Being Across Homes

by Olga Hubard — 2011

**Background/Context:** This essay is a part of a special issue that emerges from a year-long faculty seminar at Teachers College, Columbia University. The seminar’s purpose has been to examine in fresh terms the nexus of globalization, education, and citizenship. Participants come from diverse fields of research and practice, among them art education, comparative education, curriculum and teaching, language studies, philosophy of education, social studies, and technology. They bring to the table different scholarly frameworks drawn from the social sciences and humanities. They accepted invitations to participate because of their respective research interests, all of which touch on education in a globalized world. They were also intrigued by an all-too-rare opportunity to study in seminar conditions with colleagues from different fields, with whom they might otherwise never interact given the harried conditions of university life today. Participants found the seminar generative in terms of ideas about globalization, education, and citizenship. Participants also appreciated what, for them, became a novel and rich occasion for professional and personal growth.

**Purpose:** My inquiry is driven by the following questions: How is our sense of self influenced by the place where we live? And what happens when our lives take place in two different homes, two cultures?

**Research Design:** I explore the guiding questions through the unique perspectives of three individuals whose lives straddle Mexico City and New York City. I share these perspectives as much for the ideas they embody as for the ponderings they provoke. Thus, my reflections, often in the form of questions, are interwoven into the three accounts.

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** The three accounts and their juxtapositions make evident how the experience of being across cultures can be fraught with opposing experiences, with tensions and contradictions that are, in too many cases, unresolvable. The challenge, then, is not to try to eliminate the tension altogether, but to find ways to become more at home in a world of ambiguity and confusion.

Inside a closet in my New York City apartment is a small painting I made years ago. It looks unlike anything else I have ever painted. Thematically, it is also far from my usual work. Perhaps because of its oddness, I have never shown this piece. I have never tried to sell it, never thought of giving it away. And for some reason, I have resisted putting it away in a taped box, as I have done with so many old paintings.

I like visiting this painting every now and then. Today, I focus on the bottom, right corner, where fragments of two maps painted with fine, white lines are layered on one another. The first map shows the streets that surround one of my New York City apartments, the one I moved into when I finally made enough money to rent my own tiny space—no roommates—in a neighborhood I loved. The second map is of the streets that surround the Mexico City house where I grew up, the one I moved into at age 3 along with my mother, father, and little sister, and left 19 years later when I graduated from college. Right above the maps is the most intense part of the painting: a childlike, red house motif, the symbol for home.

This painting was one of those that “just happened.” I did not plan what to paint or how to paint it; the image simply formed as I laid paint on wood. Though I’m not quite sure why I made it at the time, today this painting invites me to contemplate what it is like to have these two places, New York and Mexico City, as home.

Comparing life across homes seems to happen spontaneously to those of us who leave one place to go live in another. In a sense, then, I have been reflecting on what it is like to dwell in two different homes, two cultures, since I moved to New York City to pursue graduate studies in art in 1990.

My ponderings on the two-home experience became more deliberate recently when, in our faculty seminar meeting on November 5, 2009, I heard myself say, “I am a woman differently here than I am in Mexico.” This statement stayed with me for several days. What, exactly, did I mean? How is it that I am a woman—or anything else—differently in New York and my Mexican world?
Unable to articulate answers to my own questions, I began to speak—casually, at first—to people in my life: close friends and family who are part of my daily living and who share my two homes, Mexico and New York. Could listening to their experiences of being across cultures help me make sense of my own?

I sought one person's perspective as we strolled the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art. “Do you feel the way you are changes in Mexico and New York?” I asked. I posed the same question to someone else over the phone, as I walked on the street on my way to an appointment. I conversed with a third person sitting outdoors, on a lovely day, north of New York City. Yet another individual shared her perspective, unsolicited, when I told her of my inquiry during a visit to her apartment. Familiar life themes run through my friends’ accounts: gender roles, class interactions, experiences of belonging, the awareness that distance can breed.

In this essay, I share the content of some of these conversations. Interwoven are my reflections on what I heard, often in the form of questions. In the spirit of our faculty seminar and consistent with the definition of the essay (a trial of ideas, as David Hansen reminded us), my reflections represent incomplete thinking and wondering in action, indeed an “ongoing, enacted, and visible inquiry,” and by no means “a report on thinking that has been completed.”

Working in the realm of “half-knowledge,” to quote Keats, has been both difficult and refreshing. The difficulties have been in resisting my impulse to rush toward understanding that feels solid, thorough, but which in fact is chimerical, unmoored. In the end, “the patience to dwell, at least for a time, with ‘half-knowledge’” that Keats advocated has allowed me to articulate questions that are, in my humble view, worthy of reflection. In other words, I share my friends’ accounts as much for the ideas these embody as for the ponderings these accounts provoke.

Let me declare now (not without some self-consciousness) that my Mexican experience, and that of my friends and family, is colored by our membership in the upper-middle class of Mexico City. The Mexico my friends refer to is therefore not necessarily representative of the Mexico that most Mexicans inhabit. Nor is our border crossing. Unlike that of countless Mexicans in the United States, our travels south are frequent and facilitated by the privilege of U.S. visas and “green cards.”

My conversations have generated scores of material in the form of notes and transcriptions. After some back and forth on what to share in this essay and how to do it, I have decided to present the perspective of only three people as completely as possible. Though this decision implies the exclusion of some compelling experiences and points of view, it also allows me to honor the integrity and complexity of individuals' accounts with their tensions, ambiguities, and layers of interconnected themes.

Like all conversations, those I present here have been coconstructed by both interlocutors. Even though I asked only a few questions—just one, in some cases—and listened, mostly, as my friends spoke, there is no doubt that my relationship to each person, our previous conversations, my body language, and my positionality as a university professor are some of the factors that influenced the words I heard. But to qualify these perspectives as coconstructed does not obliterate their connection to lived experience or their value as springboards for reflection.

These exchanges between Mexicans took place in our native language, Spanish. Though we all speak fluent English, not communicating in our native tongue would have felt unnatural. The quotes I share in this essay are thus mediated in one more way, as I have translated them from Spanish to English, inevitably making decisions about wording, phrasing, and rhythm. I have since shared my translations with each interlocutor and ensured they all feel their sentiments are represented well.

MARISOL

Marisol (pseudonym), an active woman in her mid-50s, came to New York 6 years ago to accompany her husband, who was offered an attractive professional opportunity. During these years, Marisol has visited Mexico with great regularity.

She opened our conversation with a bold statement: “Here, in New York, I’m me: Marisol Oliveros Martinez. In Mexico, I’m the wife of, the mother of, the daughter of. "

What a stark contrast between two ways of being. One, Marisol, the individual, represented by the complete name that has accompanied her since birth. The other, Marisol, a woman defined in relation to the familial roles—wife, mother, daughter—she has adopted throughout her life. As she utters the phrases “wife of,” “mother of,” Marisol speaks of more than roles, however. She alludes to the particular individuals who frame her life, her people.

She continued:
In Mexico, you’re tied to all these social structures. You’re always a part of something larger. You belong to certain circles. They shape how you dress, how you keep your home, how you speak. You are cautious. Everyone knows what goes on.

Being part of something larger: an experience often described as the height of spirituality. But this is not what Marisol has in mind. She is alluding to social structures laden with norms for being. I note that, as she describes how she enacts some of these norms, Marisol’s choice of words point to external manifestations of selfhood: how you dress, how you keep your home, how you speak. Her words also suggest networks of people who communicate regularly about the happenings within the circle—“everyone knows what goes on.” For reasons that are not quite clear, Marisol feels participation in these social structures demands caution. What might be the consequence of letting down one’s guard, of not performing according to norm—and of “everyone” knowing it?

Marisol talked of other ways in which participation in the social structures of Mexico has impinged on her sense of self:

Because you are always part of a larger structure there, I used to be terrified of solitude. I remember when my kids grew up and didn’t want to hang around with me on weekends anymore. Fridays would arrive, and I would panic. I would call friends desperately, try to make whatever plan I could. And the thing is, I’m not particularly social by nature, but I just had such a fear of being alone.

We glean from these words an existence that entailed the ongoing physical company of others: parents, siblings, neighbors, eventually her own family. Immersed in this sort of communal life, Marisol developed a fear of solitude. When she was an adult, this fear led to a paradox in her way of being: in spite of not feeling like a naturally social being, she desperately sought social situations. It is in relation to solitude that I began to learn how Marisol feels life in her second home, New York, has influenced her sense of self:

During these years in New York, I’ve learned to be with myself. I go out to lunch by myself, walk around, or just nestle in my apartment for a couple of days to read or write or whatever. I have become independent.

What is it that has helped Marisol become comfortable with solitude? What has allowed her—or pushed her, perhaps—to become comfortable with this way of being? Is it the distance from the social structures that framed her prior life? Is it the experience of living someplace new? Or is there something about the dynamics of New York City? A combination of all of the above, I suspect. Marisol gave us some specifics:

In Mexico, you depend on your husband to do all sorts of things. You depend on the chauffeur to be driven places. You’re reminded: “You can’t go alone, it’s not safe.” Here, you jump on the subway and just go wherever. I solve problems, deal with issues, make things happen on my own.

The relative safety and ease of transportation in New York City have something to do with promoting a sense of independence in Marisol, then. I empathize, as I have had parallel experiences of mobility, efficacy, and independence in safe cities with competent transportation systems. Still, I can’t help but pause when I think of Marisol’s dependence on men in Mexico—her husband, her chauffeur. Is this dependence based on safety concerns, or are there other dynamics at play—traditional gender roles of protector and protected, or an upper-middle-class reliance on service for comfort and status, for example?

As another interlocutor put it:

A [male] friend was complaining of how, even though his girlfriend has her own car, whenever they go out together in Mexico City, he has to follow her all the way across the City until she gets home. The issue is safety, supposedly. But as he told me, “If a couple of thugs with guns came and stopped her car, what would I be able to do? Nothing. But I have to follow her nevertheless, because that’s how it is; it’s what one does.”

It’s what one does. I suspect that, next to safety and effective transportation, the distance from familiar gender and class power structures—structures that dictate “what one does”—has also helped Marisol find a sense of independence while living abroad.

Later in our conversation, Marisol shared an example of “doing what one does” as a mother in Mexico:

I am the mother so I am there to receive. The family, friends, other people come and visit. Everything has to be just right, the table set in a particular way. I have to supervise the maids, the chauffeur, attend to people coming
and going. Managing the house in Mexico—you don’t know how stressful I find it.

She compared this experience to the sort of homemaking she does in her New York life:

It’s not that I don’t like making a home, I love it. But I like to do it freely, in my own way, as I do it here. I like to be casual, make you a sandwich standing together in the kitchen, as I am doing now.

I envision the material luxuries of Marisol’s life in Mexico. I then listen to her description of her homemaking in New York. I wonder, when we talk of ways of being, what constitutes luxury? A showpiece house? Service staff? The freedom to do things freely, our way? When we are fortunate enough to have the option, which luxuries do we choose and why? And what do we give up with each choice?

With some more urgency, I also wonder: When what one does is what one has always done—for generations, even—how easy is it to realize that these doings might be preventing valuable opportunities for being and becoming? And, when is the promise of new ways of being compelling enough that one might stop doing what one has always done?

Toward the end of our conversation, as if recapping her earlier comments, Marisol shared, “I think I had been losing myself in Mexico. In New York, I’ve been able to recover it.” She then added, “The flipside is, life is lonely here [in New York].”

I am struck by the drama in her brief statement. Life in one home contributes to the loss of self. Life in another home contributes to its recovery. But, as with everything else, it’s not black or white: The gift of self-recovery comes with the pain of loneliness. And at this point, Marisol is not talking of being physically alone—but of a deeper feeling of isolation, of being far from the people she loves, her people. She articulated a predicament: “It’s hard for me to think of going back and giving up my independence. But my children are in Mexico, and I adore them and want to be with them.”

Independence or being with her loved ones. I can’t help but wonder if this is necessarily an either/or situation. I left our conversation with an invitation to reflect—an invitation that Marisol will perhaps want to join:

What happens when we return to our old home, having discovered a new, more constructive way of being elsewhere? How likely—how feasible—is it that we will revert to our old way of being? How likely—how feasible—that we can be part of the old structures with a transformed sense of self? Can we learn to be differently, more freely, more “our way,” within our old structures—even when these structures scream caution to those who don’t conform? Or do new ways of being necessitate new kinds of structures? Can individuals with a refreshed sense of self contribute to structural change? If so, what kind of work does this transformation entail?

How else might we make sense of social structures that restrict who we can be while being charged with the power of shared history and love?

RAÚL

Raúl (pseudonym) is a man in his 30s who came to New York 8 years ago to pursue a graduate education. Upon graduating, Raúl decided to remain in New York City. He visits Mexico once or twice a year.

Raúl told me:

In Mexico, there is a larger need to belong or fit in, more desire to be accepted and recognized within the group. But the concept of belonging gets confused with a sort of mimesis, with homogenization, with not embracing your individuality, not being your own self. The idea of belonging is, in a way, synonymous with not breaking out of the box. It is a kind of belonging that is laden with pressure.

Raúl’s opening comments echo Marisol’s reflections: the norms for being, the sacrifice of individuality, the pressure to comply. He shared how, as a man, he experiences some of these norms: “In Mexico, all men pay the bill; they all open the door. And money. Money is more tied to you as a man in Mexico. It’s about you being capable of supporting a family.”

Also like Marisol, Raúl alludes to a tight-knit, highly communicative network of people, poised to judge those who don’t conform. Talking of dating situations, he said:

Whatever happens, the world will know. Her friends, your friends—and in all likelihood her friends and your
friends will know each other—they will all talk. It's very restricting. Your role as a man has to be accomplished according to the rules; otherwise, you are called a jerk.

In New York, away from these norms, Raúl finds more freedom for being. To illustrate, he referred to interactions around dating once more: “Here, nothing is written. Things [such as gender roles] are more diluted. You have a date, and if it works, fine, if it doesn’t, fine. You can be freer.”

Having felt the pressure to be the provider, he also appreciated that “in New York, it’s less obvious how financially successful you are, who has money and who doesn’t. Here, most of us live in small spaces; most of us take the subway.”

This, in contrast to Mexico, where address, type of home, and car model are a few of many immediate indicators of financial status.

Raúl shared: “In Mexico, I often feel out of place.” He illustrated with an anecdote:

On a recent trip there, I was at a luncheon with all these people from my past. I felt really out of place because I just don’t fit into the man paradigm; I’m not a successful, married businessman. People would ask me, “How are you? Are you still with your music?” And there was this demeaning tone to the question, a suggestion that being a musician may be something you do in college but not a respectable path for a grown man. So I started to feel very bad, very inadequate. Because I started to measure myself against these external standards, against this paradigm that limits the possibilities of who one can be.

By contrast to Marisol, who talked of performing the expected roles in Mexico, Raúl is aware that he does not embody the social expectations for an adult Mexican man of his class. He is not a successful businessman but a musician trying to build a career, and unlike most Mexican men his age, he is not married. The consequence of not complying is feeling out of place, demeaned, inadequate.

Raúl does not fully blame Mexican social structures for his feelings of inadequacy, however. He accepts some responsibility as he acknowledges that it was he who “started to measure himself” against external standards. It appears that, in a momentary lapse, he saw himself in the way others saw him and forgot what he already knew: that the paradigm against which he was being measured is one “that limits the possibilities of who one can be.” I also note Raúl’s choice of words as he qualifies the standards as external. I wonder, would he have been able to regard these standards as external had he never left his home country? Would he have been aware of their limitations had he not experienced other possibilities for being?

Raúl’s anecdote raises other questions: What are the forces that can lead us to put our strong-held beliefs aside—even if for a moment—and to judge ourselves (and others) based on value systems that we find troubling? Why is it particularly easy to lapse into acting—being—according to value systems that are unacceptable to us when these are the systems we were born and raised in? Perhaps the more generative question is, what kind of effort might be involved in remaining true to our values and beliefs when rejection from our group is at stake?

Raúl gives us some cues. As he recognizes uncomfortable emotions, acknowledges the internalization of external standards, and regains awareness of the limitations of these standards, he is already engaged in defying the pull of the limiting familiar.

Thinking of the familiar, I become cautious of representing the stifling social world that Raúl and Marisol have described—a world of tight paradigms for being, obvious signs of status, harsh judgment for those who don’t conform—as uniquely Mexican. In fact, it is not hard to think of similar environments in places across the world, including New York City.

Raúl agrees that restrictive social environments exist across places and cultures. Yet, for him, the character of a given place can nevertheless offer more or less possibilities for being: “In New York, it’s easier for me to embrace myself as a musician. There are more people who share my way of life and more tolerance of different life choices. People’s uniqueness and differences are accepted more easily.”

If diversity and possibilities for being are inextricably linked, what sort of actions can help us move from homogeneity toward diversity? And is such a shift desirable in every instance? When we resist diversity, what is it that makes us want to hold on to paradigms for being—for us and others—as we know them?

As we have seen, the diversity of New York City works for Raúl. He stressed: “In short, I feel much, much happier with
who I can be as a man in New York.” An unapologetic musician with a day job. A man who interacts with women beyond traditional gender roles. A person who is not read first in relation to his financial status. Someone who can feel accepted, at ease with who he is.

One might infer, then, that Raúl would have no problem severing his Mexican ties and continuing to craft a life—a self—exclusively within the freedom of his New York home. Not so. When I probe, he speaks of a deep sense of connection with his friends in Mexico, whom he described as not quite part of the “paradigm world”:

They are immersed, but they are not. They actually recognize the limitations of the social mold, which puts them on a different level. I can relate with them better. It’s more that so many people in their lives live in the paradigm than they themselves live in it.

If Raúl’s friends “recognize the limitations of the social mold” even as they are surrounded by it, if they are in it but not in it, I wonder, what sort of distance is necessary to free oneself from the trappings of a stifling society? How can we find generative spaces for being and becoming even as we are surrounded by paradigms that we find restrictive? And is a model for being that is limiting for some necessarily limiting for all?

But back to Raúl and his friends:

With my closest friends, there is no problem. They know where I come from and where I am going, and they are flexible. We know our mutual processes. After all, we were doing music together back then. It is with the group beyond that I struggle.

Two things strike me. One, how the honest sharing of life processes, of life stories, can help people find connections and embrace difference—antidotes against quick judgment and dismissal. And two, how powerful shared creative spaces can be for facilitating human relationships.

Musing about friendship took Raúl back to the idea of belonging:

There is another type of belonging, one of the heart. In truth, what I described earlier [being accepted because you comply with a model for being] is not really belonging. Belonging is being with people who accept you for who you are. You accept yourself as a person and you feel accepted in a group that accepts you as you are. In the other version of belonging, you don’t arrive at this point. You seek to be part of something before discovering what you want and who you are, before accepting yourself as an individual different from the others.

He shared:

I really belong with my family (who are in Mexico and in New York), with my friends (who are in Mexico and in New York), with the people who have surrounded me with my music (in Mexico, in New York, in other parts of the world).

The sites for belonging Raúl describes are worlds pregnant with possibilities for individual and collective being. In his case, these are not geographical homes, but homes created through meaningful interactions with others, wherever these others might be.

To end our conversation, Raúl talked about belonging, of being at home, in yet another way—this time in relation to creative endeavors:

But there’s a larger sense I sometimes have of belonging in the world. It’s curious; it’s when I’m alone, doing what I love. My music, for example. One thinks that belonging entails having people around you. But when I do this stuff, the music, it feels like everything finally makes sense. This sense of belonging is merged with the feeling that your existence makes sense in this world. That there’s a reason for being. That you are part of a universe plan or something like that.

JACINTA

Jacinta (pseudonym), a woman in her 40s, came to New York as a young adult, when she married a Mexican man whose education and career had led to a life abroad. Jacinta and her husband have formed their family in New York City and visit Mexico at least once a year. Jacinta observed, “I am very different in Mexico than I am here. Mexico is my country, there’s an immediate connection. That’s where I am from, where I belong, it is my people.”
Having established Mexico as her people, the place to which she belongs, Jacinta stated:

In Mexico, I understand people’s signals and people understand mine so my public self is very different there. For example, if I walk into a social gathering, I immediately know who the snobbish people are, who I can have a good laugh with, etcetera. I locate the people I might want to spend time with and gravitate toward them.

In this paragraph, we see a woman who does more than read people’s signals. Jacinta’s words hint at her awareness that different groups can animate her in particular ways. This, along with her ability to “read people’s signals,” equips her to select company based on how she prefers to be.

To help me understand how she is different in New York, Jacinta drew upon her interactions in the circle surrounding her children’s private school. She explained that it is primarily in this context that she lives the social dynamics of her second home:

Even though I have lived here for many years, I don’t read people that well here. I find things very strange. I get to a school event, I look around, I see how people are grouped together and interacting, and it’s hard for me to assess where I might feel most comfortable.

How disorienting this must be for a woman used to the easy identification of environments where she can feel at ease and have “a good laugh.” I note that she has spent 18 years here. How long can it take to learn a new social system? What can facilitate this learning? Perhaps it would help if we asked, what experiences acculturate the young into particular ways of being, which often accompany them for their lifetime? For example, how has Jacinta developed such fluidity reading people’s signals in Mexico?

A lack of shared experiences and traditions, Jacinta believes, is one cause of her difficulties reading people in New York. She observed:

One thing that binds adults here, I have learned, is the university they went to: those that went to Brown, those that went to Harvard . . . And the whole experience of college, of leaving home, of living in the dorm is so very different from ours. (Mexico City’s middle- and upper-class youth generally attend college in their city and often live with their parents throughout their higher education—if not until marriage.)

When life experiences and customs are shared, however, “you just know how to be with others right away, depending on the signals you get. You can start making connections immediately. You soon discover people you both know or other things you share.”

It is as if Jacinta is describing a platform that allows her to dive readily into interpersonal relationships. I know I have experienced the ease for relating such platforms facilitates. Still I wonder, when does a shared sociocultural platform lead to predictable, superficial encounters? And when can a lack of shared history promote relationships that are deeper, more real?

Jacinta illustrated other ways in which she doesn’t “read people well” in New York:

Some mother in my kids’ school will call me to invite one of my girls to a birthday party. She will be super friendly on the phone, we’ll have a good chat about the kids or school issues or whatnot, and I’ll assume we’re building a friendship. But then I run into her the following day, and she doesn’t say hello. It’s puzzling. And then I might still get a lovely, personal thank-you card from her. These demonstrations of interest are part of the social protocol here, I’ve discovered, not signs of friendships being built.

Jacinta expresses puzzlement at not understanding protocols for relating and frustration at assuming emerging friendships when there is no such thing. This sort of frustration does not color her interactions in Mexico, however. In her culture of origin, the meaning of actions and gestures—or the lack of them—is intelligible to her. She shared, for example, that “in Mexico, you may never get a thank-you note, but you know your friend is grateful all the same.”

As I listen to Jacinta’s account of being like fish in water, so to speak, in Mexico, I recall Raúl’s feelings of inadequacy and of Marisol’s sense of identity loss. By contrast, Jacinta, seems empowered, undisturbed by the restraints the others found in the same society. Could this be the result of her ability to select acquaintances, to gravitate toward more open groups—groups that “are in the paradigm, but not,” to quote Raúl? Is it that, being a wife and mother, she does not face rejection for perceived gender inadequacies, like Raúl does? Could it also be that, having built her family in New York and
not Mexico, she has evaded the daily pressure to comply with social expectations, which can lead to identity loss? There is also the fact that she is the family’s main breadwinner, an unusual role for a Mexican woman from her class. Has this responsibility helped Jacinta maintain a sense of independence? Whatever the reason, Jacinta cherishes the “immediate connection” she experiences in her home country and the sort of relating, of being, that that this connection makes possible.

This does not mean that her social experience in New York is necessarily negative. Jacinta stressed:

It’s not that there aren’t lovely people, interesting people here. Everyone is very polite and cordial. But it just doesn’t come naturally for me to start jabbering away in the way I would in Mexico; I’m certainly shyer here. I interact just fine, but I generally know what we are going to talk about beforehand: “What plans do you have for the summer?” I find most conversations are predictable.

Is this predictability related to Jacinta’s cultural distance from the New York group? Or is it a reflection of “what one does” in the social network in which she has landed—another upper-middle class, with its own set of norms for being and interacting? I notice that mentions of the freedom to be that Raúl and Marisol find in New York are absent from Jacinta’s account. Could this be a function of the circle that frames her social experience in New York? As mentioned earlier, it seems true that any cultural setting can constrict as much as it might unfetter individual initiative.

Having learned that Jacinta is shyer, less chatty in her New York interactions, I asked her if she feels her Mexican public persona is more congruent with who she is inside. “It’s not that I’m more me in Mexico or that I’m incongruent here,” she said. “You just learn to adjust; you express different aspects of yourself.”

I recall Marisol’s conundrum of being: Mexican wife/mother figure or New York independent woman. Jacinta speaks of adjusting, of expressing different aspects of herself. Her language makes the shifts of being feel less drastic. I wonder, when do distinct environments do more than ask us to show ourselves differently? When do they also challenge us to develop, to become, in unique ways?

I also ask, how might embracing the ways of being that our different homes bring forth influence our overall sense of self? (Is there an overall sense of self?) When and how do these home-specific ways of being start crossing boundaries with us? When and how might they enhance, complement, expand each other? Can being across homes—or rather, our awareness of being across homes—help us become more than we might in any single home? And what might it mean to “become more”? More flexible? More adaptable? More capable of accepting change, uncertainty? More tolerant? More understanding? More capable of empathy?

Jacinta continued to talk about reading people’s signals and of how these readings orient her interactions—including those beyond her social group:

In Mexico, once you learn where people went to school, where they live, once you talk with them for a little bit, you start placing them; you understand how they fit into the social fabric. And we all read others this way. It happens automatically, unconsciously. So, people with a certain status tend to get special treatment from others:

“Oh, this is so-and-so . . .”

The talk of reading people in terms of social position makes me uneasy. Yet, I know that it is all too real and that I, like Jacinta, do this sort of reading more readily in my original culture. But Jacinta’s point is that, even as these hard-to-escape readings reinforce problematic power structures, the instinctive understanding of “how things work” can also facilitate relationships. She explained:

Take the lady from Gigante [a Mexican grocery store]. You can become quite close with her. You know how to interact with each other, how far to go. You chat regularly and share aspects of life. You may not go have lunch together, but you still develop an authentic kind of closeness.

I see what Jacinta means. I can relate to the comfort of understanding accepted paradigms for relating and of interacting with ease within them. I have experienced the sort of closeness that she describes. I have also known the sense of isolation that comes with not knowing how to connect, the anxiety of not understanding what kinds of relational approaches are deemed appropriate in a given situation.

Still, I am uneasy. Jacinta’s ruminations on domestic service help me articulate my unease. She said, “One thing I like better in New York is how people treat domestic employees. In Mexico, I feel very uncomfortable with how we treat maids; I always have.” Once she has asserted her feelings about power relations across her two homes, Jacinta offered an
example:

Think of the [American] woman who was babysitting the little boy in yesterday’s party [in New York]. If we had been in Mexico, she would have been in her uniform, she would have never been introduced to the guests, let alone sit at our tables. Here, she was clearly working, but she was treated like a guest as well. We were all introduced to her, she joined in our conversations; she was one more human being who happened to be taking care of Andres during that time, not someone who is simply seen as different.

I listen to Jacinta’s accurate description of the disturbing treatment of Mexican nannies. I then mull over her example of the lady from Gigante. I wonder, when do relationship paradigms that tell us how far to go promote life sharing and closeness? When do they lead to—justify—oppressive or exploitative interactions? How do these modes of relating—life sharing, closeness; oppression, exploitation—coexist? And when do feelings of closeness help us justify acts of exploitation?

I also wonder, what sort of distance, awareness, is necessary to become conscious of the unjust social orders we have always lived—participated—in? What sort of distance—and what sort of involvement—is needed to begin to imagine and construct a more just, a more humane, social order? How can we “become more” in this context: more mindful, more engaged, more generous?

* 

Until fairly recently, the prospect of writing up the accounts of Marisol, Raúl, and Jacinta was weighed down by a nagging and somewhat discouraging question. Why would I want to talk about issues that have been addressed countless times effectively, impressively, movingly, in domains ranging from the social sciences to literature, from philosophy to film, from psychology to visual art? Why talk, once again, about the experience of cross-cultural belonging and becoming? Why bother generating yet another piece that refers to cultural norms, to gender expectations, to class interactions? An e-mail from David Hansen helped me come to terms with my quandary. He wrote:

One distinction I find myself playing with is the difference between a problem and a predicament; a problem can (in principle) be solved and disappear; a predicament can only be handled in better or worse ways, but never solved or eliminated.

David referred to “the numerous ways of trying to dwell in our often confusing and often promising world,” and wrote of the human need to engage with predicaments, or “existential questions” in our own terms (D. Hansen, personal communication, May 17, 2010).

If the work represented on this pages—the sharing of and reflection on individuals’ accounts—is part of my way to come to terms with an existential question, then what about my potential readers?

I feed my hope that this is not an entirely selfish endeavor when I think that, even when human situations are as numerous as they are unique, there are also parallels of human experience across time and culture. We know that insights into other people’s lived experiences and subjectivities can provoke healthy reflection about our own life—my hope for the possible significance of this work is also rooted on this fact. I cling, in addition, to the notion of the predicament, of an existential issue that calls for revisitation—from different angles, through different perspectives. With this notion in mind, I gain optimism from any impetus that potential readers might have to revisit what it can mean to be across homes and across cultures.

The issue of being and becoming across homes feels timely in today’s world. Global networks of trade, transportation, and communication have brought different cultures closer than ever, and have generated new cultures within, or next to, existing ones. Though I have written of the sort of culture crossing that entails traversing national boundaries, I would like to believe that some of the tensions, confusions, ambiguities, and possibilities articulated in this essay will also feel relevant to people who have come to live across cultures within the same nation, the same state, or even the same village.

As an educator working in this global world, with its increasingly diverse societies, what do I take from my engagement with Jacinta, Raúl, and Marisol? As before, my reflection is not in the form of conclusions but questions. I ask myself:

- What kinds of learning spaces do I help shape? What kinds of norms for being do I model and reinforce in my teaching? How open am I to various possibilities for being and becoming?
- How might I gain awareness of how my “true, tested, and trusted” ways might limit who students can become?
How do I embrace the ways of being learners bring from their other worlds? How can I tap into our diversity to help open, for learners including myself, inroads into previously unknown ways of acting, thinking, feeling, relating?

- How do I support learners as they navigate social systems that are new to them?
- How can I create flexible spaces for being and becoming in an educational milieu with increasing emphasis on standardization?
- How can I help learners gain agency in their own becoming—or recognize when and how this may already be happening?
- How do I help create shared experiential platforms that facilitate deeper, more satisfying human relationships?
- How can I work toward learning communities where each individual, with his or her unique way of being, feels entitled to full participation? How can I help students feel they belong?

These questions are by no means new. But since Marisol, Raúl, and Jacinta shared with me how life in different communities impinges on their sense of self, the questions feel a bit more real, more alive, more urgent.

* In the e-mail communication mentioned earlier, David Hansen referred to the discipline closest to my heart. He wrote, “In a way, it could be that art . . . is precisely what helps us come to these [existential] questions in our own terms.”

Art. I wonder what sort of painting I would make now that I have attended to the accounts of Marisol, Raúl, Jacinta, and others. The story they tell together is, in many ways, reflective of my own.

- I have thrived without regulation and felt the ease of habitual norm.
- I have flowed in the familiar as in warm, sweet milk, feeling judged.
- I have rejoiced in severed ties, mourning my lost sense of belonging.
- I have felt outrage and guilt about the woman in uniform, made other, while I scrubbed the floor, whining.
- I have felt asphyxiated and supported at once. I have felt ignored and propelled at once.
- Today, I rebuild old bridges even as I continue to burn them.

Perhaps my next painting will be of bridges, then: bridges being burnt and built at once. This makes sense since, in the end, my conversations with friends and family have helped me see how the experience of being across cultures can be fraught with opposing experiences; with tensions and contradictions that are, in too many cases, unresolvable. The challenge, then, is not to try to eliminate the tension altogether but to find ways to “become more” at home in a world of ambiguity and confusion.

APPENDIX

Olga Hubard. Home (1997). Acrylic on wood. 11 ¾ x 8 ¾