

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY
AMERICANS SEE THEMSELVES FROM ABROAD
A Continuing Conversation

As responsible citizens of the United States, we are very interested in the relations our country is fostering with other countries and also with their citizens, who are as representative and non-representative of their cultures and governments as we are of our own. We have a deepening concern with how we as Americans understand ourselves in resonant, inextricable relationship with the world around us—an inter-connectedness we, personally, rejoice in because it invites us powerfully back to the need to see and serve our common, mysterious, redeeming humanity. It concerns us gravely that on our travels we have become more and more aware of how rarely the people we meet believe that we as a country can see the ‘we’ in ‘them’, the ‘us’ in ‘you’.

For *Through A Glass Darkly* we invited writers who have traveled or lived abroad to share the experience of finding themselves to be, for others, the embodiment of a culture they may have always considered an ill-fitting second skin. Many of us have never felt as American—or less American—than we have when we have traveled or lived for any period of time in other countries.

We have posted these essays on our website and invite you to join in the conversation if you already have written something about your own developing self-awareness as an American when traveling abroad or if you are inspired by something you read here to share your own experiences. We encourage you to contact us and the individual authors whose experiences speak to you.

Heather Tosteson and Charles D. Brockett, *Editors*

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II

CITIZENS OF THE WORLD

Citizens of the World. It's not as simple as it seems. How do we feel when we need to petition another government for work papers? Or when we hear our own language used as the lingua franca between Japanese and French businessmen—the only intelligible words we may have heard for days. Or are they? Do we really know the world any of these men live in, refer to? Do they swallow their capitalism raw on the half-shell or nibble it rolled in sticky rice—or do they prefer it deep-fried with a Coke on the side? What about us? Our judgments have a way of turning back on ourselves.

What do we see when we're asked to stand back and look at our own country, our president, with the eyes of a Swiss—or Moroccan—or Argentine taxi driver? The most dangerous leader—and country—in the world, they insist. Chosen twice, they mutter. Twice. They can shrug it off. Can we? We may think global, but our passports, actual and psychological, say otherwise.

Becoming a citizen of the world enlarges and redefines our inner terrain, but it doesn't usually erase or simplify our original allegiances. Questioning or outright denying those allegiances doesn't necessarily purify us in the eyes of anyone we meet either. We still have automatic working privileges in the richest country in the world. We are free to choose to leave—for a month or a decade—a landscape, a culture, an economy, a life-style others yearn for like heaven on earth. Our chagrin is a luxury item others would exchange for dollars on the black market if they could. It doesn't change anything, does it? We still cast an unmistakably American shadow wherever we go. One we can't control. Can we, individually, apologize for our country? Self-elected ambassadors? In a global economy is that even possible anymore—an apology with a national border? And, as citizens of the world, where do we go to cast our votes?

Teresa Peipins

The Pulse of the World

How often does a middle class or not so middle class American have the experience of being treated like much of the world is, that is to say, as an immigrant? Living in Spain as I do, this happens to me every time I have to renew my work papers. I postponed the process as long as I could but the day arrived when I had to join the lines at the police station to turn in the necessary documents.

On that morning I got up as early as I could given that I worked evenings and getting up at dawn was no easy feat. I managed to get to the police station at about quarter after eight. The office opened at nine and already there were about two hundred people on line. The line snaked around the block in between parked cars and past office buildings. I settled into my spot, looking around at the people to make sure I wouldn't be jostled out of place.

I was stunned and muttered out loud "What time do people get here?"

A Chilean guy next to me answered my question, "They spend the night." Hence the cardboard boxes that were dismantled and now littered the sidewalk. They provided a little protection from the chill of the sidewalk. Although we were in Barcelona, it was the winter and it could get chilly especially under these circumstances, standing on the side of the street which the sun didn't hit without moving or barely moving. Immediately, I regretted not bringing gloves as I rubbed my fingers to warm them.

"One hundred euros," Jaime, the Chilean, continued informing me. That was the cost of having someone, usually a Chinese guy, secure a place on line for you. I mentally made calculations reaching the conclusion it was obviously worth it for anyone who could afford it. It also explained the absence of any affluent looking types. This line was populated by Africans, Chinese, Pakistanis, and Latin Americans representing the major immigrant groups in Barcelona.

Behind Jaime, Rosa, an Ecuadorian joined in the conversation. She had come the day before at noon and hadn't been processed by the time the office closed at five. Five wasted hours; she was still upset. Despite the cold and the apparent futility of our mission, Jaime was cheerful. He asked me, "Are you Polish?"

"American."

"What the hell are you doing here? My dream has been to go to the States."

I looked for an explanation that would be plausible for Jaime. I couldn't go on about my romantic notions of Europe or even launch into my parents' own immigrant story when they came to America from Latvia so I settled on my boyfriend as the reason for my staying in Spain.

Burro-cracia is what Spaniards call their public system with its remains of the Franco era. Burros or donkeys were what bureaucrats were called colloquially. Calling ahead for appointments or giving out numbers to people on line from the start would have streamlined the process but that wasn't the point. It was deemed a physical challenge. If you could handle this experience and whatever else followed, you would be eligible to stay in the country.

We were moving at the rate of five steps per half hour until eleven rolled around. It was break time and no matter how many people were waiting, the bureaucrats would have their coffee break. By this point I was standing next to a piece of cardboard so I took advantage of it to sit down and have a rest. The chill had penetrated my bones and shifting from one leg to another wasn't assuaging the discomfort.

A man came out of the office building entrance we were now blocking to scream at us. He herded us away from the building wall which now removed support for our backs. Jaime and Rosa initiated an animated discussion about who was more racist, the Spaniards or the Catalans. Jaime claimed the Spaniards were, but Rosa cleaned houses and took care of the elderly and said both were equally bad. Jaime worked at a McDonald's in a tourist zone of the city and was completely taken with the American concept of management. He had obviously swallowed the American dream.

A skirmish broke out ahead of us as someone tried to jump the line. An official came out of the police station to break it up and to straighten up the line. "Look, they can't even speak Spanish," Jaime pointed at the Chinese men ahead of us. He needed to feel better about himself by pointing out someone who was worse off.

I asked Jaime why he was here. "Chile is doing well economically."

"I'd live better there now but when I came here it wasn't. Europe was a dream for me. I wanted to go to Italy." Rosa had never wanted to go anywhere and sent all her earnings home.

I offered stories of my treks out to the industrial zones of the city where I taught English to factory owners and how one man wanted his father, who was in his 70's to study English to meet people.

"Too old," they both declared. "You have to learn when you're a child." Though it was effectively dismissing the utility of my career, I had to agree with them. An entire African family arrived to join their father on line. I looked up and down the line and felt an enormous gratitude to be near such communicative pleasant people. They managed to chat and laugh despite the circumstances. Jaime took a look around the corner and came back. "Even in the worst of the Pinochet years, I never saw anything as bad as this. But I think we'll get in."

I wasn't convinced but just as I was starting to feel faint the crowd moved quickly and we were in sight of the police station entrance. Another hour and we were given numbers and ushered into the building. Inside there were seats and I sat next to my newfound friends.

Two more lines and a date to pick up the new document. I gave Rosa a thumbs up sign as I left the building. Five more years before I was due for another dose of reality.

Paula Sergi

Four Raise Their Hands

Dinner at my hotel in Kassel, near the train station. At the table to my right, six Japanese businessmen meet with their French host. One of the Japanese, clearly the boss, sits at the head of the table. He discusses business in English with the Frenchman. Between the tinkle of glassware, the waiters' shuffle, I hear a few words. *We were not happy. We cancelled.* One of the Japanese men seems puzzled by the salad bar. I don't blame him. Where is the lettuce? I see carrots and olives, some sliced cukes. *We will agree.*

The Japanese men study the menu for a long time. *You must write a letter.* Finally the boss takes charge, makes his men decide and order with a hand vote. *Who wants tortellini? Who wants margarita pizza?* It's an Italian restaurant. The waiter is Turkish. *I must tell you, our product is faster. Forty percent.*

Four raise their hands for minestrone.

Erika Szostak

Fade to Flat

Late May, 2003. Upon arriving in Geneva during the week before of the G-8 summit, I encountered a city that had turned its back on itself and tucked in its knees; its watches and its chocolates, its frill and its glitz tucked away behind sheets of compressed wood, the city a sullen woman curled fetally in bed, her lacy lingerie hidden beneath a potato sack. Among the fashionable, function, in a rare moment of triumph, had temporarily replaced form. The wooden boards barring every window had been spray-painted with slogans. “No war,” they said, as well as “Fuck U.S.A. Bush, go home.” At the time, the U.S. had been at war with Iraq for less than three months. In the dismal sunlight of a cold spring afternoon, bright Swiss storefronts had given way to particle board, stoic Swiss faces had given way to dull black gates.

In Geneva, the Pont du Mont Blanc and several pedestrian bridges span the Rhone River as it bisects the city. The bridges were lined that week by a flock of rainbow-striped “Pace” flags fluttering cheerfully in the spring wind. Those colorful flags seemed to promise gold, belying the fear of a city universally closed for business, all of its treasure hidden safely away.

On the eve of the summit, negotiating Geneva’s crowded lamp-lit streets was like trying to dance along an electrified tightrope. The city, with its silent, crowded streets had become a carnival without a calliope. The Rue de la Confederacion had morphed into gauntlet of black-suited, helmeted, night-stick and shield-wielding riot police backed by a gleaming water tanker with a menacing cannon. There was little talking above a whisper, yet a buzz crackled in the air, human energy compressed, bodies radiating rage. Anti-globalization protestors trickled into the city throughout the night, with the majority of the 100,000 still expected to arrive in the morning. Glances between strangers set fists to flying along the Rue du Rhone. In a smooth city usually full of glass, the only vestiges to be found were in blackened shards at our feet. A few brave falafel vendors remained open for business, but between the bloody noses, the homemade petrol bombs and the broken glass, few people seemed hungry enough to care.

Over the next several days, 120,000 protestors rioted; the police unleashed concussion grenades, rubber bullets and tear gas canisters upon them. By that point, I was safely 289 kilometers away from the fray, hunting unsuccessfully for bottled vanilla Frappuccinos within walking distance of my employer’s suite at the five-star Bauer au Lac Hotel in Zurich. Having traveled to various countries of the world and seen the same bland logos marring the landscape from Dominica to Indonesia to New Zealand, from Goleta, California, to Greenwood, Indiana, I sympathized with the protestors. The inescapable ubiquity of those corporate logos, all that unyielding geometry, those sharp-edged corners made me too feel as if I might wither in their manufactured light, those endlessly repeating signs full of harsh syllables—KFC, Taco Bell, Starbucks, Panda’s Express, Quizno’s Subs—produced a sprung rhythm of names that exhausted my tongue, syllables that refused to rest in my throat, globalization clear-cutting language as much as it does to the landscape. I once read that only 20% of the U.S. population owns a passport, a statistic that, at the time, seemed horrifying, a perfect example of isolationism and hubris. Since then, however, I’ve begun to question what it even means to travel, whether the possession of a passport will become a moot point. What point, eventually, in leaving home only to arrive 5,000 miles away still in the throbbing, unchanging heart of the United States of Generica?

Despite my feelings on this, I was in Switzerland in 2003 on someone else’s dime, in limbo between the off-brands and deep discounts of my decidedly working-class background—the oldest child in a Catholic brood of seven, brought up on clearance racks, overruns and leftovers—and my position of privilege as the assistant to an unimaginably wealthy family, not a member of the elite but a de facto beneficiary by virtue of association. We were in Switzerland on business for an international meeting of my employer’s non-profit organization, through which she worked closely with former Soviet President Gorbachev, and she was due to give a speech at the Palais des Nations. We had met with President Gorbachev’s party upon our arrival in Geneva, and at 9:13 a.m. on the morning of the G8, just hours before the uneasy energy of the city unleashed itself in riots, our entourage, on foot, swept out of the Hotel Bristol and into the Gare Cornavin, timed precisely to board the train to Zurich just minutes before it departed for a peaceful ride through the countryside, leaving volatile Geneva in our wake.

We arrived in Zurich to flowers and flashbulbs, and then watched the riots on television in our hotel rooms, so that the urgent whispers of last night that had become the shouts of this afternoon, the palpable crackling human

energy, the acrid petrol fumes mixing with the scent of grease and fried falafel and urine, all of it now far away, seeming no more relevant than the muesli I'd had for breakfast yesterday. It occurred to me then that when events are filtered to me through a television screen, when objects trade in their three-dimensions for two, when the way we experience the world is reduced from receiving information from all five senses to only two, when all that we see and hear comes through an intermediary and when things can no longer be tasted, touched or smelled, reality becomes as flat as the television screen upon which we watch it, as bland and impersonal as the drive-thru sign at a fast-food restaurant.

While I've always believed any concept of reality must be firmly rooted in the physical, trying to define what that means feels like trying to hold onto a bar of soap in the bathtub. However, I do know this. When we become simply spectators who base our conception of reality on merely what is immediate, what can be seen, what can be heard and what can be edited, we're like the store owners of Geneva who, despite closing their doors for business and boarding up their windows, still sustained millions of francs worth of damage. Those boards were ripped down, windows nevertheless smashed, merchandise summarily looted. Despite an attempt to shut out the seething anger of the protestors, boarding up the windows was no more effective at keeping out the reality of rocks and stun grenades—physical, tangible, covering measurable distances of space and time—than turning off the television exempts us from being vulnerable to the consequences to the disembodied things we see on its screen.

In Geneva, prior to the G8, whenever I was out in public, whether at intersections waiting to cross the street or strolling the shores of Lac Lemman, Europeans, upon hearing my American accent, would stop me to discuss politics. "Do you know," said an earnest Englishman on a red bicycle, "that your president is a mass murderer?" Few, if not none of them, expected me to agree that what we were doing in Iraq was terribly wrong; all of them were surprised to know that there had been anti-war rallies all over our country. They hadn't seen any of them on TV.

Rubber bullets, stun grenades and high pressure water cannons. With the television on, I could still see and hear about these things, but once I could no longer touch these things, or once there ceased to be a threat that they could touch me, they were replaced by the mundane concerns of servitude: where could I find vanilla Frappuccinos, could room service bring up a jar of Nutella, would the limo pick us up on time? Experiencing reality as it's filtered through a television flattens the face of that reality as much Botox

flattens the wrinkles on our foreheads; television flattens experience as much as globalization flattens landscape and language.

It's not that Americans don't have a grasp of reality, it's that because we've never felt the sting from a rubber bullet, never suffered a concussion from a grenade, never smelled the soured fruit of tear gas or tasted the water of a high-pressure cannon blasting us in the face, because we've always managed to get on the right train at the right time, we've consistently believed ourselves immune to its consequences. It's that we've come to believe that if we don't see or hear something right now, it does not exist; if we shut down the TV, we shut down the problem.

Peggy Landsman

After the News

The tea bag sinks to the bottom of the cup.
I wait a few minutes; watch as the water turns dark.
I sip the tea. It works no magic.

I go outside; watch the sun set.
As it sinks into the Pacific,
Cirrus clouds—high overhead—turn pink.

In Sarajevo, Mufid's mother
Marinated pink rose petals in large glass jars of sugar water.
She set the jars on the window sill early in the morning—
They made the most of ordinary light.

In Osaka, *sakura yuki*. Cherry blossom snow.
That's what I called it.
Walking along the river in the wind and rain—
Cherry blossoms.

At Kibbutz Usha, I killed a snake
On the stoop out back behind the kitchen.
In the middle of peeling and chopping two hundred seventy onions,
My eyes tear-blind and mad with stinging,
I smashed in its skull with a stone.

Night after night...

I think about the former Yugoslavia.
On the spot where Gavrilo Princip took aim and shot,
The impression of a pair of pointy-toed shoes
Is sunk in the sidewalk. Preserved in bronze.
I stood in them. They were just my size.

So many spots where I stood in Kobe
Waiting for all those job interviews, the trains at Sannomiya.
Waiting and watching as Black Vans rolled.

Impossible to not think about the Holy Land.
Tonight another bombing of another bus in Jerusalem...

Somewhere down the street a car backfires.
It startles me. I turn around.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century
the thing that still amazes me
is how easily I startle.

Elayne Clift

BEYOND ANGKOR WAT, SADNESS IN CAMBODIA

It's the woman with the infant in her arms I can't take my eyes off. More than the other pictures of frightened children, of men with missing ears, their eyes swollen shut, or the faces reflecting sheer terror or numb acceptance, it is her face that mesmerizes me. Maybe it's that she doesn't seem to know about the torture. Perhaps she was still thinking they didn't kill women, or their babies. But she died here, in this school turned prison, along with 14,000 other people during the Khmer Rouge nightmare in the time of The Killing Fields. When it was over in 1979 half of Cambodia's population, two million people, were gone. Only seven prisoners were found alive in this hideous dungeon when it was liberated; one an artist who, without bitterness, has captured on canvas what happened at S 21, the notorious Toul Sleng Prison.

On the streets of Phnom Penh it's the multitudes of limbless that make me want to stare and look away at the same time. Mostly men, they are legless, or have no arms, or are blind because of landmines. Children lead them as they beg. Everywhere you go there is begging. Naked little children beg. Women with babies hold out their palms and plead. "Yum, yum," they beseech, a hand on their mouth. Disfigured men and young boys try their best to flog postcards, shoe shines, sunglasses. What you don't see are old men. They are gone now, gone to Choeung Ek and the other fields of slaughter.

There is also the other Phnom Penh – a city of riverside cafes frequented by tourists, family picnics on the quay as the stifling day draws to a close, hustling tuk-tuk drivers and aggressive vendors, a stifling and claustrophobic central market, smiling people who seem genuinely happy to welcome you to their poor country. There is commerce and tourism flourishes as foreigners come to see the Royal Palace and its Silver Pagoda, to light incense at Wat Phnom, or to watch the sunset from a longboat on the mighty Mekong River.

Siem Reap, the rapidly growing and anachronistic base camp town for Angkor Wat, again reveals the abject poverty of Cambodia. Barefoot children, some following older siblings, drift about. Women sell fruit and other goods at roadside stands and small markets. Men languish in hammocks, prostrate from the heat. And yet, amidst its dirt roads and street commerce, a bizarre assortment of glitzy four and five-star hotels proliferate along the main drag. Strange and disturbing: Disneyland Meets Las Vegas. While Cambodians struggle for subsistence survival, tourists feast on Bacchanalian buffets, shop in upscale craft outlets, and enjoy chauffeured air-conditioned cars.

Behind this eerie façade lies reality. Here is what our guide shared with us. He is self-taught, speaks three languages, and supports his twice-widowed mother on the \$10 he earns daily—when he has “clients.” His father, sister and brother died during the Khmer Rouge genocide. Corruption is rife in Vietnam-controlled Cambodia. No one cares, he says. Everyone exploits everyone else. Health care is virtually non-existent if you can't bribe someone to take care of you, and most kids are lucky to make it through eighth grade. Listening to him I feel ashamed and embarrassed by my affluence.

Less than a mile from the glitzy hotels there is a state-of-the-art children's hospital founded by a Swiss physician, an iconoclast whom many believe violates agreed-upon international protocols for primary health care in impoverished countries. They think this because he uses western diagnostic tools like CT scans, an outrageous expenditure some say, in countries where people don't even know enough to wash their hands. But this doctor, for all his possible eccentricities, maintains the extraordinary belief that even poor children deserve to live, and saving their fragile lives often requires the same technology that rich kids can access. He is a thorn in the side of the Ministry of Health and, he claims, esteemed organizations like UNICEF and the World Health Organization because he treats babies with non-contagious TB when the resources needed to do that could save a lot of kids with infectious disease. It's not cost-effective, his critics argue. These kids deserve to live too, he tells the critics, experts who stay in the fancy hotels when they come to Siem Reap to advise or evaluate him. I'd like to have met the Swiss doctor.

Something is amiss in the awesome land of Angkor Wat, one of the manmade wonders of the world. These amazing and prolific Buddhist and Hindu temples, scattered over nearly 200 miles and dating back to the 12th century, are exquisite, mysterious, and revealing. It is a privilege and a pleasure to see them, for no amount of research or documentary footage can capture their grandeur.

But why, I wonder, given today's technology and the advanced

civilization we in the west take such pride in, can there not be other manmade wonders – an end to poverty, for example? An end to childhood mortality from preventable causes? An end to genocide?

Everywhere I go, I feel as if I am treading on hallowed ground. What happened here, I wonder, driving through villages and vacant fields? Who lived here and who died here in the dark days of Cambodia's Holocaust? What is the story behind this limbless man, that misshapen child?

Sometimes when you ask someone here how they feel toward Americans, they respond as the Vietnamese do to that question: "Oh, all that is in the past. We are friends now."

"Official government script," say the guides whose trust you have garnered.

Once, I talked with a vendor in a tourist kiosk. He was a teacher but there are no jobs so he sells crafts. I felt compelled to offer an apology for America's role in what happened there, in his sad part of the world. He accepted graciously. "Thank you," he said. "It means a lot that you would say such a thing."

An American woman who overheard our exchange said, "I can't believe you said that! Why would you say such a thing?"

Luckily, I was rendered speechless by her attitude and could not answer.

Angkor Wat has much to teach us. So does Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. The Cambodian people, gentle and generous, deserve much more than gaping tourists snapping their pictures and bargaining for their souvenirs while they try, yet again, to live. I left that little country hoping that the awesome monuments of that struggling place never rise above the awful reality of its suffering. It has continued, unabated, for far too long.

CONTRIBUTORS

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