Zaynab says that it’s hard because you naturally seek out members of the same community, but you don’t have much of a ‘choice,’ and there is a much smaller range of Arabs in the area, and so you are forced to get along with people you wouldn’t necessarily have chosen to be friends with in Iraq, simply
because you miss and enjoy being around other Arabs. Thus, often the attempt to find similarity in members of a community can fall short, as everyone is at a different point in their immigration to the US: ‘too American,’ or ‘too traditional/un-American.’ This straddling of culture suggests a strong feeling of disconnectedness, and begs the question about whether or not most immigrants feel this way, and it is just individuals’ perceptions of other immigrants ‘becoming more American,’ while they remain unwilling to, that deepens and widens the gap between the individual, members of their ethno/racial identity and American society at large.

Change is a crucial component of feeling connected to a place or people for Zaynab; whether it’s related to changing people, changing neighborhoods, or changing situations. Thus, while Zaynab has gained comfort in Philadelphia and calls it her home now, she also refers to it as just a physical space of comfort, and that when she’s really thinking of home she is thinking of a memory that no longer exists. She refers to Philadelphia as home, but she doesn’t ‘feel’ it as home. “I’m constantly looking for a place to call home again, and really mean it, and really feel like it’s the whole package. But I know that it’s difficult to have, and find, and I honestly, like at some point [hesitates] I think I’m starting to give up on that hope. I mean I definitely, I think I will find a place where I feel comfortable, and happy, but I don’t know if it will be a place where I can call home, because it won’t be home...home is where your family is, it’s where you grow up, it’s where you have memories.” In this way, Zaynab hierarchizes the idea of home, with Baghdad (or, perhaps more specifically, her grandfather’s house) being the ultimate ideal home, and ‘being at home,’ that she cannot attain or find anymore, and then Philadelphia coming up behind it, because she is “familiar with the place. [She] love[s] traveling and being in an unfamiliar place, and just having to navigate, and just being uncomfortable, because you know that at the end of it you’re going to go back home, and everything is going to be exactly where
you left it. And that’s what makes [her] feel at home when [she] come[s] back to Philadelphia...I know that I will never get lost in Philadelphia again. And that makes me feel at home.” Zaynab’s emphasis on getting lost in Philadelphia to learn about, and calling it home when she can no longer be lost engages directly with Walter Benjamin’s work. Benjamin looks at how being lost is the best way to learn about a city or a new space, likening getting lost in a city to being lost in the woods, which is a privilege, as opposed to merely being unable to find your way in a city, or ‘not knowing’ which is not (Benjamin 2006).

However, Zaynab counters this immediately by saying that she also just doesn’t consider Iraq as home anymore, but just remembers it as being a home in the past. “I honestly don’t think Iraq is home, for me, anymore. I do call it home, because I don’t know what to call it otherwise. It used to be home, while I was living there...if I were to go back, I don’t think I will feel at home- at all. So I think I was at home to a certain [hesitates] until I had to leave. And after that I was never able to find it anymore. Not even in the same place, where I was [once] able to feel that.” ‘Home’ appears to be idealized by Zaynab, and entirely elusive. She labels both Baghdad and Philadelphia as ‘homes’ for different reasons, and yet when discussing the particularities of each one states that she can’t really think of it as home for a set of specific reasons. At the same time, however, Zaynab is not unhappy. She is not upset that she cannot find this notion of a ‘home,’ and through speaking with her it seems as if she may simply believe that it doesn’t exist (for her, and maybe even not at all) and that that’s okay, so long as she can find comfort and familiarity and routine. For her, leaving home in and of itself was an act that meant that she would never find a home again: “I know for me personally it will never be like it was when I was living in Iraq. Not even in Iraq. Because things changed. I mean once you leave home behind, you become a different person. So when you come back to that place, that place is different. But
you still have all these roots from that place, that you can't quite apply to other places either… At some point it [this idea] stopped being sad. It's not sad. It's just… it is what it is.”

Zaynab’s narrative, although unique in many ways, still holds aspects that reflect the voices of the previous women. Although Marianne specifically mentions her husband’s relationship to the US as depending on Obama’s victory in 2008, Zaynab mentions being disengaged from American politics. Ironically, the biggest political act that a person can partake in as a citizen is to vote, and Zaynab specifically references feeling separate from American politics, and uncomfortable participating in politics she feels isolated from. This is interesting in relation to Zaynab’s story, due to her specifically political arrival in the US in the first place, and how this is juxtaposed with her reaction to American politics. It is essential to note, however, that this is not abnormal for an American citizen, with smaller and smaller turnouts at each subsequent American election, particularly local ones.

As such, the relationship between nation, nation-state, and citizen is called into question when the national rhetoric of citizenship is undermined. As a refugee, Zaynab’s relationship to these ideas is more tenuous than most: she romanticizes her memories of Iraq and believes in its nationhood, specifying her ties to the language, the people, and the ‘land’ itself. However, it is the collapse of the state and the legal, structural institutions and systems therewith that caused her departure from Iraq and subsequent arrival in the US. Thus, her relationship with the city is unclear and unarticulated until she arrives in the vast nation-state that is America, and finds herself most tied and able to make a home in the specific city of Philadelphia, as she becomes familiar with it. In the next chapter, Shahnaz is a great example of someone who has strong relationships with particular cities, and truly makes use of her flexible position to cross borders and make them fluid.
Chapter 4: “For us nomads,” there never was a home

“If I travel all my life,
and I never get to stop and settle down,
Long as I have you by my side
there's a roof above and good walls all around,
You're my castle, you're my cabin
and my instant pleasure dome
I need you in my house
'cause you're my home.” (Billy Joel, 1973)

Shahnaz’s story is unique in many ways when compared to the previous four women presented. Firstly, one of the most striking aspects of her immigration is Shahnaz’s agency on how and why she ended up in the US, and where she might still end up. She has been an active part of her process, deciding when and how to file for the Green Card, although of course US immigration constraints were also important in this. Shahnaz talks about moving yet again at some point in her life, speaking of dreams to retire in Italy, holding a lot of knowledge about other countries and her ability to travel and vacation around the world. In this same way, perhaps due to a combination of cultural capital and agency, but also because of Shahnaz’s unique and specific ‘nomadic’ upbringing, ‘home’ itself never seems to have existed. Whereas the previous four women all had a defined sense of ‘home’ until they lose it, their immigrations becoming the moments they first started questioning the meaning of ‘home,’ Shahnaz’s sense of ‘home’ has always been loosely defined and contested due to her attachments to both India and Egypt as she grew up. ‘Home’ has always been temporally defined for Shahnaz, and she is comfortable with its fluid nature and with feeling displaced.

In fact, Shahnaz’s comfort with never really having had a ‘home,’ and believing that it can be created anywhere and at any time is interestingly related to her relationship with her passport. Despite feeling unattached to a specific place and the notion of ‘home,’ Shahnaz is
troubled at the prospect of replacing her Indian passport with an American one, and remains an Indian citizen even though she is eligible for American citizenship. This relationship with her passport is deeply symbolic, and reflects Shahnaz’s relationship with the nation of India and being ‘Indian’ although feeling separated from the state of India itself. Here, nation and state become separable, reflecting Appadruai’s notions of deterritorialization and how the nation’s boundaries are pushed beyond the delineations of the state.

The “liberating” Green Card

Shahnaz moved to the US after having lived for significant periods of her life in two other countries. She spent her entire childhood in Egypt, until she was 16, at which point she moved to India at her parents’ wishes, in order to attend college and partake in the Indian education system. However, as an Indian citizen, Shahnaz explains that her time in Egypt was spent as a “foreigner,” because she had “more in common with the expat community, so you know you’re a foreigner in this country but that [it’s] your home... There was always a sense that India is the country of my passport, ‘we are Indians first,’ [just] living in Egypt.” Shahnaz’s parents had wanted her to experience college in India primarily because they wanted to expose her to Indian culture, and have a connection to India – at the time the prospect of moving away from either Egypt or India was out of the question. However, upon coming to India with Shahnaz to help her settle down (her parents planned to remain in Egypt for work-related reasons), they experienced a huge “culture shock” as well. “I mean, if you visit a place every year – till you live in a place you don’t experience how much has actually changed. And so they experienced the whole cultural change, and I think that’s when a lot of their fundamentals were shaken.” Realizing that India was no longer the same place they left behind, Shahnaz’s parents began to
reconsider plans for her education and her life moving forward. For Shahnaz personally, she didn’t feel strongly about America as a country, but rather that she felt as though she needed to escape a conservative environment. “I really wanted to get out and find my own way, and not just follow the path which was prescribed, which was expected out of me, because everyone who’s older than me, that’s what they followed, and I knew that for that I had a chance of getting out, just because of the international exposure we had in school. Like, I knew I could fit in better if I just got out at the school level, rather than… [Pauses]. I think the other option my mom kept offering was [to] get married to someone in America or England, or wherever, and I was like – that’s not even an option! Because I wanted to fit in at an intellectual level, not just by transplanting myself into another society. I actually wanted to be a part of a process, and I knew the inflow of students coming into these countries is the highest, and I knew I had a good chance of getting in [to a Master’s program] in America…so I applied, and that’s how I got here.” She felt that it would be easier to convince her parents to let her go to the US, because she had more familial and social connections in the US over the UK, so she knew it would be “easier to convince them that [she’d] be looked after, that [she’d] be in touch with people here.” A second reason why Shahnaz’s father in particular was more amenable to her studying in the US instead of England, was because “he thought that racism, and a lot of these issues in the US, were less – they were less prevalent I guess, than what he’s heard about in England,” with regards to the treatment of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent in Britain. Furthermore, they also briefly considered Australia as an option, but it was quickly ruled out because her family knew nobody there, and it seemed like it was almost at “the other end of the world.” Shahnaz’s father thus believed that the US would be “friendlier.” Shahnaz adds that these were the only three countries that her parents were willing to consider sending Shahnaz to, for reasons of social and symbolic
capital, such as the language barrier and also because in India, those were the countries with well-regarded and well-known academic institutions. England, Australia and the US were more familiar to Indians, Shahnaz explains, because of the colonial ties to England and Australia, and the huge outflow of people from India to America in the years directly preceding Shahnaz’s application process.

Shahnaz specifies that her original plan (or rather, the plan approved by her parents) was always to just finish her program and then return to India. However, during the two years of Shahnaz’s program, Shahnaz believes that her parents had a lot more exposure to different ideals, “especially [her] father, who was the decision maker, and he started appreciating a lot, and he started encouraging me to work, and follow my dreams, realizing that I could have, you know, I could still be a ‘good Indian girl’ and get married, but at the same time I could follow a career, I could explore things, you know. Explore life...And [now] those two years have turned into...it will be 16 years this August! So yeah, that’s how I got here. And I have a Green Card [now], and we’ve [referring to herself and her Indian husband] been eligible for American citizenship. I have been eligible, for the past 3 years I think? But I still haven’t applied for it.” Ultimately, Shahnaz met and married another Green Card-carrying Indian citizen, and her time in the US started to look indefinite. Shahnaz’s decision to apply for the Green Card in the first place was a hard one, as it felt permanent to her, and she still wasn’t sure that she was going to remain in the US indefinitely. When Shahnaz first arrived in the US, she came in on a student visa, after which she received and accepted a job offer from KPMG, and was sponsored by the company for an H1B (work permit) visa. “I remember I think I dallied around for applying for a Green Card for almost a year [after that]...I started working for KPMG and there was a probation period for about a year with them, because they want to make sure that I’m going to stick around if they’re
going to invest in (sponsoring me for) a Green Card, so they’d already gotten my H1 visa. So I waited for another year after that (period), because I didn’t want (breaks off). I remember (pauses). Like, I’ve never thought of myself settling down here, and I never wanted to get stuck to that Green Card. Because unfortunately the Green Card process turns, I mean you hear so many stories, and it’s almost like bonded labor, like you’re stuck to that company, and it’s very hard to move around. So that whole immigration process was quite intimidating to me. And as much as I love America, I wasn’t even sure if I wanted to stick around with that company, or even within the US...that’s when I was being introduced to guys as well (referring to the arranged marriage process in India)...But a lot of the guys I was being introduced to were from a similar background, in the US, they’d come here for graduate school...So my parents were just like, why don’t you just go for your Green Card?” Shahnaz refers to that moment as the first push of encouragement to apply for her Green Card, the next coming in the form of conversations with her colleagues, who told her that since her firm was willing to sponsor it, she would be getting it for free, and that in the end she could always still leave if she wanted to, but that she should apply for it as a backup nonetheless. After about a year of thinking about it, and swaying back and forth on the issues, Shahnaz applied for the Green Card, making the argument to herself that she wasn’t committing to anything, because it was just a “backup” in case she did end up wanting to stay in the US.

Shahnaz refers to her Green Card application as a trap that tied her to her labor. Shahnaz states that the “immigration process...sucks you in,” because she was moving at “snail’s pace” with regards to her career path, and “you do kind of end up sticking to your company for a few years. And then those two years can turn into 5 years, into 6 years...” Funnily enough, for Shahnaz, the stress of the Green Card was not that she felt increasingly tied to the US, a country
she wasn’t sure she wanted to live in anyway, but because she felt trapped professionally. There was a minimum number of years that Shahnaz had to stick to her company regardless, because “if your company sponsors you, you kind of have to stick to them to a certain level, because they have to prove that nobody else [i.e. no other American citizen] was eligible for this job, and get that labor certification,” and this process took 1-2 years for Shahnaz in any case. Shahnaz explains that there are a lot of “ifs and strings” attached to the Green Card when it is being sponsored by a company, and that this is a binding and scary feeling.

Shahnaz does add that the Green Card did also affect how she felt about America, and her relationship with the country, even though the overwhelming initial feelings about it were tied to her company. “I started breathing a lot better after I got my Green Card,” Shahnaz laughs, remembering the fears and stresses associated with the number of hoops she had to jump through in order to be eligible for permanent residency. There were a lot of obstacles that made Shahnaz frustrated with the whole immigration process, feeling like it was “taking the best time away from [her], because [she] doesn’t have the freedom to move, or do whatever [she] wants to.” On top of the professional limitations placed on Shahnaz during this process, although traveling was possible, it was made more difficult. After applying for labor certification to receive a Green Card number, Shahnaz still had to wait before receiving the actual, physical Green Card, although she had been issued with the number. “…You have to wait until that number becomes available,” Shahnaz explains, “because there are so many other people in line waiting for Green Cards…And at that time traveling is a pain, because you’re not on your visa, so you get this advance parole, which is like a document [that states] you haven’t been arrested and you have a very safe potential of being a part of this community…so you have to use that to enter the country…and that was a pain.” So gaining the Green Card was an immediate, tangible relief for
Shahnaz as she was able to act on her freedom. She left her prestigious job in management consulting, and she was able to be professionally, and literally, mobile again. The Green Card, in short, gave Shahnaz a lot more “flexibility.” She described it as having been “quite a liberating feeling!”

“I don’t need to belong”

When Shahnaz first arrived in America, her relationship with the few relatives she had in the US was tenuous, because her father had just left the family business, and so she felt like she was pretty much on her own, and living in the US completely independently and alone. However, family did begin to impact her decision to remain in the US as her sister moved to the US for college, and then more and more of her cousins began moving to the US for either educational, professional or social reasons. This impacted Shahnaz to feel more comfortable about staying in the US, because “there is a lot more family” than when she first arrived. Additionally, as Shahnaz’s own “network” – and thus social capital – grew, and she made her own contacts, friends and connections in the US, she began to feel more rooted and comfortable in the US. For someone who perennially felt like a foreigner in both Egypt and India, unable to connect fully with Egyptians in Egypt or Indians in India, she felt that she had finally been able to connect with “like-minded” people, and feel independent and free. Shahnaz adds that “having a son here, and getting married here” also definitely shaped her views on America, and how comfortable she felt staying there as “over the years [she’s been] getting more and more rooted.” Additionally, although Facebook and other social media platforms, and apps such as ‘What’s App’ have made maintaining contact with people in Egypt and India easier, they also remind her that her ‘present’ connections are mainly in the US. Shahnaz says that she feels a lot closer to
some of her friends in Egypt, because she was able to reconnect with them recently, whereas when she left for India, it was harder to keep in touch. However, the primary topics of conversation are about “the old days”, which makes those relationships appear more dated than the ones Shahnaz has formed in the US. Shahnaz quickly adds though, that despite feeling more connected to America, this is conditional on the very reason she first arrived: job opportunities. Without these opportunities, Shahnaz doesn’t feel she would be as attracted to staying in the US, as it was the opportunity to work and the freedom to pursue different career paths and professional choices that first caused Shahnaz to stay in the US. “When I came here, I was 21, and I had started grad school, business school. The average age was 27, 28, so on my first day I was like ‘Yikes! Where am I?!’ I actually cried and I was like I need to go back, because I was so intimidated by everyone. But then, one, everyone was so welcoming and wonderful, that was great you know, not once did I feel like I was less experienced, [and] people were helping each other around. What I like about American people is that they’re competitive in terms of work, but they’re not competitive in things that don’t matter, which is what I like, you know?...the second thing I really love about the culture generally, is some of the people were 37, 38, they were lawyers, very successful lawyers from Harvard law school, very successful careers, who wanted to do something different...there were people from all walks of life...I realized that Americans truly believe – that they can do anything, you know?!” However, Shahnaz juxtaposes the excitement of coming to America with some of the obstacles and challenges she faced. Shahnaz asserts that many of these challenges were personal, emphasizing that she had been coming from a sheltered, conservative environment. “…It took me a long time to understand the whole social realm of dating, and everything. So I didn’t dislike it, but it kind of threw me off, of how aggressive people can be. So that was one part that I found difficult to get into...[and] I
think when I started working, I actually experienced loneliness, and I think that’s the part that still gets to me about American society. It’s, at many levels, it’s too structured of a society, like there’s too much structure to each lunch date, or each dinner date, or each get together, and party. So that familiarity is sometimes missing. And you know, like with people, it’s too politically correct...like culturally if you see someone in the hospital, you ask them, ‘how are you?’ But in America, you don’t! And I learnt that in school. Like, you don’t ask people what’s going on, you know, medically, like if you see them at the hospital, you say, ‘I hope everything’s okay!’ and walk off!...you have to be very clinical at times, and it’s hard to get personal...[whereas in India, and even Egypt] there’s so much warmth you know?...you have to find the right group of people and the right kind of people that you feel comfortable getting – messy – with, a little bit.”

Therefore, people are both something that Shahnaz is fascinated and impressed by in America, but are what she misses most about both Egypt and India. For Shahnaz, thinking about Egypt or India has stark divisions, and she misses them each for particular reasons. For example, she misses family in both, but she associates India with the opportunity to chaotically meet with huge numbers and varieties of extended family, “meeting cousins, cousins’ spouses now [too], and seeing all these dynamics now and going for all these get-togethers and the awkwardness of all those things. The drama of it.” But in Egypt, Shahnaz finds herself craving a different sort of experience, and missing very different things. “When it comes to home, I miss the ‘Egypt,’ because Egypt as the country, and as the environment we lived in, and partly because my parents are there, and you’re taken care of in that environment...it’s not crazy, you know, it’s just – really relaxing to me in Egypt – it’s very peaceful...It’s like you’re walking around and you’re just exploring...So I really miss Egypt from that perspective. The validity it gives me to spend
time with myself as well. It’s a pace...[whereas] in India I miss the connections that people have been developing over the years, and the humor they’ve developed with each other. And I miss that. I feel left out. Both Egypt and India are referred to as ‘home’ by Shahnaz, although when she is talking about India it’s the people and the family that makes her ‘at home,’ but in Egypt ‘home’ is about the placed-ness and physical environment of the place, combined with her familiarity with the streets, “the food, the smells...!” Yet, Shahnaz does feel that if she had not had 5 years living in India, she wouldn’t feel as strongly about it, despite the fact that her family would still have been there. “While it’s [the time in India] has confused me a lot more, I think that it built that connection with India. So, the idea of India is a lot more pleasing, I can see myself living in India [now], because of those 5 years...I do understand the dynamics in India, which I didn’t before [I lived there]...I had a budget so I wasn’t allowed to take a car to college, I had to take the train, and that too, I had to go during rush hours and take the bus and slug it out [referring to the difficulty associated with Indian public transportation]...So I really [learnt] to appreciate how people made things work for them in India, despite all odds...And so, it’s confused me a lot more as to what my sense of home is, but it’s also given me another dimension and you know, another place that I’ve come to appreciate.”

Furthermore, Shahnaz expresses how she feels about Egypt and India very starkly: while it is the physical space of Egypt that Shahnaz misses and thinks of as home, she never quite felt as though she belonged to Egyptian society, while on the flip side, she feels a stronger cultural and social tie to India despite feeling physically out of place. Shahnaz attributes this to her family’s emphasis on the fact that she was Indian, by birth, by citizenship and by culture, although this also contributed to her confusion over her identity when she did finally move to India, and notice that she didn’t quite feel like she belonged there either. “...In Egypt the
environment we lived in was so international. It was so expat oriented. Like with, you know, we were one of the few families, especially at the time, who were permanently there as foreigners. Otherwise everyone else was a diplomat there for a certain period of time, and didn’t think of Egypt as their home either. So I had friends, who were Indian, born in America, naturalized there, parents there, but they were raised in the India community...[which we all were, so] they know Egypt is not their home, and they probably all associated England or the US or wherever as their home. So it was very easy to mix in with that, and not feel like from the immigration status [i.e. that they were not Egyptian citizens, or ‘immigrants’ as they had temporary resident visas to be renewed every 3-5 years] that there was anything ‘deficient.’ I think had I mixed with the Egyptians, or been part of that population, I might have felt it...And culturally because I didn’t know any better, and you’re told everyday that you’re Indian, you don’t do this because you’re Indian, you don’t date because you’re Indian, you don’t go out to parties because you’re Indian, you don’t go out till 3 o’clock because you’re Indian. You just kinda accept it until you go to India, and I mean, it’s only when I went to India when I started questioning, ‘who am I?’ Because till then I always thought I was Indian, you know? Because all the other expats coming to Egypt, I was like ‘I’m just like them, except I lived here for 16 years and they lived here for 3 or 5 years or whatever.’ But then when I went to India I realized that I really don’t know if I fit in here...And I think that’s when the whole question of okay, am I Indian or not, started.” At times like this, when thinking about her identity, Shahnaz feels like it’s too complicated to simply feel one way or another. “I almost think it’s also just the curse of being brought up [this way]...I mean, too many associations with too many places, um, it’s really hard to say [hesitates], like I don’t think I’m Indian like the Indian [breaks off]. I mean I have the Indian passport, but that doesn’t make me [hesitates], I’m not as Indian as other people in India are.
Although I’m married into an Indian family, I mean, Dev [her husband], and I were just discussing it...I’m so different from how his cousins are, and on the surface we might be similar, like you know, we dress the same way, we talk the same way, but in terms of values, they’re still quite different. [But] I’m not really an Egyptian, I’m just not! You know, I’ve never been Egyptian. I’ve been part of a very expat community. I don’t feel very American either...I think I’m more at peace knowing that that’s just the way that’s going to be, I don’t need to belong.”

Shahnaz continues her pondering about what it means to belong, and therefore feel ‘at home,’ ultimately coming to a grand, and beautiful, conclusion, defining ‘home’ for her own experiences; “I can appreciate different places, I can appreciate different people and communities based on the different regions that I’ve been in, and that just adds another dimension to my life. It just adds an exposure and richness to my life, but at the same time it means that I don’t have [pauses]. A place will never be home for me. It’s like, you know, it’ll be the moment that will be home for me.”

In flux

Shahnaz feels that while she certainly misses things about certain places, and feels connected to them, she doesn’t necessarily feel the need to go back to them, or recreate those feelings elsewhere. Shahnaz, in a way, doesn’t see home in the country, the community, or in the physical setting, but rather in moments she creates for herself, with her family, or alone, or cooking her favorite Egyptian dish – moments that may at some times feel strongly like a sense of home, and at other times just feel like part of a daily ritual. She focuses on the temporal rather than the spatial dimensions of ‘home,’ or a combination thereof. Thus, Shahnaz is still open to moving to a fourth country altogether, and is uninhibited and unafraid at the prospect of looking
at job opportunities for her or her husband in Europe, or East Asia, or other regions of the world. So long as Shahnaz knows “where [she] come[s] from,” that’s all that is important for her to hold and think of as home. And that is all that she needs to keep her ‘rooted’ wherever she may be. However, at this point it is interesting to think about Shahnaz’s unwillingness to give up her Indian passport, despite considering herself ‘at peace’ with the idea of being from and in between three places, and feeling like she’s never had a ‘home’ in a traditional sense. Shahnaz quickly retorts by expressing that her unwillingness to apply for American citizenship and lose her Indian passport has to do with practical reasons. “So um, America’s deficit is just getting worse and worse, because of their whole debt situation, so I know taxes are going to go up regardless. And I know a couple of people who are trying to give up their American citizenship because it is just [breaks off], they just don’t live here and it’s just too expensive to maintain. So I just think financially, I’m, you know, I don’t know if it’s sound business...[and also] right now I don’t see myself retiring in America, and if I’m not retiring in America, I’m thinking another 20 years, 25 years? Maybe? If I retire around 65?... I don’t want to be paying taxes just because I’m American if I’m not living here, you know?...” Shahnaz’s dream to travel, relocate, and her lack of sentiment surrounding her placement in the US also reflects her deterritorialized position as someone who is not fully attached to a particular nation-state, allowing for her flexibility. However, Shahnaz then hesitates, also realizing that she may be more attached to her Indian passport than she realizes. “The second side is I think that at some level, being in Egypt and always being told that you’re ‘Indian Indian’ [indicates being doubly Indian, or a ‘true Indian’], and being in an international environment where you had to have an identity, and that identity ended up being Indian, I got attached to my Indian passport. I am Indian you know, in my heart...And I know a document is a document, but it’s still been very, it’s still, I think it’s just
something that I’ve been attached to from a young age...like in [school], if anything to do with Gandhi or like Hindus...came up, I would always be the one, like okay, she’s from India, so me and this other guy we were the only two people from India, so we would stand up for that, and then you’d have 5 or 6 Lebanese, Palestinians and Egyptians standing up for their cause, and so you know, you’d have 1 or 2 Americans, and 1 or 2 [British people] and maybe 1 or 2 Asians, but then being Indian, that [became] part of my identity in Egypt.” So despite not necessarily feeling entirely close to India as a place, Shahnaz appears to feel connected specifically to the document that gave her the right to express her opinion on certain topics and issues, and the document that meant she was perceived a certain way by her peers. Shahnaz grew to feel attached to the identity her passport gave her, despite never having lived in India, because she was part of this international environment, where being ‘from somewhere else,’ was exciting and applauded, and also marked her as a specific subject with identification with a specific place. Shahnaz was attached to the nation of India, but not the state.

Something Shahnaz does think about often, however, is, again, the practical rights of being a citizen somewhere. Shahnaz was only able to vote in India once, during the 5 years she lived there, and otherwise has been unable to exercise her political rights as she lived in America. Growing up within an international context in Egypt, Shahnaz says, fuelled her interest in politics, and does often make her feel like she wishes she could just be “married to a country, so [she] could actually participate in the change process...India is a country with a lot of potential, [while] Egypt is a country where politically I just feel powerless. And especially with the revolution and everything...I feel like I can support it, I can understand the dynamics, but you know, it doesn’t matter to an Egyptian what I think. Because there’s very little I can do, or I can participate in...[other than] cheerleading them, or...discussing [events] or whatever...the two
countries in which I have the potential to be involved in a community are America and India.” Another reason that Shahnaz is therefore still tied to her Indian citizenship, is because she feels like she can see a lot of potential for growth and change in India, and wants the opportunity to be a part of it one day, even if at the present moment she is too far away. Shahnaz feels that this sentiment and the strong feelings she has about Indian politics and change movements are influenced by her husband, and his (past) active political engagement in India.

Today, Shahnaz travels to India and Egypt once a year. When Shahnaz first moved to the US for graduate school, she didn’t go to either country once for the whole two year period, traveling to Latin America on vacation and meeting her parents there instead. Shahnaz went back to India when she first got her job, after graduating, because her parents happened to be in India at the time, and not Egypt. She describes this trip back to India as extremely “satisfying,” but less because she wanted to ‘go back home,’ and more because it enabled her to see whether or not she had gained what she had desired by leaving in the first place. “The environment I left in India at the time, it was very satisfying...knowing the things you want to achieve are like independence, you want to have your own experiences to talk about, and you want to live on your own terms...when I went back to India I had achieved it. Because you know, I had a job and I think getting that external kind of validation from everybody else was really nice, in India...when I was living in India, a lot of people had a say in what I did...When I came back from the US, because of living on your own for two years and figuring things out on your own, the confidence was really high, on managing your own life...it was very gratifying going back to India, knowing I’d achieved what I’d set out to achieve...Because at the time I still remembered the girl who’d left, and then I came back and a lot of those chains were broken.” Shahnaz remembers this trip fondly, with a great deal of pride, because India is the place where she can
most clearly remember the restrictions that were placed on her, and feeling the need to get out, so being back in that space and having a very different experience juxtaposed with those memories of India, made Shahnaz proud of her accomplishments. Alternatively, Shahnaz didn’t have as strong of a reaction when she went back to Egypt for the first time, referring to the fact that she never felt as trapped there, possibly because she was younger, and possibly because there was less family around to control her actions and movements. Shahnaz says that it is also probably related to the fact that she was already accustomed to the process of “going back to Egypt” for holidays or vacations during the 5 years she lived in India, and so that process just continued for her, but from America instead. She adds that while it seems weird to say, ‘vacationing in Egypt’ has never been an odd feeling for her, because “growing up you always knew that you wouldn’t be living there forever.” Shahnaz had grown up expecting to leave Egypt (probably at the time anticipating settling down in India), and so the idea of temporary visits ‘back home’ was not novel, or unexpected. When traveling to India or Egypt, though, Shahnaz expresses joy at what she considers a great adaptability that she was able to develop through moving around so much. “Maybe once in a while I miss the quietness here...But when I go [back to Egypt or India] I just feel like I get back into the routine of things, locally...like when I’m in Egypt there are times when I feel like I never left Egypt, when I’m in India I feel like I never left India, and when I came back here it’s like a button switches off, and I’m happy to be back and I feel like I’ve never left the US. So it’s really weird...that adaptability is quite high. The ability to adapt to different places and environments.”
A citizen of the city of longing

The concluding part of our discussion was closely related to Shahnaz’s thoughts and final ideas about ‘home,’ developed over years and years of thinking about her identity, home, and what it meant to be attached to so many different places. Shahnaz refers to the fact that when somebody asks her ‘Where are you from?’ she never has a response. “I have no idea where I’m from. That’s what I usually say, or I’ll say I’m still trying to figure out where I’m from. Or the simplest way of putting it is, my childhood was in Egypt, my youth was in India, and my adulthood is in the US.” She also specifies that as long as her parents remain in Egypt, she will feel most taken care of there, and Egypt will always feel like a home in that case. Once her parents either leave to return to India (which they plan to do at some point), or pass away, Shahnaz sees her relationship to Egypt transforming from one of a home to one of a fond place of memory. Sometimes, however, due to Shahnaz’s difficulty in answering such questions, she will “let people assume [she’s] from India,” in an attempt to not draw attention to herself. Shahnaz will always make the effort to communicate to people that she didn’t “grow up” in India, but she will “let them assume” that she has a simpler story than the one she does have (for example, that she is originally Indian but raised in the US; a much more common story). “It’s an impossible question to answer,” Shahnaz sums up. Shahnaz then quotes a novel called Maximum City, by the Indian author Suketu Mehta, to explain a constant underlying feeling she has. “He wrote about when he moved here [to the US] and then he tried to go back to India and live there, and he said, ‘something sucks,’ he says, ‘I can’t figure it out. When I’m here I want to be there, and when I’m there I want to be here.’ And that’s the constant. And it’s not the whole idea of the grass is always greener. There are just some wonderful things about the places that I have associations with that are just so hard to get out. So like, when I come back I get into the daily
routine, and I feel good to be back, from India or Cairo, but the **food** in India, I really, really miss food. And for some people it might not be a big deal, but I really miss being served food and just – fresh food, and good food...I miss the familiarity and peacefulness of Egypt, of just taking things as they come...so I’m always like ‘Oh, Egypt this,’ [but] ‘the food is better in India,’ but when I’m in India...where I’m eating good food...I’m thinking ‘oh if I was in the US, I could do this at the moment’s notice, I wouldn’t have to check with like 50 people if I could, and coordinate and ugh, it’s crazy!’ There is something in each place that keeps her feeling connected, and something in each place that keeps her longing for it when she’s not there. If we are to continue with Mehta’s quote from his book *Maximum City*, one could say that Shahnaz is “a citizen of the city of longing.”

Shahnaz thinks back on her relationship with America, and, like both Gaia and Marianne, specifies the time during which she had her son as the time that she was able to start thinking of it as home. Like both Gaia and Marianne, Shahnaz states that “having a child here [the US], who is part of the system here, who is growing up like any American kid, the same lifestyle and the same kinds of exposure” is what makes Shahnaz feel more connected to the US, because her own child is so obviously connected to it, and a part of that community. She refers to a realization she made with a friend, over beginning to accept America as her own, “He said that the problem with people like me, and us [i.e. her friend and herself], is it’s hard for us to adopt any country as our own. So even if we’re living in Egypt we don’t really amalgamate with Egyptians that easily, like you know, we’re not Egyptians, we’re living as foreigners in Egypt. Like even in India, you were not an Indian...so I think, he said that the problem with America is probably that you are trying to keep Krish’s [her son] connections with India and Egypt going on as well, like take him back every year, and ‘you’re Indian’ – trying to give him that sense. And actually [we came to]
the conclusion that just for his sanity I have to kind of, if I’m living her right now, I need to adopt this country, like at least for now, this is home...” This attempt to adopt America is reminiscent of Marianne’s feelings toward the US after the birth of her first son, and reflects Marianne’s attempts to raise her children as ‘Polish’ as possible.

Finally, Shahnaz refers to ‘home’ as being a specific physical location as a Western notion. She introduces thinking of home as a spectrum, or a multiplicity, explaining this by saying “that’s what I tried to say is when the home is in the moment, in your moment, like I think – like for years, I tried to figure out, what is home? What is home?! And I think it’s actually coming to peace with the fact that I have multiple homes...And when I look at some of my American friends who lived in one town, and their parents live there, and their in-laws are close by, everyone’s within a 5 hours drive, they have baby-sisters on call, like 2 sets of grandparents and all that – and I get very envious. And I was telling [someone] that I wish I had that. You know, just all the cousins and everyone. But then on the flip side of it I feel so fortunate that I have this exposure and these connections with three amazing countries. So, there’s so much to get out of each one, and I think, yeah. I think it’s like [a] spectrum. It’s not a place; it’s not a physical location.” Shahnaz feels strongly about the idea that, despite everything, the good outweighs the bad, and that ‘home’ is not in contestation, but rather she is able to have more of a good thing, that she expresses sometimes thinking about even adopting a fourth home. “When we talk about retirement, well India seems like a natural place to move to, just because of the extended network. [But] at the back of our minds, it’s not the only place. You know, when we were talking about it, and like, if we could ever make it work, we would love to live in Italy, it’s just that practically to get some of those things to work, to get to own property in Italy, and everything when you’ve never lived there – the older we get the harder it gets. But when we
went to Italy, totally felt at home in Italy...where we’ve had a good time, we feel like we could easily live there. Like we went for vacation to Aruba and we loved Aruba because there’s this Dutch and this Caribbean sort of flair, and this mixture! Again, it’s sort of like this potpourri, it’s like this mixture of everything! And we felt at home there! ... You can see yourself doing this, anywhere in the world. And um, it’s just practically speaking how feasible it is to adopt a fourth country, at this point in our lives. If we were in our 20s, maybe, I just don’t think it’s very practical [now].”

**An email from Shahnaz: Places, people and moments**

Shahnaz ends our conversation by letting me know that, because of her strong feelings on the topic, and because her own feelings being in flux, that her “sense of home, and what we associate with, it’s also very transient. It changes, what you’re going through. I don’t think it’s a permanent state. And every time I talk to someone, I learn something [new]!” Shahnaz acts on this, and proves this to me, by following up after our conversation by contacting me on Facebook and writing me a message. She adds some new afterthoughts, and some ideas that she has thought more about since our conversation, having changed some of her opinions after giving it some more thought. These ideas can only speak for themselves, so I will just add her messaged thoughts below.

“True, I think home is a combination of the place, people and the moments we spend in a place. For some of us nomads, its perpetually changing as circumstances change. After our conversation I feel as if where we live is sometimes a practical decision, family, education or work takes us there. At the same time, the sense of 'home' is associated to places, people and places we are familiar with. I feel at home eating a foul sandwich [an Egyptian street food], as
well as Bombay sandwich, as well as the neighborhood deli I have been visiting since I landed in US. Three place[s], three different sandwiches, but each makes me feel right at home.

"Ethnically I am Indian and that works for me. I was thinking about your questions, and at some level I have this fear. It’s miniscule and at a subconscious level, but I am afraid to have expectations that come from getting that American passport. I think it’s comfortable to me to be a nomad - be from somewhere, live somewhere else, have associations with another country. I was never enamored by the American dream so the permanency of it scares me. I have never been part of a clique, always had eclectic friends from all walks of life and to be permanently part of [a] clique is scary. I like being an immigrant - I want to be of the few and not of the masses. Call me a commitment-phobe, a snob, but if I lived in India I may have gotten that American passport. That confusion, that feeling itself is familiar, exciting and therefore more homely. Don’t know if it makes sense but just thought of sharing."

Shahnaz’s story reflects deep and thoughtful considerations of her identity, her background and ‘home.’ Although she expresses comfort with her displacement, indeed to the extent that permanency frightens her, it is clear that Shahnaz has given these conversations a lot of thought through her lifetime, and that perhaps her ability to be comfortable in in-betweenness is related to her constant feeling of being in flux throughout her lifetime. Shahnaz could be considered Ong’s fundamental ‘flexible citizen,’ gaining cultural and material capital through displacement and movement across borders, and ultimately applying for a Green Card according to advice from co-workers who express its use as a “back-up,” something that she can use to ease travel and her desire to work in the US, but can give up at any point. Although the process in obtaining the Green Card is exceptionally vivid for Shahnaz, because she actively pursued it as opposed to gaining it through marriage (like Gaia), refugee status (like Zaynab) or through

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family as a child (like Yasmine and Marianne), the process reflects her agency and thus the positive consequences of her flexibility. A major result of this flexibility is her ability to appreciate travel and different countries, including her joy at her own adaptability and her belief in her own fundamental capability to ‘fit in’ and ‘belong’ practically anywhere, not really having a sense of ‘home’ to lose in the first place.

Lastly, the topic of ‘food’ has reoccurred throughout the stories that have been recorded here. Whether it’s Zaynab’s critique of the “fruits and veggies” in the US and their lack of flavor, Marianne referencing the smells and sounds of Warsaw, or Shahnaz’s reference to sandwiches from all three parts of the world she identifies with, sensory particularities remain an important category through which these five women are able to remember and conceptualize ‘home.’
Conclusion

“I like to shop on the Champs-Élysées,
Eat curry in old Bombay,
And spend New Years Eve in either Tel Aviv or Rome,
But if it's all the same to you
Let's eat home.”
(Lyrics by Dave Frishberg, performed by Rosemary Clooney, 1989).

Each woman’s story reveals multiple struggles, contested definitions, and continuous physical and emotional work to make and remake home under different circumstances. They have all clearly grappled with thoughts of home and what it means to them, whether Gaia and Yasmine as two people who felt strongly about leaving home behind, and then found a way to create a new home in the US, Zaynab and Marianne who lament over having left and therefore lost their homes, and hesitantly accept Philadelphia as a new home, or Shahnaz who believes that she has never had a home, and feels strongly about travel and being 'out of place.'

Although each woman’s story offers multiple meanings of home, and while scholarship on ‘home’ has moved far away from its rooted and localized beginnings, the specific, physical space of the house and the role of family in home-making remains important, perhaps because in immigration everything else ‘known’ is questioned, dismantled and fundamentally in flux. As Kelley argues, despite mobility and movement across borders, there remain thoughts of home as where families are, and people spend time curating their houses to reflect their identities and remind them of their cultural backgrounds. In moving to the US, immigrants are inherently undermining (but not necessarily intentionally) the political projects of nationhood and statehood, engaging flexibly with national borders, and yet in doing so, the core nucleus of home as house and home as family is being recreated and reemphasized. After speaking with each woman, with the exception of Shahnaz, it was clear that they were each seeking some kind of (at least temporary) home after viscerally feeling as if they had lost it, and in doing so recreated their
memories through decoration, food and self-identification. However, all five women have had
trouble with self-identification, never sure how to answer the question: “Where are you from?” It
is important to gauge that while there is an assertion of ‘home’ as family and ‘home’ as house,
simultaneously there is a multiplicity of homes as emphases on certain elements of home (the
house, the family, the nation-state) are questioned and brought to the forefront and pushed to the
background at different points and for different reasons. The various definitions of ‘home’ that
we have traced as they have been transformed and remade through these women’s stories depict
the idea of ‘home’ as having multiple levels that include nation, state, nation-state, citizenship,
community, city, and house (Tucker 1994) but, as argued earlier, are overlapping and
continuously being reformed in different shapes and sizes. These variations present ‘home’ as a
process in and of itself, one that is dependent on experience, the person defining it, and its
relationship to sets of socio-economic structures.

Shahnaz differs tremendously in her self-defined “nomadic” existence. Rosi Braidotti’s
work on the nomadic subject defines one as “non-unitary and multilayered...a dynamic and
changing identity,” that is “split, in-process, knotted, rhizomatic, transitional” (2011:3-5).
Braidotti furthers his definition of the contemporary nomad through contextualizing it in its
hyper-capitalist world, in which work has become ‘fragmented’ and ‘exploitative,’ ultimately
inducing capitalist flexibility (2011:5). When Shahnaz’s self-proclaimed nomadism is viewed
through this lens, Ong’s flexible citizen becomes an especially valuable framework through
which we can view Shahnaz’s immigration to the US and her participation in a capitalist order,
through which her Green Card becomes part of her legal capital that guarantees her mobility and
access to employment in the US, while also maintaining her connection to the Indian nation
through her passport.
In thinking of herself as a nomadic subject, Shahnaz is able to identify with Kelley’s framework of ‘home’ as temporal, defining it through “moments,” thinking about it through her senses and experiences of events, places, and people. Likewise, the other women’s stories reflect an emphasis on the senses and memory, reminiscent of Kelley’s focus on story-telling and remembering as home-making. However, Shahnaz diverges from Kelley’s concluding remarks that people are seeking to define ‘home’ and rebuild it, by emphasizing through her email to me that she finds value in refraining from having a fixed notion of ‘home’ and where to find it, and that she specifically enjoys her liminal state and being in flux. In order to express this, Shahnaz refers to eating a food item from each country she identifies with, and explains that she feels equally ‘at home’ when consuming each product from each place. In David Sutton’s review of “Food and the Senses,” we are exposed to the different ways in which food remains an integral aspect of culture. Sutton references Seremetakis’ ethnographic work to express the relationship between the senses and memory, looking at how food relates to memory and place-making (2010:212). Furthermore, he looks at Law’s use of ‘smellscapes’ and ‘sensory landscapes’ that are created by immigrants who share their home-cooking in the public spaces of their host countries (Sutton 2010:214). Sutton looks at how “Greek migrants ‘return to the whole’ through the powerful experiences of taste and smell, encapsulated in such objects as a small vial of olive oil,” and how through a certain smell and taste, they can be transported to locations beyond their immediate surroundings (2010:214). This underpins the reasons for which food in conjunction with the other senses remain an integral part of my interlocutors’ lives. The smell or taste of a certain food, the sound of a city at night, and the view of a cityscape at a particular time of day, are all able to connect these women back to the home of their childhood and in their memories; all five women refer at least once to their sensory relationships, in order to emphasize
attachments and detachments, to their countries of origin.

In drawing on memories to recreate a sense of ‘home,’ though, childhoods are often reimagined, because of the way these memories are reworked over time and through space. The participants in my thesis all anchor their memories and belonging in the city they originally came from as opposed to the country itself, displaying an overwhelming attachment to the city versus the nation-state as explored by Holston and Appadurai (1996). It is important to note that it is when referring specifically to cities that the women tend to remember or be triggered by more sensory and tactile representations of the place, as compared to their more abstract attachments to the imagined community and nationalism related to the nation-state. It is when referring to foods, value systems or cultural ties that each woman tends to explain the balances they pursue after immigrating as a careful consideration of the pros and cons of ‘American’ culture versus the cultures of the countries they come from, whether that is India, Egypt, Iraq or Poland. However, when specifically speaking to their experiences of home, the women tend to associate with the cities they were originally raised in. Of course, Zaynab’s story is unique regarding her refugee status, and so it is crucial to consider that while she does clearly have a strong relationship with Baghdad, which also includes her feelings about her grandfather’s house specifically, Zaynab speaks fondly of Iraq as a whole. It is necessary to note her relationship to Iraq as a nation, and whether it has been challenged and redefined by the current socio-political situation in Iraq, considering that, unlike the other women, Zaynab has been unable to revisit Iraq and reconfigure some of the difficulties she’s been facing. Zaynab is the only person for whom the context of political conflict and war forced her to immigrate to the US, and thus her departure from Baghdad is specifically tied to the political and security situation in Iraq as a nation-state.

Additionally, a major thread identified in this thesis is the importance of documentation
as a form of legal capital. All documents (including visas, Green Cards and passports) require a
certain amount of material capital in order to gain them, and cultural capital to know the
institutions through which you need to request and use such documents. However, you can only
begin to think about applying for these documents once you are legally eligible to do so. It is
important to note that documents hold a lot of symbolic and legal capital for all these women, but
in remarkably different ways. It not only allowed them access to specific resources in the US but
it also enabled them to travel abroad and reconnect with their home countries. Receiving the
passport and the various forms of capital that came with it was important to all the women, and
indeed many immigrants in the US. Additionally, the American passport was heavily emphasized
by the majority of my interlocutors. There is a (symbolic, political, and legal) hierarchy when
thinking about passports and documentation. Although passports ‘lower down’ on this hierarchy
are often less desired when one can choose between them, there remains the case of Shahnaz
who has decided that the Green Card performs all the cultural, material and legal functions she
requires, and retains her Indian passport for its symbolic value. Yasmine says that her Egyptian
passport is now meaningless to her (especially when crossing borders), but her references to the
use of her Egyptian passport to attain discounts and specific treatment in Egypt implies that it
still plays an important role in positioning her vis-à-vis the Egyptian nation-state. Thus, although
there exists a hierarchy through which having an American passport (for example) is privileged,
this hierarchy can be symbolically upset by other documents that privileged, flexible citizens
hold. The tension between the legal, cultural and material values of American documents and the
symbolic value placed on documents from an immigrant’s country of origin poses an interesting
challenge to Ong’s emphasis on the role of passports for flexible citizens. Shahnaz, for example,
is a great example of the ultimate flexible citizen, immigrating to the US with education and
employment in mind, using her relationship with India and Egypt to bolster her social and cultural capital as a frequent and adaptable traveler. Yet, at the same time, she is eligible for an American passport, which would ease her travels as she would need fewer visas, but her Indian passport with its numerous visas and stamps is an integral aspect of her identity as flexible, which undermines Ong’s argument that passports are merely a means to an end, and that the flexible citizen aims to attain American citizenship to open up labor potentials in the US.

Finally, Kelley’s emphasis on the importance of retelling one’s stories in order to ‘bring an immigrant home’ is essential in understanding my personal quest for home-making and my own positionality throughout this work. In hearing my interlocutors tell their stories, I am brought closer to a new understanding of what ‘home,’ home-making and belonging really mean. Through this research and my interactions with the participants in my thesis, I have come to imagine a ‘home’ that can be recreated through my senses and how they trigger certain memories that are reformulated temporally and spatially, to think of moments in time and space as recreations of ‘home,’ and how despite being a liminal figure, I still have the ability to create my own version of ‘home.’ I am compelled and drawn by the idea that I can be a citizen of any city I decide to settle down in, and that citizenship and the nation-state may not be so specifically interrelated. Finally, however, I am also consciously aware of how this decision to become a citizen of a city, or allow myself to become tied to temporalities and spaces, will depend on the legal capital I hold at any given time and whether I am excluded from the nation-state where that city is. I believe that Ong’s emphases on how borders and nations are reified by flexibility and mobility is essential to understanding how in one or two years time, I may no longer have the “correct” documentation, and with it, accumulation of legal capital, to permit me to stay in a country that I have made my home for four years.
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Transcripts and Field-notes from Interviews/Research Conducted Summer 2014
Appendix: Prepared Interview Questions

Context and background
1. What country are you originally from?
2. Did you move around a lot when you were growing up?
3. The place that you most recently call home, would you describe it as rural, suburban or urban?
4. Were most people local, and did they all speak the same language? Did they practice the same religion? Were community members similar culturally?
5. How did you and your family fit into the community?
6. Did you like it?
7. What is your country of origin's general view/perspective of the US? What was your view or perspective of the US?

Experience of coming to the US
8. When did you first come to the US, and with what goal/with what intention?
9. What was the experience of arriving in the US as a foreign citizen?
10. When did you decide to stay in the US permanently?
11. Why did you decide to become a resident or US citizen?
12. Could you tell me about the process of acquiring a Green Card or US passport?
13. Did you know anybody in the US before you came here?
14. Did any of your relatives or friends move to the US at the same time you did?
15. What did you like most about the US after first moving here? And now? What are some of the challenges that you faced when you first moved to US? What are the biggest challenges you face now?
16. What did you miss most about your country of origin when you first moved here? What were you happy to leave behind? What do you now miss about your country of origin?

Documentation and mobility
17. How do you think gaining a Green Card or passport changed your relationship to the US?
18. How do you think having the Green card or passport changed your relationship to your country of origin?
19. Was it easy to give up your previous citizenship? Do you hold dual citizenship?
20. How important do you think these papers are in identifying where you are from?
21. Do you feel more “American”?
22. Do you feel less “[insert nationality of origin]”?
23. Do you have any particular feelings about your old passport? Any attachments to it?
24. How often do you visit your country of origin? How does it feel to return to your country of origin with a US passport or Green Card?
25. How does it feel to return to the US with your Green Card or US passport?
26. What are some of the major changes that resulted from you becoming a Green Card holder or US citizen? Did this impact how you travel in the US and abroad?
27. [If Green Card Holder]: Would you consider applying for citizenship? Why or why not?

Home

28. Do you maintain connections with friends and relatives back in your place of origin?
   How do you maintain these connections? (via social media, phone, emails/letters etc)
29. Do you have connections (family or friends) here in the US?
30. What is 'home' for you right now?
31. Has this changed throughout your life? Has it changed during your time in the US? Why?
32. Where and when do you consider 'home', or feel most 'at home'?
33. Is 'home' and knowing where it is, important to you?