

Staying or Going: The Ethics of Mobility, National Identity, and Citizenship¹

Oh, tourist,
 is this how this country is going to answer you
 and your immodest demands for a different world,
 and a better life, and complete comprehension
 of both at last, and immediately...

- Elizabeth Bishop, "Arrival at Santos"²

In 1494, the monarchs of Portugal and Spain convened in the Spanish town of Tordesillas and proceeded to halve the world. The Iberian powers delineated a meridian 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands. All unconquered lands to the east of this line—Africa, Asia, a chunk of South America—belonged to Portugal; all of those to the west—which meant most of the New World—belonged to Spain. As a child, I learned about the Treaty of Tordesillas in neutral terms, nothing more than a historical document that preceded the founding of my country as a Portuguese colony (a development which, ironically, the Treaty was meant to prevent, given Brazil's geographic position in relation to the meridian). Over the years however, the Treaty of Tordesillas acquired an ominous symbolic significance, both historical and personal. *Here is where it began, I think to myself, the rush to possess, the urge to point one's finger at some patch of ink on a map and say, this is my country now.*

Like the European explorers, whose privilege prefigured my own as a Brazilian citizen studying abroad, I can choose new places to inhabit. I can draw lines dividing and rearranging my identity as I see fit. The urge of the Portuguese sailors to explore and claim new territory foreshadows my own indecision about which country to choose as my own after graduating

¹ Word count: 3830, not including footnotes, title or epigraph

² See Bishop's *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*

university in the United States. At some point in the future, I must decide whether to return to Brazil and maintain it as my primary country of residence, or seek better opportunities by emigrating. This is the classic *should I stay or should I go* question that dangles before all international students in American or European universities, as well as the choice hounding educated citizens of underdeveloped countries. While many who face this choice quickly find the answers within themselves, I have always grappled with the implications of choosing which country to live in.³

Perhaps this is because the choice to stay in Brazil or to emigrate is an ethical one. Nowadays people speak of global generations and “citizens of the world,” but how does that rhetoric impact the idea of duty to one’s country or of practicing good citizenship? ⁴ In this day and age, do we owe anything to the countries in which we were born? Do we have an ethical obligation to improve them and fulfill them where they are lacking? How can the so-called developing world overcome its challenges and break the cycle of dysfunction without its most skilled and educated citizens? Amid the staggering inequality of Brazil, I was born on the lucky side, and my life is blessed with the luxury of choice.⁵ As such, I get to watch my country live with the legacy of Portuguese imperialism without suffering from it myself, and always with the knowledge that I can leave if I want to. The irony of this reality is enough to make me stop and

³ I exclude from this analysis the extreme situation of refugees fleeing violence and persecution in their home countries, to whom the ethical questions posed here do not apply.

⁴ See definition of “citizen of the world” at the World Government of World Citizens website: <http://www.worldservice.org/wcd.html>. Also see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, “Global Generations,” 33: “At the start of the 21st century, in contrast, it is cosmopolitan experiences and events . . . which have become the key to the space of expectation of the up and coming generation.”

⁵ Shorrocks, Davies, Lluberas, *Global Wealth 2014* (Zurich: Credit Suisse, 2014), 61. Brazil’s Gini coefficient was 82%, indicating high income inequality.

consider the ethics of leaving a country that could not only benefit from my skills, but that has also seen enough exploitation and abandonment by its most privileged citizens.

Although I have not yet made the decision to stay in Brazil or emigrate, the ethical implications intertwine with the personal. Over the years, I have come to realize that identity is fluid, and that this fluidity comes with numerous implications. I spent my first six years of life in England, studied in an American school in Brazil for the following twelve, and by the time I graduate will have lived five years in the United States. I often feel like an impostor, too foreign to belong to any one country, my identity too diffuse to conform to the requirements of any one label. Though I was born in Brazil and carry a Brazilian passport, is the seal of a Brazilian identity enough to be a Brazilian? Am I truly of my country when my fluency in English surpasses that of my Portuguese? What ties me to Brazil, when the only indication of my roots in a surname full of German and Dutch patronymics is my first name? If I am Brazilian only nominally, why should I feel obligated to stay and toil for the sake of some distant future, or some vague notion of greater good, both of which are not guaranteed? What do I owe a country that is not my own? I unearth all of this history and pose these questions to demonstrate that having a fluid identity, particularly in terms of nationality, is disorienting. My geographical mobility correlates with my fluidity of identity, which in turn informs my ethical unease. Even though I cherish my ability to adapt to new places and my chameleonic sense of self, these same qualities prevent me from settling somewhere without an array of qualms. I am adrift in my own mobility, and dropping anchor will not be easy.

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Brazil is hardly the only country afflicted by the flight of its most educated citizens. Even a cursory look at the numbers of foreign workers emigrating to countries like the United States, France, or the U.K. shows us that human capital flight—also known as brain drain—is a scourge of the developing world. Smaller and poorer nations tend to suffer most—Haiti, Jamaica, and Guyana, for example, have lost 80% of their college-educated population as of the year 2000.⁶ In certain sub-Saharan countries, over half of nationals with a university degree have emigrated.⁷ Yet brain drains are not endemic to these places. For many decades now, skilled Chinese and Indian workers with the means to leave have been doing so in droves. Clearly, human migration is by no means a modern or a new phenomenon, and I am not alone in thinking that better opportunities reside overseas.

But what does it mean to have better opportunities, and how do we arrive at the conclusion that these better opportunities are worth the upheaval of migration? The dilemma of whether to emigrate or stay is deceiving, precisely because the supposedly desirable choice may not appear so optimal under further examination. In his 1966 paper *A Theory of Migration*, Everett Lee schematizes this uncertainty with a model often referred to as the push-pull theory.⁸ According to this theory, migration occurs because attractive factors in one country may pull people out of another and/or because unfavorable conditions in the country of origin may impel them to leave. Pull factors thus include job opportunities, security, and better education; push factors range from persecution and natural disasters to dissatisfaction with the government.

⁶ Çağlar Özden, “Brain Drain in Latin America,” (paper presented at the expert group meeting on international migration and development in Latin America and the Caribbean, Mexico City, November 30 - December 2, 2009), 3.

⁷ “Migration and the Brain Drain Phenomenon,” accessed December 14, 2015, <http://www.oecd.org/dev/poverty/migrationandthebrainrainphenomenon.htm>

⁸ Everett S. Lee, “A Theory of Migration,” *Demography* 3, no. 1 (1966): 50. Note: Seminal migration theorist Ernst Ravenstein (whose 1885 paper Lee references) first posited that migration depends on push and pull factors.

However, none of these factors can determine the likelihood that someone will migrate. In addition to the conditions in the country of destination and the country of origin, Lee identifies two other confounding variables: intervening obstacles (distance, immigration laws, transportation costs) and personal factors such as temperament, age, education levels. The decision to migrate, it seems, results from not only an intricate dynamic of checks-and-balances, but from highly personal circumstances.

With this in mind, I can identify two competing yet interrelated assumptions that form the crux of my decision when I think about emigrating or staying. The first assumption dictates that emigration is not publicly responsible. By many measures of development Brazil performs poorly, and it fails to provide the possibility of a decent life for most of its citizens. Through no merit of my own, I have been spared this reality, and have agency and access to human capital that the majority of Brazilians lack. Shouldn't I, along with the Brazilians who grew up with similar privileges, stay and wield these advantages in a way that benefits our home country? Part of me believes so. I feel the tug of responsibility when I imagine the jobs I could pursue in Brazil: teaching, translating, civil service positions. I feel angry at the Brazilians living abroad who complain about the state of the country as if they still had to endure it. If I am in an ideal position to enact change, it would be irresponsible to squander a vital opportunity to help my country, and outright shameful to forsake such an opportunity and then carp about problems that no longer affect me.

This sense of obligation to return to Brazil quickly dissipates however, when faced with the assumption that I will thrive in the U.S. or Europe more than I would in Brazil. The pursuit of personal or private good generally connotes selfishness, but the truth is that life in Brazil is

unrewarding. The needs that oblige me to stay and help it develop are the deficiencies that make me want to leave. Furthermore, though Portuguese is my mother tongue, English is my primary language. I think, read, and write in English. Most of my social interactions happen with friends who speak only English or are bilingual. Of the cultural and intellectual figures I admire, few of them are Brazilian, and considering my starry-eyed ambitions of working in academia, it is unlikely Brazil will house the opportunities I seek. Admittedly, I am well aware that emigration is not risk-free. As Lee writes in his study, “[T]here is always an element of ignorance or even mystery about the area of destination, and there must always be some uncertainty with regards to the acceptance of a migrant in a new area.”⁹ Nevertheless, the predominance of English and the unique career opportunities in the U.S. or U.K. are the main pull factors influencing my decision.

Ideally, I would find a way to reconcile the push and the pull factors, to determine where public good and private good intersect. Such a marriage of interests would not necessarily lead to satisfaction, but it would certainly represent an answer to my ethical dilemma. Ostensibly, the ethical choice would be to stay in Brazil and do my part to help it grow as a country. I am inclined to think that I can fulfill roles of greater importance to humanity in Brazil, and if staying there is not the ethically acceptable choice to make, it is at least a noble one. Currently, this prioritization of Brazil’s public good coincides with my idea of the private good. Right now, I am homesick and filled with nostalgia for the idea of my homeland—I want to go back. When I graduate however, I will have to return to Brazil due to visa requirements, and I know that this longing will likely evaporate a few months after my arrival. Fortunately, Brazil has pull factors of its own in my life: financial and career security, family bonds and childhood memories, the

⁹ Lee, “A Theory of Migration,” 50.

emotional bias I have towards the Brazilian way of life, natural beauty. Furthermore, I do not believe that I would feel the urge to return to my country if there were not some essential Brazilian-ness in me deeper than a superficial appreciation for a comfortable life in a perpetually sunny place. There is so much that I love about my country and so much that tires me about living abroad that I find myself ignoring thornier aspects of life in Brazil that turn the question of emigration into a dilemma.

From afar, such thorny aspects appear negligible. Ask Brazilians on the street, however, whether they would rather stay or emigrate, and many would not see the dilemma I see. Ask them about the future of the country, and they will respond with knee-jerk pessimism. It is a Brazilian tendency to be self-deprecating and dramatic, but I do not doubt the discontent of my fellow citizens. We all tailor our grievances according to our interests, but all of us have awaited the country's future, in some way, for five hundred years now. With every political corruption scandal, every school left to crumble, every pile of bureaucratic paperwork obstructing the lives of law-abiding citizens, this future is delayed. Violence remains a problem, and in response, gated communities have proliferated, further dividing society across racial and socioeconomic lines. Brazilian students perform abysmally in world education rankings, and as of 2012, 27% of Brazilians between ages 15-64 were functionally illiterate¹⁰. Almost every industry sector has gone on strike to demand better compensation and government administration: bus drivers, bankers, doctors, teachers, the police. When change occurs for the better, it is probably because it is statistically likely; advancements, after all, are bound to happen at some point, even if by chance.

¹⁰ *Source in Portuguese* “Alfabetismo Funcional em Última Década,” last modified January 5, 2012, http://www.ipm.org.br/pt-br/programas/inaf/relatoriosinafbrasil/Paginas/inaf2011_2012.aspx

So why is change so difficult to implement in my country? For a long time, I blamed our excessive tolerance of government incompetence and our collective apathy towards the injustices done upon the country and its citizens. In Brazil we speak of the colonial mentality—a mindset inherited from Brazil’s legacy as a Portuguese colony and its historical status as a nation exploited by those in power. The Portuguese had no intention of molding Brazil into its own nation, and as a result of the colonial mentality, Brazilians today rarely manifest such a desire either. Little boys grow up dreaming of careers as soccer stars; little girls aspire to be supermodels; the government is the province of morally bankrupt white men, and so the cycle goes on. While I admire the indomitable resilience of my compatriots, it frustrates me that we continuously shrug away these problems with lazy gripes, weekend barbecues, and—if one has the means—casual decisions to move to another country. Though this is by no means an indictment of the entire Brazilian population, I can speak to the cynicism, indifference, and hypocrisy that poison the country’s morale and prospects. These pernicious attitudes were demoralizing to witness and made me feel like any effort made to make Brazil better (including the choice to live there permanently) would be futile.

Recently however, I have noticed indignation prevailing over cynicism, as well as a surge of proactiveness and commitment to progress in the Brazilian population. The protests of 2013 revealed the deep-seated and widespread discontent of the Brazilian people with their government, and the years that followed did nothing to mitigate their displeasure. The magnitude of the protests surprised me: some of them drew crowds of over a million. I remember feeling proud of the ribbons of people marching through Rio, São Paulo, and my own city, Brasília. I remember scrolling through my social media accounts, reading the signs and posters my friends

made for the protests they were attending. Among the most popular protest slogans was the imperative, “Vem Pra Rua;” in English: “come to the streets.” We may not have known how to enact change and our dissatisfaction was haphazardly divided among sundry problems, but we were angry. Most importantly, we were possessive, and defensive, of our homeland. I did not experience the military dictatorship, nor was I around for the impeachment of President Fernando Collor, so this was the first time in my lifetime when I felt like my generation was holding itself and the rest of the population accountable for the nation’s welfare. This burgeoning sense of collective responsibility reaffirms the necessity and ethical correctness of staying in Brazil, and adds a dimension of urgency to my decision—I want to contribute to this spirit of change, instead of just witnessing it, and I fear it may lose momentum by the time I make my choice to stay or emigrate.

That being said, I am no stranger to the desire to leave. In his article, Lee postulates that, “A person who has once migrated and who has once broken the bonds which tie him to the place in which he has spent his childhood is more likely to migrate again than is the person who has never previously migrated.” I can confirm such a statement—I struggled to develop any sort of bond with my home country, mostly because I spent the formative years of my childhood elsewhere. My family and I resided in London until the year 2000, when we moved back to the city where I had been born: Brasilia. I remember hating this new, stuffy, tropical place, with red earth that stained your toes and battered cars on pot-holed streets. It took me a few years to comprehend that I was not, in fact, British, and that this place was my home country. It took me much longer to begin to appreciate my roots, to stop judging Brazil by its poverty, its shabbiness, its lack of state-of-the-art toys and American candy. When I look back upon these childhood

prejudices of mine, I am flooded with a mixture of shame and awe. I wonder what instinct could have prompted me to systematically reject my home country purely because it lacked the niceties of the first world, and I wonder whether I picked up this streak of elitism from the adults around me. Whatever the cause, for too long I stowed my Brazilian identity away like an odd item of jewelry that I never felt like wearing.

Familial bonds and psychological maturity eventually mitigated my misconceptions, and although my Brazilian identity remained decorative, at least I started to feel like wearing it. As I entered high school, I told my mother I was grateful to be born in Brazil. Even so, this gratitude never amounted to anything more than a dutiful appreciation inspired by a romanticized (and largely foreign) perspective of Brazil's greatest treasures: the multiculturalism, the hedonistic *joie de vivre*, the wealth of natural resources and treasures, the glamor of the Brazilian woman. What an exotic distinction, to be a citizen of such a mythical country! What did it matter that part of the reason this multicultural society appeared so attractive to me was because I did not have to suffer its deeply ingrained racism? Or that my joyfully hedonistic approach to life was so shot through with foreign influence that it barely featured traditionally Brazilian sources of entertainment, such as Brazilian popular music, soccer, or Carnival? As for the wealth of natural resources and treasures, I admit—Brazil is beautiful—but my recognition of this fact has never protected a land that has known nothing but exploitation since the Portuguese arrived. And finally, below the surface of the Brazilian woman's sensuality (which does not apply to me, a skinny white girl, in any way) is a cesspool of problematic assumptions that merit an essay of their own. In truth, my Brazilian identity never solidified; even today it feels superficial and tokenistic.

But in any case, I embraced my Brazilian identity, capitalizing from its exotic allure whenever I went abroad and dodging the inconveniences it entailed while at home. I cannot imagine any country wanting or needing such a fair-weather citizen. No matter how ethical it may be to remain loyal to my country of origin, I don't know what I can offer it, not only in terms of my identity, but also concerning technical skills and area of expertise. I am not an engineer, scientist, or doctor, essential professions for every community and nation on earth. Though I would love to volunteer as a tutor or teacher of English, I do not aspire to become a full-time teacher in a Brazilian school (a sacrifice if there ever was one, and more important than any contribution I can make to Brazil's future). What I can offer is a belief in Brazil's viability as a country, a willingness to work hard, and affection for its culture and people. Whether that will be enough to help the country, I cannot say.

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We think there is autonomy in mobility, especially when mobility is a product of fortune and privilege. We can go wherever we desire and be whoever we want to be, untrammelled by expectations or past experiences. But we gloss over the consequences of such a lifestyle. It may seem old-fashioned to promote patriotism or nationalistic devotion, but if we hail from countries that were not intended to become countries at all, I believe a sincere attempt at citizenship is in order. I am drawn to the idea of wholeheartedly embracing my origins; of being a genuine cultural representative for Brazil; of flaunting my foreignness right down to the subtlest mannerisms. At the same time however, I also want to engage seamlessly with American or European culture. Currently, these two goals are at odds with each other. I love pointing to places on maps and saying, like the Portuguese explorers, *this is my country now* to wherever

pleases my fancy, but I hate the emptiness that results from feeling like I do not belong anywhere, or that I do not like where I belong most. Ultimately, while mobility makes it easier for me to choose where to go, it cannot help me choose where to stay or who to be.

The nature of ethical dilemmas in general places us in a similar state of “adriftness.” Making the ethically right choice will not solve Brazil’s problems, neither will it guarantee any particular type of outcome, whether positive or unfavorable. Choosing to stay in Brazil determines one thing: that I have abided by a sense of obligation and responsibility radiating mostly from within myself. Such a decision will not, however, ensure a better future for my country, neither does it mean that my actions or good intentions will have any impact in the long run. Similarly, emigrating entails two certainties, both of which I have experienced before: my emotional and cultural connections to Brazil will further attenuate, and I will not have to experience the mundane hassles of Brazilian life. There is no assurance of personal satisfaction, career success, or happiness. If there is one thing I have learned from a life spent watching cities shrink below me from the panes of an airplane window, it’s that while we can assert our identities through the choices we make and the places we love, we have limited control over the consequences of our actions. We use ethics to try to sort the choices before us according to their consequences, but that does not translate into easy decision-making, and rarely does it lead to a solution.

In truth, I find that the fundamental dichotomies inherent to ethical dilemmas distract us from alternative courses of action or modes of thinking. Regarding my own dilemma, for example, why is the burden of improving Brazil, a developing nation, solely upon my shoulders, or the shoulders of Brazilian citizens? If we want to genuinely entertain the idea of world

citizenship, shouldn't everyone—particularly individuals from powerful and wealthy countries—feel a similar sense of obligation towards the most vulnerable and underserved places throughout the globe? After enduring centuries of plunder and imperialism, so-called third world nations are expected to pull themselves up by their bootstraps in a world that continuously shifts the power balance in favor of developed countries. From this perspective, the question of whether I should emigrate or stay in Brazil appears rigged. Perhaps the ethical decision, then, does not involve choosing one country over another or other similar sacrifices. The ethical decision is to rethink the lines drawn five hundred years ago, and then rephrase the question.