2023

At the Crossroads of Culture: A Study of Cultural Identity and the Interaction Between People and Place

Alesandra Temerte
Syracuse University

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A Study of Cultural Identity and the Interaction Between People and Place

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Alesandra (Sasha) Temerte

Candidate for Bachelor of Science
and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2023

Honors Thesis in Writing and Rhetoric

Thesis Advisor: _____
Eileen E. Schell, Professor

Thesis Reader: _____
Kevin Adonis Browne,
Associate Professor

Honors Director: _____
Dr. Danielle Smith, Director

Abstract

"Where are you from?" For as long as I could speak, I have struggled to answer this question. Do they want to know where I live now? Where I was born? The ethnicity related to the language that I speak at home? Where *am* I from? Where are any of us from, really?

I have always found myself to be at the crossroads of culture. After being born in Uzbekistan to a Russian, Greek, and Korean family, I immigrated to the U.S., where I spent a lifetime learning how to boil my complex identity down to a single city. Since then, I have spent a large part of my young adulthood seeking to immerse myself in other cultures through traveling and intentional interactions with everyone I meet.

This project investigates the role a cross-cultural identity plays in the life of an individual, who can and cannot cross borders, the negotiations that come with existing at the in-between, and how one can travel with more intention. To accomplish this, the project combines creative nonfiction, scholarly research, and case studies of Greece as a refugee stopover and Turkey as a geographical and cultural crossroads.

In this research and reflection, I discovered that much of border crossing and migration is the result of luck and complex bureaucratic processes. Existing at crossroads can lead to both productive mingling of culture but also conflicting tensons that oppress ethnicities, such as in Turkey. Identity is a state of constant evolution that is influenced both by our cultural upbringing and the people and places we surround ourselves with over the course of a lifetime. And finally, tourism is driven by consumption, whereas intentional travel is focused on deeply engaging with a country's culture and people. This thesis teaches us that the crossroads can be just as challenging as they are rewarding. Nevertheless, in an increasingly globalizing world, it is important to understand how to navigate these crossroads and above all, to seek value in the discomfort, for there is always more to learn.

Executive Summary

This thesis is an exploratory piece that draws on creative nonfiction and scholarly research in an effort to answer questions surrounding cross-cultural identity and the interaction between people and place.

More than ever before, now is the time to explore cross-cultural understanding as our globalized world becomes rife with tension, conflict, and misunderstanding. It is simple to read a scholarly article on historical and current cross-culturalism, X and Y phenomenon about immigrants, the legal processes surrounding migration and borders, and identity. I hope to provide a more creative approach to exploring the impact of one's multicultural identity on a personal level and humanize the experiences of those who exist at crossroads: refugees, migrants, residents of Turkey, Third Culture Kids, and above all—you and me. What readers will learn is that this cross-cultural experience is extremely common, and most people can identify with it in some capacity. I also intend to foster new dialogue regarding how travelers can cultivate empathy and understanding through more intentional travel and how individuals who find themselves at the crossroads of culture can play a key role in unifying this increasingly globalized world.

The piece begins with recollections of my own multicultural upbringing and experiences as an immigrant in the U.S. These first two chapters examine how we answer the question of "Where are you from?", the bureaucracy surrounding immigration to the U.S., and the role of luck in shaping movement and identity.

The third and fourth chapters study the refugee situation in Greece, challenging readers to consider who can and cannot cross borders with ease, what it means to live in a state of limbo, and the difficulties migrants face when pursuing freedom and a place to call home.

The fifth chapter delves into the modern sociocultural landscape of Turkey as a crossroads, linking its marriage of Eastern and Western culture to the concept of negotiating a country's identity, while scrutinizing Turkey's cross-culturalism by revealing the reality of Turks' treatment of the Kurds. The sixth chapter expands on this analysis of cross-cultural identity through research on scholarly discourse surrounding Third Culture Kids and the concept of the "in-between." It explores our negotiations of identity on a more personal level.

The last section moves away from these "forced" crossroads and contemplates the "voluntary" decision to be at crossroads. This chapter defines and contrasts tourism, travel, and residency. Through travel narratives and comparisons between itinerary maps, the final chapter offers readers insights on how to engage in intentional travel and immerse themselves more authentically in a new place to understand the culture and its people.

Critical Statement

Having existed at cultural crossroads for most of my life, it is only natural that my thesis is written at the crossroads of genres too. By blurring the boundaries between the literary and the critical, I embody the very themes I am seeking to explain. These are the words of not only a researcher and scholar, but a storyteller—a poet. Likewise, though this is written for my degree in Writing and Rhetoric, the research featured here is interdisciplinary.

This thesis is primarily written in a fragmented style, similar to a braided essay but going further to weave scholarly research, creative nonfiction, poetry, and images together. This draws upon prior writing I had done in Professor Eileen Schell's WRT 422 class, a creative nonfiction class where we developed a multimedia work, and I had woven creative nonfiction, poetry, and postcards into one piece. In this class, I discovered the beauty and power of unfolding a narrative through brief glimpses into moments, which are then unpacked through self-reflection and rhetorical questioning.

The fragmented nature of the thesis also draws upon my experiences with poetry—its similarly fragmented, lyrical manner and the way it often introduces a series of specific, seemingly unrelated imageries under the threading of a common theme or message. Like poetry, some sections here may not be in chronological order, and there may sometimes be "scenes" or research that seem unrelated yet still positioned side-by-side—this is intentional. I am challenging readers to consider where the commonalities lie, and by juxtaposing select sections together, I create the connections for readers to understand these underlying themes.

The creative nonfiction is written in present tense, and sections are separated by dinkuses—three asterisks arranged horizontally—to be reminiscent of an immersive short story

that jumps between scenes. For better immersion in the storytelling narrative, I will also be using endnotes rather than in-text citations. Endnotes are less disruptive and will minimize the confusion in-text citations could create since I may be using parentheticals for other purposes in creative writing. For this reason, my research will be cited in Chicago style, and since all sources I referenced are included in the endnotes, there will not be an additional bibliography.

I have written a couple of poems in this work, including an "ode to the immigrants." My poetry is heavily influenced by modern spoken word and slam poets, such as Olivia Gatwood, who often utilize "ode" to describe any poem written in honor of a particular subject to highlight it in a new way. Though these odes are written rhythmically, they are not meant to be sung. Nevertheless, the poems I had written for these pieces are meant to be performed in a spoken word style and should be read as such. The style in which they are read draws on the tradition of slam poetry and is inspired by Button Poetry performance poets which, in addition to Gatwood, also include Rudy Francisco, Sabrina Benaim, Neil Hilborn, and Sarah Kay.

With this piece, I hope to humanize the research I have done and contribute knowledge at the crossroads of places, cultures, disciplines, and genres. Though I share my own experiences, I would like readers to extrapolate from the unspoken—to consider where their own experiences parallel mine and where they do not. In this space, in these crossroads, is where critical thinking and reflection lies.

Table of Contents

Preface

Though penned in a year, the reality is that I have been writing this piece over the course of a lifetime, and it is a reflection that will never truly be finished. As I continue developing my own cross-cultural identity and understanding of the world through the experiences, travels, and relationships that are still in store, this work will continue to grow.

This thesis serves as both a scholarly discussion and a dissection of personal experiences. I am very grateful to be in the position of privilege of writing this thesis at all, and I'm cognizant of the number of opportunities I have had since coming to the states. Oftentimes, I wonder what my life would have been like had I grown up in Uzbekistan instead of in the U.S., and I am reminded how lucky I am to have made it here. I recognize that my passport—and education—now unlocks more of the world than many people could afford to dream of (including the travels that accompanied this thesis), and for this I am eternally thankful.

Acknowledgements

Though there are a number of professors who have made a profound impact on me during my time at Syracuse University, I would like to use this section to especially thank Professor Eileen Schell, who has been endlessly supportive in my writing journey over the course of four years. From our first Creative Nonfiction class following my freshman semester abroad to a year of challenging me to reflect on my cross-cultural experiences in our senior Writing Distinction class, Professor Schell has witnessed my growth as a writer, and traveler, and individual. Beyond being an impeccable thesis advisor, she has also worn the hats of mentor, sage, and friend. Thank you for reading my words all of these years.

Chapter 1

Born at Crossroads

"There never were in the world two opinions alike, no more than two hairs or two grains; the most universal quality is diversity."

— Michel de Montaigne[1], French philosopher

***

"I want to study abroad," the girl tells me.

"Oh, you're asking just the right person!"

She grins. "That's what I've been told. I was told to ask you because you're, like, Mrs. Worldwide."

I laugh. "Did someone really call me that?" Pitbull would be proud[i].

We talk about international experiences, and I tell her I'm traveling again for thesis research. The girl asks what my thesis is about. I explain that for most of my life, I have struggled to answer the question, "Where are you from?"

Do they want where I live now? Where I grew up? Where I was born? My ethnicity?

I tell her that I'm from right outside of Philly, but I was born in Uzbekistan. Except, no, I am not Uzbek. My family speaks Russian—we are ethnically Russian. And that yes, I know that's kind of a touchy ethnicity to have right now, but I haven't ever even been to Russia. I'm

[i] Pitbull refers to himself in songs by the moniker of "Mr. Worldwide."

also ethnically Greek and Korean, but not enough to tell people I am. Besides, I'm basically American by now anyway. *You know what I mean?* I ask.

She is nodding along enthusiastically, her eyes widening.

"That is *just* like me!!" She is enthused. Before I even have the chance to ask, she elaborates: "So I'm from LA, but my family is Puerto Rican. But I wasn't born in Puerto Rico! I was born in the Dominican Republic when my parents were on vacation. They didn't make it back in time. So now I always have to explain that I was born there, but I've literally never actually lived there. And I always visit Puerto Rico, but really, I live in LA. I *so* get what you mean."

We laugh about it, and I spend the rest of the day thinking about how common these experiences are: how I would have never guessed by looking at her; how she would have never told me if my thesis didn't come up; how if I had just asked where she was from, she would have told me "LA"—nothing less and nothing more—and the conversation would move on.

She would have never felt like someone understands the difficulty of trying to explain your background, that there are others like her.

But there are. We exist. And we are much, *much* more common than we think.

***

Unlike me, my sister was born in America. But also unlike me, she does not pass as White. I texted her, recently, *What ethnicities have you been mistaken for over your lifetime with your skin tone?*

The typing bubble appeared for five minutes straight. Typing. Typing. Typing. Finally, I received a simple response: *like all ethnicities.*

What was she typing before?

No, send me the whole list, I said.

I can't even remember, she replied.

Typing. Typing. Typing.

She sent me a list, then a series of five more messages as she remembered more. The takeaway? A lot: Chinese, Korean (true), Indian, Native American, Russian (also true, noticed by another Russian—"you look like me"), Hispanic, Mexican, mostly anything Spanish-speaking actually. That one is the most common.

My sister does not have a drop of Hispanic blood.

She has been called Jasmine and Pocahontas and told it is a compliment. She has been told she could blend in to nearly any country ("Which isn't technically wrong," she said).

And what do you tell people? I asked her.

That I'm Russian and Korean.

Greek didn't make it to the list?

No one knows what Greek people look like, she said.

***

// ode to the immigrants //

This one is an ode to the immigrants,

an ode to strength,

ode to crossroads of cultures and identity crisis,

ode to “Where are you from?”

and not knowing what to say.

This is an ode to belonging everywhere

but nowhere,

not quite American, not quite European,

not quite Asian, and nothing in between.

This one is to never fitting in

but finding home in everywhere you go.

This is an ode to Uzbekistan.

to a distant home I haven’t called home

since I was four,

ode to “Is that somewhere near Afghanistan?”,

ode to right outside of Philly,

which is where I say I’m really from,

that my blood is American

and has been for decades now.

This is an ode to green card lottery—

the Diversity Visa,

years of persistent applications

by desperate family members

and honest, flip-of-the-coin luck,

where the odds are never in your favor—

did you know there was a 0.2% chance

that I am here today?

20 million applications

and only 50,000 of us

who make it each year?

This is an ode to

"My sister looks nothing like me—

she got all the Korean genetics!"

as if my DNA is something that can be

sliced and distributed like cake.

Ode to "You speak Russian?

Can you say something in Russian

right now?"

Nyet.

This is an ode to my parents,

who skip over articles when they speak,

“the” and “a” lost in translation.

This is an ode to these words,

which trip over my tongue

like actors falling on stage,

stumbling to pretend like they know what to say.

This is an ode to the immigrants,

to their strength among this language,

this language—

a harsh syllabus to follow,

a lesson in the art

of giving up

what you hold dear.

This is an ode to the immigrants

to their strength in this country,

this country—

sink or swim,

speak our tongue

or do not speak at all.

***

An Instagram reel posted by creator Christian Maldonado (@christianjmaldonado)[2], is an impeccable example of what I've deemed the Cross-cultural Conundrum. I define the Cross-cultural Conundrum as scenarios when immigrants, or the children of immigrants, are asked where they're from and are unsure whether to reply with their ethnicity, birth town, hometown during upbringing, current residence, or some combination of it all.

Captioned, "When somebody asks you 'Where are you from?,'" the video begins with Christian being asked that very question.

He begins to answer—"Oh, I'm from…"—then pauses abruptly and asks, "Wait, what do you mean exactly?"

The asker merely responds with the same question again: "Yeah, like where are you from?"

Christian is now lost in thought as he runs through the options, *Does he mean where I was born or where I grew up? Or is he talking about where I live now? Or is he talking about my ethnicity, where my parents are from?*

Just answer everything, he finally decides.

"I was born in Virginia but my parents moved down to North Carolina when I was young, so I grew up in North Carolina, and I still live here. But if you're talking about ethnicity, where my parents are from—my mom is from El Salvador and my dad is from Guatemala. So yeah."

The asker nods and merely says, "Okay! No, I meant like what city?"

Christian's face falls. *I still got it wrong?*

This humorous representation is a frustrating and stressful reality for many sufferers of the Cross-cultural Conundrum.

I have a list of personal go-to responses:

- If I'm in a lengthy conversation with an acquaintance, they'll inevitably ask about my background, and I'll run them through the full storyline: "I was born in Uzbekistan, but I'm Russian, Greek, and Korean. 50% Russian, 25% the others. My family lives near Philly now; I moved here when I was four." Presumably, the person already knows in which city I'm based now, if we're having this conversation.

- If I'm meeting someone for the first time in a more intimate one-to-one coffee chat, I'll say "I'm from right outside of Philly, but I was born in Uzbekistan." Again, the person likely already knows my current city.

- If I'm part of a quick introductions circle, I'll just reduce my response to "right outside of Philly."

- If I'm interviewing for a position, I'll just say "I grew up right outside of Philly, but I'm now based in [insert city here]."

- If I'm abroad, I'll switch it up entirely and say "New York." I don't say "United States" because sometimes people ask where in the U.S. then stare blankly at me when I say "Pennsylvania." I also don't say I go to school in Syracuse because they think I mean the one in Italy, not the one in New York. When I say "New York," I likewise let people

assume I mean the city because it's too much to explain in passing that I mean central New York. What's central New York, anyway?

In any scenario, I'm making sacrifices about my identity. We all do, every day. But for most people, their hometown encompasses a large part of their identity already—it's their accent, their lingo, their favorite sports team, the token meal their town does best, their family and friends. For immigrants, our hometown is a mere fraction of our location-based identity. Our family is scattered around the world. The language spoken inside our home isn't English (or perhaps it is, but with the tension of our native tongue slipping away). The rules, the culture, the food—it's all far different than what we find when we step outside.

Now, some individuals ask, "Where is home?" This makes the question a lot easier to answer for sufferers of the Cross-cultural Conundrum. Where's our family now? Where do we spend the most time? Where did we grow up for most of our lives?

Yet this new shift toward a focus on home as a present moment, or as our closest memory, still leaves us aching for a piece of ourselves that we leave behind.

If you ask me, "Where is home?" I will respond Philadelphia, where my immediate family lives and where I grew up. If you ask my grandmother, she would say the same.

But is that really home? Do the 10 years in America outweigh the 50 in Uzbekistan?

What do we lose when we reduce "home" to a single place?

***

Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes identity as a function of searching for belonging: "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs… 'Identity' is

a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty. Hence 'identity', though ostensibly a noun, behaves like a verb… Identity is a critical projection of what is demanded and/or sought upon what is; or, more exactly still, an oblique assertion of the inadequacy or incompleteness of the latter."[3]

Bauman challenges us to consider identity as a verb, rather than a noun. In essence, "identity" is to search for certainty, to acknowledge the space between who we are and where we seek to belong, to demand resolution to the discrepancies or confusion or incompleteness of parts of ourselves that we hope to discover.

For many of us, our identity is a projection of several things: Who we were, who we are, and who we seek to be. Our expectations of ourselves. The expectations of others—of our loved ones, our social circles, greater society. How we wish to identify and how much we can reveal based on social and state sanctions. The pieces of ourselves we do and do not share, can and cannot share. Identity represents a complex web of narratives that battle for our attention, sometimes contradictory, and our ability to discern between them all.

***

The warm summer air fills my lungs as I close my eyes and listen to the hum of the cars and distant laughter in the streets below my balcony. I had been chatting with Piotr and Dan, two friends I made during my summer internship.

Piotr breaks the silence.

"Have you guys noticed how all the minorities formed their own friend group?"

I scrunch my eyebrows and turn to face him.

"Huh?"

Dan also turns.

"Wait a second—" he trails off.

"What do you mean?" I ask again.

"Think about it," Piotr pushes.

I consider our shared social circle at the internship. Piotr is from Poland. Dan is one of the seven Asian Americans we spend time with, including my roommate Chloe. Yousef is Palestinian. Ruben is South African. Andy is Mexican, one of the three Hispanics we mingle with. Chait and Karthik are Indian.

"What about me?" I blurt out before thinking. All that crosses my mind is that I'm pretty White.

"Dude, you're literally an immigrant," says Piotr.

"And Asian," adds Dan.

"Well, sort of."

We sit with the thought.

"I wonder how that happened," I say aloud. The boys shrug.

"It's interesting, right?" says Piotr.

The realization continues to bug me. How did this happen? Do we actually have different interests than the "other group"? I think back to the first week when we were still doing our full-group social events, stumbling to find our future friends. I recall how much more easily

conversation flowed with the people I'm with now and how I felt like I couldn't connect as deeply with those now missing from this circle. It couldn't have all been… culture? Right?

As my mind returns to the present moment, I also remember what Dan said.

"I'm not really Asian though." I lament. "Like I'm Asian enough to relate to all the Asian immigrant memes but not Asian enough to say I'm Asian, you know?"

I've struggled with this part of my identity for a while. A large part of me grappling with this quandary boils down to my appearance. My sister looks far more Asian than I do, so I would feel more comfortable labeling myself as Asian if I could blend in the way she does. But with the skin tone I have, I fear the double take and confused glances I receive if I say I'm Asian. I'm 25% Korean, which is just Asian enough to not *not* be Asian, but still not Asian enough to say I am.

I also have Central Asian roots from my Uzbek origins, but I'm not ethnically Central Asian, and "Central" Asia isn't what most people think of when they think of "Asia" anyway. There is also quite a bit of people who think Uzbekistan is in the Middle East and don't even know what "Central Asia" means or that it's even a region that exists.

TLDR: Asian identity crisis.

"You're Asian, don't worry," Dan says confidently.

"I'm not sure that's how it works." I laugh.

"You have my official Asian approval card. From Asian to Asian. That means it's true."

I squint at him, still dubious of his logic. But isn't that in part what cultural identity boils down to? The groups we feel we can and can't identify with? Is it possible to receive permission to externally identify as what I already internally identify with?

And why do I always feel like I need permission to say what I am?

"Okayyy," I respond, unsure if that changes anything anyway. It's not that simple, right? "I appreciate that."

Nevertheless, I smile.

I look up from the street below and turn my eyes to the apartment beside ours, with row after row of massive windows. The well-lit living rooms and open curtains reveal glimpses into the lives of the residents of Stamford—soccer moms and fluffy dogs, bouncing through the kitchens adorned with monstera plants and art prints on the walls, proudly on display for voyeur eyes to compare neighboring apartments to their own. I consider our own balcony. This moment. This summer. The memories I cherish most have all been with people most different from myself—and yet, this difference is the exact commonality that brings us together. We find solace in our shared diversity, in the similarities among our non-traditional backgrounds, in the hallway that connects belonging not quite here but still among each other.

Chapter 2

Luck, Law, & Lottery

"Immigrants: We get the job done."

— Lin-Manuel Miranda, American songwriter, in *Hamilton*[4]

***

"How many amendments does the Constitution have?"

"28… no, 27," my uncle replies, in a thick accent.

There are two stacks of flashcards before me: right and wrong. I place this card into the wrong pile, then flip to the next flashcard.

"What is one promise you make when you become a United States citizen?"

"Obey the law," he says. I scan the list of possible answer choices, of which "Obey the law" is easiest to pronounce.

I switch to Russian. "It says 'Obey the laws of the United States,' so you're not wrong, but I don't know if they want exact wording."

Exasperated, he clucks his tongue and shakes his head. He nods to the growing wrong pile, and I place the card there. Take no chances.

"The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words?"

"Slower," he tells me in Russian.

I repeat the question again slowly, his eyebrows furrowed as he listens for the key words in the question: three words of the Constitution.

"We the People!" he beams, delighted. Easy. I place the card in the correct pile.

We continue like this for an hour, drilling the questions until the wrong pile is empty. I'm back in town for winter break, so my parents have already done most of the legwork in helping him study. My job is just to fine-tune the practice, so my parents can finally focus their attention on work.

"Tomorrow morning we'll do it again. You're not ready." His citizenship test is in a week.

***

The NPR news headline reads, "Trump's Immigration Policy Proposal Would Eliminate the Green Card Lottery." My stomach twists.

Something very few people know about me is that the reason I am here today is because of a green card lottery, deemed by the U.S. government as the Diversity Visa lottery.

Let's do the math. In 2021, 11.8 million people applied to the U.S. green card lottery from around the world.[5] 50,000 winners are admitted by random selection each year. That means a 0.4% chance of being here today. In 2017, there were 22.4 million applicants.[6] That's a 0.2% chance. Ouch.[ii]

[ii] To contextualize, Harvard's notoriously difficult admission rate is 4%.

I'm here on years of persistent applications by family members desperate to get to the land of opportunity and, in the end, a whole lot of luck. Many families who apply year after year will still never receive optimistic news.

And now that we are here, we are received by a President threatening to take away the very thing that brought us.

From my experience, very few people realize I came here on a green card lottery because few people even guess that I was not born here. How could I be? When I seem so American? Pale skin and accent-free? I am not exactly the spitting image of people's expectation of an immigrant, who, oftentimes, must sound and appear differently than they do.

Based on my American assimilation and my White skin, I'm sure the U.S. government is one of the few organizations to consider me a "diversity hire."[iii] There's only ever a checkbox for "race," not "born abroad" on job applications, and if you don't already know, you wouldn't think to ask. You might even consider me to instead be a poster child of the American Dream: Suburbia. Great education from a great university. Awards for my accomplishments.

How could I be everything people least expect from somebody born in a country whose name just ends in "-stan"?

***

"Sasha, we need a letter to three people."

[iii] Diversity hiring is an organization or company's efforts to recruit people from different backgrounds, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and ability.

I sit down on the couch. This is the usual—I always help with drafting or grammar checking the important emails.

"Can Steph help? She's old enough to write emails; I've got some work I need to finish."

"It's for your uncle." Right. So I'm not just the resident native English speaker now; I'm also the resident writer.

"Ok, more details."

They explain the situation. My parents would like to meet my uncle's wife and baby this year. After months of waiting, his wife received a green light on her visa application. She booked a flight for June, four months from today. Her visa would only be valid through the end of June.

This week, they realized the baby was not approved.

"How?" I am confused.

"I'm not sure," my mom says. "We thought she was included in the original application. It's a baby—why wouldn't she be?"

"Who are the three people?"

"Your friend Brian and the Senators."

"Brian Fitzpatrick?" I laugh. I went to a Girl Scout award ceremony dinner with him once—he even came late, but we got a photo together—and now he is my friend. "Okay, yeah."

"And the Senators," my Grandma emphasizes again in her thick accent. "Pat Toomey and what's the other guy? Casey?"

I'm impressed that she knows our Senators. Honestly, I was forgetting the names too, but I was pretty sure she was more familiar with their names than many people in my county's high school would be.

"Bob Casey Jr." I look it up to double check.

"Yes," she smiles.

I begin drafting the emails.

Dear Brian Fitzpatrick:

I hope this email finds you well.

We had recently reached out to you regarding my wife (case number listed below) and my daughter applying to come to the U.S. to spend time with me and my family.

We had finally received notice that my wife was approved, but my 2-year-old daughter had not been.

As one of your constituents, we are humbly reaching out to you for help with this matter. We are heartbroken that it is possible for my wife to have been approved but our baby to not have been (we of course cannot abandon our child in Uzbekistan).

Please let me know if there is anything you can do or if you can reach out to the embassy to help with our cause. It would mean the world and make a deep, genuine difference in our lives.

Thank you and have a lovely day.

We hit send, three times.

What follows is three months of back-and-forth, being referred to different offices in the U.S. government that might be able to help expedite an answer. In the end, the baby needed a separate visa application filled out, which was not approved in time. My uncle's wife arranged for the baby's grandmother (the wife's mom) to look after her for the week that his wife would be here.

***

I receive an email from the honors office regarding the application for my thesis, *At the Crossroads of Culture,* and open the email ecstatically to see that my funding request was approved. In May, a few months from now, I would be boarding a flight to Uzbekistan to reconnect with my heritage and conduct research for the very work you are reading now.

Except, when I clicked through the website for the U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, I realized I will not be able to board the flight. Why? I never formally renounced my Uzbek citizenship after becoming naturalized as a U.S. citizen.

I didn't think I needed to.

I re-read the embassy website closely:

Uzbek Citizenship by U.S. born children of Uzbek citizen parents

Citizenship of Uzbekistan can be acquired:

- upon birth; or
- as a result of being granted citizenship under certain conditions provided for by the Uzbek Laws on Citizenship and its international agreements.

A person holding Uzbek citizenship will not be recognized by Uzbekistan as a citizen of any other country.

A child is considered to be an Uzbek citizen if:

- both parents at the time of the child's birth were citizens of Uzbekistan regardless of the fact where the child may been born in the world.
- if one of the parents is an Uzbek citizen and the child is born in Uzbekistan.
- if one of the parents is an Uzbek citizen and the child is born outside of Uzbekistan, but either or both of the parents had a permanent place of residence in Uzbekistan at the time of the child's birth.
- if only one of the parents is an Uzbek citizen and if at the time of the child's birth both parents had a permanent place of residence beyond the boundaries of Uzbekistan, the child's citizenship shall be defined by the consent of the parents expressed in writing.
- a child, one of whose parents at the moment of the child's birth was a citizen of Uzbekistan, and the other one was a person without citizenship, or was unknown, regardless of the birthplace.

I read it again: *A person holding Uzbek citizenship will not be recognized by Uzbekistan as a citizen of any other country.*

In Uzbekistan, I am considered a citizen of Uzbekistan and *only* Uzbekistan. The website states that citizenship of Uzbekistan can be acquired upon birth in the country (ditto). However, even if I were born anywhere else in the world, as long as both of my parents were still considered citizens of Uzbekistan at the time of my birth, so would I.

Here's the kicker: Unless you formally renounce your citizenship (a lengthy bureaucratic process that could take a year, sometimes two), you will always still be considered a Uzbek citizen. And why would you renounce it? You had moved to the U.S. for a reason—you probably won't be going back for a while. So you're in no rush to fill out the paperwork—it's just not something that will ever come up.

Right?

Yes. Until you do decide to return, to visit family or as a tourist or to pursue research for your honors thesis on the crossroads of culture.

But Uzbekistan does not recognize your dual citizenship. It does not recognize that you are no longer theirs—that you now bleed red, white, and blue.

So what now? As soon as you step foot off the plane, you are no longer a U.S. citizen, but Uzbek. Your rights, your freedom of speech, your voice, your "I'm American—America will always save me, right?" no longer applies. I keep reading:

> Uzbekistan does not recognize dual nationality. It considers any dual national to be solely an Uzbek citizen. Thus, the ability of the U.S. Embassy to provide assistance to an American-Uzbek dual national in Uzbekistan may be limited.

The ability of the U.S. Embassy to provide assistance to an American-Uzbek dual national in Uzbekistan may be limited.

In other words: You're on your own, bud.

So you do not book the flight. You do not board the plane. You do not do the thesis originally as planned.

Instead, you tell yourself, "I'll get around to relinquishing the citizenship—I guess it isn't so urgent right now anyway."

Chapter 3

Living in Limbo

"Geography is a field that is more human than it used to be."

— Patrick J. Williams, humanities librarian at Syracuse University

***

There are 103 million people forcibly displaced worldwide.[7]

Consider this statistic for a moment. When was the last time you hiked 2,500 miles? Or even just 10? Have you ever boarded a rubber boat, unsure of where it will take you?

As we may have already learned from the Diversity Visa lottery and the countless emails to senators, much of the migration process is contingent on bureaucracy and luck. For many, this game of bureaucratic luck is—at most—a long, arduous headache with a light at the end of the tunnel. For others, it's the difference between life and death.

Whether it is U.S.-Mexico border, the Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama, or the Aegean Sea where Syrian refugees board boats from Turkey to Greece, the stories of less fortunate migration journeys are all around us.

***

Weaving through the streets of Plaka, mere steps from the Acropolis hill, it is easy to naively imagine that the bright pink cafes and narrow bookshops are the reality of Athens. When venturing just a 20-minute walk away from Plaka and toward Omonoia Square, it becomes clear that the marble columns and bustling tourist districts hide a darker history.

As we begin walking from Omonoia Square toward the direction of Viktoria Square, we discover an Athens vastly different than the one pictured in postcards. In these multicultural neighborhoods, we find more poverty, food vendors that cost 15% of what a meal in Plaka might, and dozens of NGO locations that offer support to the migrants living there.

Since the onset of the refugee crisis, the situation in Athens has improved as non-profits built more shelters to accommodate the influx of migrants flooding into Greece. But Vikoria Square, which is a bright and sunny park overtaken by pigeons during the day, had served as a more frightening meeting point by night for children living without papers.

A documentary detailing these experiences explains, "[Refugee minors in Athens] don't trust the legal family reunification process. They are, however, kept updated about their applications by NGO employees, who meet them unofficially. And in case the legal family reunification process doesn't get them out of Greece, they can always turn to the many smugglers in Athens… For these children, [Viktoria Square] is a dangerous waiting room for going further North."[8]

A journey of nearly 2,500 miles, Syrian refugees travel by bus, boat, train, and foot through seven or more countries on their route from Syria, through Turkey, across the Aegean Sea to Greece, and upward to Germany. They scrape together money through desperate means to pay smugglers, unsure of whether their boats will be intercepted or whether a bus will bring them to the safety of their next border or back to a desolate camp. Oftentimes, families are separated, and children are left unaccompanied, hoping for years to be reconnected with their parents.

But why are refugees so afraid of being taken to an asylum camp? For starters, these camps are often described as "prison-like," located in remote areas with 24/7 surveillance and barbed-wire fences.[9]

I had interviewed a representative[iv] from the Home Project, a non-profit organization that offers holistic child protection services and developmental support for unaccompanied refugee children in Greece. He said, "Some of our children have experienced a lot more trauma when they arrived to Greece [than during their journey here]. It is not easy being in a camp… Imagine a lot of people living in a camp without being able to move freely. It is like being in a jail. Right now, in the camps they don't have a lot of services in terms of psychological support."

Mehdi, a 23-year-old man from Afghanistan who was in a camp on Samos, echoed this sentiment: "You can only enter/exit between 8AM-8PM. When you arrive at the camp doors, one by one they let you inside, to the checkpoint where they check your phone, wallets, pockets, even the small pockets of your clothes. Then when you want to go inside you have to pass through doors with fingerprints." [10]

These refugees cite loneliness and a feeling of inhumanness while being distanced from the locals on the island.

*"*We refugees are not guilty criminals, we are human, we came here with hope," said Mehdi.

[iv] Unnamed for confidentiality due to the sensitive nature of the work of the Home Project.

A map depicting the routes of Syrian refugees

Escaping a war-torn country, these refugees seek a new place to call home. Unfortunately, finding a new home isn't so simple. Anti-immigrant rhetoric can be found all around the world, cultivating mindsets that paint refugees as dangerous job-takers and "terrorists" (ironic given they are the ones fleeing for safety).

A bill passed in Greece in 2021 designated just five countries as "unsafe": Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Somalia—all where most refugees originate.[11] In the same breath, this bill also designated Turkey a "safe third country," meaning that refugees who pass through Turkey before reaching Greece will be denied asylum in Greece on the grounds that Turkey could have offered similar protections. Unfortunately, for a year, Turkey had already been refusing to take back refugees who had already escaped to Greece.[12]

In my interview with the representative from the Home Project, my interviewee lamented that the bill creates an unjust black-and-white distinction on what constitutes a valid asylum case. He explained that many children are denied asylum from countries that are considered "safe," which consist of any others not listed among the five above.

"What about, for example, Iran?" he said. "We have cases of girls that left because they didn't want to marry as minors or they wanted an education," he said. "We have cases from LGBTQ communities. We have cases that are climate refugees." Because there is no direct threat of immediate violence, none of these are considered valid enough reasons for asylum by the Greek government.

The interviewee added that the same happens with African countries—the discrimination is not limited to just the Middle East. He explained that there are many African countries deemed "safe" even though they have intermittent civil conflicts or other case-by-case issues.

"We have a lot of girls leaving because of inhumane mutilation processes. There is also a lot of job exploitation for boys in African countries who work in mines. So, you can imagine we can have two cases from the same country but from totally different backgrounds."

My interviewee expressed that being granted asylum could even boil down to the biased opinions of the worker on the case who interviews the child that day.

"It's institutional racism," he summarized.

The reality is that all asylum cases are deeply individualized stories and should be treated as such. These seemingly arbitrary rules allow legislators to play God on which child's trauma is important enough to grant safe admission and the start to a new life.

And with the bill designating Turkey as a safe "Third Country," Greece could deny asylum to refugees who had passed through Turkey in transit to the European mainland and didn't file for asylum while in Turkey.[13]

***

Even when asylum is granted, the battle doesn't end there.

Katerina Voutsina's "Living for Years in a Transitory Home" is an expository case study that documents the obstacles refugees in Athens face. For example, although asylum seekers appear to have access to healthcare on paper, they are denied medical care without a Social Security Number. They also struggle to make ends meet—without having a permanent address, they have no Tax Registration Number, and therefore cannot be legally employed. Instead, they need to depend on humanitarian aid, including limited cash cards and daily meals from NGOs.

Volunteers offer language courses for refugees, but the quality of this education is often lacking, leaving refugees without the language skills necessary to attend schools or vocational training.[14]

Once released from the asylum camps, integration is just as difficult. A 26-year-old Iranian man recalls, "After being recognized as a refugee, so far, I have become familiar with a clear distinction between Greek asylum policies and other countries: in Greece, when you receive asylum, there is no further protection, and you have to go back to your own life. In other countries, when you receive a positive answer, you receive a home, and rights, and education, and so on. When they called me, and told me that my asylum result is positive, they insisted that all the rights of a Greek citizen would be given to me, such as the right to work, travel, and so on. But I waited for a year to get the passport (travel document), and I tried to find work for a long time up to now. I did not know the rights of a Greek citizen, but after a while, I came to know that I am abandoned with all my problems and have the right to die."[15]

To be an asylum seeker is to never quite have equal rights as citizens. To be a migrant is to never have the right to exist—not in peace, and certainly not like everybody else.

***

Those living at crossroads are often either shunned or fetishized. When we're not asked to "go back to your country," we are instead exoticized for our skin tone or the language we speak. Those at crossroads are those forced to grow up too quickly, to learn the intricacies of legal systems before they can even speak the language, and above all, to live a life at the mercy of the decisions and opinions of others.

Living at crossroads often means living in limbo—whether that limbo is biding the months until a visa email from the American government pops up in your mailbox or hiding in the invisible shadows of being undocumented in Athens.

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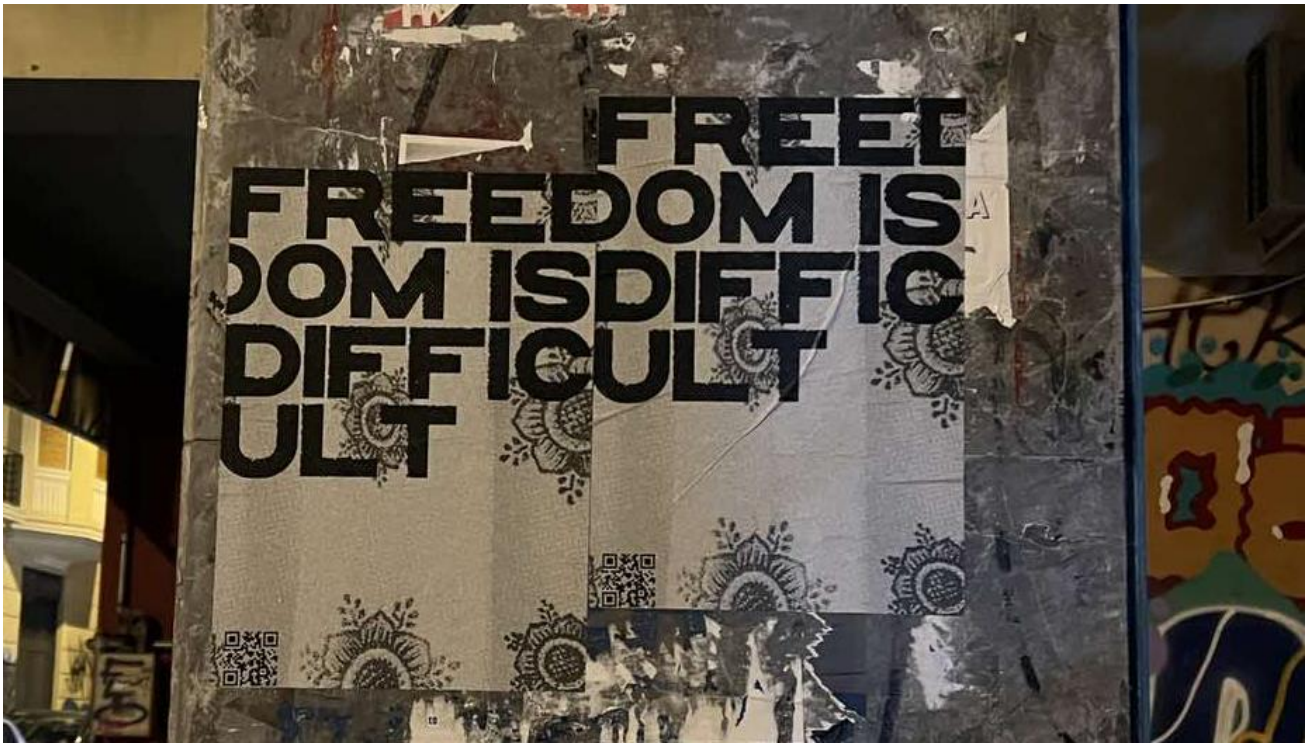

Graffiti / Art Display on the streets of Athens

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Exodus

By Thomasz Jastrun, translated from Polish by Daniel Bourne

In a great hurried march

They came with their everyday belongings

Children dogs laundry

The quarrelling blue and white china

Mickiewicz dying of cholera

Bound in a gilded spine

Uprising crossed on top of uprising

And at last their common heart

An ailing muscle

Propped up on a dirty pillow

They fled to the year two thousand

Toward the snow-covered peaks

At the food there had to be a trail

But they found no passage

Only one wall standing of a house

The gutted frame of a window

And it was then they saw

Their own backs were bent

Over the backs of other displaced people

And carried forth like a heavy cross

Chapter 4

Who Can Cross?

"Home is wherever feels safe because we live in an unsafe world."

— Vir Das, Indian comedian[16]

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In February 2022, 19 migrants froze to death in a Turkish town bordering Greece. Survivors and witnesses recalled that they were arrested upon crossing into Greece, stripped of their belongings, and detained for 2-3 days without food or water before being deported back into Turkey. That night, most of the group froze to death while resting, and the only survivors were those who kept walking until reaching Turkish police who provided them with food, warm clothing, and medical treatment.[17]

Protests quickly rallied in Istanbul following this event, with signs reading "Humanity has no borders." Similar protests occurred in Athens, with a banner urging the government to "Stop pushbacks, stop border violence."[18]

According to the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, "Pushbacks entail a variety of state measures aimed at forcing refugees and migrants out of their territory while obstructing access to applicable legal and procedural frameworks. In doing so, States circumvent safeguards governing international protection (including minors), detention or custody, expulsion, and the use of force."[19] In essence, pushbacks violate international law by depriving refugees of their right to seek asylum.

The following graffiti around Athens echoes similar sentiment as the protests, highlighting the remnants of unshakeable tensions between Greeks and asylum-seekers.

Athens graffiti that reads "Open borders for migrants. Stop neocolonialisms."

Athens graffiti that reads "4,082 people murdered at Greek border since '94. Stop pushbacks!"

Interestingly Greece and Turkey are known for their history of conflict and distaste for one another. And yet, the protestors of both countries could rally around the same cause: Stop pushbacks. End violence. Open borders.

***

I am at Istanbul's airport, fumbling to refill my water bottle as I hover it around the water fountain spout, searching for the sensor. A man, perhaps in his late 40s or early 50s, steps up to the fountain beside me.

"Like this," he says, seeing me struggling, and steps closer to his fountain. Water begins gushing out of the spout. The sensor is placed at the front to sense a body, not a bottle.

"Thank you!" I exclaim, stepping closer to the fountain and surprised to see water now flowing into my bottle.

"Where are you from?" the man asks me.

"New York," I give him my usual answer reserved for abroad. It's only half the truth.

"Oh, America!" he sighs. "I am from Kazakhstan. America is my dream." The chuckle that follows has an undertone of sadness, and the man walks away.

I wish to call him back, to tell him I lied, that I told only a half-truth—a quarter-truth even—to tell him that I'm from Uzbekistan, that I'm just like him, to ask for a re-do of the conversation in Russian, so I could tell him the truth and that there is hope for him too.

But before I process all of this, he is already long gone, and I am left with an uneasy feeling. What if I had told him otherwise? Responded in my mother tongue, and not in English?

Would we still be talking now? Would he return home with a newfound sense of hope that he'll win the Diversity Visa lottery, like I did? I'm sure he applies each year.

I return to my seat and consider all of this. Had the conversation gone a different route, would anything have changed all that much? We've already reviewed the stats – he has a 0.2% chance of winning the lottery, like I did. My parents were extremely lucky after a decade of applying.

Most of all, I feel guilty, even though I have no nameable reason to be. Who am I to play tourist in my home side of the world? To respond in English before Russian, in a country where Russian would be the inter-tourist default?

But likewise, who am I to respond in Russian? After 18 years in America, I am so distanced from the struggles of my people that I don't have the right to pretend that our experiences are still shared.

Or are they? After all, I'm still helping family members to apply for visas to America.

And besides, why can I move so easily across borders when he can't? We are not so different—why am I the one with the American passport? Who is on the other side of these decisions, dealing the cards on who does and doesn't get approved for a visa?

Turning these questions over in my mind, I am left more confused than ever before as to who I am and where is home, lost in thought of who can and can't afford to cross the Atlantic.

Chapter 5

Negotiations

"Historically, the coexistence of peoples of different languages and cultures is normal; or, rather, nothing is less common than countries inhabited exclusively by people of a single uniform language and culture."

— Eric Hobsbawm, British historian [20]

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"Oh, a sleeping drunkard
Up in Central Park,
And a lion-hunter
In the jungle dark,
And a Chinese dentist,
And a British queen--
All fit together
In the same machine.
Nice, nice, very nice;
Nice, nice, very nice;
Nice, nice, very nice--
So many different people
In the same device."

— Kurt Vonnegut, American writer, in *Cat's Cradle*[21]

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New York City may be the melting pot of the Americas, but Turkey takes the gold for being the melting pot of Eurasia. Istanbul, a city which straddles Europe and Asia, is a true blend of Eastern and Western culture.

When walking through the streets of Istanbul, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish local from tourist. The Ottoman Empire once spanned three continents, with dozens of ethnicities and multiple religions living under the same dominion. “The Ottoman Empire had been characterized by a spirit of cosmopolitanism; by ethnic, linguistic and religious mixture and interchange,” wrote scholar Kevin Robins.[22] This continuous exchange led the Ottoman Empire to not only be one of the most diverse in history, but also, the most powerful.

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“There is really no such thing as a typical Turk,” says the tour guide as we weave through the alleyways just outside of the Grand Bazaar. He explains that Turks have all sorts of skin tones and hair. “For example, some might look a lot more Greek because of their genetics.”

Beyond the diverse range of ethnic origins, Turks likewise have a wide scale of commitment to religious practices, like prayer, alcohol consumption, and headwear. This integration of Eastern and Western attitudes about religious expression is due not only to Turkey’s history as a crossroads but also the decision in 1937 to formally become a secularized state, even though the large majority of the country is Muslim. Turkey is often celebrated for being a bridge between the European West and the Middle East, allowing beliefs originating from both to coexist in Istanbul, but whether it is in harmony or in a state of collision varies greatly depending on the extent to which these beliefs passively coexist or actively conflict.

"You may notice that women can wear anything they want," the guide notes, motioning to a few women wearing headscarves and a few others without them. Since the secularization, headscarves had been at the forefront of controversy in Turkey, with debate over whether legislation should ban the headscarf in certain public sectors of education and work. But for the most part, people in Turkey retain flexibility regarding the extent of their religious expression.

The dichotomy is similarly evident through the religious rituals and knowledge of Turks about Islam. Turkey secularized their language to replace Arabic, though the country remains of Islamic heritage. Turkish Muslims pray five times a day, and yet, most Turks don't know Arabic or how to read the Quran. In fact, only 1.2% of the population speaks Arabic.[23] As explained by my tour guide, many followers of Islam in Turkey merely memorize the prayers.

Some consider this dynamic to be the dissonance between tradition and modernity. Others consider it a mismatch between Eastern and Western culture. Both are at play, but they are not to be conflated as the same. Eastern doesn't necessarily mean traditional, just as Western doesn't always mean modern.

Nevertheless, recent government efforts by Turkey's president—"The Tall Man," as our tour guide referred to him—have taken strides to reverse some of Turkey's modernization and bring it back to its religious roots.

"Luckily for you, you can visit the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque free!" The tour guide explains that both mosques had been converted into ticketed museums for a while, but the new president has made them free again to encourage regular prayer there. The Hagia Sophia was originally built as an Eastern Orthodox Church until the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, when it was then converted into a mosque, representing the wax-and-wane of culture in its very

architecture. During Ottoman rule, the Blue Mosque was also constructed. In 1935, the mosques were opened as museums, and they were only recently converted back for open prayer in 2020. For some, this decision is a welcome embrace of tradition; for others, it's too far of a step back into history.

Many Turkish residents also drink alcohol, which is unusual in many countries of Islamic origins. Unfortunately, alcohol has grown more and more expensive—not only because of the country's inflation, but also because of a tax implemented to discourage alcohol consumption. The rule works—even the tour guide says he goes out less now because it's become too pricey to drink.

In "The Identity of Turkey: Muslim and Secular," Ayla Göl describes the nature of Muslim identity: "Muslim identity is not merely religious, but is an historical political marker and part of collective identity… the public visibility of Islam usually functioned through ambivalence, which allowed a crossover between Islam and modernity and between secular and religious practices and identities… therefore, the assumed clash of secular and Muslim identities is misleading. The real struggle is not between pious and secular Turks. The fundamental problem that underlies the conflict is the power struggle between the AKP [a conservative party] and the secular establishment during the consolidation of democracy in Turkey…The sociological and historical experience of Turkey shows that secularism and democracy mutually reinforce each other in a Muslim context."[24]

Sometimes, coexistence ends in disagreement. Sometimes, in war. But other times, to coexist means to interact, and through this interaction, to accept (even begrudgingly). Not only can seemingly contradictory identities coexist, but they can even enhance each other in novel ways when each culture respects the other. In this case, to coexist means to learn from values,

beliefs, and ideas that may differ from our own. It is possible to find value in "colliding" beliefs by adopting unique perspectives on what differing beliefs can teach us about ourselves, the world around us, and above all, about what we still may not know.

In fact, "Renato Rosaldo[25] has argued that we need to move away from the tacit assumption 'that conflates the notion of culture with the idea of difference' and towards an alternative notion of culture as productive… what has prevented the development of a view of culture as production is a particular (modern) logic of individuality."[26] In other words, scholars like Rosaldo suggest that productivity can arise in the collaboration between cultures—that by limiting cultures to individual differences, we stagnate the development of progress and ideas, which arise as a result of evolution of cultures through their interaction with each other. In Turkey, these so-called "differences" are really a productive intersection of a multitude of ideas, handpicked from the East and West, from tradition and modernity, from the past and present, allowing Turkey to transform into a future culture that may differ from its own culture now.

Interestingly, Turkey has long sought entry into the European Union, and for many years, the E.U. has denied the request, citing human rights violations, deficits in rule of law, economics, and geopolitical reasons. In addition, there is often reference to the national identity of Turkey, usually with regard to Turkey being a predominantly Muslim country, despite its secularization. In "Interrupting Identities," Robins explained that "What is invoked is the 'uncertainty of identity' within Turkey: 'There appears to be some considerable doubt even among Turks of similar socio-economic background as to the exact nature of the country and its people'[27] In this case, it is what seems equivocal in Turkish culture that is so unsettling for Europe. Turkey is seen as 'an in-between place.'[28]"[29] Arguably, this "in-between place" offers a unique value of its own.

Still, as put by another scholar, Zafer §enocak, there is the belief that "a Turk reads the Koran, he doesn't go to the opera,"[30] pointing to the cultural bias that Turkey faces because of its Islamic roots. In this statement, we also see the misleading perception that "European culture" can be defined by going to the opera, a cultural token only of the elite European minority and not necessarily representative of European lower-middle class culture, or even all of the refugees and immigrants who live there now. Perceived culture is sometimes that which is written by the elite, and the nuanced layers of a region's culture may differ greatly from the one on display.

***

Turkey is a fascinating case study of cultural patterns and the evolution of a state of both coexistence and productivity in daily life—of a religion existing without the language that usually follows, of the women wear or do not wear a headscarf walking side-by-side, of a mosque that was once a church. Yet, these snapshots may not tell the full story. When we zoom out from these fragments of peace—when politics rears its ugly face—we see the darker side of coexistence.

Existing at crossroads rarely comes with ease. Like a crystal lake reflecting the sky, it is difficult to see what lies beneath the surface until we dive in. Below the mirage of a singular body, there are countless living beings seeking a place of their own within the diverse ecosystem. We all know a small disruption can collapse an ecosystem—so what happens when this disruption is the push of a group away from its home?

Although the Ottoman Empire was characterized by an unprecedented cultural diversity, the coexistence of such identities hasn't always been smooth sailing. On multiple occasions, it had instead resulted in resentment for ethnicities that threaten the unity of the nation through

desired autonomy. The "Turkish state that emerged out of its collapse was fundamentally opposed to such pluralism of identity. It resolved to build a nation without minorities, which it did first through exclusion - the Armenian massacres (1915), the exchange of populations with Greece (1923) - and subsequently through cultural assimilation and integration."[31]

In the 1915 Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire during World War I, paramilitaries massacred close to a million Armenians, defending the systemic killings and deportations by claiming Armenian protesting "betrayed" the empire, when the real goal was to reduce the population enough to prevent Armenians from ever achieving independence. Fearing further dissent and the inevitable global backlash, the genocide has been prohibited in Turkish public discourse and suppressed in historical accounts, leading to a mass cover-up and lack of accountability.[32]

Since then, a similar suppression has occurred with the Kurdish people, another group seeking to find their place in a region they had called home for decades.

We are standing outside of the bookshop street while the local guide describes the political conflicts that eclipse Turkey. Suddenly, his voice grows quieter, to a near whisper. We all lean in closer, curious about the secret he would uncover for us. The natural next topic of the political talk would be the tensions between the Kurds and Turks.

"I have to be careful what I say out here. Once, I was giving a tour, and I simply said the word 'Kurdish,' and police showed up to interrogate me. I guess someone must have overheard and reported me. We will talk about it later on the tour in a safe place."

We nod attentively, and the guide resumes discussions about Turkey's president, "The Tall Man," instead. An hour later, we find ourselves outside of a small kebab shop, and the guide whisks us inside.

"This kebab shop is run by Kurdish guys," he tells us. "We are safe to talk here." The two Kurdish owners behind the counter nod kindly at us.

There, the guide explains the repression of the Kurdish ethnic group within Turkey, which denies their very existence. It's a vicious cycle that breeds more violence. Repressed Turks protest for independence, which only causes the Turkish government to crack down more.

Later, I learned that the words "Kurd," "Kurdistan," and "Kurdish" were all banned by the Turkish government, and our tour guide was actually lucky—he could have faced far more serious consequences than a brief interrogation by the police. Citizens of Turkey who outwardly speak the Kurdish language are arrested and subject to be imprisoned.

Existing at crossroads is often complicated by state actors. Like we've seen a number of times in history, governments can decide a group is no longer welcome or recognized in the span of a changing tide—a single signature on a document signed, a declaration of war made, a policy passed.

Is it possible to erase an identity through silence alone? How do you prove you belong when you can't even say who you are?

***

Malik Bulut's "Connection" on display in Istanbul's Basilica Cistern

"The work designed for the Basilica Cistern represents the abstract bonds between the layers of time. Emerging as symbols in Istanbul's memory, the chains represent multiculturalism, cultural layers, freedom and captivity."

Chapter 6

The In-Between

"I'm too Indian for the West but too Western for India"

— Vir Das, Indian comedian[33]

***

Those of us who find ourselves in such a space, at the crossroads of two (or a multitude of) cultures, find it challenging identifying specifically with any given one. Instead, they occupy another space, a "third" space, that draws on elements from all the cultures that shaped them. These individuals are oftentimes Third Culture Kids. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "The 'third culture' to which the term refers is the mixed identity that a child assumes, influenced both by their parents' culture and the culture in which they are raised."[34]

For example, my upbringing in the U.S. meant the reconciliation of American culture with the Soviet[v] culture of my parents. In some ways, I uphold many of my family's behaviors—I don't whistle indoors for fear of losing money, instinctively take my shoes off at the door, drink tea by the gallon, and tap eggs on Orthodox Easter[vi]. On the other hand, I've also adopted many American-style behaviors—I thrift shop regularly, I split the check at dinner, I'll openly debate politics, and I don't believe that sour cream belongs on pancakes.[vii]

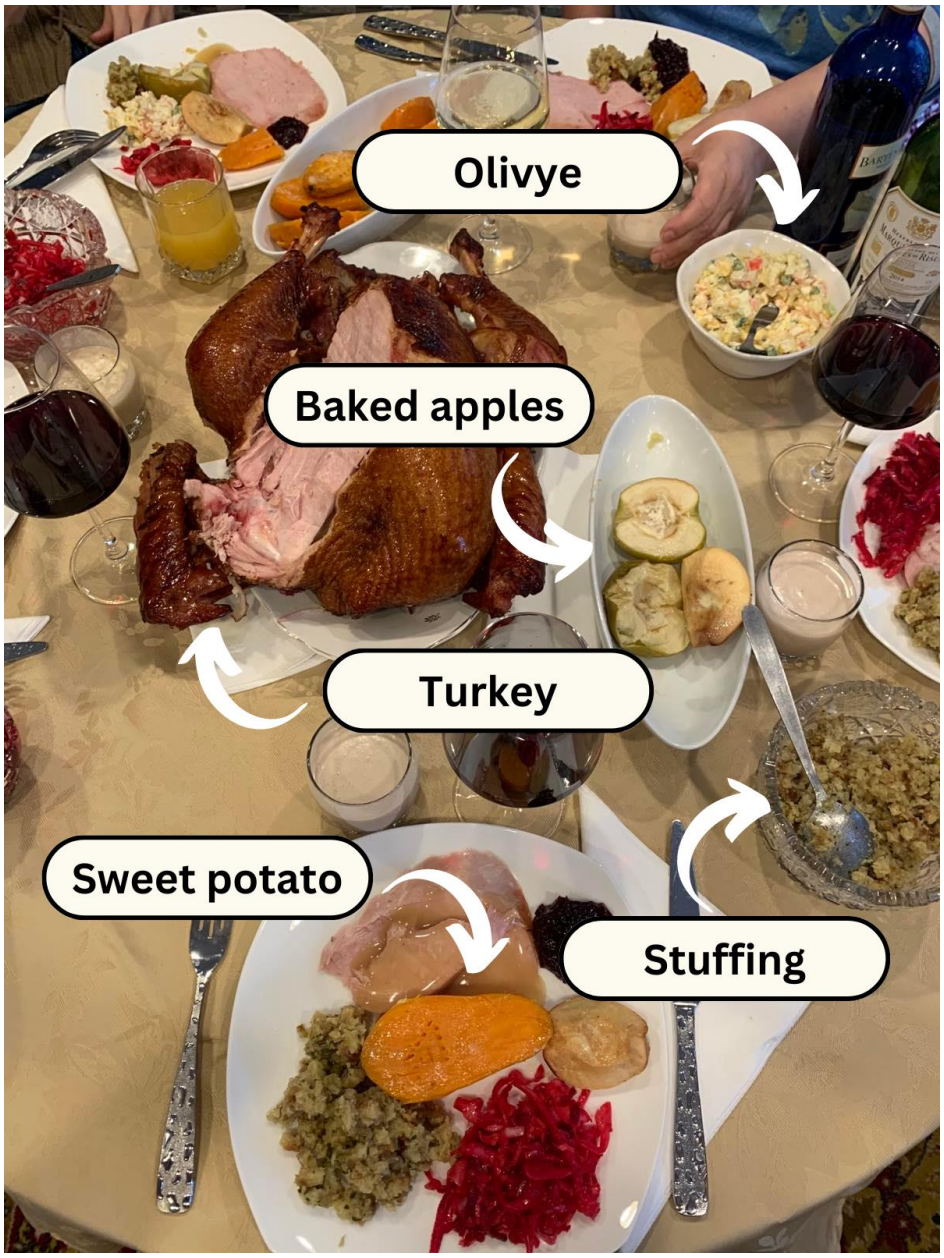
[v] Soviet, in this case, is in reference to the culture of those raised either during or shortly after the Soviet era in any country that had once been a part of the Soviet Union.
[vi] Egg tapping is a tradition where you take the pointed end of your boiled egg and knock it against the pointed end of someone else's. The winner is the one whose eggshell doesn't crack.
[vii] My relatives would disagree.

There are, however, still gaps in this definition. How many of the differences are cultural, and how many are differences between generations? Are my parents' superstitions and distaste surrounding thrifting generational, cultural, or a combination of both?

Scholar Bic Ngo explained that "The culture clash discourse emphasizes the differences between first-generation (parents) and second-generation (youth). This dichotomy results in a preoccupation with the intergenerational conflict where arguments that immigrant youth and adults have over clothes or dating restrictions are construed to be clashes between the traditional values of immigrant parents versus modern values of youth who are influenced by contemporary U.S. practices."[35] In other words, the clash between beliefs of immigrant parents and their American-raised children is often assumed to be purely cultural, when often, it is the interaction between both divergence in culture *and* in generation.

And how do we account for the changes in my parents during their time living in the U.S. for 20 years? Surely, they are also not the same people they had been prior to arriving. I *know* they're not because they've begun to compliment my thrift store finds more than critique them for being a bad omen.[viii] How do we explain the fact that my parents celebrate Thanksgiving but cook olivye[ix] and baked mayonnaise apples alongside our sweet potatoes and cranberry sauce? What do we call this, if not being a Third Culture Kid?

[viii] Certain Slavic families discourage thrifting under the belief that it can lead to bad luck if the owner of the clothing item is deceased.
[ix] A Russian salad



A typical Thanksgiving meal at my household, featuring both American and Slavic food

Since the definition of Third Culture Kid is not broad enough to encompass these nuances, we must expand our understanding of what it means to exist as an immigrant at crossroads. Ngo suggested that identity is a "continuous process of change and negotiation," and

that “In order to account for the complexity of immigrant students’ and families’ experiences, and the ever-changing nature of culture and identity, we need to move beyond discrete understandings of culture and identity as good/bad, traditional/modern, us/them.”[36]

Ngo echoed another scholar, Homi K. Bhabha, who nudged our understanding of cultural identity toward being an “in-between” that allows this constant change, reconstruction, and existence in evolving spaces. This is in line with other discourse seeking to redefine cultural identity. Stuart Hall, a leading cultural theorist, explained that “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.”[37]

Cultural identity is not a state of being we are born with, nor subject to the country we grew up in as children. I envision it as a borderless puzzle—for the puzzle to make sense, there will always be a central core that begins the image. But over a lifetime, we can continue adding and removing “negotiable” pieces along the edges that adjust the final image. The puzzle is never complete. In our travels, conversations, and relationships, we discover new pieces that build out an image we like more and more. And always, there will be the unpredicted—pieces you can’t find and pieces that must stay, try as you might to remove them (such as those imposed upon us by others and those where how we are perceived intimately influence how we perceive ourselves).

Like a “Choose Your Own Adventure” novel, the core narrative is unwavering, but the final outcomes can wildly differ based on the choices we make. To have culture—to have identity—we must have framework. What is up to us is the negotiation between what is expected of us and who we ultimately choose to become.

***

// where are you from? //

"I was not born here,"

I must sometimes remind people

when I ask them to take their shoes off at my door,

to not jump on the bed in "outside" clothes,

to put on tapachki, so their feet aren't cold on the kitchen floor.

I am from

baked apples with mayonnaise at Thanksgiving,

from

cold summer soup when it is 85 degrees,

from

boiled pelmeni,

even though I like fried dumplings more,

from

small family dinners

because we don't have enough relatives in this country

for big ones,

from

all my cousins are toddlers

and live miles away,

from

Green Card lottery

from

“Can you help us write this email to the governor?

It’s for your aunt’s visa,”

from

“My uncle studied to be a diplomat,

but in America he’s just a truck driver.”

I am from

evil eye bracelets around my wrist

but not the commercialized ones

they sell in Namaste stores—

the real ones, blessed in a church.

I am not from

black cats

or walking under ladders

or stepping on a crack.

I am from

“Always take one rose out from the dozen

when you’re giving flowers

because even number bouquets

are for funerals.”

I am from

“Blin sasha,

Don’t whistle indoors.

You will lose money,”

from

“Don’t sit on the cold ground,

or you won’t have children.”

from

“If my birthday is on Monday,

I’ll wait a week to celebrate the Saturday after, not before.

Before is bad luck.”

I am from

“America is strange.

What’s the point of sleepovers?

You have your own bed.”

from

“We’ll meet their family later—

it’s hard to speak English, you know?”

from

“Don’t go to the protest—

you might get lined up and shot.”

from

"Aleksandra, ne poslushnaya doch ti nasha."[x]

I am from

"Back home,

we already learned this math by 6th grade."

from

Immigrants aren't raised with college savings funds.

from

"Remember—you need to get a full ride."

from

"Sasha, but don't take so many AP classes,

You're killing yourself"

from

"Sasha, you need to spend more time with the family"

from

America is different,

and times are too—

you cannot expect success here

without the death sentence that goes with it.

from

when I went to kindergarten,

we were still sleeping on someone else's couch,

[x] "Aleksandra, our daughter who doesn't listen to us"

from

"And why are you so worried about money?"

from

"We made it. We're here.

You can rest now."

I am from

"When will your boyfriend learn Russian?"

from

"Zaika, you're losing the language—

How will your grandmother speak to your children?"

from

"Ne ruskaya nasha,[xi]

Say it again in Russian."

I have been here for decades—

this feels most like home.

But I was not born here.

I am not from here.

[xi] "Our non-Russian"

***

"And these guilt-free people, speaking English at work but German at home, built not only successful businesses, most strikingly in Indianapolis and Milwaukee and Chicago and Cincinnati, but their own banks and concert halls and social clubs and gymnasia and restaurants, and mansions and summer cottages, leaving the Anglos to wonder, with good reason, I have to say, 'Who the hell's country *is* this anyway?'"

— Kurt Vonnegut, American writer, in *A Man without a Country* [38]

***

My friend, Melting Pot Boy (MPB), speaks six languages: English, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, German, and Italian. He is German-Brazilian, born and raised in Brazil, but with blonde hair and blue eyes very unlike any other Brazilian he knows. He attended college in Russia and is now studying in Italy, where I currently am. I'm referring to him as Melting Pot Boy because, well, his very existence is a melting point of culture.

"You know why I think we get along so well?" MPB asks me.

"Why?" I reply.

"It's like… you don't feel American at first, you know? Like you fit right in here. Your style, your accent, how you act—you seem very European," he begins, and I wonder where this is going. "But at the end of the day, you're American. You have the sophistication of Europeans, but you're not really like them."

Now, I wonder if I should be offended. From my experience, the label of "American" carries the weight of insult in Europe.

"Um… what is that supposed to mean?"

"I never feel like I fully fit in with Europeans here," MPB continues. "But with you, I can relate. American culture and Brazilian culture are a lot closer in heart."

"How so?"

"We're both cultures who know how to have fun."

"Are you saying Europeans don't know how to have fun?"

"No! I mean, they're just more… conservative. You know what I mean. Americans and Brazilians have a certain energy."

Although the compliment (can I even call it that?) is for something that was entirely out of my control (I didn't choose to be a Slavic immigrant in America), I still feel touched. MPB was right. I would never have been able to pinpoint it myself, but his observation was true.

"So are you saying it's good I'm American?"

"Yeah."

"Funny—most Europeans look down on that."

"They look down on Brazilians too."

Why do I feel touched? Perhaps it is because somebody had been able to see the American-European conflict within me and interpret it not as the curse of not fitting in but instead as the gift of adaptability—that somebody abroad saw being American not as a fatal flaw to be condemned, but rather celebrated.

“Fair enough,” I finally say. There’s no feeling quite like the camaraderie of being the odd foreigner out.

***

“Wherever the vagabond goes, he is a stranger; he can never be 'the native', the 'settled one', one with 'roots in the soil. '”

— Zygmunt Bauman, Polish sociologist[39]

***

Our identity is inherently shaped by the people we interact with. By broadening this circle of interaction, we extend the possibilities for who we can become. In fact, it is even possible to argue that we don’t unlock our full potential *until* we interact with people different than ourselves. It is only through exposure to different perspectives that we can understand what ideas our own value systems lack.

Robins poses a question, “What would an identity mean in isolation? Isn't it only through the others that we become aware of who we are and what we stand for? We must consider identities in terms of the experience of relationships: what can happen through relationships, and what happens to relationships.”[40]

It is through these relationships—these moments of cultural collision, interaction, enlightenment—that we learn more about ourselves, and in turn, about the world.

Chapter 7

Intentional Travel

"Peculiar travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God."

— Kurt Vonnegut, American writer, in *Cat's Cradle*[41]

***

Let's begin by defining tourists, travelers, and residents.

A tourist is one who is temporary, who is just stopping by, who dines out instead of grocery shopping, who visits the "must-see" over the course of days instead of months, who sleeps in the hotel or Airbnb rather than signing a lease, however brief that lease may be.

A resident is one who has lived there for years, who views this city as their home base, who is a regular at some bar or café, who works without a visa, who has favorite furniture inside their home.

A traveler occurs in the in-between, once again. It is one who dines with the locals, who stays anywhere from over two weeks to under three years, who could study or work with visa, whose visit moves beyond the travel guides, who has a go-to grocery aisle, who walks without aim but still does not consider this city home.

Tourism falls under the umbrella term of traveling, but not all travelers are tourists. A tourist consumes, whereas a traveler engages. My goal is to be a traveler whenever possible, and whenever it is not, to infuse elements of traveling into tourism and to urge others to do the same.

***

When the sun sets and storefronts are pulled shut, the profound tensions in Athens can be felt through graffiti painting the metal shutters of storefront security doors, such as the following one:

Athens graffiti that reads "Migrants welcome. Tourists go home."

As travelers, how are we to interpret this kind of messaging? Tourism, which contributes to 10% of the world's global economy,[42] can be an opportunity to learn about new cultures and cultivate meaningful cross-cultural relations while stimulating local business growth. Should be a win-win for everybody, right?

Unfortunately, careless tourism can do more harm than good. It can damage environments and lead to the commercialization, exploitation, and disregard of local culture and traditions. So what can tourists do to travel more mindfully and more genuinely immerse themselves in local communities?

Consider how you would play tourist in your own hometown—what does the "Top 10 City Sights" on TripAdvisor recommend? But as a resident, what would *you* recommend? Surely, this list isn't the same. Would you recommend the overcrowded restaurant with mediocre food or the local mom-and-pop diner where you talked for an hour with the owner at the bar? Assuming it's the latter, you can imagine that diner wouldn't make it to a top 10 list—most people barely know it exists.

What I most treasure about the places I've been are spots that never made it to the first page of Google. Discovering these spots begins with a little bit of conversation with residents and a lot of desire to go off the beaten path.

***

"Ready?" my friend turns the keys in the ignition and moves the stick shift into first gear.

"Ready," I say. Today, a local friend I made in Italy and I are road tripping to Monte Baldo for a hike. As we are weaving through roads of open fields, the landscapes change. Soon, we are winding upward in elevation and reach a crossroad of our own.

With the trailhead no more than 30 minutes away, we notice a strange sign veering to the right into an unpaved road, which is not visible in this Google Maps capture from 2011 but located in the same spot.

Curious, we decided to stray from our original path and explore. Driving precariously down this path, we eventually reached another sign, reading “Benvenuti a Piagù.”

Where are we? I wondered, as we approached closer and saw a carved wooden Jesus at the edge of the world.

As we parked and stepped out of the car, we were eagerly greeted by the resident farm dog, shortly followed by a “Ciao!” The man explained they are a community living independently. Free from technology and the hustle-bustle of city life, they grow and make all of their own food. The intention is to bring together a close-knit community that is back in touch with their natural roots, living off the land. The man eagerly welcomed us to explore the property, meet their animals, and see their crops.

After petting a few of the goats, I wandered over to the field to greet a cow. For 10 minutes, the cow and I inched closer to each other, each equally fearful of the other. Eventually,

we were close enough for the cow to nibble on my offering of dried grass. In that moment, I felt deeply trusting of this animal, these people, this place. I felt what I imagine this community must feel every day: a sense of peace and of closeness to the Earth and other living things.

As we walked back to the living quarters, a smiling woman offered to cut us some samples of their cheese, made from the same goats and cows we had been interacting with. She graciously poured us samples of liqueurs made from various herbs and flowers on the premises, which tasted better than any I had tasted before. Armed with homemade cheeses and herbal liqueurs, we eventually finished the day with our intended hike, and this day remains my favorite experience of Florence.

As I continued with the rest of that week, I replayed the day, treasuring and inspecting it closely in hope of reigniting the same feeling I had atop that hilly road in Piagù. I wondered

often what their daily lives are like. What do they do in the absence of phones and work and hasty living? They must converse and bond, reflect and write, tend to the land and reconnect with their faiths. This appreciation for simple, connected living is something I hope to keep with me as the years pass. Had I not taken the road less traveled, met people unlike myself, I would have never had this experience.

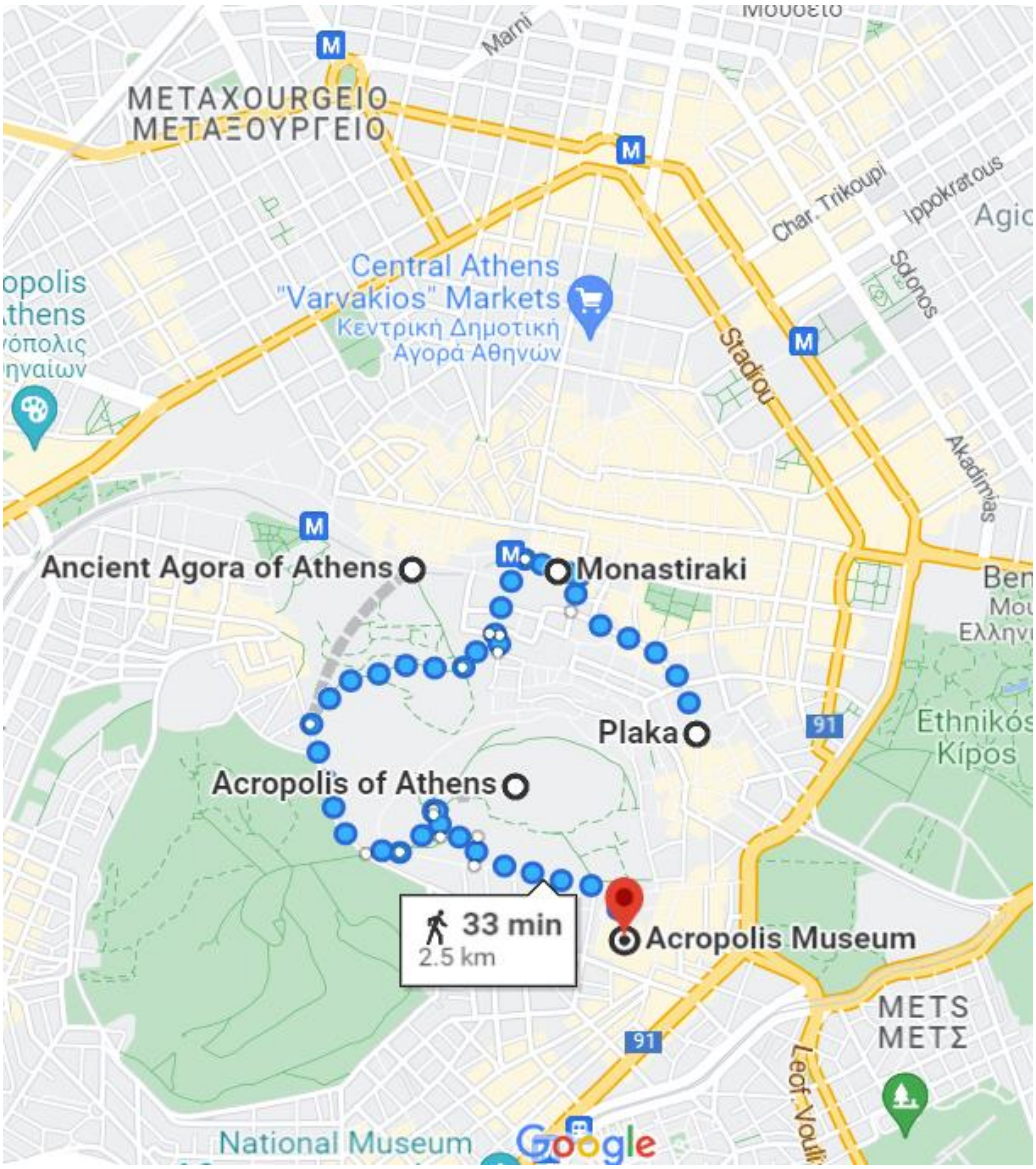
Students studying abroad have the unique opportunity to be travelers. Yet, too often, this experience is diluted by a unique phenomenon, different than the dilution of tourism. Many American study abroad students arrive with no knowledge of the language, which isn't inherently the problem; the problem is not attempting to practice when given this once-in-a-lifetime immersion opportunity. Likewise, it is a lost travel opportunity when students return to the same English-speaking bars each week, packed with other Americans, including the same ones they arrived with. The experience, in this case, becomes not one of travel—nor of tourism—but of never leaving home at all, even when halfway across the world.

I've learned it's valuable to find a local spot. To start conversation. To learn enough of the native tongue to make an effort. To join a local workshop, such as a cooking or dance class. To befriend someone with a car who can take me outside of the city, or to rent a car of my own. It is important to not just visit "attractive" cities like Venice and Amalfi but instead that random small town or farm I accidentally zoom in on while scanning a map. Most of all, I've learned it is important to be open—you never know who you can meet, where you might go, or which experiences you end up having.

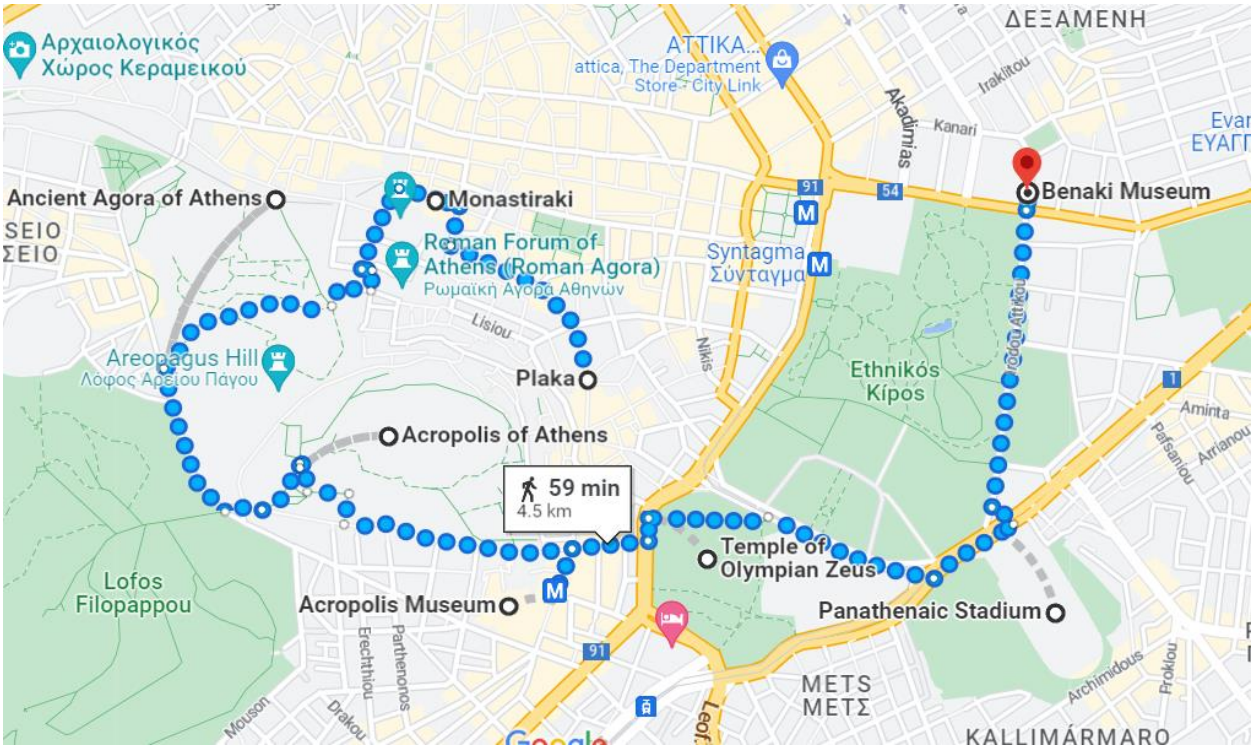
***

Let's consider the traditional route of a suggested two-day itinerary in Athens (which, for the record, is never enough time to truly get to know a place—two days in a city is the equivalent of skimming the inside flap of a book, but hey, you have to work with the time you got, right?)

In this suggested itinerary, visitors wander around the Acropolis and the surrounding cutesy tourist town of Plaka.

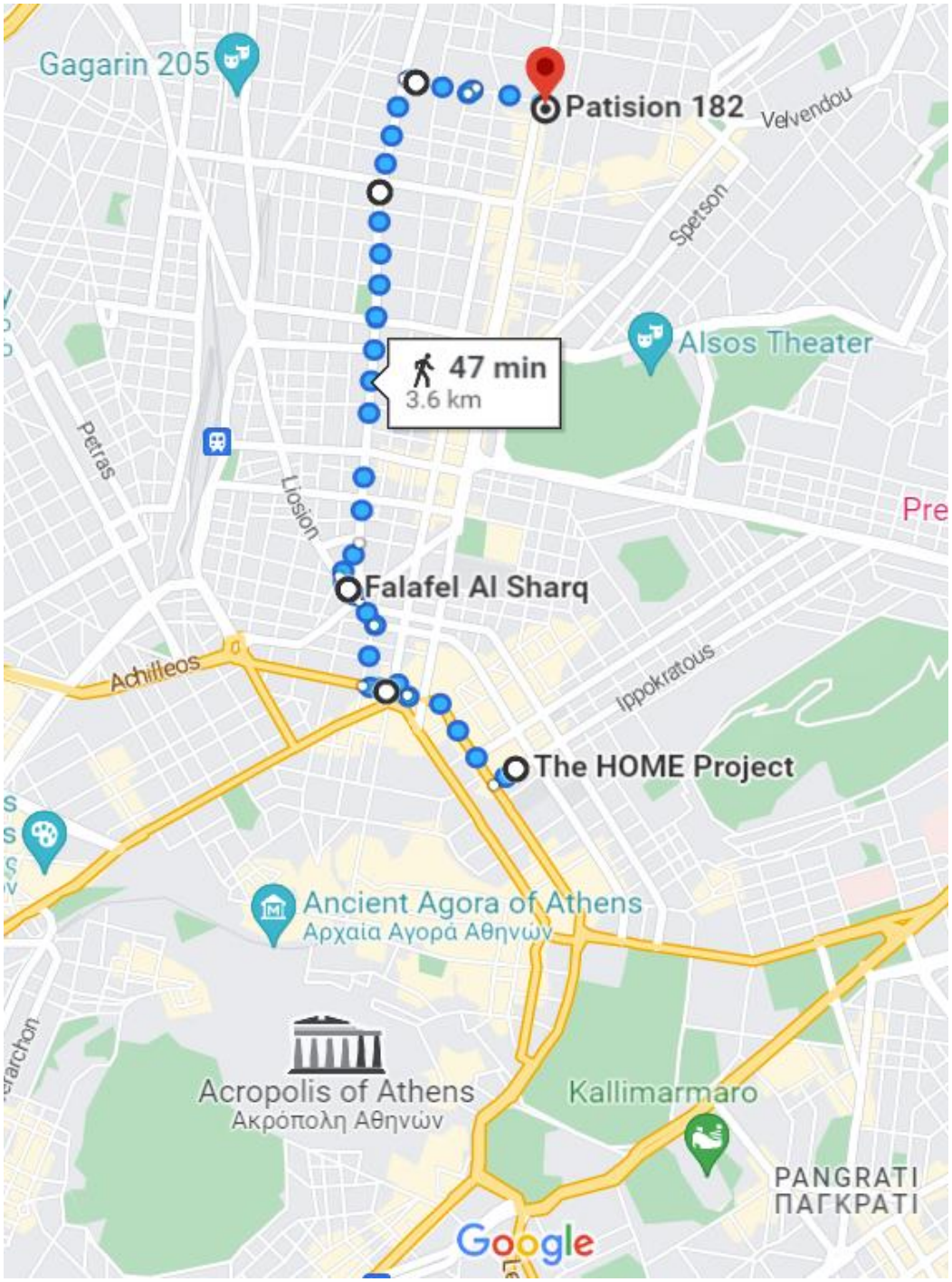


When the itinerary expands to four days, visitors see more ruins, a museum or two, and a day trip *out* of Athens to the shore.



It is worthwhile noting that nearly all suggested restaurants are in the Plaka area. With this itinerary, tourists are guaranteed to witness the marble remains of history, a robust meal of dolmades and moussaka, and a scattering of boutique shops with flowy dresses and miniature statues of Greek gods.

Predictably, the locals aren't buying mini statues, so with only four days in Athens, I decided to dedicate a day stepping into the shoes of a different kind of non-native to Athens: an immigrant. When I say immigrant, I don't mean myself—I mean the immigrants of Athens, perhaps some of the same ones we discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Here is a route I dedicated a day to, inspired by a guide on the Athens of Refugees and Immigrants by Rando Wagner, founder of project One Human Race.[43]



The further and further I strayed from the Athens we know from postcards, the more honest Athens became, revealing that beneath its glimmering columns, there is a city with real poverty, real community, and real people. There are immigrant-owned shops lining entire streets, all from different countries, and all for lower prices. There are likewise fewer English speakers.

Before I entered Falafel Al Sharq, I peeked inside to scope out the menu, written only in Greek and Arabic. Earlier that day, I had scoured the internet to find a photo of their menu in an online review and plugged the photo into Google Translate, so I knew what I'd be ordering. No English on the menu: confirmed. Next glancing to the prices then to the food on display, I knew this would be a good meal.

I nodded at the workers as I stepped inside and began to order in broken Greek, pointing at dishes when I could, and nodding when they asked "With everything?" for my pita wrap, even though I was unsure what "everything" entailed.

After ordering, I floated to the cash register and attempted to pay but was waved away to sit down instead. Waiting as they prepared the food, my eyes wandered around the small place, landing on a little fridge in the corner. I scurried over to pick out something I hadn't tried before and popped a glass container of guava juice out of the fridge, bringing it over to my table. Within moments, a worker appeared with foil-wrapped pita and a plate with falafel and a dollop of hummus.

Ravenous, I scarfed down the meal quickly. The workers, who spoke minimal English, watched happily. I tried to ask how late they are open, but we struggled to understand each other, with me fumbling for an online translation and the workers earnestly shaking their head. A local Greek sitting nearby kindly translated our responses for each other in the end.

Eventually, I went up to pay, and they simply continued smiling. It was clear they didn't get many English-speakers (or tourists generally) popping by on this side of town, so they were unsure how to communicate with me. Yet, they still welcomed my visit with open arms.

The experience was in stark contrast to other restaurants in Plaka with flourishing performances, extravagant prices, and perfect English speakers. The real Athens is not the same as the ones we see on travel brochures—places rarely are.

By engaging with Athens, rather than merely consuming it, I discovered new experiences that offered me a more nuanced understanding of the city, and more importantly, a deeper connection to its heart and people.

***

"As life itself turns into an extended tourist escapade, as tourist conduct becomes the mode of life and the tourist stance grows into the character, it is less and less clear which one of the visiting places is the home."

— Zygmunt Bauman, Polish sociologist[44]

***

At this point, a reader like yourself might be wondering if it's worth all the trouble: *Sasha, I don't want to spend months on Duolingo leading up to my vacation. Your itineraries sound like too much work. And how do you expect me to make a new friend in a foreign country?*

Good. If you feel like the plan that's brewing in the corners of your mind is challenging or nerve racking, that means it's the right plan.

In an increasingly globalizing world, it is important to combat divisiveness and misunderstanding by celebrating differences and seeking to learn from our fellow global citizens. It doesn't matter whether you grew up without ever leaving a suburbia bubble town or you were already forced into crossroads through your multicultural background—the learning does not end. There are 195 countries and over 3,800 cultures in the world: you could dedicate a lifetime to cultural immersion and still not experience them all in full.

Challenging ourselves to think critically about culture, difference, and behavior is the first step in becoming a global citizen who can play a role in forming bridges between people and nations. "Globalization, I want to suggest, must always begin at home. A just measure of global progress requires that we first evaluate how globalizing nations deal with 'the difference within' – the problems of diversity and redistribution at the local level," explained Bhaba in "The

Location of Culture." By internally pushing the boundaries of our identity puzzles, we naturally begin to share what we learn with others and continue the cycle of cross-cultural exchange.

***

As our time spent contemplating the ins and outs of cross-cultural communication draws to a close, I will leave you with a final story about what it means to be more than just a tourist in a foreign place, to transform culture shock into a learning experience, and to find home—once again—in everywhere you go.

***

In the Grand Socco of Tangier, Morocco, the world bustles with men selling spices, locals bartering produce, and tourists slinking through dimly lit shops. In the crowded maze of the neighboring Socco streets, there are raw fish stands and stray white cats and little boys that catcall light-skinned women without headscarves. When travelers exit the web of markets, restaurant owners stalk the main plaza with menus. "Hello, friend!" they shout in thick accents, "Would you like to eat?" There are old women on crumbling stairs, who feed the cats that bounce between café chairs and garbage cans. There are cannabis-scented men, who answer questions for lost visitors, then plead for spare change. There are children with dirt on their knees and mischievous laughs, who drink mint tea to fill their much-too-skinny waists. There are vendors and beggars, the hopeful and brave, desperate believers of maybe-tomorrow-will-be-better and today-isn't-so-bad.

In the brief few days I spent at Tangier, I was with Elliott—a boy I had met while abroad in Spain that I grew close with whilst traveling. We had bonded over our hunger to explore and the meaningful conversations we would have in doing so, whether it was while squeezing

through a robust flea market crowd or perching atop a rural overlook on a sunny afternoon. It was never about the time, place, or circumstance—it was what we made of it.

Nevertheless, we had quickly grown restless traveling Spanish town to town and were looking for a change in pace—unfamiliar language, non-European streets, a challenge to our comfort zones.

And so, in Tangier we hopped shop to shop, warming our bodies with tea and harira soup, meandering to nearby parks, and hopscotching the broken glass along the streets. Every morning, we would wake to the call of prayer that blared through the medina, rubbing our groggy eyes and smiling at the crack of dawn peeking into our window.

Our hotel was a short walk from Café Hafa, an outdoor café that overlooks the Strait of Gibraltar, known for its glasses of rich, sugary mint tea. Tea is in the blood of the Moroccan people, and within Café Hafa, it's nearly impossible to find an empty seat—tourists merge with locals to sit in plastic yard chairs at the tiled blue tables, arranged in staggered rows atop a hill. Children pace with trays of nuts, dried fruit, and pastries, not leaving a single table unvisited. When buyers slip dirhams into their palms, they eagerly rush back to their families, coins jingling in their pockets, before being shooed back into the crowd to sell more.

Café Hafa became our home away from home—a familiar oasis in an area where it was all too easy to feel lost, jarred, overwhelmed by the begging men who follow us for too many turns and hover outside the restaurant we sneak into for lunch.

By our third day and yet another visit to Café Hafa, Elliott and I felt like we'd seen everything Grand Socco had to offer—twice. We figured we could venture to the nearby caves or lighthouse, but we only had enough dirhams to afford the taxi one way, there or back. If we

wanted to explore something new, we'd need to walk three hours to the cape, then taxi back just in time for our flight. Reasonable? Yes. Daunting? Perhaps. Were we just courageous enough to make the walk? Definitely.

After leaving Grand Socco, the terrain changed. The path shifted from rugged stone to well-paved streets, and open air replaced the claustrophobic maze. But as we continued to walk, guided by vague street signs that pointed to where the cape may distantly be, something happened: The once-flat roads began to slope, weaving into rolling hills, and rows of suburban houses replaced the empty parks. The palm trees and architecture reminded me of photos I'd seen of southern California—Hollywood, maybe? We nearly forgot we were in Morocco. How were these houses mere miles from the poverty-stricken region we just left?

When we emerged from the suburban streets, we spotted a wave of people crowding around a solitary field. This was the first sign of life we'd encountered since we left Grand Socco. Puzzled and intrigued, we moved towards the frenzy, and the bazaar stretched out before us. There was not a single tourist in sight—we were alone. Instead of shops with postcards and stained-glass lamps on shelves, families crouched along the street, selling rows of dusty books, worn-down baby shoes, and small battery packs spread out along white sheets. We walked with a humble curiosity, heads slightly down to avoid drawing too much attention (impossible—we stood out like herons in a field of sparrows).

Beneath a large tarp, tables were set up with crates of still-unwashed carrots, apples, tangerines, and melons. Rows upon rows of elderly men and women sold fresh fruit and vegetables, but an equal amount were selling the most basic household knickknacks and well-used clothes. Although we stepped carefully to dodge the mud, our feet sunk into the ground.

The locals weaved through the stands with a natural ease, unbothered by the sloshing dirt beneath their feet.

The scent of freshly baked bread wafted past our noses, and we gravitated towards the scent. Once we reached the table with loaves of traditional Moroccan bread, Elliott asked if the baker spoke any English or Spanish. A sheet of confusion slid across baker's face, lips parted and eyebrows scrunched. Shaking his head, he responded in Arabic. No tourists here, no languages learned—we were out of luck. Instead, I gestured to ask how many dirhams for a loaf of bread, and after a series of confusing back-and-forth motions, we settled on paying three dirhams. Food for the road.

Nearby, a man stood with a tower of round lidded metal trays, nested within one another. Each tray contained what resembled a large omelet-like pancake with a texture reminiscent of bread pudding. He was cutting slices as if it were pizza, placing them on paper towels, and seasoning them with a red spice before handing them out to bazaar-goers. When I signaled to ask the price once again, he lifted his pointer finger. We handed him a dirham each—barely an American quarter. Their normal prices were staggeringly low for our wallets.

Elliott and I shuffled out of the bazaar to resume our walk and devour the dish before the slices stuck to the paper towels. My eyes widened at the rich taste. The flavor had an oddly familiar seasoning, but we couldn't quite place our finger on what it was, and besides—we were both overtaken by the daze of good home-cooked cuisine. We never spotted the meal in the tourism hub of the Grand Socco, and even now after hours of scouring the internet, we still aren't sure what it was. I still taste the ghost of the dish to this day—to think we wouldn't have discovered the bazaar if we chose to taxi.

Picking up the pace, we hopped back on the main sidewalk and continued to walk. Although we'd already been on the road for about an hour, the map still said we had another three hours to go. Determination flooded our bodies, the adrenaline of newfound adventure beating in our blood.

The further we inched along our journey, the more the scenery continued to change. When we reached the end of the neighborhood, we encountered a brief, decrepit nature path. Between spurts of vibrant grass, there was a creek—or the remains of it. Piles of floating paper and cans intermingled in the stagnant and foggy brown water. Somehow, we had uncovered the abandoned desert amidst an oasis—humanity's repugnant mark, masked by the riches around.

Once we emerged from the chaos, the remaining trek was picturesque. For another two hours, we bumbled along the highway, cars whipping past us and men turning on their motorcycles to stare back at my unfamiliar skin tone and style. The map's arrival time remained static, trailing ever so slowly, as if it believed we were still at the bazaar, as if we weren't meant to leave, as if we still had more to learn. Along the highway we passed country clubs with pools and gated colorful homes—a stark contrast to the cats pawing on mice and filthy alleys we grew used to.

Was this the real Tangier? Or was reality the Tangier we had left behind?

By the time 4pm had rolled around, our destination seemed much too distant and elusive, the highway much too long. Though we could have trudged onward, our looming flight plagued the back of our thoughts. As we chipped off bread from our loaf, passing the warm pieces back and forth, the journey quickly became less about the destination and more about the time we

spent exploring together. In the end, we sprinted across six highway lanes, hailing taxis that drove past until one finally drove us back to Café Hafa.

While we sipped on tea, the warm mint flavor sliding down our throats, we realized we didn't need to travel far to find more value in the city around us. Grand Socco was too real, too raw, too full of all that is desperately human. And still, somewhere within us, it became home—a temporary home, albeit, but even for a moment, it felt like so. I watched the mint leaves floating through the centuries of history brewed within my glass—fragments of culture that outlive this moment. Reflecting on the day, we watched the sun set over the sea, Spain in the distance and small figures drifting between golden streetlights below.

***

Painting by Sasha Temerte, where the fragments of writing on the globe read "Leaving pieces of myself around the world as the world leaves pieces within me."

***

// traveling heart //

And if there is one thing

that remains constant,

it's that I will not—

growing and changing

as I leave pieces of myself

around the world

and as the world

leaves pieces within me.

So when you ask me,

"Where are you from?"

the honest answer is

"Not from here."

Perhaps,

I am from everywhere,

and maybe,

you are too.

Notes

[1] Michel de Montaigne, "Chapter 37," in *Book II*, ed. M Rat, Essays, 1580.

[2] Christian Maldonado, "When Somebody Asks You 'Where Are You From?,'" Instagram, January 19, 2023, www.instagram.com/reel/CnnaPK7sGj8/?igshid=NTdlMDg3MTY%3D.

[3] Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (Sage Publications, 1996), 18–36.

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