



Longing for landscape: Homesickness and place attachment among rural out-migrants in the 19th and 21st centuries



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ABSTRACT

Migration research has begun to consider the emotions associated with moving. In so doing, it has engaged with geographies of home and feelings of homesickness, yet less so with emotional attachment to elements of the non-human environment. Historians, too, have begun to consider the human longing for natural landscapes, though historical examinations of homesickness tend to be similarly focused on longing for family and familiar built environments. This mixed methods research, conducted by a geographer and a historian, considers the environmental homesickness experienced by rural out-migrants. Out-migrated Vermonters have consistently expressed a longing for landscape from the nineteenth century to the present. Drawing on nineteenth-century archival materials and findings from a recent migration survey, the paper examines the production of place-based identities and enduring attachments to landscape over time. The research reveals the emotional dimensions of moving away and the ways in which people have attempted to remain connected to home. The work suggests expanding theorizations of home to include the natural environment. The intersection of individual identity, rural place attachment, and migration history is fertile ground for additional research.

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1. Introduction

Daniel Thompson was happy to take a tutoring job with a wealthy Virginia family shortly after graduating from college in 1820. By then, the twenty-something was itching to get out of rural Vermont, to see other places and have new experiences. Virginia did not disappoint him; Thompson relished his southern experience. He would eventually return to Vermont to work, raise a family, and become Vermont's best-known writer of historical fiction (Flitcroft, 1929). But all of that was far in the future when Thompson wrote home from Virginia. He had rare bouts of homesickness but found that they could be cured quite easily by traveling to the nearby mountains. During a trip to the Blue Ridge Mountains, Thompson compared the mountains to those back in New England and concluded that in some ways they reminded him of home:

On the Blue Ridge I was again at home, —the steep mountains and lofty summits, the heavy forests ... and the fertile valleys, all

reminded me, most forcibly, of my own native mountains, and afforded me a pleasure combined of association and novelty, greater perhaps, than I should have felt, had I been, that moment in reality transported to the mountains of New England (Thompson and Pierce, 1823).

Over time, the novelty of Virginia faded for Thompson as it became harder for him to ignore the longing that he felt for home, particularly for the natural environment he'd left behind.¹ Several years after returning to Vermont, Thompson was relieved to hear that one of his cousins had made a similar return to his native New England, writing:

I am satisfied that a New England man living here till the age of maturity will always be too much influenced by the effect of early associations to live happily in the south or west for permanent residence as in New England—to such settled in [other] countries, the birds do not sing so sweet, —the foliage of the

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¹ We use the term 'natural' here to loosely refer to the non-human environment, fully aware that no place is devoid of human interaction or influence, as argued by Bill Cronon (1995) and many others.

trees does not present so beautiful an appearance—nothing is so fair—so pleasant, as fancy is forever telling him are the things of our early home, and the heart is always sending up its little regrets for reason to stifle, and the mind in spite of that reason will turn back and the memory linger on the mountains of New England (Thompson and Pierce, 1829).

Patty Devereaux grew up in a hardscrabble town in Vermont's rural Northeast Kingdom at the turn of the twenty-first century.² Like Thompson, she left Vermont immediately following her college graduation to seek new experiences elsewhere:

I wanted to get out of Vermont to explore and have other adventures outside of the state that I had spent so much time in. I wanted to get to know other places so that when/if I decided to move back to Vermont, I'd feel like it was by choice, not just because I had always lived there.

Devereaux found she was homesick for Vermont a few years after she left. As she described it in 2014, she missed 'the small-town vibe, the outdoors, feeling each season change so acutely, my parents who live there.' Experiences away had given her insight into her attachment to the place where she was raised:

Being from Vermont is an ingrained part of my identity - it is me and therefore it is home. I can't describe how it is home to me, I just feel an incredible sense of ownership and pride when anything having to do with Vermont is brought up in conversation or the news. I feel the most connected with Vermont socially, politically and geographically.

The similarities between Thompson's and Devereaux's definitions of home and feelings of attachment to place are striking. Thompson's 'little regrets' for leaving home are much like the homesickness Devereaux felt. Each offered evocative descriptions of place characterized by longing, pride, and the ambiguity that results from leaving a place they loved. For them, home was more than the house where they lived and the people who remained back home; home was also the natural environment. Their identities were formed, in part, out of relationship to a rural culture and place. Their descriptions of homesickness illustrate the emotional dimensions of moving away.

This paper explores the idea of rural landscapes as home and considers attachment to the natural environment by bringing together insights from two time periods in Vermont history characterized by rural out-migration. Letters, diary entries, newspaper articles, and other primary documents written by Vermont residents and out-migrants in the nineteenth century comprise the first dataset. Findings from two migration surveys of people who had grown up in Vermont, both conducted in 2014, furnish contemporary perspectives. These studies demonstrate that the material environment holds lasting meaning for people who have left Vermont, and that these sentiments have persisted over two centuries. Put in dialogue with the rural migration research conducted elsewhere, findings suggest that migrants moving away from rural areas may have deep attachment to non-human aspects of places, in addition to the social worlds they leave behind, a point overlooked in much of the migration research. Findings suggest that the homesickness felt by contemporary rural out-migrants deserves deeper consideration for what it may reveal about

place-based identities of mobile people. The pairing of an historical analysis with a contemporary investigation of the emotional dimensions of rural out-migration reveals an enduring narrative of place-based attachment, one that suggests expanding critical studies of home to include the natural environment.

2. The emotional geographies of rural migration over time

2.1. Homesickness and nostalgia in the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries

Homesickness was a common emotion among out-migrated Vermonters like Daniel Thompson, as it was for other nineteenth-century Americans who found themselves away from home. Indeed, Americans tended toward feelings of homesickness, despite the antebellum American propensity for movement and migration that was celebrated as evidence of ambition. As Matt (2011, 2007, 2005) has demonstrated, expressions of homesickness date to before the American Revolution and were common sentiments in letters to family back home. Homesickness could be both spatial and temporal, as Americans longed not only for people and places left behind but also for earlier times that would not return. And, importantly, homesickness could be environmental; a longing for landscape that has often gone unacknowledged in the literature (Mudgett, 2008).

Nineteenth-century Americans knew that homesickness was an illness. In extreme cases homesickness could lead to nostalgia, a medical condition with both psychological and physical symptoms. First documented in medical literature during the seventeenth century as a serious condition that could cause everything from poor appetite to death, by the nineteenth century nostalgia had lost some of its fatal associations but remained a condition for which there was no reliable cure (Hofer, 1934). Returning home was the only successful treatment for the disease. The first lengthy study of nostalgia linked the disease to the natural environment. Johannes Hofer's 1688 dissertation on nostalgia underscored the connection between physical manifestations of the disease and too frequent thoughts of the 'Fatherland' (Hofer, 1934). Derived from the Greek word *nostalgias* (which denoted a sense of 'suffering or grief' to 'return to the native land') the word nostalgia as Hofer defined it conveyed through its very sound 'the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one's native land' (Hofer, 1934, 382). Although Hofer did not explicitly comment on nostalgia for natural environments, the few case studies he offered dealt with residents of rural mountainous areas, such as a young student from Bern who became gravely ill while studying away from home and was almost instantly cured as soon as he, still in his sick bed, had begun the journey home.

Europeans and Americans concerned about the disease of nostalgia continued to note the link between cases of homesickness and patients' rural origins well into the nineteenth century, but by then both the causes and the most common manifestations of the disease were thought to be mostly psychological rather than physical (Dames, 2001; Austin, 2002; McKnight, 2003). Newer theories of nostalgia centered on the role of associative thinking, or the tendency of the mind to associate certain physical landmarks, sensations, or sounds with the idea of home. By the nineteenth century, others had begun to suggest that associative thinking could be controlled if the nostalgic patient could shut off unhealthy memories of home. Once recast as romance, nostalgia became the stuff of literature and the nostalgic patient an appealingly tragic figure (Boym, 2001; Dames, 2001; Austin, 2002; McKnight, 2003).

Homesickness remained a cause for concern in the nineteenth century, however, as evidenced by medical assessments of homesick soldiers during the Civil War (Clarke, 2007). As Union troops

² Patty Devereaux is a pseudonym. Her story and quotations come from the Vermont Roots Migration Survey, described in this paper.

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