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Meditations on the Meaning of Home: Where is Home? And Does it Matter?

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Plenary for the Forum on Education Abroad Conference
Boston Park Plaza Hotel
April 3, 2008

Eight months ago, in the middle of a beautiful Paris summer when Brian Whalen invited me to give this talk I suggested the title “Where is Home and Does it Matter? The Paradoxes of Global Identities.” This topic, global identities, stemmed from my interest in what I called in an article I wrote several years ago “the new global student.” By this, I meant the young person who has more in common with another young person across the world who speaks a different language and has a completely different history than he/she does, certainly with his or her grandparents but even with his/her own parents. I had been intrigued by the idea that young Japanese, Chinese, Australian, German, Basque or Hispanic –American students who wear the same jeans, listen to the same music, and eat the same food from the international food marts represented a heady new breed, one that Pico Iyer called “the global soul.” I had become quite enamored with that concept, captivated by my own students’ amazingly diverse experiences in terms of background, culture, travel and, of course, technological wizardry. In his book, Iyer used the airport as a symbol for this new identity because of the familiar shops, hotels, lounges, malls, food courts, laptops and cell phones that are a fixture in all major hubs. Since no one knows where anyone is coming from or going to, airports according to Iyer are emblematic of our “borderless world.”

I was also influenced by some of the lyrical arguments made by a number of social scientists and cultural studies theorists during the last decade or so regarding the increasing irrelevance of nation states. I resonated to Benedict Anderson’s definition of “imagined communities,” to Homi Bhabha’s celebration of the “in between,” of the “unhomely,” that is, the migratory, partial, borderline, scattered, indeterminate, displaced, interstitial beings who challenge traditional definitions of “national culture.” I embraced Salman Rushdie’s “Imaginary Homelands” and agreed with Amartya Sen’s caution against fixed national identities. And today I

continue to be sensitive to the eloquent analyses of what is increasingly described as our post-national, trans-cultural world, and to the celebration of our diverse new cosmopolitan personalities no longer dictated by essential national or linguistic definitions but characterized by a fluid, multiple, fast-paced choice of layered and hybrid identities.

Looking back, however, I am more critical of Iyer's concept. Never mind that most of the world does not even know what an international airport looks like. But, and to remain faithful to his emblematic site, I worry that some of these ideas may in fact lead only to what sociologist Dominique Wolton has called "airport cosmopolitanism."

Liberal political theorists have been reviving the traditions of tolerance, plurality and the emphasis on our shared humanity. Debates around the decline of the state, new concepts of the nation as a constructed, invented, imagined and performed entity, arguments about the transgression of established forms of boundaries, these constitute compelling arguments made by writers who come at them from different disciplines and do not always agree with each other's approaches or conclusions. Those who theorize the decline of the nation state and celebrate de-territorialization, however, tend to gravitate toward an alternative model: world citizenship. That is: "Allegiance not to a local community but to a worldwide community of human beings." Now this is a noble thought and indeed a necessary corrective to xenophobia and ethnic nationalism. But I am concerned that it is much too vague and too abstract a label, and that it may not in fact correspond to our most profound and dare I say it **unchanging** human needs, that is the need for individual stories and collective memories that constitute the idea of home. So while as utopias, I find these writings reassuring, in reality, I remain skeptical.

Yes, clearly, individuals move more freely across the globe—though we must be careful not to confuse the new nomads who take charters to exotic destinations with the African immigrants who end up on rafts on the coast of Lampedusa. And yes, displacement is an anguishing state of being, and because it characterizes so many of our populations today, it deserves to be theorized in more positive and hopeful ways. Yes, the emphasis on technology has completely redefined conventional communications. Yes, time and space are being greatly compressed. And yes, traditional allegiances are much more multi-layered and fluid --or at least we are more aware of their fluidity. No doubt about any of this. But I for one think that we should not eschew concepts such as "belonging" or "home" that are, I would like to suggest, as important and vital as ever, and that the more fashionable idea of "global identity" has not displaced by any measure.

Amin Maalouf was one of the first writers to argue that although we were living in a "post-national" era and were increasingly members of many shifting communities, it would be dangerous to overlook the ways that

in globalized times the need for identity reasserts itself, and that one should not discount this just because it doesn't fit within a fashionable set of theories. Maalouf was correctly concerned that seeking refuge in one single affiliation might be one of the more negative outcomes of the globalization movement, and that it would encourage intolerance, fundamentalism and tribalistic ideologies. More recently, the Nobel-prize winning economist, Amartya Sen has reiterated some of these same warnings. In his book on Identity and Violence he too advocates a plurality of affiliations. He too believes that one of the dangers of globalization is that it will not do away with but reinforce dangerous and violent identities--and of course he is most concerned with religious identity. He too decries the "illusion of singularity" as he warns against what he calls 'reactive identities.' But like Maalouf, he comes to the conclusion that in the end "culture matters." Sen acknowledges that just because our current self-definitions are increasingly vertical, we must not ignore the horizontal dimensions of our heritage.

The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah also makes a strong case for the rejection of tribalism and nationalism in favor of the wider embracing of a human community. His meditation on cosmopolitanism is a compelling one; yet he too warns that it would be a mistake to think that common interests outweigh differences because, as he acknowledges, values are deeply embedded in different ways of life. Appiah makes a case for "partial cosmopolitanism" or "rooted cosmopolitanism" – which initially may seem like a contradiction but offers a lucid attempt to find some equilibrium between the local and the global. He asks us to remember that 'as we struggle in the global village' of the contemporary world, "without a deeply felt connection to the local there will be no real obligation to the universal and vice versa."

I for one do not see a great deal of evidence that nation states are disappearing. Just because we wear the same brand of shoes, eat sushi and quesadillas from one part of the planet to the other, and listen to hip hop whether in the south of France or in the clubs of Tokyo does not mean that international cultural industries have replaced the importance of national contexts, historical affects, the influence of cultural habits and views, of linguistic attachments, of childhood identifications with people, places and words. The interpenetration of cultures does not mean there are no cultures. So while I agree that we have come a long way (though clearly not far enough if one is to judge by the grim situations around the world), though we have come a long way from the idea of "cultural purity," I do not think we have moved all that far from the notion of cultural **specificity**. I am convinced that place-based identities continue to be of immense significance and that this is the key to international education. In our so-called "borderless" world the focus on cross cultural understanding may in fact be more important than ever, even as we move (at least theoretically) away from this notion. The world may be more interdependent and interconnected but the differences in cultural environments pertain as much as ever, and all the methods of communication in the world do not mean that we are communicating any

better. Admittedly, the increasing complexities of individual cultures mean that it takes more time to understand and teach their realities; and in this respect, the educational challenge is more daunting than ever. But if “Global identities” means identification with all peoples and transcendence of all national boundaries, then it is not just an elitist notion but a fuzzy, diffuse and perhaps misguided one as well.

To begin with, being a global citizen is the prerogative of higher social classes and groups of greater affluence. We can analyze youth culture based on the proliferation of media such as film, television and popular music, the internet and other information and communication technologies in every day life. But the number of youth who live in abject poverty, fight in wars, are forced into slavery, are ill fed, ill treated and illiterate, must also serve as reminders that “theories of global youth culture that celebrate its urbanity and mediated qualities can be misleading and not applicable to the cultural experiences of huge segments of the world” (as Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner rightly point out). And at the risk of making egregious generalizations, I sometimes wonder whether a familiarity with the English language and with an American academic point of view is not what informs some of the discussions about post-nationalism. By this, I do not mean that scholars from numerous other countries and disciplines are not discussing the pros and cons of globalization, that they are not asking whether it leads to homogenization, convergence, uniformity or diversification, for example. These are, after all, the major questions of the early 21st century. But I wonder whether perhaps it is not easier today to claim a “global” identity as an American if we can travel, work, study in a world where many people now speak our language, wear clothes familiar to us, listen to our favorite music, watch our films, and order our fast food and our specialty lattes. This would explain why the concept of global identity may reassure those who are most familiar with these brands and symbols; and it may also comfort our students in the illusion that the world is more like them and so they need not agonize over messy and time-consuming enterprises such as learning languages or studying history, geography, politics, religion and art. In other words this may result in a regrettable mis-reading of the world.

Appiah writes that culture is not an artifact but whatever people make and invest with significance through the exercise of their human creativity (Cosmopolitanism, 112) For him, this significance is something produced through conventions, and so “interpreting culture in this sense requires knowledge of its social and historical context” (118). With this statement, I agree completely. And because I am speaking to faculty and administrators who are dedicated to the internationalization of American institutions and of-- primarily though not exclusively-- American students, I think will you probably agree as well.

Digging a well in Chad is not learning about “the social and historical context” of a foreign culture; nor is setting up a computer lab in Ecuador, or finding ways to control malaria in Niger. No matter how

extraordinarily useful these activities may be to the people desperately in need of such serious problem- fixing. My own students are engaged in multiple humanitarian commitments around the world and are putting their extraordinary scientific and engineering knowledge and talents to work for less privileged groups, and I am extremely proud of them. But I doubt that any of these initiatives engage them in the really hard work of cross-cultural understanding that will enable them to navigate meaningfully this increasingly fraught world. In fact it may even result in a certain complacency if after spending 3 weeks in India observing the country's extraordinary growth rate or in Germany working in English-speaking multinational corporations, they think that they understand the complexities of these countries. These "experiences" do add a valuable line on their cv, but sometimes they constitute little more than a gesture.

Some of my students, if asked the "where is home?" question will respond: "home is my computer," since it centralizes all of the information and the connections that they think one possibly needs to make. At the click of a finger you can get information on everything, everywhere, but this does not mean that they understand, assimilate, process, and interact successfully with other societies. The danger is that the quick fixes that tend to define American "can-do" ism will only lead to a sort of "wikipedia globalization."

Stressing global identity may therefore eschew the long and slow and frustrating and deep travel experience. In the valiant attempt to stress commonalities over differences, it does not address the ways of the world nor encourage the very hard work that it takes to begin to understand these ways.

In her essay in André Aciman's collection Letters of transit, the writer Eva Hoffman acknowledges that diasporism and Nomadism have a positive valence today in our post-modern world; but she warns that we may underestimate its human cost. Dislocation is not as glamorous as some would have us believe, she writes, for it is a matter of what she calls "an upheaval in the deep material of the self." She mistrusts the celebration of what she refers to as the 'Don Juans of experience'. The price we pay, she explains, is the dispersion of internal focus and of certain strengths that come from the gathering of experiences so that they add up to memories, from the accumulation of understanding, from placing ourselves squarely where we are and living in a framework shared by others." In other words, from our primordial moorings. Hoffman writes: "The transports of patriotism, narrowness of provincial perspectives and confinements of parochial tradition are not plausible solutions to the dilemmas of our time. And yet continual dislocation or dispersion is both facile and, in the long run, arid." I share her quest when she asks, "Can anything be rescued from the notion of home, or at-homeness, that is sufficient to our condition?" The French philosopher Simone Weil once wrote that "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul." I don't see, in our rapid and ever-changing world, that this need has changed significantly.

So yes, our sense of “home” may be more scattered today, but it is no less important. And understanding others’ sense of “home” is central to international education, whether in the classroom or in the target country. This means embracing somewhat renovated definitions of certain old-fashioned concepts such as attachment, tradition, history, culture, geography. And, of course, language: language not as communication but as identity. We are shaped by language. Language constitutes our representations of the world. “Global” English may respond to the need of economics, but not to the expression of cultural roots. Nor to a true understanding of the other’s world which is embedded in that very language. Just because we tend to agree that we have more than one fixed identity does not free us from representations, childhood memories, references, habits, values, all of which act as a compass regardless of our new-found mobility and adaptability. Every national culture is geographically situated, historically contextualized, socially localized, expressed in a given language and is a factor of identification both for individuals and collectivities. It includes religious customs, collective memories, artistic manifestations, linguistic practices, beliefs concerning the body, the emotions, health, illness, love and death, and it takes a great deal of time to understand these values and the people who hold them. Home and roots are not just consumer choices for most people in the world, and this, I think, is the most important lesson we can transmit to the young people we teach and advise.

Contemporary films and novels tell us these truths. They tell us that regardless of the Babel-esque nature of our current world, at least for a small elite, being “trans-national” does not free us from national contexts. I am thinking, for example, of the Turks and Germans who go back and forth between “porous” borders in Fatih Akin’s films, who do not try to transcend but to bridge cultural specificities. Or of the film *Babel* which has been lauded for its “global” qualities because we see a Japanese gun ending up in the hands of an Algerian youngster who shoots an American tourist and we are to be asked to interpret this sequence as a sign of our increasing interconnectedness. Well, It may signal the mobility of weapons, but I don’t think it leads to any real connection between these three very different national cultures. Much more poignant, in my opinion, is the frightening dilemma faced by the Mexican-American immigrant woman who takes care of the California couple’s kids and who is stuck in the no man’s land (literally) between two nations, two ethnic pulls, two languages, two ways of seeing the world, two allegiances, all of which she tragically tries and fails to reconcile.

In the *Storyteller’s Daughter*, the young writer Saira Shah quotes her father’s metaphor as a vivid example of what links generations born in a second country to the parents born in the first: From him she has inherited stories of Afghanistan and she is anxious to go to this country, which she has never seen. But the political situation makes this impossible. So the father tells his daughter: “I’ve given you stories to replace a

community. They are your community.” To her question: “But surely stories can’t replace experience?” he points to a packet of dehydrated onion: “Stories are like these onions—dried experience. They aren’t the original experience but they are more than nothing at all. You think about a story, you turn it over in your mind, and it becomes something else.” He adds hot water to the onion. “It’s not fresh onion—fresh experience—but it is something that can help you to recognize experience when you come across it. Experiences follow patterns, which repeat themselves over and over again. In our tradition, stories can help you recognize the shape of an experience, to make sense of and to deal with it.”

This is familiar territory for readers of Maxine Hong-Kingston’s classic memoir The Woman Warrior, which captures the joys and perils of the inter-generational transmission of memories and the (re)creation of an imaginary homeland. Hong Kingston fashions a bicultural identity from fragments of truth, stories, myths, dreams, fairy tales, ghost stories. In sorting out this abundance of often contradictory, often frightening narrations, none of which can ever really be verified, Maxine must accept her ancestral connections while claiming her present life as an independent young Chinese-American woman living in California. It is from this hybrid consciousness, through the interpretation of her mother’s stories and her father’s silences, that she attempts to re-create a Chinese homeland and an ancestral past. Implicit in her very rich text are the questions so often asked by members of the first generations, regardless of what countries they live in: do you tell your stories or do you try to forget the past so that your children will encounter no obstacle on their way to becoming fully assimilated into a new culture? Do you raise them in your own mother tongue, or bilingual, or in the language of the host culture exclusively? How to reconcile the old and the new, the legacies and the present, how to resolve the double binds, discover the spaces within two distinct cultural identities, between transmitted heritage and lived reality, between the pull of inherited memories and the desire for a greater engagement with the society in which you live?

This generational question concerning inherited memories is posed acutely in the works of young writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake or Lan Samantha Chang’s Hunger. They show us that whether parents transmit their memories or communicate them only through their silence and self-censorship, “hunger” for homes of the past make returns inexorable. Parents will never stop transmitting stories that will capture the imagination of their more “globalized” children. Thus one cannot grapple with the realities of other cultures, or with answers to questions such as “what is Frenchness, German-ness, Britishness?” without the generational stories of Algerians, Turks or Pakistanis, to name but a few examples. This is where the hard educational work needs to be done, whether in the classroom or the host country.

So... Despite the post-modern emphasis on fragmentation, despite the refusal of binary oppositions, the celebration of diversity and of the “more-than-one-ness;” despite the intellectual conviction that attempting to find wholeness in our lives is a somewhat obsolete ideal that narrows and limits; us despite this fashionable discourse, contemporary world literature, art, and film tell us otherwise; they tell us that the search for coherence and the hunger for home remain strong human characteristics and that these are still based in national realities. And that understanding the self is a sine qua non to understanding the other. In the end, we all need individual stories; we are all hungry for personal narratives no matter how often they are filled with contradictions, paradoxes and ambivalences.

This is why I am a believer in teaching fiction, but also in teaching language and history, in teaching the otherness of values that are steeped in centuries of past and tradition (even if these are modified by contemporary transformations). And I do not consider that advocating universal principles is incompatible with the focus on specific social histories. I believe in teaching the comparative otherness of values not as divisive strategy but as a comprehensive one. For this reason, I do not think that the study of cross-cultural differences is obsolete by any means, even if at times it may appear somewhat less glamorous, and definitely harder to undertake, than the celebration of global identities and of cosmopolitan ideals.

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