

Agents of opportunity - from nowhere in particular

Frances Cowell

What nationality are your friends? That was the second question the interviewer asked. The first was the more predictable, why do you want to become a French citizen? The second question, though, points to something never mentioned about immigration: that, as a migrant you have many choices; for instance whether or not your migration itself was voluntary.

There are as many reasons for upping sticks and moving to another part of the world as there are people on the planet and vastly more if non-human migration is counted. They include study, career advancement, joining family or loved ones, or distancing oneself from oppressive family values, not to mention to seek a more hospitable economic or physical climate.

Why somebody migrates is a major factor in how the experience affects them, so too do things like how far they are from the place they left behind in kilometres and time zones, how different their adopted country is in its language, customs and cuisine. How large is their home country's diaspora and how difficult is it to connect with or avoid its members?

Whatever the circumstances, being a migrant is a golden opportunity to challenge one's ideas and preconceptions, learn from new neighbours and fellow citizens, thus share ideas and insights that migrants inevitably bring with them. Everyone benefits.

When somebody is new to a place banal, everyday events and activities take on a new meaning. An altercation on the metro intrigues less for its cause than use of the polite form of address to say some pretty impolite things. Even more ordinary things like opening hours of shops and restaurants reflect local foibles, as do when and how garbage is collected.

To many of us, few things seem sillier than other people's patriotism. Watch a TV programme about some past event or era that is important to your new fellow citizens, then reflect on the history you were taught at school, and ask how people from other countries think about that. Visiting a museum or watching a programme to get others' views on shared episodes in history gives insights into which one is right, or whether both are wrong, half-wrong or distorted.

Try listening to popular radio. Some songs can be heard pretty much anywhere. But how about unfamiliar songs, particularly from local artists? If a newcomer likes them, then either they are pretty good and should be played more widely, or the newcomer is on their way to becoming a local.

Once somebody has been away long enough from the country they were brought up, after perhaps a few years, they may be surprised to find, on a visit, that they no longer feel entirely at home there. They are becoming part of that most numerous, if ill-defined, diaspora: from nowhere in particular.

Far from a curse, as some people would have it, this is a sign that they have risen to the challenge and in doing so have acquired valuable insights. They may not have realised it, but they are almost certainly more thoughtful, tolerant and probably more philosophical than they were. They become an agent of opportunity, for themselves and for those around them.

This article was first published on TheEuropeanNetwork.eu in July, 2021