

## ABSTRACT

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   LIVES: THE EMERGENCE OF STUDENT  
   VOICES IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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This study offers a rare glimpse into the histories, images, and meanings that inform the experiences of six international degree-seeking undergraduate students at the University of Maryland College Park in the spring of 2007. Specifically, the design and content of this study centers around the recovery of student voices as a way to understand the limitations and possibilities of international education policies and practices. The experiences of these six students in many ways challenge the understanding and categorization of a traditional international student. Focusing almost exclusively on nationality as an organizing agent and bereft of significant and robust concepts that bring into view the content of international student sense-making, international education discourses neglect to explore the complexity and

range of meanings students ascribe to educational sojourns, thereby resulting in a series of undocumented generalizations made about students.

This study reveals that these twenty-first century students are experienced border crossers with very complex identities. These students engage in diverse constructions of meaning as they negotiate the boundaries of geography and mind that are inherent aspects of crossing borders. The perspectives of these contemporary students suggest the need for a foundational rethinking of the assumptions that ground the international education literature and a reconceptualization of the entire apparatus of thinking about educational sojourns. Through an analysis of how student participation in transnational spaces influenced pathways to the university, how students negotiated identities as international students, and how students envisioned futures, it becomes evident that a new kind of international student is emerging.

GROUNDING IDENTITIES, TRANSIENT LIVES:  
THE EMERGENCE OF STUDENT VOICES IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

by

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*To Brett, for enduring.*

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## Chapter One: International Student Voices

Student perspectives have received little attention from international education specialists, scholars, policy-makers, program directors, and others with compelling interests in the construction of cross-cultural learning programs in colleges, universities, non-profit organizations, scholarly societies, and various planning agencies. To my knowledge, there is only one publication, entitled *Crossing Customs: International Students Write on U.S. College Life and Culture*, that foregrounds the experiences and voices of international students as participants and shapers in the twenty-first century world of transcultural and international higher education.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as the literature review will document, there is a relative paucity of studies that focus on the roles students take in the construction of their own experiences and identities as educational border crossers and global actors.

This study begins to address this puzzling gap by exploring the perspectives and experiences of six degree-seeking international undergraduate students at the University of Maryland College Park. These students, who study abroad for extended periods of time, are required to occupy multiple linguistic, geographical, contemporaneous, historical, and academic spaces. Students like these six, are commonly labeled twenty-first century educational sojourners, border crossers, global

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<sup>1</sup> Guy S. Metraux, *Exchange of Persons: The Evolution of Cross-Cultural Education* (New York, NY: Social Science Research Council, 1952), 9. International education or cross-cultural education can take on a variety of forms, including study abroad, faculty and staff exchanges, foreign language instruction, collaborative research, institutional partnerships, and area studies among others. Cross-cultural education was defined as early as 1952 by Guy Metraux as “the social process of acquiring knowledge of an intellectual or technical nature, under institutionalized conditions, outside one’s own social and cultural environment.” For the purposes of this study, international education refers to study abroad and international student mobility activities and discourses within higher education.

nomads, world citizens, and third culture kids.<sup>2</sup> Participants in this study have also labeled themselves rootless ones, who are searching for a place to establish a life; city sluts, who can't be in one city for too long; compressed springs, who are constantly adjusting to cultural circumstances; and turbines, who oscillate between lives in the United States, contexts of origin, and elsewhere. No matter what their labels, they are twenty-first century border crossers who enter universities in possession of a dazzling multiplicity of communicative modes unknown and even unimagined by their predecessors, and for that matter by traditional leaders of international education.

These contemporary educational sojourners make up a significant portion of migratory flows to the U.S. Historically international students were considered a “small factor”<sup>3</sup> in U.S. higher education and the “overall impact of foreign students on American higher education is [was] minute.”<sup>4</sup> However, that is no longer the case, as students have now become important cultural carriers of globalization processes. An estimated two million students are pursuing higher education in countries other than their own, with the U.S. hosting one third of the world's students who study abroad.<sup>5</sup> For the 2006-2007 academic year, international student enrollments totaled

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Adams and Angelo Carfagna, *Coming of Age in a Globalized World: The Next Generation* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2006), Morten Ender, ed., *Military Brats and Other Global Nomads: Growing up in Organization Families* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), Henry A. Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (London, England: Routledge, 1992), David Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing up among Worlds* (London, UK: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Lewis C. Solmon and Betty J. Young, *The Foreign Student Factor: Impact on American Higher Education*, Institute of International Education Research Series, vol. twelve (New York, NY: Institute of International Education, 1987), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO, *Oecd Indicators* (Paris, France: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005).

582,984 or approximately four percent of those pursuing higher education in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> International students contribute over \$14.5 billion to the U.S. economy and the Department of Commerce ranks higher education as one of the top five largest service sector exports.<sup>7</sup>

Not only have the numbers of international students in the U.S. increased exponentially, their networks of affiliation have become amazingly complex. Students travel abroad but are never really far from contexts of origin or significant others who may be dispersed around the globe. Socializing technologies are altering the landscapes and networks of international students, creating a “sea of social connection.”<sup>8</sup> In today’s technological age of instant communication it is hard to overlook the degree of reliance students have on the Internet as a means for maintaining ties with both family and friends far away and nearby. International students stay connected to friends and family on a daily basis through Internet technologies such as Skype, and stay informed about events in contexts of origin by reading newspapers online. Students access libraries and conduct research on-line in their native languages. They create blogs, hook-up in chatrooms, and participate in social networking sites to pass the time, reconnect with old friends, get to know new people, send invitations to campus events, share pictures, or rally around a cause. According to the 2006 University of Maryland Student Survey, 93% of students instant message friends, 77% of students communicate with parents via e-mail, and

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<sup>6</sup> IIE, *Open Doors: Report on International Education Exchange* (New York, NY: Institute of International Education, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), xiv.

76% of students participate in online social networks.<sup>9</sup> Communication technologies are remapping the terrain of educational sojourns and the ways student engage in networks of affiliation. Thus situated, international students have become important cultural carriers and transcultural navigators.

The research questions guiding this study aim to uncover the histories, range of affiliations, and perspectives that inform international student identities and construction of meaning. 1) How have students made sense of their experience in the United States? 2) What kinds of transnational spaces do international students create and imagine? 3) What do these spaces reveal about how international students position themselves and negotiate boundaries of geography and mind? 4) How, if at all, have global cultural flows and processes influenced international student imagination and sense-making? 5) How do international students reflect on the past, engage in the present, and craft aspirations for the future? 6) What lessons, if any, can the experiences of these students convey to those in charge of international education programs and policies?

This study offers a rare glimpse into the histories, images, and meanings that inform the experiences of six international undergraduate degree-seeking students at the University of Maryland. This study applies a historical lens to the recovery of student voice to as a means for understanding the development of their thinking and their life trajectories. To generate a deeper understanding of educational sojourner experiences, negotiations, and sense-making, it is necessary to analyze the ways in

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<sup>9</sup> Campus Assessment Working Group, *University of Maryland Student Survey* (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, 2006).

which international education<sup>10</sup> discourses construct student experiences. There is great richness and diversity among students, yet international education policies, practices, and programs are not informed by the complexity of student experiences because their voices are silenced and as of yet not fully understood.

There is a relative paucity of studies that focus on the roles students take in constructing their own experiences and identities. Rather than a complex body of literature about educational sojourns, international education discourses describe international students as one group. When students are described in further detail, it is only their nationality that is signaled out as the most important characteristic of their construction of meaning. Due to a concentration on nationality as a form of classification, international education discourses are bereft of significant and robust concepts that bring into view the experiences and meanings that students construct from studying abroad. There are problems with this single-mindedness. As a result, international education studies do not explore the diversity of experiences, range of affiliations, and multiple trajectories of students who study overseas. The multidimensional experiences and socially constructed realities of students go unrealized. As a consequence, the field perpetuates a series of undocumented generalizations made about students in an imagined way that homogenizes and oversimplifies the needs and negotiations of international students. These generalizations are not purposeful lies or direct deceptions, but a series of misunderstandings about international students that rose to the status of myths.

This study proceeds on an assumption that students are important cultural narrators who have much to tell policy-makers, planners, and scholars about twenty-

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first century international education. Indeed, a variety of discourses and a range of relevant literatures converge within the field of international education, yet none highlights or provides a forum for international student voices. Four discourses come together to create a murky and superficial picture of educational sojourns without the presence or influence of student voices, including *research* on international higher education, international student *mobility*, educational diplomacy as *public policy*, and campus *programming* literatures. Despite the fact that each of these four threads of literature is intended to draw attention to internationalization efforts and approaches, none attempts to take account of student perspectives. To some degree each literature ignores student voices, and generalizes and homogenizes students and their construction of meaning. Regardless of which analytical lens is adopted, none bring concepts to bear on the content of educational sojourns, cross-cultural learning, and identity negotiations as defined by students themselves.

First, the *research* literature simplifies a very complex experience by relying on nationality alone to define students and their sense-making. It is assumed that all students holding membership in the same nationality will have similar needs, experiences, and understandings of an educational sojourn, sidelining both individual histories and the broader historical, political, cultural, and social contexts associated with the inherent mobility of crossing borders. Applying analytical frameworks that rely solely on nationality simply denies the complexity of student voices.

Investigative frameworks that are grounded in studies focused on nationality lack a comprehensive analysis of the intersections of identities, including combinations of class, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, gender, and other student-

defined salient selves. Historically, membership or citizenship in one country was the one student descriptor employed to uncover changes in student learning, attitudes, and personalities. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, researchers used nationality as an organizing agent and springboard to generate articles such as “An Analysis of Change Among German Exchangees,”<sup>11</sup> “Italian Exchanges: A Study in Attitude Change and Diffusion,”<sup>12</sup> “The American Experience of Swedish Students: Retrospect and Aftermath,”<sup>13</sup> “No Frontier to Learning: The Mexican Student in the United States,”<sup>14</sup> “The Impact of Foreign Study: The Indian Experience,”<sup>15</sup> “The Effect of a Year’s Experience in America on the Self-Image of Scandinavians,”<sup>16</sup> and “The Effects of Cross-Cultural Education on Attitudes and Personality of Japanese Students.”<sup>17</sup> Today not much has changed.

The durability of nationality as a sense-making category for contextualizing student voices continues to be the most prolific and consistent way of describing international students as the generalized other in the twenty-first century. Nationality

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<sup>11</sup> Bureau of Social Science Research, *An Analysis of Change among German Exchangees* (Washington, DC: The American University, 1951).

<sup>12</sup> Inc. International Research Associates, *Italian Exchanges: A Study in Attitude Change and Diffusion* (New York, NY: International Research Associates, Inc., 1955).

<sup>13</sup> F.D. Scott, *The American Experience of Swedish Students: Retrospect and Aftermath* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

<sup>14</sup> R.L. Beals and N.D. Humphrey, *No Frontier to Learning: The Mexican Student in the United States* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> Amar Kumar Singh, "The Impact of Foreign Study: The Indian Experience," *Minerva* 1 (1962).

<sup>16</sup> Lotte Bailyn and Herbert Kelman, "The Effect of a Year's Experience in America on the Self-Image of Scandinavians," *Journal of Social Issues* 18, no. 1 (1962).

<sup>17</sup> Fumie Kumagai, "The Effects of Cross-Cultural Education on Attitudes and Personality of Japanese Students," *Sociology of Education* 50, no. 1 (1977).

continues to trump other aspects of international student identities, as demonstrated by more recent titles such as “Academic Expectation and Adjustment of Russian Students,”<sup>18</sup> “Adjustment of Turkish College Students Studying in the United States,”<sup>19</sup> “Extracurricular Activities and the Adjustment of Asian International Students: A Study of Japanese Students,”<sup>20</sup> “Dreams on Distant Shores: Understanding Indian Students and Their Flow to the United States,”<sup>21</sup> “Turkish Student Attitudes about the United States,”<sup>22</sup> “Taiwanese Students’ Perspectives on Their Educational Experiences in the United States,”<sup>23</sup> and “Variation in Acculturative stressors Over Time: A study of Taiwanese Students in the United States.”<sup>24</sup> The titles and content of these articles are indicative of the approach throughout the literature to generalize experiences and tie sense-making solely to nationality.

Second, the portrait of students that comes out of the *mobility* literature is generated through large scale statistical analysis, reducing students to a number

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<sup>18</sup> Irina Efimova and Scott Gillis, "Academic Expectations and Adjustment of Russian Students," *International Educator* Fall (2000).

<sup>19</sup> Senel Poyrazli and others, "Adjustment Issues of Turkish College Students Studying in the United States," *College Student Journal* 35, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>20</sup> Teru Toyokawa and Noriko Toyokawa, "Extracurricular Activities and the Adjustment of Asian International Students: A Study of Japanese Students," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 26 (2002).

<sup>21</sup> Vijaya Khandavilli, "Dreams on Distant Shores: Understanding Indian Students and Their Flow to the United States," *International Educator* Spring (2003).

<sup>22</sup> Ann Kelleher, Ozlen Kuncuk, and Sevilya Kharaman, "Turkish Student Attitudes About the United States," *International Studies Perspectives* 4, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>23</sup> Wen-Jiuan Yen and Pat Stevens, "Taiwanese Students' Perspectives on Their Educational Experiences in the United States," *International Education Journal* 5, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>24</sup> Yu-Wen Ying, "Variation in Acculturative Stressors over Time: A Study of Taiwanese Students in the United States," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 29, no. 1 (2005).

grounded in linear migration patterns between home and host countries, which again categorizes students based on national origin. Suggesting that “there are always two voices: international students' intentions to stay in the U.S. or return to their home countries”<sup>25</sup> grounds students in the geography of home and host countries and situates students in a dichotomous context that ignores other student actual and imagined trajectories.

Statistical trend analysis of student migrations from home to host countries does not go beyond collecting simple demographic data about the age, gender, places of origin, institutional destinations, and programs of students or the educational background, occupation, and income of their families.<sup>26</sup> Since 1948, the Institute of International Education (IIE) has annually published *Open Doors: A Report on International Education Exchange*, which elaborates on trends in international student mobility to and from the U.S. While *Open Doors* is helpful for establishing a snapshot of the international student body in the U.S. as a whole, the report does not go beyond providing tidbits of descriptive information about students from particular countries. In the early 1980s, the American Council on Education acknowledged that “surprisingly few attempts have been made to collect information about the personal traits of foreign students.”<sup>27</sup> Today this challenge remains.

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<sup>25</sup> Heike C. Alberts and Helen D. Hazen, “‘There Are Always Two Voices...’: International Students' Intentions to Stay in the United States or Return to Their Home Countries,” *International Migration* 43, no. 3 (2005).

<sup>26</sup> Solmon and Young.

<sup>27</sup> *Foreign Students and Institutional Policy: Toward an Agenda for Action* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1982), 14.

Third, the international education discourse on *public policy* occurs at a national level and without the inclusion of student voices. The advocacy efforts and actions of the federal government and professional organizations such as The Association of International Educators (NAFSA) are intent on standardizing a national policy for international education activities, leaving little room for students to impact the very practices that govern their academic lives. These activities paint a portrait of students as a means to an end, as a way of educating those residing outside the U.S. about those who live inside U.S. borders. Again, the absence of student voices resonates.

The public policy rhetoric focuses on advocacy and diplomacy. Through speeches, policy papers, and mission statements, special interest organizations and the federal government joined forces to voice the importance of and demonstrate the need to continue international education efforts. NAFSA, the largest international education professional organization with over 9,000 individual members from educational organizations throughout the world, advocates for a national policy on international higher education. NAFSA publishes a variety of policy briefs, hosts a Take Action Center on its Web site, organizes letter writing campaigns, and coordinates an annual Advocacy Day where educators from across the country visit Capital Hill to reinforce the importance of international education to policy makers.

Governmental public figures throughout history have promoted the diplomatic objectives of international education to ensure Americans understand the world beyond our national borders and to help educate others about U.S. culture. In a statement acknowledging the fifth government sponsored International Education

Week, Colin Powell stated, “we benefit enormously from their [international students] interaction with our society as they help our citizens develop understanding and knowledge that enriches our lives, increases international cooperation, enhances our national security, and improves our economic competitiveness.”<sup>28</sup> According to then Assistant Homeland Security Director, Stewart Verdery, “today’s foreign student may be tomorrow’s foreign leader, and having them exposed to U.S. policy, culture, and society is a plus.”<sup>29</sup> In celebration of the 2007 International Education Week, State Secretary Condoleezza Rice released a statement further justifying the importance of engaging in cross-cultural learning. “In a world where challenges transcend borders, education is essential for making the world more peaceful and more prosperous...Moreover, our country has no more valuable asset internationally than the friendship of the millions of young people, citizens, and leaders around the world who understand the United States because they have studied here.”<sup>30</sup> The federal government is interested in educational diplomacy that attracts the best and the brightest students to spread the values and attitudes intended to help the U.S. maintain a position of influence and dominance in world affairs.

A fourth and final strand of literature focuses on educational *programming*. The programming literature paints a portrait of students as aliens and lacking cultural competencies or worldly knowledge. Embedded in the programming literature are

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<sup>28</sup> Colin Powell, *International Education Week Statement*(U.S. Department of State, 2004, accessed June 1, 2007); available from <http://exchanges.state.gov/iew/statements/powell.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> R Pacia, "Ridge Details Visa Reforms: Secretary Speaks to University Presidents at Yale.," *Yale Daily News*, October 19 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Condoleezza Rice, *Statement on International Education Week 2007*(U.S. State Department, 2007, accessed July 6, 2008); available from <http://iew.state.gov/>.

assumptions that clearly ground students in a deficit model, which does not prove promising for exploring the experiences and negotiations beyond that of culture shock.<sup>31</sup> What is reflected in the programmatic literature are assumptions about what students do and do not bring to higher education, expectations about students' ability to engage and negotiate a campus community, and a preconceived construction of what students are going to learn. The perception of educational border crossers grows out of the understanding that students are a product of their immediate environment and not the agglomeration of what they bring to an educational sojourn that expands or challenges their sense-making. The programming literature reduces and decomplexifies a student to an outcome rather than to an experience, making the exploration of educational sojourns one dimensional rather than multidimensional. Here again, student voices are silenced.

The overwhelming majority of the international education programming literature is designed for educational professionals with the responsibility for recruiting, orienting, and managing students while creating, administering, and evaluating successful programs. The programming discourse describes and outlines effective training methodologies for conducting orientation and re-entry programs aimed at helping students prepare for their educational sojourns in attempts to increase cultural awareness, develop cross-cultural communication skills, or deal with culture shock. The programming literature assumes that students will experience some degree of culture shock because of their limited exposure to the ways of life in

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<sup>31</sup> In 1960 Oberg was the first person to coin the phrase culture shock or what he considered the cross-cultural adaptation stress of individuals traveling to an unknown land in an attempt to become immersed in another culture. Culture shock has remained a staple concept in the international education field and is used to conceptualize and justify the need for a variety of orientation, re-entry, and cross-cultural training programs.

the countries where they will study and inadequate knowledge of the educational systems they will encounter.

Years ago the literature was characterized as “lopsided in the direction of exploring either the cross-cultural consequences of studying abroad or the conditions and means necessary to help international students adapt and succeed in an alien institutional and cultural environment.”<sup>32</sup> In the past, surveys designed to gather information about student challenges in host countries included categories such as “difficulty related to lack of necessary clothing,”<sup>33</sup> “difficulties following accustomed sanitary habits,”<sup>34</sup> or “difficulties obtaining accustomed food,”<sup>35</sup> situated students in an alien environment destined to experience hardships. While clothing, food, and information from around the world are now readily available in the U.S., little has changed with regards to the assumptions that continue to guide research on student experiences.

Much of the current literature still addresses the social, psychological, and cultural adjustment issues of students such as homesickness, language barriers, and loneliness. A significant portion of “the literature on international education and international students is descriptive, ‘how to’ analysis, such as how to understand

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<sup>32</sup> Philip G. Altbach, David H. Kelly, and Y. G-M. Lulat, *Research on Foreign Students and International Study: An Overview and Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1985), 24.

<sup>33</sup> Steven E. Deutsch, *International Educational and Exchange* (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970), 81.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

learning styles, how to deal with perceived deficits and so on.”<sup>36</sup> International students are taught how to “assimilate into the western academy.”<sup>37</sup> The international education literature is based on a preconception that “coming from a non-mainstream cultural background is a disadvantage”<sup>38</sup> rather than an understanding that the ability to transverse cultural boundaries is an advantage. This perception grossly underestimates students, overlooks the traits and skills students bring to bear, and neglects to recognize the diversity among students. As a result, students are commonly characterized as “deficient”<sup>39</sup> or in a state of “difference with inferiority,”<sup>40</sup> often excluded from being “knowers.”<sup>41</sup> Educational sojourners are stigmatized and situated as requiring assistance “because they have ‘deficiencies’; as needing to adjust and adapt and be assimilated, resulting in the loss of their voice(s); being positioned as Other.”<sup>42</sup> The characterization and assumption that international students are lacking language abilities, cultural knowledge, or academic prowess permeates the literature.

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<sup>36</sup> Norma Koehne, "Positioning International Education and International Students: Multiple Discourses and Discursive Practices," in *Doing the Public Good: Positioning Education Research* (Melbourne, Australia: 2004), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Anne Campbell, "Cultural Identity as a Social Construct," *Intercultural Education* 11, no. 1 (2000): 31.

<sup>39</sup> Koehne, 5, J. A. Mestenhauser, "Learning from Sojourners," in *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, ed. D. Landis and R. W. Brislin (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon, 1983).

<sup>40</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson, *Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1994), 233.

<sup>41</sup> Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins, "Pedagogical Events: Re-Reading Shared Moments in Educational History," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (2004): 144.

<sup>42</sup> Koehne, 13.

Literary metaphors often prevail and lump educational border crossers into the single category of “aliens.” Throughout academic works, the word “alien” is used to describe many aspects of border crossing experiences, including “alien tongue,”<sup>43</sup> “alien core,”<sup>44</sup> “alien elements,”<sup>45</sup> “alien nation,”<sup>46</sup> “alien world,”<sup>47</sup> “alien cultures,”<sup>48</sup> “alien other,”<sup>49</sup> “alien customs,”<sup>50</sup> “alien classrooms,”<sup>51</sup> “homeless-stateless alien,”<sup>52</sup> “resident alien,”<sup>53</sup> “pre-alienated self,”<sup>54</sup> “hyperalienation,”<sup>55</sup> “alien society,”<sup>56</sup> “alien

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<sup>43</sup> Isabelle de Courtivron, ed., *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> Andre Aciman, ed., *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1999).

<sup>45</sup> Nadjie Al-Ali and Khalid Koser, eds., *New Approaches to Migration?: Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home* (London, England: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Sophia A. McClennen, "Exile Perspectives on "Alien Nations"," *Comparative Literature and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>47</sup> Deborah Mutnick, *Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Education*, Crosscurrents (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London, England: Routledge, 1996).; Metraux, Fazal Rizvi, "International Education and the Production of Global Imagination," in *Globalization and Education: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Nicholas C. Burbules and Carlos Alberto Torres (London, England: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997).; Michael Peter Smith and Luis E. Guarnizo, eds., *Transnationalism from Below*, ed. Michael Peter Smith, Comparative Urban and Community Research (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998).

<sup>50</sup> Bateson.

<sup>51</sup> Meeri Hellsten, "Students in Transition: Needs and Experiences of International Students in Australia," in *Australian International Education Conference* (Hobart, Tasmania, Australia: 2002).

<sup>52</sup> George Robertson and others, eds., *Traveller's Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis *Dialogues in the Diasporas: Essays and Conversations on Cultural Identity* (London, England: Rivers Oram Press, 1998).

community,”<sup>57</sup> “alien voices,”<sup>58</sup> and even “alien difference.”<sup>59</sup> Publishers incorporate the concept of aliens into videos and simulations, including a video entitled “Aliens: Being a Foreign Student” and a diversity game, “An Alien Among Us.”<sup>60</sup> The depth and breadth of alien concepts and terminology framing cross-cultural encounters is substantial.

The program evaluation literature in the U.S. has blossomed as researchers seek to understand the impact of an “alien” landing. A major assumption that sustained the international education literature over the years was that cross-cultural encounters bring about value, perception, and attitudinal changes. Decades ago researchers were positing how to generate international understanding,<sup>61</sup> develop world-mindedness,<sup>62</sup> or encourage world-responsibility.<sup>63</sup> Today, the overwhelming

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<sup>55</sup> Sanford Budick, "Crisis of Alterity: Cultural Untranslatability and the Experience of Secondary Otherness," in *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> Michael Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*, second ed. (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>57</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1963).

<sup>58</sup> Gergen.

<sup>59</sup> Bateson.

<sup>60</sup> Intercultural Press, the leading publisher in the intercultural communication and cross-cultural training field, produces training videos, manuals, guidebooks, simulations, activities, and cultural profile tests with titles such as *Developing Intercultural Awareness: A Cross-Cultural Training Handbook*; *Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide*; *Teaching American Students: A Guide for International Faculty and Teaching Assistants In Colleges and Universities*; *The Art of Crossing Cultures*; *The Exchange Student Survival Kit*; *Studying Abroad/Learning Abroad: The Whole World Guide to Culture Learning*; and *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Learning* to help train and educate individuals to function in a variety of cultural contexts by developing intercultural coping skills.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas R. Adam, *Education for International Understanding* (New York, NY: Columbia University Teachers College, 1948).

<sup>62</sup> Carleton Washburne, *The World's Good: Education for World-Mindedness* (New York, NY: John Day, 1954).

tendency to stress measurable competency-based evaluations<sup>64</sup> continues through quantitative studies using independent and dependent variables, pretests and posttests, frequencies, means, lickert scales, nested hierarchical data structures, chi-square analysis, and other statistical processes.<sup>65</sup> Researchers attempt to identify, categorize, and assess often cited increases in cultural competencies, cross-cultural adaptability, global literacies, global-mindedness, global competencies, global imagination, global understanding, global awareness, international understanding, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural competencies, or intercultural communication skills, to name only a few.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Irwin T. Sanders, *Professional Education for World Responsibility* (New York, NY: Education and World Affairs, 1968).

<sup>64</sup> Educators explore the impacts of studying overseas and conduct program evaluations, yet there remains great deal of debate in the field of international education about how to evaluate or measure the impact of an educational sojourn. Tools such as the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory, The Cross-Cultural Assessor, the Intercultural Sensitivity Index, the Cultural Orientations Indicator, the Intercultural Development Inventory, and the Student Survival Self-Efficacy Measure are often used to statistically outline how students self-report changes in attitudes, perceptions, and values as a result of studying overseas.

<sup>65</sup> Jian Guan and Richard A. Dodder, "The Impact of Cross-Cultural Contact on Value and Identity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Students in China and in the U.S.A.," *The Mankind Quarterly* XLI, no. 3 (2001), Shideh Hanassab, "Diversity, International Students, and Perceived Discrimination: Implications for Educators and Counselors," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10, no. 2 (2006), Anne McCreary Juhasz and Aldona M. Walker, *The Impact of Study Abroad on University Students' Perceptions of Self* (ERIC, 1987), Roger Yao Klomegah, "Social Factors Relating to Alienation Experience by International Students in the United States," *College Student Journal* 40, no. 2 (2006), Tracy Rundstrom Williams, "Exploring the Impact of Study Abroad on Students' Intercultural Communication Skills: Adaptability and Sensitivity," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 9, no. 4 (2005), Jiali Ye, "An Examination of Acculturative Stress, Interpersonal Social Support, and Use of Online Ethnic Social Groups among Chinese International Students," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 17 (2006).

<sup>66</sup> Jerry S. Carlson and Keith F. Widaman, "The Effects of Study Abroad During College on Attitudes toward Other Cultures," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 12 (1988), Darla K. Deardorff, "Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10, no. 3 (2006), Guan and Dodder, Bill Hunter, George P. White, and Calen C. Godbey, "What Does It Mean to Be Culturally Competent?," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10, no. 3 (2006), Janet E. Kalunian, "Correlations between Global-Mindedness and Study Abroad," *International Education Forum* 17, no. 2 (1997), Anastasia Kitsantas, "Studying Abroad: The Role of College Students' Goals on the

A large-scale study conducted by the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES), surveyed program alumni from 1950 to 1999 to seek additional information on how studying overseas had impacted their lives. According to this research, 99% of respondents felt studying abroad fell into the category of helping them “better understand my [their] own cultural values and biases.”<sup>67</sup> With such an overwhelming percentage of respondents indicating that crossing borders aided in an understanding of their culture, the study neglected to investigate the content of this learning. Current quantitative studies and surveys leave no room for individual voices and do not provide an opportunity for in-depth analysis of educational sojourns, but rather define for students the meaning of their experiences through predetermined categories that simply require students to check a box.

Student voices are excluded from the myriad of publications designed to help educational professionals develop, manage, and evaluate successful programs. The second edition of *NAFSA’s Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators* contains three sections, including “Education Abroad and American Higher Education,” “Advising,” and “Program Development and Evaluation.” Within these three sections are nineteen chapters that address important programming considerations such as academic credit, financial aid, promotion and publicity, health and safety issues, budgeting, and legal issues. Of the 492 pages, there is not one quote from a student. Not only is there an absence of student voices, but

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Development of Cross-Cultural Skills and Global Understanding," *College Student Journal* 38 (2004), Rizvi, Williams.

<sup>67</sup> Mary M. Dwyer and Courtney K. Peters, "The Benefits of Study Abroad," *Transitions Abroad*, March/April 2004, 56.

administrators are encouraged not to validate the experiences of individual students. When addressing student program evaluations, administrators are given “a word of caution: try not to give too much weight to any one student’s evaluation; the more readings you have, the closer you get to an objective view.”<sup>68</sup> This approach invalidates the experiences of students and negates the important influence studying overseas has on individuals. In addition, it neglects to address the myriad of intercultural interactions that influence cross-cultural learning and overlooks how this understanding may contribute to designing programs aimed at facilitating critical reflection for all students.

In summary, research on student experiences is characterized as a “poorly documented phenomena,”<sup>69</sup> touching on student construction of meaning in only superficial ways. The portrait of international students as defined by their nationality, grounded in the geography of home and host countries, characterized as alien, and reduced to statistics becomes inscribed, reinforced, and enabled by university policies and practices that continue to set international students apart. The limitations of international education literatures reverberate on campuses where policies and programs isolate, marginalize, and stereotype international students rather than integrate them into the larger campus community.

What is more, it is not enough to assume that the voices of students can be explored through the same lens repetitively adopted over time. Researchers must

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<sup>68</sup> William Hoffa and John Pearson, eds., *Nafsa's Guide to Education Abroad for Advisors and Administrators*, second ed. (Washington, DC: Association of International Educators, 1997), 346.

<sup>69</sup> Fred M. Hayward, *Internationalization in U.S. Higher Education* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2000), 8.

recognize that embracing different analytical frameworks brings into view a profound and deeper level of understanding of how students do or do not see themselves as international students and create meaning from their experiences. A rich interdisciplinary literature focusing on transnational networks and global flows exists, yet is only rarely applied to educational contexts or student experiences.<sup>70</sup>

Frameworks for analyzing educational border crossings that reside in the international education literature lack concrete theoretical groundings or are one-dimensional at best. Therefore, it is important to look beyond current international education discourses to seek out approaches and theoretical constructs that have the potential to illuminate the contours and pathways of educational border crossings and examine the complexity of student lives in relation to larger contexts. It is at the intersection of transnational and globalization literatures where the potential exists to create a framework for overcoming the shortcomings of existing international education approaches to privilege student voices.

Educational border crossings are not a new phenomenon, but the creation of innovative theoretical approaches that examine the flow of people and ideas across national borders is a profound development. The research questions in this study are informed by two theoretical constructs, one from the transnational migration literature and one from the globalization discourse. Employing an analytical lens grounded in transnational and global constructs recognizes that student sense-making does not occur in a vacuum and is influenced by cultural flows and lives lived out across borders.

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<sup>70</sup> Walter Grunzweig and Nana Rinehart, eds., *Rockin' in Red Square: Critical Approaches to International Education in the Age of Cyberculture* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002).; Rizvi.

The first concept is *transnational social fields*, which has the potential to reveal the complex spaces and network of affiliations that students negotiate while pursuing an education overseas. A transnational social field is “an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extends across the borders of two or more nation-states and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations”<sup>71</sup> and includes those who travel abroad and those who remain in contexts of origin. For international students, transnational social fields are a space for the exchange, organization, and transformation of ideas, practices, and dreams; where the connections, ruptures, and intersections between the social, personal, and academic are forged. Recognizing international students operate in transnational social fields forces the reexamination and reconceptualization of the relationships embedded in student-defined social, cultural, educational, and geographical spaces, and illuminates important points of reference and ways of understanding that, while developed in other contexts, influence student construction of meaning in the U.S.

The second concept is the *work of the imagination*, which calls attention to the role and influence of global cultural flows and processes in student lives. The work of the imagination is possible through mediation and migration and encompasses “a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern.”<sup>72</sup> Appadurai employs a cultural

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<sup>71</sup> Georges E. Fouron and Nina Glick Schiller, "All in the Family: Gender, Transnational Migration, and the Nation-State," *Identities* 7, no. 4 (2001): 544.

<sup>72</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis, 1996), 4.

lens and outlines a “theory of rupture that takes media and migration as its two major and interconnected diacritics and explores their joint effect on the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity.”<sup>73</sup> Appadurai suggested we increasingly live in “a world that has become deterritorialized, diasporic, and transnational...a world where electronic media are transforming the relationships between information and mediation.”<sup>74</sup> International students engage in the work of the imagination, which finds its power in “the fabrication of social lives inescapably tied up with images, ideas, and opportunities that come from elsewhere”<sup>75</sup> to create “sites of agency and globally defined possibility.”<sup>76</sup> International students engage in the work of the imagination as “an interaction between the past, the present, and a projected future”<sup>77</sup> as they expand networks of influence and create cultural identities.

Neither the concept of transnational social fields nor the work of the imagination prescribes a certain reality or offers limited positions of polarized binaries from which international students can tell their stories, but rather acknowledges the various social interactions, myriad of historical influences, and wide variety of contexts that can shape the meanings constructed by students. As conceptual tools, transnational social fields and the work of the imagination recognize the profoundly interactive nature of educational sojourns. Together, what these two

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>77</sup> Jean-Francois Bayart and Steven Rendall, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 137.

concepts offer is an opportunity to situate student experiences in a transnational space that holds the possibility for exploring aspects of educational border crossings and the saliency of identities that international students themselves define through the work of their imagination. An analytical lens grounded in transnational social fields and the work of the imagination contributes to the aim of deepening the understanding of educational sojourner experiences so that student voices are placed in the center of a dialogue on international higher education and administrators will be challenged to step outside standardized practices to develop innovative programs to realize the potential of cross-cultural learning.

Existing assumptions developed decades ago during a time when instant communication was unavailable, fewer students were crossing borders, and the flow of ideas and images was impeded by the distance and time it took share information continue to guide the policies and practices of international education. Little has changed. Yet the cultural sites where students reside, the relationships students create, and the borders students cross are multiplying. Contemporary educational sojourners are exposed to a “plurality of voices vying for the right to reality.”<sup>78</sup> As students engage socializing technologies the opportunities and spaces to create and enact identities multiply. Due to global processes and the current state of “liquid modernity”<sup>79</sup> which challenges previous conceptions of stable and contained representations of selves, identities are being created and recreated more actively than

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<sup>78</sup> Gergen, 7.

<sup>79</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2000).

ever before.<sup>80</sup> From a postmodern perspective, choice in identity formation and a recreation of selves is the norm as compared to the inscribed social roles, limited cultural reference points, and restrictive worldviews of the past. The spaces and socializing technologies students engage today are different from students of the past, begging the question, do the guiding beliefs and foundational assumptions that were developed decades ago still hold true for understanding the experiences of international students today?

With this in mind, Chapter Two introduces portraiture as a methodology for recovering contemporary student voices, while Chapters Three, Four, and Five amplify the voices of students. Chapter Three focuses on family histories and networks of affiliation that paved student pathways to the university and elaborates on the range of affiliations that create the spaces international students inhabited. Chapter Three situates each student in specific historical and familial contexts, describes educational histories, and essentially introduces the six students grounded in transnational social spaces. Chapter Four provides cultural portraits that delve into the situated meanings of educational border crossings as it explores how students positioned themselves to construct their identities as international students. Chapter Four describes how students differentiated themselves from others, how students envisioned belonging in the campus community, and what meanings and images students employed to create and enact an international student identity. Chapter Five examines the ways students mobilized knowledge to imagine futures or possibilities. The focus is on the ways studying in the U.S., specifically at the University of

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<sup>80</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalism Is Reshaping Our Lives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

Maryland, has shaped what students perceived as thinkable and the ways in which aspects of mobility manifested in student narratives.

Chapter Six, the conclusion, analyzes the ways in which student narratives reinforce or challenge existing assumptions throughout the international education literature and offers ways in which student voices can be integrated into the conception and practice of international education programs and policies.

## Chapter Two: Methodology

There is no one standard to determine who is or is not classified as an international student. Governments, institutions, and practitioners around the globe define international students through various criteria, including domicile address, residency status, years in the host country, citizenship, or the type and level of program in which students are enrolled.<sup>1</sup> In the U.S., international or foreign students are identified as “students who are neither U.S. citizens, immigrants, nor refugees, thus excluding permanent residents.”<sup>2</sup> International students are primarily classified based on their visa status and “include holders of F (student) visas, H (temporary worker/trainee) visas, J (temporary educational exchange-visitor) visas and M (vocational training) visas.”<sup>3</sup> However, in this study I chose to challenge the longstanding technical definition of international students based on visa classifications.

Initially, I attempted to recruit students who were in the second or third year of studies at the university, who came to the U.S. solely for the purpose of pursuing higher education, whose families continued to reside in contexts of origin, who were not U.S. citizens, and who had not previously studied in the U.S. Dilemmas surrounding credits earned verses class standing or the length of time spent at the university verses students who have resided in the U.S. prior to attending the

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Bain, Dao T. Luu, and Madeleine F. Green, *Students on the Move: The Future of International Students in the United States* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Line Verbik and Veronica Lasanowski, *International Student Mobility: Patterns and Trends* (London, UK: The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2007), 36.

university, were only a few conflicting criteria that I sought to resolve. As I tried to outline the characteristics of international students for this study, I began to realize that putting students in a box was exactly what this research was seeking to remedy, and that by creating predetermined criteria I was in fact defining international students rather than allowing students to define themselves. None of the existing boxes would serve to reveal the full meaning of being an international student is all about.

This research proceeds on the assumption that student definitions of their own status as international students might provide a more robust approach to understanding their stories. For this study I focused on the experiences of six students, sophomore and juniors who had been at the university for at least two years. There are three individuals of Indian heritage in this sample. Although they shared Indian heritage, their preliminary stories suggested that their “Indianness” may have been less important than their experiences as educational sojourners. The other three students were from Istanbul, Caracas, and Tokyo. Taken together, this group provided an intense and complex, but ungeneralizable sample. They came in possession of a large amount of cultural and social capital. As it happened, they were from privileged families with the resources that allowed them to study overseas. None of these six students were sponsored as part of a formal exchange program or institutional agreement through the university.

I undertook a variety of activities to locate student participants for this study that included word-of-mouth, student referrals, and electronic postings. I attended new student orientations, visited with staff at administrative and academic offices

throughout campus, and attended weekly international student coffee hours.

Throughout the spring semester I was the instructor for Global Communities, the campus global living and learning program. Through my interactions with students, I was occasionally referred to students outside of the program. The following e-mail was distributed to various campus organizations and university offices by myself and the International Education Services office to solicit student participation:

International student experiences are not all the same! Come share your story and be part of a research study that is exploring international student experiences at the University of Maryland. Second or third year undergraduate international students enrolled full-time are invited to participate in a research project chronicling how personal characteristics such as language, gender, ethnicity, and religion affect international student experiences. Volunteers will be asked to participate in individual and group interviews on campus throughout the spring semester. If you are interested in participating in this project, please e-mail Terra Gargano at [terrargargano@hotmail.com](mailto:terrargargano@hotmail.com).

I initially corresponded with students via e-mail to collect basic information. I was initially contact by over a dozen students who expressed an interest in the study, however not all participated. I met with students once before beginning the formal interview process to explain more about the study, answer any questions they had about participating, and share the consent form so students had time to review it before our first interview.

I struggled with the decision of whether or how to compensate students for their participation in this study, as I was unsure how monetarily compensating students would change the dynamics of the research. However, as I sought student participants I soon realized that compensating students increased their willingness to participate. Therefore, at the end of the semester each student received a \$200 Visa

gift card in accordance with university policies. In addition, I occasionally took students to lunch or dinner off-campus where we conducted interviews.

## **Portraiture**

Portraiture is a methodology that seeks “to combine empirical and aesthetic description, in its focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis, in its goal of speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy (thus linking inquiry to public discourse and social transformation).”<sup>4</sup> I employed portraiture as a methodology that merges both narrative and art to listen for student stories.<sup>5</sup> Portraiture allows for the act of imaginative rediscovery<sup>6</sup> through a recognition and retelling of the past, as educational sojourners create a sense of self and describe how they negotiated identities as international students and imagined futures. Portraiture privileges student voices and provides a window to capture “from an outsiders purview-an insider’s understanding”<sup>7</sup> of studying overseas. As a methodology portraiture illuminates student constructions of meaning through interviews and artistic representations or metaphors of selves to create cultural portraits of students.

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 13.

<sup>5</sup> While most Cultural Studies research generalizes about sets of people (societies, nationalities, community members, or categories of persons like "international students"), a variety of scholars in different fields have focused on the cultural complexity of individuals. This includes work in Portraiture, Life History and Cultural Biography. For examples of the latter two types see Gelya Frank’s work entitled *Venus on Wheels*, John Caughey’s book *Negotiating Cultures and Identities: Life History Issues, Methods, and Readings*, and *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research* written by Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles. However, for this study I chose to use the method of Portraiture as developed by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 393.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 25.

A crucial aspect of portraiture is the link between inquiry to public discourse and social transformation. For it is not enough to just recover or illuminate student voices. Rather, it is essential that educational administrators listen to their voices, recognize the importance of what they have to say, and incorporate their perspectives and understandings into programs and policies. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot developed portraiture as a method of inquiry and documentation that includes five essential features, *context*, *voice*, *relationships*, *emergent themes*, and the *aesthetic whole*.

In portraiture, *context* serves as a resource for understanding a story. For the students in this study, context included shifting geographic, temporal, aesthetic, social, and cultural sites. With the understanding that context is not static, I intended through portraiture “to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding”<sup>8</sup> what students said and did. In this study, context denotes the spaces international students shaped and defined for themselves at the University of Maryland, in contexts of origin, and elsewhere. The act of recreating the past, making sense of the present, and imagining a future does not occur in a vacuum, but within contexts and localities that influence how students saw the world.

Both my *voice* and student voices are integral in portraiture, which is explicit in its “recognition of the self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences”<sup>9</sup> of students. Therefore, I brought my voice, a lens colored by my experiences, values, and worldviews, through which I carefully observed, actively listened, and interpreted meanings, to this research as a

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 13.

tool for exploring student sense-making. My assumptions, interests, and understandings of the international education literature created a mental roadmap paved by my life story and the professional, personal, and academic experiences that have colored my views on cross-cultural learning. In addition, minoring in a second language during my undergraduate studies gave me a greater appreciation for how students function and express themselves in a second language, and a greater appreciation for portraiture as a methodology that allows students to express their ideas in an artistic form in conjunction with the spoken word.

A provost once appointed me to a university-wide task force charged with examining the ways in which the campus community could foster international student learning and success. Our task force met twice a month for two semesters, devising approaches to further the research, writing, and language skills of international students due to the demise of the English Language Institute. We developed a special course; created a permanent campus-wide committee with academic advisors, writing specialists, immigration consultants, and international office support staff; reexamined international admission policies; and wrote a report about our activities and recommendations.

Not once did we seek input from international students throughout this entire process. Not once did we ask what types of support or programs international students thought they needed. At one of our last meetings, one committee member broached the fact that we had excluded international students from a process that was intended to assist them. Another committee member told us he got paid to know what his students needed and that if we didn't already understand what our students

required to succeed academically, we weren't effective administrators and educators. His perspective is one way of looking at our situation, but certainly not the only one. In fact, his perspective silences student voices in a process that was designed to foster active student learning. Serving on this committee was just one of many experiences that influenced my professional and personal perspectives on international higher education, the inclusion of student voices, and emphasis on cross-cultural learning.

Before I worked in higher education, I lived and taught English in Japan for three years and was often witness to the influence of the global circulation of information and images on personal perceptions and understandings. While teaching in Japan, one of my high school students asked a very poignant question. As we sat around the kotatsu table in her dining room during one of our weekly discussions that ranged from Leonardo DiCaprio and his latest endeavor on the big screen to her description of her latest academic and social pursuits, Sumie asked, "Is swimming a high class sport in the United States?" Her question came during the summer Olympics, which are broadly televised around the world. "Why?" I asked. "Well there are no black divers on the American team." I was surprised and taken aback at her question, not quite sure how to answer. How does someone, who has never traveled abroad, lived in rural northern Japan, and admitted to having no friends of various ethnic backgrounds, develop the idea that darker skinned Americans are of a lower class than lighter skinned Americans? What experiences and images in Sumie's life have helped her construct this meaning and what could possibly challenge this notion throughout her life?

As an educator, administrator, student advocate, and traveler, I am intrigued by certain topics and issues, particularly what students learn about themselves by stepping outside of their cultures and comfort zones, confronted with a range of ideas, values, and images. Through a variety of professional and personal experiences, I've come to recognize the diversity of students who engage in "contact zones."<sup>10</sup> I realized the enormous range of reactions and understandings that these cross-cultural encounters can manifest in students while spending a semester on a ship sailing around the world with over 700 undergraduate students who were confronted on a daily basis with varying cultural traditions, beliefs, norms, and worldviews. Although I have traveled and lived abroad, the duration, purpose, and intensity of my border crossings are different from the students interviewed for this study.

*Relationships* and co-interpretations are the foundation for portraits which are "constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships."<sup>11</sup> This study was continually shaped by and through my interactions, dialogues, and relationships with students. Although I initially presented myself as a graduate student to lessen the social distance between us, through portraiture I was able to enact a range of roles throughout the research process, developing relationships of varying dimensions including counselor, friend, cultural broker, editor, inquirer, and a myriad of others. These relationships emerged and changed over time, ultimately shaping this research.

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, "The Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991): 35. Contact zones "refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 135.

In portraiture, *emergent themes* are generated from convergent narrative threads, illuminating metaphors, or overarching symbols. I identified a combination of repetitive refrains and rituals to contrast among individual experiences for the purpose of developing emergent themes and coherence.<sup>12</sup> Some of the themes throughout this research were easily identifiable and persistent, coming into view as common narrative threads throughout student stories and central tenets for understanding student sense-making, while others were elusive. Through constantly examining and revisiting student narratives, I identified themes and posed questions to students that gave them an opportunity to confirm, deny, challenge, or elaborate on what I saw as emerging themes.

I conducted interviews simultaneously with all students throughout the spring 2007 semester. As a result, parallel conversations with the students helped me recognize similar themes in their stories and to modify or introduce questions and issues into my conversations with other students. I prepared for each interview by reviewing previous interviews, developing follow-up questions, and generating a list of initial topics and open-ended interview questions that ultimately morphed into others as a result of our conversations. Experienced researchers would instruct any new researcher to transcribe interviews as soon as possible upon completion of each one. While I initially made a valiant attempt to adopt this approach, I soon fell far behind. What I found most useful was repeatedly listening to previous interviews before proceeding. Listening to the student voices, rather than reading and rereading transcripts, provided a more nuanced understanding and initial analysis that helped

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

develop follow-up questions and additional topics to pursue. Ultimately, I spent the summer transcribing and coding all 37 interviews or over 70 hours of audio files.

I constructed a list of general questions that I hoped to explore and integrate into the interviews which allowed students to express a wide range of perspectives and for additional issues to transpire from student stories. Interview questions were designed to learn more about how international students defined community; negotiated affiliations; developed aspirations; decided what is thinkable of themselves and the world; constructed an international student identity; defined linguistic, cultural, geographical, social, and educational spaces; sensed ways of being and ways of belonging; interacted with technology; engaged and created tradition; and valued education. These were initial questions to get students talking more in-depth about their experiences and broach the topics mentioned above in a general manner that allowed student narratives to guide the interviews. I did not utilize a list of interview questions as a checklist and not every student answered all questions. I allowed the interviews to emerge spontaneously, always knowing I could pull from the interview questions if needed. Student responses fostered individual follow-up questions which allowed us to probe deeper into the meanings they ascribed to their educational sojourns. Interviews and questions began with the past and the decision to attend to University of Maryland and progressed throughout the semester to address the future and how students envisioned terrains of possibility.

Students were interviewed individually five to seven times throughout the semester, with each interview lasting anywhere from one to three hours. All interviews took place in public spaces both on and off campus, in locations such as

the student union, resident hall lounges, coffee shops, and local restaurants. Several students also interviewed me about the research and my interpretations of their stories as we continually tried to make sense of their evolving realities. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and then coded in NVivo to assist in the identification of emergent themes. However, not all interactions with students were audio taped.

A three-hour group interview with all six students was conducted at the end of the semester on April 26, 2007. The purpose of the group interview was to have students make sense of their experiences through conversations with each other. By hearing other student stories, students challenged, defended, or rethought their own identities or worldviews. I viewed the group interview as a co-construction of meaning between the students rather than between the students and myself.

I prefaced the group interview by emphasizing the importance that this was a conversation or a dialogue, not just a question and answer session. The group interview was not about me drilling them with questions by any means, but hopefully generating a dialogue between all of them. Everyone should participate and everyone's input was important. All ideas were equally valid and there were no right or wrong answers. I informed them that we could stop the recording at anytime.

I then launched into what I've deemed the "cabbage" icebreaker, designed as opportunity for students to introduce themselves, while forgoing the standard beginning of semester classroom introductions that I learned each of the students dreaded. The "cabbage" is a large wad of balled up paper, where layers can be peeled off revealing questions for students to answer. I tried to think of questions to use in the cabbage icebreaker that would create a sense of community and a level of comfort

among participants that would assist in their willingness to participate and share what may at times be somewhat personal information. I also tried to ensure that these questions could potentially serve as a foundation that I could return to as the interview progressed and were questions that would spark conversation among the students, which they did.

I created a diagram to help me record where students were seated, how often people were speaking, body language, and other notes that would help with the transcriptions and analysis. Students and I were seated in a circle and do not disturb signs were placed on the door. While again I had a list of questions designed to elicit conversation, I referred to them occasionally and interjected them into the conversation to help focus student comments as they related to the study. These questions were derived from student responses during individual interviews and included some of the same questions I asked students in individual interviews, but I chose to revisit them in the group to encourage students to make sense of these essential topics together as a group.

I then asked students to complete two tasks. One task included creating a symbol that they each felt represented their identity as an international student. These symbolic representations are introduced at the beginning of the student portraits in Chapter Four. The second task was for the group together to create a symbol that represented their understanding of their collective cultural identity as international students. Students created the symbol on the chalkboard, which Pablo recreated for me on paper. Although I was interested in the final symbol generated by the collaborative efforts of the students, I was mostly interested in the conversation

students were having as far as what approaches to take, what to include or not include, and critical aspects of the symbol. The graphical representative the students created is included in Chapter Five.

In addition to narratives, portraiture is grounded in the visual arts. However, my interpretation of art rested on a broad platform that was partially defined by student interests. In addition to the artistic representations students completed during the group interview, throughout the semester students completed a variety of tasks that explored what it meant to be an international student. Tasks were jointly decided upon by both the students and myself based on their interests. Two students decided to write journals. One student wrote, composed, and professionally recorded a song about her experiences. Another student created a photo collage of some critical incidences in her life as an international student. One student wrote a poem. Yet another student created a drawing to further elaborate on the images she associated with being an international student. This study therefore incorporates, writing in the form of journals and poems, photography, music, and graphic art as mediums for artistic expression. While I have included student work throughout this study, it was not possible to include and reproduce each student's artistic portrayal of an international student identity. However, these tasks did inform our co-constructions. Not only did I want to honor these students, but I wanted the voices of these students to tell their stories in artistic ways unique to each of them.

Finally, the *aesthetic whole* of portraitures encompasses the interaction and overlapping spheres of understanding among context, voice, relationships, and emergent themes to construct a coherent and logical story. The aesthetic whole

addresses the conception or the development of an overarching storyline, which includes a beginning, middle, and end; the structure or scaffolding of themes that support the story; the form or the format of the story; and the cohesion or integrity of the story.<sup>13</sup> I address the conceptualization of the aesthetic whole throughout this research by searching for several dominant themes and overarching visions that are revisited and expressed by students as I describe their understanding of the past (beginning), present (middle), and future (end).

There are always multiple readings and sense that can be made from narratives, conversations, and transcripts. What is contained in this study is a co-construction of sense-making by students and myself. As a methodology, portraiture resides in a standard of authenticity rather than reliability and validity,<sup>14</sup> further justifying its applicability for illuminating student stories. Therefore, my standard for this research was not grounded in generalizability or validity, but in the fact that I wanted to authentically privilege student stories and voices. This study elaborates on the stories of six students and articulates *a* way to interpret these students' stories, not *the* way to interpret all student negotiations.

Therefore, upon completion of the writing of this study I sent to each student the sections of Chapters Three, Four, and Five that related directly to our personal conversations. The text forwarded to each student obviously fits within the larger framework of the overall study, yet I was most interested in knowing if my characterizations of students and the stories they shared with me were as closely

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

aligned with their reality as they understood it to be. I welcomed any insights, clarifications, or questions about how I brought their voices to light. I expressed that they were under no obligation to look over the text and that I certainly understood if time did not permit them to do so, but I wanted to utilize this opportunity to be sure I had as accurately as possible represented each of them. Four of the six students returned the text with comments and clarifications.

Student narratives and identities are multidimensional and occur within shifting transnational spaces influenced by global flows and processes. Student identities, the contexts in which identities are negotiated, and interactions with others are not static, but fluid and highlight a process of becoming. Therefore, I presented student voices in past tense, situating students in time and place, recognizing that the meanings they ascribed to their experiences and the ways in which they constructed their identities may be different today or in the future.

It is not possible to address the entirety of previous student experiences that impacted student perceptions or to assume that students disclosed every aspect of their pasts. In other words, I attempt to access a variety of perspectives knowing that this study may never fully capture the totality of these student experiences, constructions, and sense-making. Ultimately, I was interested in learning from the students what contexts, experiences, and interactions were paramount to them in making sense of their educational sojourn.

I interviewed six students at one institution. Therefore, the limited number of students contributes to a degree of tension between the size of the sample and the generalizability of the study. However, interviewing this limited number of students

allowed me to go in-depth to experience the contours of their sojourns. The voices of these six students provide a framework of suggestions rather than conclusions.

In summary, I critically examined the multiple pathways that students took to arrive at the university, the ways these six students crossed borders, and how students came to understand and give meaning to an educational sojourn by situating this study at the intersection of transnational, globalization, and international education discourses. Recovering the voices of international students through portraiture, this study builds a rich, thick description<sup>15</sup> of international student negotiations as they reconstructed the past, navigated the present, and created a future.

Understanding international student negotiations can only occur by listening to the voices of students themselves, which can push educators towards innovation rather than legacy. The process of particularization is an important construct for “if the general is to be grasped at all...it must be grasped not directly, all at once, but via instances, differences, variations, and particulars; in a piecemeal fashion, case by case.”<sup>16</sup> International student narratives provide particular instances of critical engagement that allows a complex experience to be known in intimate ways. International students are visible figures on campuses across the country, yet their lives are little understood. Starting with individual student stories provides opportunities to privilege student voices and to gain a rare glimpse into the localities, histories, images, and meanings that inform student narratives.

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<sup>15</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> Alberta Arthurs, "Social Imaginaries and Global Realities," *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (2003): 581.



## Chapter Three: Legacies

### *When a Man Loses His Country*

I'm ready to scatter my past to the wind  
like ash, to learn the harsh language  
of wintry streets and empty

train stations. I'm ready to give up  
the murmur of traffic at dawn, of pale  
pigeons and swallows, of sprawled

shanties and barrios. Weekend trips  
to bright beaches dotted with frayed  
umbrellas, the fresh taste

of a mango, a cashew, the fine juice  
of passion fruit or sapodilla  
-renounce it all.

I'll resign myself to reading books  
on cold street benches, under the sallow  
glow of lampposts in vast

town squares. Memory: seaweed  
caught in low tide coils. I build  
a nation in brine and dust.

- *Pablo*

“This is a poem that says one thing but it means another. It says, I’ll renounce all these things, but in the end, in the act of mentioning them and naming them, you are not letting them go.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Pathways to the University**

Pablo acknowledged the importance of his origins, a sentiment shared by all six students. He did not denounce or distance himself from his origins, but turned to his memories and vivid visions of his youth to recount how his pathway to the

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<sup>1</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

university was significantly shaped by his traditions and understandings of what was important to him in life.

Pablo, Roohi, Zara, Sachin, Kaori, and Deniz<sup>2</sup> arrived at the University of Maryland with a range of diverse educational backgrounds, worldviews, personal histories, and expectations that shaped their experiences. They were sophomores and juniors, who hailed from six countries throughout Asia, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. Collectively they spoke a total of eleven languages, practiced four religions, and pursued six different majors. Yet these six individuals all carried the international student label, an alien classification that tends to lump their experiences and sense-making together rather than recognize the dimensions of difference in student histories and trajectories.

These six students shared stories about their pathways to the University of Maryland. They came from middle to upper class families steeped in traditions of cross-cultural exchanges that spanned generations and geographical borders, creating transnational social fields. The established networks of affiliation that propelled these students to the university shaped the values, ideals, and worldviews each brought to bear on their educational sojourn.

Student stories can only be understood within the context of the pathways each took to the university and by recognizing that networks of affiliation and contexts of origin continued to influence student negotiations and interactions once they arrived on campus. The ways students positioned, engaged, sustained, and negotiated relationships within transnational social fields can only be explored

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<sup>2</sup> For confidentially purposes, the names of students are replaced throughout by pseudonyms chosen by each student.

through student stories. So, how did students recount, visualize, and articulate the pathways that propelled them to the University of Maryland?

### **Transnational Networks of Affiliation**

*Pablo: "We never thought this was going to be such a permanent decision."*

Pablo was politically, economically, and socially grounded in a distinct transnational social field that traversed the boundaries between Venezuela and the U.S. He described himself as "transnational,"<sup>3</sup> a state of being that occurs when "you are still connected, but not geographically."<sup>4</sup> Although Pablo lived in the U.S. for over six years, he viewed his Venezuelan citizenship as a responsibility to continue contributing to change in his birth country. He voted in the recent Venezuelan elections and spoke of the growing expatriate community to which he and his mother belonged.

Pablo did not choose to create or engage in a transnational social field, but rather that decision was made for him:

I came when I was 15 to the States and it happened so quickly. I remember having a conversation during lunchtime and my mom said we may be moving to Washington D.C. because a job opportunity. A door has just opened. And it was all very quick. I remember like three months later, bam, we were here...So it all happened very quickly and I didn't really want to move. I had my friends there, my family was still there, everyone was still there. Everything I knew was still there. So I was very resistant to that change when I was 15. I probably did not foster the kind of environment my parents would have liked or even deserved I guess.<sup>5</sup>

Pablo's mother embedded him in a transnational social field when she accepted a position at the Inter American Development Bank in Washington, DC., where he

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<sup>3</sup> Pablo, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Pablo, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

lived together with his parents until their separation and subsequent divorce. Pablo spent most of his summers in Caracas with his father while he remained in Maryland during the academic year to complete high school. His older sister, another initially unwilling participant in their transnational social field, completed her university studies in Venezuela before leaving for Madrid, where she completed her master's degree in international commerce, and now resides. The entire family claims dual citizenship with Venezuela and Spain, where their father was born and lived for a few short years before his family left the country to escape the Franco regime.

Pablo added and deleted identities as he maneuvered the gauntlet of visa reclassifications in the U.S. and demonstrated a purposeful pathway toward a permanency that at times he welcomed and other times seemed to challenge. He originally entered the U.S. on a G-4 visa for dependents of diplomats or government workers, before he was reclassified to H-4 status for family members, and then permanent residency status. Toward the end of the semester Pablo obtained a green card and became, along with his mother, a permanent resident. He was never in the U.S. on a student visa. And although he attended and graduated from high school in the U.S., he still considered himself an international student. "I'm basically saying that I don't really think or feel as an American citizen...I do get the sense that I am different from even some of my friends, who lived here all of their lives."<sup>6</sup> After completing high school in the U.S. he never really thought of attending college in

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<sup>6</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

Venezuela, yet at the same time he “never thought this was going to be such a permanent decision.”<sup>7</sup>

Pablo arrived in possession of a family tradition grounded in public service. As a member of a family of public servants “or however you would define someone who works in the public interest for the benefit of the nation,”<sup>8</sup> Pablo grew up in a household and a society steeped in politics, which in Caracas “is one of those things that you hear everywhere and from everyone.”<sup>9</sup> Pablo engaged in conversations with his parents throughout his youth and shared stories often framed by the volatile politics of a country in transition. He shared his growing criticism of the leadership in Venezuela, a country he believed he was slowly losing. Like a quintessential participant in a transnational social field, he closely followed the political atmosphere in Caracas and contributed to political processes by voting in national elections and publishing his writings in an online magazine edited by his father.

Pablo continued the tradition of navigating national, educational, and linguistic borders as his parents had long before he was born. Deeply rooted in a family tradition of international education, Pablo grew to find attending college in the U.S. more thinkable as he reflected on his parent’s graduate studies in the U.S. and subsequent accomplishments. He considered his parents “very knowledgeable and some of the smartest people I [he] know[s].”<sup>10</sup> Pablo admired his father, who was trained as a political scientist and was an executive president of an industrialist

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<sup>7</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

association, for the success he found professionally and the ways in which he supported and engaged in efforts to affect change within the political atmosphere in Caracas. Pablo also respected and had a high regard for his mother. She studied at Harvard while working in the administration of the then president of Venezuela, Carlos Andres Perez, as an economist who was “instrumental in helping get Venezuela in what is called the Andean Community of Nations.”<sup>11</sup>

Pablo attended a summer camp in New England, an experience that exposed him to U.S. popular culture and “absolutely geared me [him] toward American culture or cultural experiences.”<sup>12</sup> He assumed that when he moved to the U.S. in high school that his life would resemble the television show Dawson’s Creek, a reality he quickly dispelled himself of as he recounted the fact that after living here for several years he still did not know any of his neighbors and none of them were crawling through his window to visit or let alone invite him over for dinner.

Pablo considered his privileged background when he spoke and acknowledged that his family’s occupational and socioeconomic status in Caracas shaped his experiences growing up there, created his place in a transnational social space, and afforded him the opportunity to see more of the world beyond the borders of his birth country than most people:

So in the context of how I see Venezuela in a globalized society, I think of my family a little. How that's remained the same, but at the same time the situation politically, economically in Venezuela has for me at least...we are part of a growing trend in Latin America of countries where there's a majority of people who live under a certain poverty line or a certain level of...I wouldn't say economic comfort because some people are pretty needy I guess.

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<sup>11</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

I would say we're going in a bad direction with the government of President Chavez. I think it's a consequence of the times we live in, in times of corruption and such where eighty percent of the population or something like that lives in poverty and they own twenty percent of the wealth. Whereas twenty percent of the population, which is where I fit in I guess, I would be part of that twenty percent because that includes middle-class, upper-middle-class, and upper-class. That twenty percent sort of has control or has access to that eighty percent of the wealth. I've grown more aware of that now.<sup>13</sup>

Pablo acknowledged the importance that Caracas had in framing and situating his narrative. "Even more concretely when I talk about Caracas, I talk about the east side, which is the side where I'm from, which the middle class is usually secluded too because the rest of the area is a little more...it's not as affluent I would say. So I guess that context, all of that goes into what I'm trying to say."<sup>14</sup> He divulged stories with a voice that resonated his past in Caracas and understood the influence his situation of privilege had how he made sense of his stories.

Pablo, although as a high school student did not chose to come to the U.S., took full responsibility for the decision to attend the University of Maryland. After visiting the campus library for a high school English project, Pablo admitted that he liked the size of the university and the opportunity it presented to socialize with people, while at the same time he welcomed the "anonymity factor."<sup>15</sup> He chose the University of Maryland because of its proximity to the city, the chance to remain close to his mother, the in-state tuition, a reputable psychology program, and an opportunity to pursue his interest in literature through living in the Writer's House. He envisioned his decision to attend the university as similar to other international

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<sup>13</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

students, believing that he had more “more opportunities to do the things I [he] wanted to pursue and have different opportunities here rather than there.”<sup>16</sup>

We perceive the United States as a place where we can find different and better opportunities than in our places of origin. I know that in Venezuela I don't think I would be able to find a creative writing program for instance like the one they have here in the Writer's House. The culture of a workshop for instance, is not really as embedded in a university setting or any other place. I can't really think of a workshop. Although my uncle is a poet, and a very successful poet too, and he teaches at some places and he holds workshops at his home or bar or places like that. So there different opportunities here than I guess in the places that were from.<sup>17</sup>

His relationships with family remained a constant in his life, surviving the initial teenage angst of being uprooted and strengthening over the years. “I guess something that has not changed something that has gotten stronger is my connection to my family in Venezuela. In fact I love my family a lot. And when I say my family I mean my extended family.”<sup>18</sup> Family constantly served as a lens through which Pablo viewed his country, his nationality, and his pathway to the university.

*Roohi: “We always knew that we would study here.”*

Roohi traveled a pathway to higher education in the U.S. paved through the continued efforts of her family before she was even born. Coming from a background steeped in education, Roohi recognized the concerted and orchestrated efforts of her family to ensure she would attend college in the U.S., just as her father did years before. It was through these efforts and well laid plans that she began to negotiate her place in the world and question her cultural identity.

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<sup>16</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

Roohi was born in Lucknow, India, a multicultural city in the most populous state in the country known for its hospitality, but never spent more than eighteen months of her life in her birth country. She grew up in Saudi Arabia as part of the expatriate community, living in the American compound while her father worked for a U.S. medical facility. She attended the British School through second grade and the American School for the remainder of her elementary and middle school years, a school she characterized as “very diverse...with students from different places.”<sup>19</sup> Roohi then attended the International School for high school, where she continued to learn alongside students from around the globe. Since she grew up outside of her birth country and was embedded in such diversity, Roohi credited her parents for instilling in her the knowledge and sense of what it means to them to be an Indian. Roohi learned English in the American compound and at the American School, but learned about her Indian heritage and the Hindi language at home from her mother, who came from a long line of language educators and taught Hindi at the Indian school. She also learned to speak Urdu to help maintain her connections to older generations of her family in India and to honor her maternal grandfather who was the head of the Urdu department at a university in Delhi. Even though Roohi was extremely knowledgeable about her Indian heritage, she contended that nationality was not a salient identity for her as she disclosed the discomfort and ways in which she was conflicted over her evolving national citizenship:

Even though I am a citizen of one place, I am not a citizen of that place...I am technically an Indian citizen, but I haven't lived in India for more than eighteen months of my life, which is like nothing. Maybe in one or two years I'm going to be a U.S. citizen, so then I can just say that. But then again I

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<sup>19</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 22, 2007.

would be a U.S. citizen but I haven't stayed here long enough to have this country embodied in me.<sup>20</sup>

Roohi demonstrated through conversations with her father that ambiguous place in Saudi Arabian society and lack of citizenship in the country where she was raised was troubling. She was not able to participate in politics or other civic opportunities that she considered key to actually being part of a place. For Roohi, "a person defines a place he lives or nationality by where he would take part in everything, where he would vote."<sup>21</sup> Yet, Roohi did not participate in Indian elections because she did not have an identification card. In Saudi Arabia she was not allowed to vote as an expatriate. And in the U.S. she was not yet a citizen. "I'm like dad, I'm 19. What do you think we are? Can you tell me who we are? I've never even voted once. What kind of life is this!"<sup>22</sup> Roohi consistently and concretely described the conflicts inherent in growing up in a country other than their birth country and what she perceived as the inability to define herself or associate herself with a place.

Roohi and her family continued to expand and cement their transnational networks of affiliation, geographically encompassing three countries. "We are all in different parts of the world. My brother is in California. I'm here. My parents are in Saudi Arabia. And my family is in India. So it is very hard that we will all be together again. We won't be the same family together again. When I think about it, it is sad."<sup>23</sup> Roohi supported her family's decision to send her brother to California to

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<sup>20</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

live with his aunt and attend high school, an experience her family believed would better prepare him for higher education in the U.S. and increase his chances of being accepted into a good college or university. Roohi saw her younger sister, who still lived with her parents and attended the Indian School as Roohi and her brother did before her, as the remaining link to Saudi Arabia, one that will dissolve as her sister reaches college age and her parents relocate to the U.S.

Roohi, as the first of three, felt the pressure of the sacrifices her family made over the years and her position as a role model for her younger siblings. Roohi came from a family with a strong tradition of educational sojourns, as both her uncle and father preceded her in earning doctorates at the University of Maryland. Roohi often spent holidays with her uncle, who never returned to India after his time here as an international student and still lives in Maryland. He is part of the growing Indian diaspora, politically active at the Indian embassy while writing for Indian-based newspapers. Roohi traveled to the U.S. every summer with her family to maintain her father's visa and residency status. She watched her parents file the required tax documents and follow the evolving policies that would allow her to attend college in the U.S. Roohi admitted, "we always knew we would study here"<sup>24</sup> and that attending college in the U.S. was the only thinkable option. Roohi decided to attend the University of Maryland because of both the in-state tuition and the national ranking of the bioengineering program.

Roohi was consumed by her engagement in networks of affiliation over the years. Throughout her travels to the sacred triad of India, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S.,

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<sup>24</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

Roohi continued adjusting to the cultural context she was located in at that moment and the expectations her family and friends:

I've always been adjusting to things. I guess that was naturally immuned into me. From the very beginning, I always went to different schools, so the adjusting thing was always there in me. I knew that I had to initiate to adjust because according to me, if I'm in a new place people won't break their comfort zone to come talk to me. I would have to break my comfort zone and go talk to them. So that was always my thing. So I am the kind of person who is very environment friendly. I adjust to the environment.<sup>25</sup>

Roohi believed it was important as a Non-Resident Indian (NRI) to adjust and to be perceived as normal as she negotiated her transnational social field. When Roohi periodically traveled to India, she traveled to Delhi, "a very diverse place, so there is no way to generalize how a life is there,"<sup>26</sup> and continually tried "to be as normal as possible, so I didn't want people to say that I had changed. I was trying to be like the same person. And I was realizing while I was doing that, I was like wow, I really have to take the initiative to do this. It was not coming naturally to me anymore."<sup>27</sup> Roohi felt misunderstood at times and maintaining a sense of normalcy was her defense mechanism against having to constantly explain herself or silence the hushed voices of those that misinterpreted her. Her salient identity as a NRI invoked a passion as she spoke of the many misperceptions Indians have of her family and others like her who seek a life outside of India's borders. Returning to her birth country, Roohi was constantly confronted and troubled by the stereotypes and generalizations of snotty expatriates unable to live the life of a common Indian, but

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<sup>25</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 22, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 10, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 22, 2007.

rather living a life of luxury and accumulating great wealth. “Everyone thought that we were very rich, that we had a lot of money, that we were just brass and that we didn’t know the hardship of life.”<sup>28</sup> Roohi shared stories of how her lack of an Indian accent when she spoke English was perceived as being put-on and how she was sized up when she confidently ordered food at a McDonalds that had just opened in Delhi. As she oscillated between cultural contexts, Roohi attempted to adapt, a process that although she excelled at, she found extremely exhausting.

Roohi compared the process of engaging in the pathways that brought her to the university and the need for maintaining a sense of normalcy, to a “compressed spring”<sup>29</sup> or a “turbine”<sup>30</sup> in a constant contentious process of becoming. Although she communicated on an almost daily basis through e-mail and cell phone with her family, it was her travels between India, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S., that she saw herself as adjusting to the social rules and norms in shifting contexts as she recognized the constant pressure to represent her family and her country:

My thing is to adjust in all three countries so I don’t hamper the trust that my parents have. Plus, I am representing my parents in some way. So it is also comes back in India to how have your parents raised you or what was your upbringing...It is an ongoing process. I think it will keep going and it will keep getting confusing the more I live here. It’s like the more I live here I get less adjusting, but then I have to go back and adjust also. I’m happy in all three of these places...I can find happiness somewhere. I can be happy everywhere and anywhere I am, unless I don’t want to be. That’s my cultural thing. I guess that is why a lot of people say I haven’t changed. I try to make a point that I haven’t changed because I don’t want to have to go through the whole conversation of people saying she’s changed, she doesn’t talk anymore or things like that. Even though I might not have changed, even if I do one

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<sup>28</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 21, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

tenth of a percent think differently, they will be like, oh my god she's changed. You become more cautious. You are cautious here because you are representing the Indian culture here. You go back there and you are cautious because you don't want to be standing out. It's a constant thought. It keeps coming back into your mind and then you relax and then you make some mistake. You're like a turbine.<sup>31</sup>

Roohi did not interpret her negotiations in a transnational social field as a dilemma about losing or gaining an identity, culture, or a country, but about maintaining the status quo, appearing normal, remembering who she was, and honoring the family. "You don't forget your roots that easily. And my parents wouldn't want you to forget your roots. I guess the Indians, well in any culture, they would prefer that you don't forget who you are. Because family values in India are the most important thing. You take care of your family and your family takes care of you."<sup>32</sup> She related story after story from her past about negotiating cultures and affiliations in shifting contexts, yet she acknowledged resisting change, hoping always to not stand out but to be perceived as normal. "Everyone is running, so you try to run with them. And if you slow down, you are like everyone is running. Why am I not running? Even if your life does not allow you to run, you are still running."<sup>33</sup> Roohi followed in the footsteps of previous generations that cemented her path to a university education in the U.S. She acknowledged the efforts of her family to ensure she was well grounded in her Indian heritage and recognized her own need to effortlessly transverse boundaries to appear normal as she continued running.

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<sup>31</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 10, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 10, 2007.

*Zara: "I always knew I was going to come to America."*

Zara followed a pathway to the university grounded in several generations of cross border activities that established a long standing transnational social field including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), India, and the U.S. Zara, born in India, arrived in Dubai on her first birthday and spent the next seventeen years growing up among the large expatriate community there. Although she spent her youth in Dubai, Zara was equally involved in the daily life of her extended family living in India and the U.S., a network of affiliation that steered her to study at the University of Maryland.

Zara came from what she described as a highly educated and modern family originating from northern India, specifically Bihar, known as the birthplace of Buddhism and the first president of India, and Bareilly, a major educational center. Yet her life crossed a myriad of borders. Her own socio-economic mobility in Dubai, an evolution she described as from "camel to Cadillac,"<sup>34</sup> further illuminates the agility that she and her family exhibited as they traversed boundaries:

In Dubai we've moved up the ladder completely...we first moved to the place right next to the dock because my dad used to take the boat across and go to work. And then we moved to a little nicer area, a one bedroom apartment... And then we moved down this one street. And it's funny because then we progressively moved up the street because even on the street there would be places that were not so nice and then you go further and there was a fancy apartment. So we move from that one bedroom apartment to a three bedroom apartment and then from a three bedroom apartment we would move to an even nicer apartment opposite the street. And that was a four-bedroom apartment. And from there we actually moved into a house in like this prime location...So we kind of move literally from top to bottom.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 5, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 5, 2007.

Zara consistently shared stories from her past that illuminated the mobility inherent in her life and the value her family placed on the ability to transverse boundaries of all sorts.

Zara and her family recognized the pivotal place an international education has in the changing context of the global economy and in shaping future professional opportunities. Zara's educational experiences provided her opportunities to become immersed in cultures as she learned alongside students in an International Baccalaureate program, that although it was "hell,"<sup>36</sup> she believed well prepared her for college. As a student in an international school in Dubai, a city where over eighty percent of the population is expatriates, Zara saw the value of participating in an educational system with a rigorous curriculum and a truly international focus. "We did a lot of English literature, but world literature, so that's very good. It gives you good insight into a lot of other things...Like I said, it had a very international aspect in everything. Like the fact that they teach you another language, the fact that their English class is ridiculously hard."<sup>37</sup> Through Zara's stories about her early education it is evident the significance she placed on developing an understanding of the world around her, and the ability to skillfully crisscross borders and engage in conversations and experiences with those who did the same.

Zara admitted that her pathway to the U.S. was decisive and that her family maintained green cards for the purpose of studying here. Although both her parents obtained advanced degrees in India, her father an MBA and her mother a graduate

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<sup>36</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 12, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 12, 2007.

degree in English, Zara decided to follow in the footsteps of her brother and study abroad. Albeit her brother who returned to Dubai preceded her in his studies at the university, she chose the University of Maryland for financial reasons and to be close to extended family, who resides along the east coast in Maryland, Washington, Virginia, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Zara described her transition in general and to the university as a simple one since she was grounded in a well established network of affiliation in the U.S. and understood what life here was like. “I already had a base here. My godmother has been living here for like twenty or thirty years. I’ve always had a base here. It’s not like I came right from Dubai. And also secondly, I went to international school so I already had that exposure of the West.”<sup>38</sup> As Zara negotiated her own high standards for herself and the terrain that accompanies being a college student, she continually turned to her family to help ease her transitions.

Zara and her family in the U.S. and in Dubai closely followed Indian politics, sports, current events, and entertainment. “Anything to do with India we know.”<sup>39</sup> During university holidays or on weekends, Zara often stayed with her godmother who lives a half an hour from campus. She acknowledged that when she crossed the threshold it was almost as if she was transported back to India, eating food she associated with her birth country, watching Bollywood movies or other shows that originated in India on satellite television, and sharing a common understanding with her godmother’s family that resonated with the bond she shared with her family in

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<sup>38</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 12, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

Dubai. She regularly read Indian newspapers online, watched Indian movies, and associated with other Indian students. Although Zara lived in India only for the first year of her life, her story was dominated by a grounding in her birth country through her networks of affiliation.

Zara saw her citizenship, however, as separate from her identity as an Indian due to her exclusion from political processes:

I was starting to understand the right to vote...I felt like my nationality was so far removed and it was so unfair. Being in the Gulf, because I am a non-resident alien and it is out of my control because my parents did that, I don't have the right to vote and see what happens in my country when that affects me...I'm attached to the place. I was born there. I can't vote in the country where I have spent 17 years, so at least let me vote in the country of my birth. I mean give some individuals some sort of power.<sup>40</sup>

Zara elaborated on a three pronged dilemma that ultimately lead her to question her national affiliations as a result of the lack of opportunity for civic engagement throughout her transnational social field.

Zara allowed her connection with Dubai as a locality to influence her story in only minor ways and she was highly critical of the city and its people, not excluding herself from this characterization, as she described her youth there and all that she learned since leaving. Outside of her relationship with her family, Zara considered Dubai a very "artificial society"<sup>41</sup> a characterization that colored her view of the Middle East and what lay beyond its borders.

Once Zara stepped outside of her familiar cultural context and began to see some of the diversity both within and outside of Dubai, she recognized how her

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<sup>40</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 2, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 5, 2007.

socioeconomic status shaped her perspectives. Dubai is largely an expatriate community, with UAE citizens accounting for less than twenty percent of the country's population, and South Asians, specifically Indians, Pakistani, and Bangladeshis accounting for approximately fifty percent of the expatriate community. As an expatriate Zara admitted to never "really feeling like I [she] was part of the place"<sup>42</sup> and acknowledged that if her parents or her brother ever leave, she really saw no reason to return, hinting at what she envisioned is the evolving landscape of transnational social fields as they shed layers of connections over generations.

*Sachin: "It's just a family trend."*

Sachin arrived at his house in Delhi in the middle of the night, surprising his family with his only trip home that year. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins poured through the doors throughout his stay while he shared stories about his time at the university. Sachin studied abroad because it was expected of him. He followed the road paved by those who crossed borders before him, establishing lives, professions, and families in the U.S.

He described his parents, both originally from Delhi, as very educated, business oriented, well traveled, and open minded. Sachin's upbringing was steeped in business. His parents established a stationary business handling government contracts and supplies, his grandparents owned an iron and steel business, and his aunts and uncles dealt in fabrics and electronics. Sachin learned to appreciate the dedication required to be successful and the value of generating wealth. He carried on the family tradition as a business student majoring in information systems

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<sup>42</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 5, 2007.

management and encouraged his brother to begin preparing for the SATs in anticipation of following in his footsteps and studying in the U.S.

All of Sachin's cousins studied abroad in places like Switzerland, the U.K., the U.S., or Singapore. "It's just a family trend. In India, all the business kids, kids belonging to business families, if you have money you should go."<sup>43</sup> While studying overseas was expected, Sachin had the freedom to decide where he would attend college. Although he attended a college recruitment fair hosted by the embassy in Delhi and applied to a variety of public and private schools, Sachin ultimately chose the University of Maryland because of the business school ranking, the close proximity to family already living in the area, and a cousin who was a senior at the university when Sachin enrolled as a freshman.

His social network in the U.S. spanned several generations. Sachin often spent school breaks visiting with his great uncle in Maryland and extended family in New Jersey. He admitted that his relatives have lived here for so long, raised families, and built careers here that they are less grounded in a social network that stretches across the seas to India than they used to be and travel there only once every five or ten years. However, Sachin was "generally pretty involved in what is [was] going on"<sup>44</sup> with his family and closely followed current events, politics, and sports in India. His conversations with family took place just about every other day through e-mail, instant messaging, and Internet videoconferencing. He saw himself situated in

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<sup>43</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 15, 2007.

contexts of origin defined by his family, not by the community or the country in which he was raised.

Sachin described his culture grounded in family and viewed his family as a foundation that served as a constant reminder of all that was required of him.

“Culture is what your family teaches you to do...My culture is what my parents have told me. What they have put into me. That’s what I call culture.”<sup>45</sup> Sachin belonged to a culture that required him to respect his elders and honor his family name in all that he did:

When I was leaving my parents had a lot of expectations that I should do well and be successful in whatever I do. I had to make sure that I don’t let them down and that I work hard enough. The one thing that my dad always said is do anything, but don’t get the family name down. To make sure I don’t do anything bad...Don’t play with fire. Be careful of water.<sup>46</sup>

Sachin was very cognizant of the expectations placed on him by his family and mentioned on several occasions the need to honor the family name. By studying, working, and becoming financially independent, Sachin believed he could do just that. He conceived of his culture as completely divorced from his conceptualization of nationality:

No one can say what I am is because of my country. What you are is because of your parents, because of your family, because of your friends, and because of your teachers. I went to a co-ed school. It is probably because my country allowed it. That is a very vague statement, but it is true. It’s not because the country has actually done anything. It’s just the policy there. But it is not the country that has given me, it is my parents.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 4, 2007.

While Sachin denied connections between his nationality and his culture, it is hard to ignore the contexts in which he was raised and aspects of his culture that shaped the thinkability of attending school in the U.S. Sachin's grandparents were in Pakistan before they migrated to Delhi. Their identity as Punjabis is not one that he claimed for himself, as he saw himself simply as a citizen of Delhi. Sachin grew up with his brother as part of a business family in Delhi and in a privileged neighborhood with tree lined streets and big houses, tutors, servants, and a maid. Yet he recognized the diversity that lay outside his neighborhood in India, throughout Delhi, and at his school:

India itself is a diverse country...Delhi you can say is something like the U.S., a melting pot with all the different cultures. Just like in New York City you'll find people from all over the world. Delhi is the same, but you don't find people from all over the world, you find people from all over India. People from different religions, different languages, just different people from within India. All Indian cultures mixed.<sup>48</sup>

Sachin painted a picture of India as a country teeming with dimensions of diversity and in transition from the inside out, barely recognizable from the India of years ago as the government was bent on developing a sustainable infrastructure and improving the everyday lives of its citizens:

People are more Internet savvy. They try to apply what they read to their lives. The Internet makes their lives easier. Internet, e-mail communication, everything has changed. Since the Internet came there, that allowed ATMS and e-commerce and stuff. That helps suspend the economy. Other than that educational levels have increased. Earlier nobody bothered with a college education. All you had to do was get into the business. But now since big companies are coming to India, they want professional services, so the colleges have gained more importance.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 4, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 4, 2007.

Sachin recognized India was the world's fourth largest economy with a middle class already larger than the entire population of the U.S. and is home to the largest youth population in the world, with 600 million individuals under the age of 25 and a pool of college graduates more than twice as large as China.<sup>50</sup>

Sachin and his family are longtime participants in traditions of higher education both in India and abroad. His networks of affiliation and family expectations contributed to the thinkability of studying overseas. He brought to bear on his understanding of studying at the University of Maryland the experiences of those who engaged in educational sojourns before him and an entrepreneurial perspective grounded in his family's longstanding business traditions.

*Kaori: "I never thought about going to school in Japan."*

Kaori arrived in the U.S. three days after graduating high school. When she boarded the plane in Kyoto, Kaori knew this would be a substantially life altering experience and felt the weight to succeed in her chest, a weight that she still carried with her five years after that plane landed.

Throughout her youth she was exposed through people, language, movies, music, and magazines to aspects of the U.S. Beginning in kindergarten she participated in an English theater at a private school outside of her regular academics. Every summer Kaori's family hosted students from the U.S. for several weeks, an experience that lead her to participate in two home-stay programs in the U.S. as a high school student and an experience she credited for strengthening her desire to come to study here. With a yearning to learn English and study music, Kaori "never

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<sup>50</sup> Mira Kamadar, *Planet India* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2007).

thought about going to college in Japan”<sup>51</sup> and always expected to find herself at a university in the U.S.

Kaori was grounded in a transnational social field before coming to the U.S., yet it was a network that was not cemented in the U.S., but grounded in Japan and China. Her connection to the U.S. was solely of her own making, although she recognized the activities of her parents and support from others throughout her youth made studying in the U.S. thinkable. “Somebody was always there for me, so I am here because of these people. So I don’t think it is me and I’m the one that did it and that’s why I am here. If these people were not with me and didn’t support me, I don’t think I’m here. I’d probably be back in Japan. I don’t know what I would be doing. I really don’t know.”<sup>52</sup> She was the first in her family to travel to the U.S. Kaori’s mother was a music teacher in Japan before her parents relocated to Shanghai for her father’s job as a clinical researcher with a large multinational corporation. Her younger brother and sister remained in Japan, a separation that has challenged the cohesive family values instilled in her throughout her youth.

Kaori came to the university by way of an English language school in Wisconsin and Montgomery College in Maryland. As a result of her participation in these diverse educational communities, Kaori came to construct an understanding of what it meant to be an international student long before arriving on the campus of the University of Maryland. Both of these experiences gave her concrete ideas about interacting within diverse populations, respecting differences, and analyzing cultures.

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<sup>51</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 27, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

Kaori provided an analogy for “building culture”<sup>53</sup> that elaborated on the colorful layered construction of national histories and identities:

Say every single person is a white sheet of paper, everyone is pure white, same shade, and equal. But if you separate for example, America, Japan, India, and Pakistan. If I grow up in Japan, I paint in a different color, like blue and then yellow or something like that. I have blue and yellow because I grew up in Japan. You have certain background, culture, and language too. And your parents teach you that you have to do this and you have to do this a certain way. And your parents learn from their parents. And in America, probably they paint in pink and black, or something like that. And probably every country has a different color. So, when I say we are citizens of the world, I think we are the same because we are all a white sheet of paper, no color on the paper, pure white and everyone is equal. We are all human beings. Even if we have a different color on our sheet of paper, we are human beings. We can talk, we can walk, we can see, we have eyes and nose and stuff like that. So we are all the same. But we are building culture...so that is why I think it is important to have an identity as growing up in a country.<sup>54</sup>

While the transnational community to which Kaori belonged is filled with different layers of colors, defined in many ways by race, ethnicity, and religion, her connection to family and Japan remained paramount. Because of the daily juxtaposition of cultures, nations, and belief systems in her life, Kaori gave great thought to the significance of her relationships and the diversity around her. Her desire to study in the U.S. developed in her youth and materialized through her concerted efforts to pursue her studies in language and music.

*Deniz: “I always wanted to study in Turkey.”*

Deniz realized the test results were not what she expected and would not grant her admission to the college of her choice in Turkey. Yet Deniz “always wanted to

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<sup>53</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 27, 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 27, 2007.

study in Turkey”<sup>55</sup> and never intended to attend college in the U.S. With the goal of studying architecture at a Turkish university, Deniz was worried when her entrance examination results were well below what was needed for acceptance into the major and college of her choice. Left with the decision of what to do over the next year, study to take the examination again, try to find a job waiting tables, or study abroad as her mother and brother had done before her, Deniz was encouraged by her mother’s stories of her education in Germany and her brother’s experience at a community college in Maryland.

Deniz often listened to her mother’s accounts of living in Germany throughout the 1970s and attending school as the daughter of a Turkish immigrant, allowing these images and stories to color her view of what studying overseas might be like. Deniz also listened to her brother, who attended Baltimore City Community College before marrying a fellow student, having two children, and settling with his family a half an hour from the University of Maryland campus. Their experiences of studying abroad colored how Deniz viewed studying overseas, taking a somewhat desperate situation and turning it into a more appealing option.

Deniz learned about the world beyond Istanbul through visitors who spent summers with her family, relationships that Deniz believed, “changed us in a good sense.”<sup>56</sup> Deniz felt affected as a result of these intercultural interactions and vicarious forays into other cultural traditions. “My mom always tells me that we are different from other children that she saw around us because we got to see more and

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<sup>55</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

we got to talk to other people.”<sup>57</sup> The positive experiences of both her mother and her brother, the international visitors that stayed with them each and every summer, her permanent connection to the U.S. as a result of her brother’s decisions, and her insatiable curiosity to learn more about the lives of those beyond Istanbul’s borders lead Deniz to relinquish the idea of studying in Turkey and to pursue the option of attending a U.S. institution of higher education.

Deniz lived with her brother upon her arrival in the U.S. and attended the University of Maryland Baltimore County with the intention of graduating with an English degree. Living in a household with her brother’s family for two years, Deniz saw herself as delaying her immersion to U.S. college culture. She benefited from her brother’s help with English, his major in high school. He also paid her bills and helped her purchase a car, serving as the “middle guy”<sup>58</sup> between her and their parents when it came to finances, something that made Deniz question at times her level of independence here.

Deniz seemed conflicted, describing her trips to Istanbul as being “stuck in this little box where nothing changes.”<sup>59</sup> She admitted to feeling “horrible”<sup>60</sup> when she transitioned back to her life in Istanbul during school breaks, relaying that “I think I expect more, so I’m like is this all that I get. Because I go back to a life that I already know. There is nothing new and enjoyable about it.”<sup>61</sup> However, Deniz also

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<sup>57</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

recognized the financial sacrifices her parents made so that she could attend school in the U.S. and wanted to return as soon as she graduated to help support her father who was looking forward to retiring. Yet, she seemed aggravated when she traveled to Istanbul, where her relationships with her family were somewhat strained. “Our communication is horrible. There is a gap growing I think because I have to explain myself to them. We are disconnecting more and more. I think we would have to live for a while to really understand our lives and understand each other.”<sup>62</sup> Deniz acknowledged the pivotal role of her family and her previous educational experiences in shaping her narrative, her interpretation of her history, and her pathway to the university.

Until high school Deniz went to private school. Classes were small, and filled with students from wealthy middle to upper class family. There was significant interaction between teachers and students and many of the social issues evident in the government school system did not exist. Deniz decided, even after receiving a scholarship to continue attending the private high school, to enroll in a government school for the first time in her life, “because in private high schools there are so many rich kids most of them don’t really have any ideals. They just come to school to socialize, to see other people...So I didn’t want to be with these people anymore.”<sup>63</sup> Deniz described regretting her decision to leave the private school to attend an overcrowded, segregated government high school. She talked about exhausted teachers who were overwhelmed by the sheer number of students in their classes and

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<sup>62</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

the lack of personal interaction she had with her teachers. “I had to change my personality in high school. It was horrible. I thought it was going to be the same.”<sup>64</sup>

Yet high school was one of the first places Deniz recounted becoming aware of the diversity in Istanbul and the ungeneralizability of life in her birth country:

There is Istanbul and there is Turkey. I come from Istanbul and it is just another world. So you can't really talk about Turkey when you talk about Istanbul. So when you hear something about Istanbul, you should think that is not Turkey. And when you hear something about Turkey, generally it is not Istanbul. They are so different.<sup>65</sup>

Turkey borders on Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It is a country at the crossroads of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe and a refuge for many displaced persons. Throughout its history Turkey has witnessed a large influx of refugees, and asylum seekers due to conflicts in the region and legal and illegal immigrants seeking out economic opportunities that are reflected in global migration patterns, significantly contributing to the great diversity found throughout the country. “I feel like I have everything from all parts of the world because I live in Istanbul and I live in Turkey. I saw so many different people and I got it under my skin now and all these cultures in my brain and in my background.”<sup>66</sup>

Deniz acknowledged the importance of her past, her locality, and her relationship with her family in shaping her pathway to the university. Looking back, Deniz described a new found appreciation for where she came from. “Now I know that Turkey is much more precious than I was thinking before.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 6, 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

## **Transnational Family Networks**

Students came into view as experienced border crossers through their stories. They created portraits of linguistic, ethnic, religious, educational, political, and national border crossings that came to bear on how they made sense of their past. Their lives involved a great deal of mobility, but their sense-making and identities were grounded in the localities of their youth and their extended families.

They came to the University of Maryland with well conceived understandings of college life through participation in transnational family networks and previous exposure to the U.S. Pablo attended summer camps in New England and eventually high school in the U.S. Roohi traveled to the States every summer to visit her uncle and learned from her father about his experiences at the university. Kaori's family hosted U.S. exchange students every summer. Deniz often talked with her brother about his college experiences at a community college in Maryland. Zara learned about campus life from her brother who studied at the University of Maryland and other students who left Dubai to study in the U.S. Through his diasporic links in the U.S. and a cousin who preceded him in studying at the university, Sachin also came to understand what to expect of college life. Through conversations with family and friends, students saw studying overseas as thinkable and developed specific expectations about their educational sojourns.

All of these students created images of the University of Maryland and all that it represented well before arriving on campus. Online campus tours provided students with information about the campus climate, programs, living options, extracurricular activities, and resources. Student understandings of living in the U.S.

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were informed by prior international experiences and travel. Learning alongside students at community colleges, language schools, and high schools in the U.S. and international schools overseas helped create portraits of what an international student community was like. There was a consensus among students that their previous knowledge of the U.S. well prepared them to deal with the educational and social spaces they encountered.

Each of the students in this study was situated in a transnational social field before attending college, and the thinkability of pursuing a higher education in the United States, in some cases specifically at the University of Maryland, increased through these networks of affiliation. Within transnational social fields students were at times both the ones crossing borders and the ones that remained behind in contexts of origin. Student pathways to the U.S. and the university materialized because they had family in the U.S.; they had someone in their family who studied abroad; or they had some sort of cross-cultural experience involving the U.S. that made it more thinkable or possible.

The original intent to study in the U.S. however, manifested itself in a range of ways. For some students studying in the U.S. was expected and a result of well laid plans over a lifetime. For still other students attending the University of Maryland was a pathway that was not planned for, but slowly developed as a result of evolving circumstances. And other students initially had no intention of studying in the U.S., but pursued an educational sojourn as a last resort. Roohi and Zara always knew they were coming to study here, a fact exemplified by their families continued efforts over the years at maintaining their permanent residency status. Sachin knew

he would follow the precedent established by his family and study abroad, but the U.S. was not a destination chosen for him but one he decided upon by himself. For Pablo the creation of a transnational social field crept up on him and was not of his own making. He acknowledged it was never the plan to attend college in the U.S., but the permanency of his situation manifested in such a way that it became the only thinkable option. For Kaori, the desire to study in the U.S. always existed and was fueled by interactions throughout her youth with Americans. For Deniz the thought of studying in the U.S. materialized as a last resort. Deniz never intended to leave Turkey, yet the results of her university entrance exams forced her to reevaluate her academic options. While family histories situated in transnational social fields made studying in the U.S. more thinkable for each of these students, their intent to do so varied, thereby shaping their decisions and the pathways each took to the University of Maryland.

All six students were embedded in transnational social fields that incorporated various physically locals into a single social space where family served as an anchor. The families of these students placed a high value on education, as they themselves were well educated and went to great lengths to ensure their children benefited from a college education. Families lived apart for periods of time, traveled extensively to ensure the opportunity to obtain a degree in the U.S. was an option, and personally financed the tuition and living costs associated with attending college.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Employing the concept of transnational social fields brings into question the notion of economic remittance inherent in its conceptualization. While economic remittance from those who travel abroad back to contexts of origin is a characteristic of transnational social fields, the nature of educational sojourns actually reverses the flow of funds from contexts of origin to support students and finance their education abroad.

Students demonstrated diversity in the strength and degree of participation in transnational social fields, which was at times dependent on their perceptions of relationships with family members. While all of the students cited communication technologies as a means for sustaining transnational social connections, staying informed of happenings in contexts of origin, and engaging in the day to day activities of their families, each described how studying abroad influenced their evolving relationships with family in different ways. Some relationships with family members became stronger, while there were also instances where students believed the distance between them and their family was widening. Students' relationships with families throughout networks of affiliation inevitably changed and evolved as a result of studying overseas.

Students forecasted an evolution of networks of affiliation and saw the boundaries of their transnational social fields shifting over time. Zara believed that transnational social fields are not static, but are evolving and will shed off certain layers as people mature and go through life. She felt that her own connection to her birth country was already slowly dissolving:

But I think that basically that connection is going to go away. So for example with me, my parents are in Dubai so my only Indian connection will go towards Dubai through them. For example, my Indian cousins in Chicago, born and raised, their only connection to India is through the Indian society that they have grown up with. But once that continues, the connection is going to get lost. And before I used to think that is so sad, but I think that is only going to happen because boundaries are now not going to be defined. They are not going to be defined as they were before...I just think the whole idea of transnational social fields is going to be more mobile.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

Zara's prediction and observation raises some important considerations for the shifting boundaries of transnational social fields in the future and the ways in which students negotiate these networks of affiliation over time.

The concept of transnational social fields bring light to bear on the dilemmas that international students encountered as they negotiated shifting contexts and affiliations, and were bounded by realities that were and were not within their control. Some students were members of transnational social fields that included countries where they had not lived themselves, but locales that defined their nationality nonetheless. Although students were engaged in transnational family networks, rarely did their affiliations extend beyond family into the community. This raises the question, how can students be grounded in transnational social fields where they have not been socialized, have not lived, or have not lived long enough to develop the ties and connections to these communities themselves? If students are situated in communities where they are not engaged, excluded from voting, or not granted citizenship, how do they form the connections to contexts of origin before they leave? If students were not actively involved in the community outside of their family and felt little connection, does operating in a transnational social field come down to being part of a transnational family? While student stories benefit from being grounded in transnational social fields, the conceptualization of their lives as such raises important questions for how students think about their connections to contexts of origin and paths to the university.

These six students and the stories they reconstructed through imaginative rediscovery tell a tale of diversity grounded in localities and positionalities specific to

each student. These international students came from metropolitan cities and consistently placed themselves in localities as they shared their stories, careful to explain that their story was only one of a range of realities and that it was not possible to draw generalizations from their interpretations, a perspective greatly lacking within the international education literature which homogenizes student experiences.

Locality and diversity within contexts of origin were important to students, as nationality alone was not enough in their eyes to understand a person's background or worldview. Understanding or explaining their place within a city such as Caracas, Istanbul, or Delhi was key to identifying the diversity among contexts of origin at a level that was not fulfilled by a national lens, but rather a lens that lied at much more personal level. Their narratives illuminate the importance of understanding *student* contexts of origin, not *national* contexts of origin as a lens for making sense of educational sojourns.

Students shared stories of pathways that manifested in specific contexts and educational histories. These students were not strangers to being embedded in diversity, crossing borders, or actively creating places for themselves to construct identities. Students portrayed pasts shaped by the consistent crossing of linguistic, educational, national, religious, and cultural borders, each grounded in contexts of origin to varying degrees and in a range of ways. Their past experiences and personal histories influenced what they brought to bear educational sojourns. Perhaps Kaori said it best. "A lot of times I think back to what I've been through since I've come to America and sometimes it makes me cry when I think about little stuff that happened.

I think it is a really good thing. Some people say, don't go back. The past is the past.  
But I like my past because I went through all this and that is why I am here."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 10, 2007.

## Chapter Four: Negotiations

Deciding whether or not to become an international student depends on so many variables that it makes it almost impossible to solve. There is no right or wrong answer for a decision like this because what you are about to experience as an international student will only be unique to you and your choices during your visit...Probably the most common part of becoming an international student is to leave one's culture behind and start to swim in foreign seas. Culture should not be taken for granted. When you have to leave your habits and traditions behind, you will recognize how your living is so tied up with them...If you happen to be a brave and strong international student soldier though, you will not allow these things to let you down.

*-Deniz*

### **Educational Sojourns**

Deniz recognized the conscious decision to become or not become an international student in her journaling. She acknowledged the process of self-identification that educational sojourners engage in after leaving contexts of origin and becoming immersed in a space that encompasses the foreign, the familiar, and the unknown. The uniqueness and complexity of international student experiences also did not go unnoticed by Deniz, and is a significant theme in how students negotiated identities and transnational spaces as they became international student soldiers.

Globalization and its influence on identity negotiations is a highly debated topic. On the one hand, perspectives of globalization include Americanization and Westernization, highlighting the homogenizing effects of global flows and processes on nations, cultures, and identities. This view conceives of globalization as a uniform and linear process of cultural homogenization achieved through cultural imperialism and domination, ultimately leading to an impending westernization that forces students to assimilate. On the other hand, perspectives of globalization include creolization, hybridization, and fragmentation, illuminating the heterogeneity of

cultures and identities. This view conveys globalization as emphasizing diversity and complex conditions where the forces of fragmentations and ruptures affect students in different ways. Between the two is a plethora of metaphoric language to describe the processes, influences, and factors associated with educational sojourns. The ambiguous space in between is where student voices resided.

Zara, Roohi, Deniz, Pablo, Kaori, and Sachin conceived of themselves as experienced, culturally knowledgeable, flexible border crossers. Yet, they were rooted in different communities and crossed different borders. These students were carrying around an understanding of diversity, yet none of their experiences dictated how they responded to new configurations of diversity at the University of Maryland. Roohi grew up as an expatriate and attended American, British, and International Schools, juxtaposed with a solid understanding of her Indian heritage. Zara also spent her youth abroad within the large expatriate community in Dubai. Pablo attended high school in the U.S. and was also an international student long before arriving at the university. Deniz grew up in a very multiculturally diverse Istanbul surrounded by family friends from throughout Europe. As a student in Delhi, Sachin attended high school with classmates that represented to him the great diversity within India's borders. Kaori grew up spending summers with visitors from the U.S. and eventually attending an English language school in the U.S. with hundreds of other students from around the globe learning to transverse languages. Their grounding in diversity is what unites them, but also distinguishes them. There was great diversity in how they sought to create a place for themselves on a campus

dedicated to internationalization, negotiate their identities as international students, and face the obstacles and challenges before them.

Each of these educational sojourners became one in a student body of over 35,000 students from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, and languages at the University of Maryland. They came into a community that was breathtakingly diverse, with over ten percent of the student population originating outside of the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Students walked across the 1250 acre campus with green stretches of lawn and miles of pathways separating a pastiche of massive brick buildings, and witnessed a mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and nationalities. They shared dormitories and lived with roommates from around the globe and studied alongside classmates who attended the university as a result of one of the more than 200 international exchange agreements with universities, governments, and private research institutions worldwide. Encountering traditions, norms, and values that differed from their own was a daily act of reconciliation. The University of Maryland was a shifting context. The composition of the student body changes from semester to semester as students enroll, transfer, drop-out, or graduate. The ever changing, evolving student body creates a portrait of fluidity and provides only a snapshot in time of the diversity these six students came upon during the spring 2007 semester.

It's no surprise that in encountering this magnitude of diversity students rejected, accepted, or constructed images of selves by juxtaposing self-perceptions with perceived understandings of what it meant to be an international student. The University of Maryland appeared to foster a context for students to reflect on their identities as just another student and as an international student. Toggling between

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<sup>1</sup> IIE.

the two presented a space of constant negotiation infused with dimensions of difference that students overwhelmingly sought to actively rectify for themselves. Identities as international students were developed and negotiated through dimensions of difference and comparisons of themselves with perceived expectations and images others had of international students as a group. Pablo succinctly described what he believed was the traditional thinking of what constitutes an international student. “Usually an international student is seen as someone who is here temporarily. He or she is coming here to study for a while, possibly practice English, or try to have a different cultural experience and then go back to that mother nation.”<sup>2</sup> The personal histories and backgrounds of these students contradict this description.

Students actively engaged the campus community to construct a sense of being and belonging.<sup>3</sup> Within this large culturally congested and complex university, students held membership in multiple communities and made sense of their positions in the campus community in different ways. While students encountered a cohesive and bounded international student community during their initial orientation, their sense of this community and their perceived involvement in it shifted over time. These students were situated at a university where although they recognized the montage of contexts of origin, traditions, and languages among the student community, had a difficult time describing the international student community on

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<sup>2</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 602. Ways of being “refers to the actual social relations and practices an individual engages in rather than to the identities associated with their actions.” A way of being in the world is grounded not only in a whole history, but a compilation of histories, relations, discourses, and identities situated in space and history across cultural contexts. Ways of belonging “refers to practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group.”

campus. They questioned the existence of and their participation in an authentic bounded international student community, choosing instead to describe a community that was fragmented and self-segregated by nationality. Yet as participating and nonparticipating members, no two of them thought about themselves as international students in precisely the same way. Their connections to the international student community reveal something about the ways they positioned themselves on campus and provide a context for how they negotiated their international student identities.

Pablo considered himself an international student, yet he did not see himself as a participating member of the international student community on campus. “I guess you could say I’m not really part of that [the international student] community. I usually hang out with ‘native English speakers’ or I guess ‘real’ Americans or people who have lived here all their lives or who were not here on a visa usually.”<sup>4</sup> Sachin initially found comfort in the diversity of the international student community during orientation, however, he soon realized that the differences that bound them as foreign students in the beginning would eventually separate them. “It’s really diverse and there is not a lot of interaction between students. Within the international student community people from other countries don’t really get together often. Orientation time we are all from different countries, but we are together. I don’t hang out with people from other places like South America or China or other places.”<sup>5</sup> Kaori’s previous experiences as an international student at a language school and then community college in the U.S. shaped how she conceived a differentiated

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<sup>4</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 15, 2007.

international student population on campus and her position within that community. “I feel like there are two different types of international students. I’m kind of in the middle, but there is this huge separation. One group, they are in America but they don’t want to lose or aren’t even trying to be a part of American people. But the other people, they are trying to be a part of America.”<sup>6</sup> Roohi also envisioned herself as a participating member of a particular segment of the international student population that came out of their comfort zones to experience dimensions of difference across campus. “You’ve probably noticed that the international students stick around with all their kind of people. I’ve seen two kinds of people. Some people don’t come out of their comfort zone, but some people come out of their comfort zone and say, I have lived in India, I have Indian friends, I would like to have more friends from outside this community. I’ve come here. So that I think is different.”<sup>7</sup> Zara considered herself part of the international student community, yet at the same time distinguished herself from other sojourners based on what she perceived as her unique grounding in a transnational social field. “Actually, to a great extent I do see myself as part of it [the international student community]. Although I feel like I have an upper hand because I have more of a comfort zone than they do.”<sup>8</sup> Deniz, a transfer student from a branch campus of the university where she was active in the international student community, strongly believed she did not have a connection to the international student community at the University of Maryland.

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<sup>6</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 10, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 12, 2007.

“After coming here for two years I think I forget about being a part of that community. I guess I just wasn’t interested in being part of the international community anymore.”<sup>9</sup> Each of these students felt detached to some extent from an authentic international student community and described their sense of belonging, connections, and engagement in a range of ways that rested on their perceptions of themselves as international students.

The diversity at the University of Maryland was not the only contributing factor to students’ sense of detachment from an authentic international student community. In fact, these six students believed they were not always perceived by others as traditional international students and therefore were able to continually engage in the negotiation of their identities by making the decision to pass for domestic students or to enact aspects of their international student identity. Pablo chose to pass for a domestic student and not evoke international aspects of his past. “I don’t really carry the international student banner or present myself as one.”<sup>10</sup> Kaori believed the large number of Asian students on campus allowed her to pass as a domestic student, while she acknowledged that her accent at times gave her international background away. “I sit in a class and people don’t even know that I am an international student. There are so many Asians that people can’t tell unless they talk to me and pick up my accent. Then they can tell.”<sup>11</sup> What Zara considered her convoluted pathway to the university give her the option of temporarily assuming an

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<sup>9</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

identity as a domestic student. “But amongst Indian students, when I tell them I’m not from here, they’re like did you just come from India and I’m like no I just came from Dubai and they’re like so you’re a F-O-B, fresh off the boat. I guess people don’t really think I’m from anywhere else until I tell them.”<sup>12</sup> Sachin felt confident that self-disclosure was the only way others would recognize his status as an international student. “They’re not really able to tell if you are an international student or not because of the huge diversity on this campus. It’s not like I have a badge that says F-1, so they don’t know unless you tell them.”<sup>13</sup> Roohi actually considered herself “more American”<sup>14</sup> than some of her counterparts, a characteristic that she admitted to invoking on a whim. Deniz, who initially believed it was impossible to hide her international background, came to revel in the joy of being mistaken at times for a domestic student and yet able to call upon her “Turkishness”<sup>15</sup> when she wanted to find common ground with other international students. The perceptions and representations students encountered of themselves certainly played an integral role in how they positioned themselves on campus and when they each invoked international aspects of their identities.

Through their stories students shared their interpretations of what it meant to be an international student and brought forth realities that add depth to an understanding of educational sojourns. Since they actively sought to participate in this study, all of the students perceived themselves as international students to some

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<sup>12</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 12, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

degree based on particular characteristics. An international student identity was not a new identity for all of these students, which influenced the variations in the extent that they saw themselves as international students, the images they encountered, and how they perceived others defined them. These six students came to the university with an understanding of diversity, yet faced the challenge of negotiating new configurations of diversity and their evolving multiple identities in shifting transnational spaces. These students stepped outside of the boxes assigned to them, refuted the labels they were tagged with, and challenged the understanding of what it means to be an international student. So just how did each student go about creating an international student identity?

### **International Student Identities**

It is possible to explore the range of meanings students ascribed to educational border crossings and how they negotiated and constructed their identities by situating student educational experiences within larger historical, social, and cultural contexts. Portraits of student border crossings provide a rare opportunity to explore student sense-making and the ways they position themselves to construct a sense of being and belonging. Although students engaged a virtual version of campus completely accessible online as they registered for classes, completed course evaluations, paid tuition, conducted research, ordered textbooks, applied for campus jobs, registered for campus housing, read the university newspaper, and communicated with professors and classmates, it was their daily interpersonal interactions within the larger campus community that provided a contested space for how students framed their evolving international student identities.

## ZARA



Figure 1: Zara

I always feel like I am constantly questioning, be it myself, be it my situation, or where I am from. But the thing is now I've become a lot more comfortable with that. But before I wasn't. I mean when you are a kid it is different. That's what I feel. Like if you plan something, nothing is going to go according to plan. You just don't have that much control. I feel like I am in a state of constantly questioning everything around me.<sup>16</sup>

*Zara: "I have a new term for myself. I call myself a city slut."*

Zara grew up among the diverse and constantly changing expatriate population in Dubai, although she wasn't always aware of the diversity around her. However, throughout her travels and since coming to the university Zara became more aware of the range of differences in her immediate surroundings and the multiplicity of her evolving identities. She continued her wanderlust to seek out a fusion of the foreign and the familiar in a sundry of new cultural configurations that she was initially unaware existed.

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<sup>16</sup> Zara, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

Zara considered herself a “city slut,” or someone who can’t be in one city for too long. She was no stranger to cross-cultural interactions and thrived on these exchanges. Zara arrived in Dubai from India on her first birthday, traveled to the U.S. for college, and then studied abroad in Copenhagen, a catalyst for dramatic changes in how she viewed her identities and her ideas on culture. Yet there are instances in Zara’s life where she was not the mobile one, but was rather surrounded by people who were themselves traveling to and from localities and cultures, giving her a sense of traveling the world with them.

Zara acknowledged that while she grew up in Dubai, at the same time she didn’t really grow up in the Middle East, and realized it wasn’t until she left Dubai that she began to develop a consciousness about the diversity within cultures and national borders:

I mean eighteen years of living in the Middle East. I haven’t lived in the Middle East. I’ve lived in Dubai, which is even completely different from other parts of the UAE...Dubai is such a small place. It’s like a cocoon. You know how they say that people in New York don’t see anything beyond New York. That’s exactly what people in Dubai think. They don’t think there is anything beyond Dubai. In fact, when I was living in Dubai I was so ignorant of the whole Middle East thing, but when I went to Denmark I saw there were poor Arabs and I’d never seen that in my entire life. And this is a girl who has lived eighteen years in the Middle East. But the part of the Middle East that I was exposed to was completely different. These are things you don’t realize I think.<sup>17</sup>

Zara found that being situated in a locality remains an important aspect of how she positioned herself in the world and how she envisioned or understood the people around her.

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<sup>17</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 2, 2007.

Dubai is focused on becoming the Knowledge Village<sup>18</sup> for the Arab world. Over a dozen institutions of higher education have opened there in the last ten years, with Harvard University, Michigan State University, and American University offering courses there. Yet, Zara did not avail herself of these higher education opportunities, but upon graduating from high school did what most children of expatriates in Dubai did. Due to what she considered the poor higher educational system in the country, she left to study abroad.

Zara learned more about her contexts of origin by studying in the U.S. As a result of pursuing her business degree she saw herself and her national identity reflected in the curriculum. In fact, she believed the business program needed to widen its purview of what it considered to be important beyond that of India and China, although she acknowledged these two countries are “spearheading change in the world right now.”<sup>19</sup> Zara saw her “Indianness” reflected as part of a growing trend in the business world, as she learned how interconnected individuals and societies have become. Yet, she continued to emphasize how locality played a pivotal role in the formation of her perspectives based on the information she had access to and contexts she was immersed in:

There was so much about India that I didn’t know until I came here. Because you are completely on the other end of the world, so the information that you get is completely different. Because you see when you are on the eastern side, you are always looking up to America. But now when you are in America you are kind of looking that way. So it’s a different perspective both ways. Different eyeglasses.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Dubai Knowledge Center, <http://www.kv.ae> (accessed July 12, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 12, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 12, 2007.

Her eyeglasses windows not only on India, Dubai, and the U.S., but forays into worlds that Zara didn't realize existed or hadn't had the opportunity to explore until she became conscious of how connected she was to the rest of the world:

I was unaware of the edge that we [Indians] have now and the opportunity that awaits. It's kind of like a rush. When I go back to India I can see it and I can feel it. It's kind of like everyone is talking, in the middle class or the class that I'm associate with or in. I mean there is a huge eighty percent of the population that I don't know about and I don't know what the effect is on them. But among the middle class there is a drum beat and they are all looking around and it's crazy. Honestly speaking, I didn't know how connected we are. Like in America I didn't know how connected you can be to every other part of the world because before I never really needed to. Before I was in Dubai and it was like two hours by plane, just as far as Chicago, and it was good enough. And there are so many Indians around me. I have the TV that shows me the Indian channels. I didn't realize how connected I am because of the Internet. I'm pretty connected.<sup>21</sup>

The way Zara understood the images and information dispersed by technology changed the way she saw herself connected to and engaged in a myriad of social networks that fueled her imagination.

Zara was one of two from her groups of friends that decided to study in the United States. Most of her friends returned to their contexts of origin or traveled to other English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, or England to pursue their studies. Through her travels, communications, and relationships, Zara realized that her "network is so huge."<sup>22</sup> After a recent trip to Toronto over the winter break, Zara reiterated how pleased she was that she chose to study at the University of Maryland verses a university in Toronto, a large destination among her friends. For her, Toronto was too comfortable and was not a place that challenged her to journey

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<sup>21</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 12, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 2, 2007.

into those cavernous corners of the world that still await her discovery. “It [Toronto] is a very comfortable, convenient environment for me to settle down into because I’m used to it. I wouldn’t see myself leaving that place. Who knows I might. But I wouldn’t see myself leaving, which is why I am kind of glad I’m here. So I can be here, but still in a way move,”<sup>23</sup> which is exactly what Zara did when she decided to spend a semester in Copenhagen.

Zara saw studying in Copenhagen as a turning point for in the ways she understood and valued the dynamic nature of her identities:

I always thought, no, I can never go study abroad because my family won’t allow it or there was always some excuse. But then I realized that these things, these multiple identities, these multiple places that we come from, the fact that your family is so strong, they don’t have to be a hindrance. They can be your own strengths and you can use them to leverage yourself. Copenhagen definitely made me more comfortable being myself.<sup>24</sup>

Zara’s experience in Copenhagen was a catalyst for a dramatic change in how she viewed the fluidity of her identities. Zara came to value her international background and felt it gave her an edge. “Before it used to annoy me because I never really thought I had an identity. But now, since coming here I’ve become a lot more comfortable with that because that’s what begin international is, going beyond your boundaries. It gives me a lot more flavor. It gives me an edge.”<sup>25</sup>

The fluidity or portability of cultures is a common thread throughout Zara’s story. Zara avows that “there is so much mobility in culture now. It can be taken

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<sup>23</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 2, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 12, 2007.

anywhere.”<sup>26</sup> While in Copenhagen Zara had an experience that spanned cultures, languages, literatures, and geographical boundaries that demonstrated to her just how translatable an idea can be and the inherent value in understanding an idea from multiple perspectives:

And to talk about portability of cultures, books are a great insight. While I was abroad, there was an Italian girl...and I was in her room and I saw her book and the cover looked familiar. I picked it up and it was Isabel Allende, in Italian. How cool is that! So that’s what I mean. It’s a Chilean writer, she writes in Spanish, it got translated into English and Italian and we both had a conversation about it in Denmark. We said names of the characters and we understood each other. I read it four times, she read it twice. That was the beginning of our relationship right there.<sup>27</sup>

Zara’s account of her conversation with a fellow student abroad demonstrated her imagination in action. Ideas, images, and symbols are crossing borders as a result of travel, translation, and mediation.

Zara recognized the portability of cultures in herself as well. She considered herself a second culture kid and a global citizen. “Being born somewhere, being brought up somewhere, studying somewhere else. Being exposed to so much stuff. I’m a second culture kid as you know...definitely a global citizen because I don’t necessarily associate myself with one place, but kind of all of them.”<sup>28</sup> Zara allowed the physical and cultural mobility in her life to define. She acknowledged that the mobility she encountered in all its forms was an aspect of her life that continued to positively challenge her to make sense of her multiple identities:

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<sup>26</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 12, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 12, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 12, 2007.

I think every place comes into your identity to an extent. It has somewhat of an impact. So my identity, and don't really know it is kind of complicated. But yeah, I definitely feel like there's the Indian in me, the whole culture and the values, the way things are done. That's the Indian in me. And then from the Middle East, it's like my knowledge of the culture itself over there in Dubai. And then America. Maryland because it's my school...I think we have to go beyond these definitions. I think that because everything is a part of us.<sup>29</sup>

Zara saw each of these locales as contributing in some way to her identity, yet she clearly saw herself on the margins, a space that although it posed challenges she came to own:

I'm kind of like on the margin of everything. Like the whole Muslim community. I'm kind of in and I'm kind of out. Indian community, kind of in, kind of out. The Arab community, definitely not in. But they're never going to consider me in, although I think I've probably lived in the Arab world more than they will ever have, but I'm not in it. The country doesn't consider me so, so they probably don't consider me so, whatever. I don't care. So, it's kind of like half in and half out everywhere...In Dubai I'm looked at like, oh you stupid Indian. And in India I'm looked at as a stupid Muslim.<sup>30</sup>

The fluidity of her ideas about her experiences transversing educational, national, and cultural boundaries seemed to be a constant throughout Zara's story, something she admitted she became more aware of as she critically reflected on her life, which often surprised her as she shared her story. Clearly Zara thought of herself as part city slut, part second culture kid, and part cosmopolitan. She welcomed the fact that her mother, who recognized her efforts to bring people together, bestowed upon her the nickname "Little Gandhi."<sup>31</sup> Her family would often say "bring out the

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<sup>29</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 12, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 2, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 2, 2007.

Little Gandhi,”<sup>32</sup> as Zara again attempted to reconcile the adversity that emerged from the diversity around her. Little Gandhi, clearly passionate about her educational sojourn, was still seeking out the diversity in the world, not in an attempt to change it, but in an attempt to experience it, understand it, and make it her own.

### ROOHI

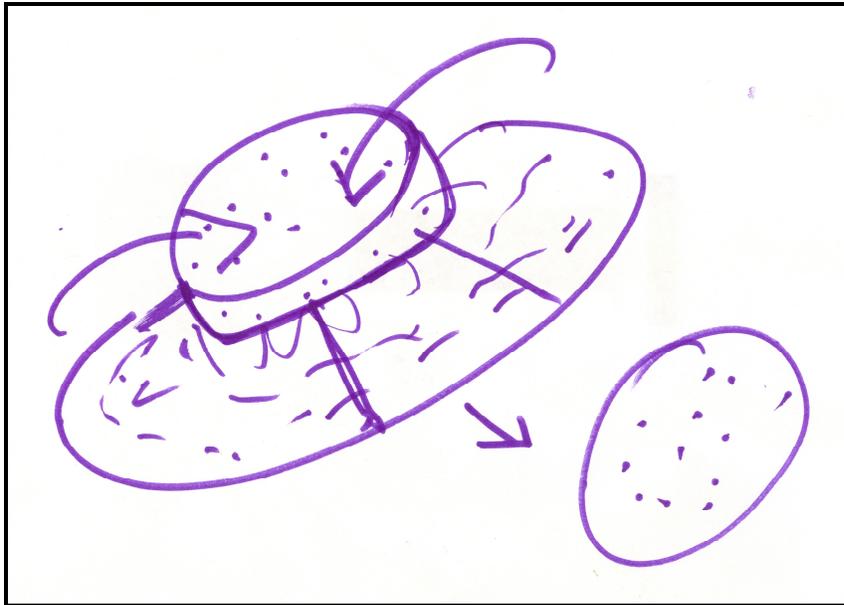


Figure 2: Roohi

I totally feel like I am a sponge or something. Because this is like the sponge and this is the water, and this is all the places that I've been to. I absorb all those things, but you can kind of squeeze out some of those things and some things still remain. And then you still add more things to it. That's what I think. That I am kind of like a sponge because I am very adaptable, that I can adapt to any situation. I can adapt to things quickly. I can also de-adapt. Like when I go back to India or Saudi Arabia I can become the same old person. A lot of people have told me that I haven't changed much, but I know the changes in me, but I try to hide them because I still want to remain the same person for them. So a lot of them have said you haven't changed much, but at the same time I have changed. So I have this whole thing where I can absorb, but at the same time take it out. So that's who I am, a sponge.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 2, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Roohi, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

*Roohi: "I'm not the Indian who lives in India. I'm the other."*

Roohi described herself as a global nomad. She was born in India but lived there for no more than eighteen months of her life, spending the rest of her adolescence shuttling between Saudi Arabia where she resided with her immediate family and the U.S. for the purpose of establishing residency. Yet Roohi came to the university with an identity very much grounded in her Indian heritage and not the physical localities where she grew up. While Roohi believed people put her aside in India due to her status as a NRI and in Riyadh because of her status as an expatriate, she found her experience at the University of Maryland to be quite different. "Here it is different because there are so many different people. It is more accepting."<sup>34</sup>

Roohi found the campus community to be more open to differences due to its size and the diversity of the student population.

Roohi's educational experiences before coming to the University of Maryland were varied, as she moved from school to school in Riyadh, experiencing a range of cross-cultural encounters along the way. She attended the British School for kindergarten through second grade and was a member of the very diverse study body at the American School for grades three through nine, educational experiences that Roohi said helped her learn to adapt to new situations. She attended high school at the International School and began to negotiate her identity as an international student long before setting foot on campus.

Roohi applied and was accepted to Global Communities, a global living and learning program where she lived in a dormitory with international and domestic

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<sup>34</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 21, 2007.

students for two years and continued searching for ways to engage in transcultural learning spaces. During her freshman orientation to Global Communities and through conversations with others, Roohi began to clarify her thoughts about her cultural identity. When asked what she considered the most troubling question, “where are you from,” she would jokingly question how long they had. However, Roohi located a label through one conversation with the then director of Global Communities that she felt completely comfortable with and provided a way of describing herself that illuminated aspects of her cultural identity she had tried to rectify for years:

They were like where are you from and stuff like that. I was born and brought up in Saudi Arabia and my parents are Indian, so I’m living in the US. And the director was like, wow, that’s how I was brought up, because she lived in Kuwait. She said yeah, so you’re a global nomad. And I thought wow. That is the first time someone has told me I am from somewhere or given me a name, because I don’t know where I’m from.<sup>35</sup>

Before that conversation Roohi told people she was from three different places or just made something up, admitting that she was just bewildered about what to call herself and described herself as a “confused person.”<sup>36</sup> Giving herself a name or owning the label of a global nomad was an empowering act that provided a pathway towards understanding her positionality in the world and on campus.

Roohi’s experience as a member of a global living and learning program was a catalyst for how she understood and described her identities and culture, and the ways in which these cultures intersected. She never spent more than 18 months of her life in India, yet maintained her Indian citizenship as a matter of necessity since the government of Saudi Arabia did not grant citizenship to expatriates regardless of how

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<sup>35</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 22, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 22, 2007.

long they lived in the country. Roohi considered herself “Saudi Arabian-Indian,”<sup>37</sup> a distinction she made based on her birth to Indian parents and her upbringing in Saudi Arabia. “I mean I wouldn’t consider myself Indian because I’ve never lived in India. I’m not the Indian who lives in India. I’m the other. I would be a different kind of Indian.”<sup>38</sup>

Roohi determined which identities she enacted based on the context of her interactions and how she believed she was perceived by others at that moment in time. “The foreign exchange students just think I am American. The American students think I am some sort of international person and they can’t define it. And my Indian friends pretty much think I’m very Indian. So when I’m with different people, a different side of me comes out.”<sup>39</sup> While Roohi recognized the various ways people saw her, she also acknowledged the misperceptions people had about her. She as if she was often an unofficial ambassador for the cultural contexts in which she grew up. She believed some students on campus had a negative perception of her as someone who grew up as a Muslim in the Middle East:

I think it is a very feared perception, like terrorists or Muslims and stuff like that. Or maybe it’s not safe to live there or that there are camels there and that people still go to school on camels. In one of my freshman classes I was talking with one of the girls in my class and when I told her I was from Saudi Arabia, she asked me if we had camels around. I said, yeah in the desert. Then she asked if I lived in the desert. We were in the computer lab and so I showed her on the computer how Saudi Arabia was. And trust me it is much more beautiful than most cities in the U.S. They work on their greenery, they have trees. I mean who has trees in a desert. People still have this perception that it is a desert and people still wear the gown.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 18, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 22, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

Roohi, once she arrived on campus, witnessed the diversity around her and started to interact with other students who often asked questions about her background, felt a desire to learn more about her culture and a heavy responsibility as an incarnation or representative of where she came from:

I think you represent your culture. That's what I think. And I don't know if that is just because I am in Global Communities or if that is prevalent everywhere. Because in Global you have to look at your culture and you are representative of your culture because there are people from different cultures. More broadly it would be that you represent your own culture when you are with different people, especially if they don't know anything about India or Saudi Arabia. So they would look through my eyes into those cultures. So you kind of get more responsible about speaking about your culture.<sup>41</sup>

Roohi admitted that she was engaged in an ongoing struggle and at times “totally clueless”<sup>42</sup> when it came to explaining or defining aspects of her Saudi Arabian-Indian identity.

Roohi spent most of her life in Saudi Arabia, yet she consistently framed her narrative from a cultural lens grounded in India. Her identity was not tied to a place as much as it was tied to her family:

It all goes back to my mom because she knew that we were never going to stay in India. We were never going to learn about how Indians are or how our roots were connected to us or whatever. Because she knew we were going to live in Saudi Arabia and we were going to move to the US. So we were just going to be moving away from her, away from the country that she is from and that we are from. And she didn't want to hear from her in-laws or from her family that her children didn't have all that culture in them and that they should be respectful and stuff like that. She always stood her ground and she said, I am going to teach you Hindi and I am going to teach you Urdu and you will be very Indian. You will never live with me again and you will never live in India so you are never going to learn it. So we could have been just

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<sup>41</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 10, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 10, 2007.

like any other people. We could have talked English in the house, but she made sure we knew.<sup>43</sup>

Roohi was confused when asked to write about her culture in Global Communities and didn't know how to tackle what seemed like a daunting task dominated by a convergence of cultures and traditions. "Was I supposed to write the Saudi culture, the Indian culture? So that's when I came to realize that my culture was about the Indian people living in Saudi Arabia. It was not very Indian at all. Indian people are very different. Like their thinking is very different. There's a whole gap between the NRIs, the Non Residential Indians, and the Indians."<sup>44</sup> While Roohi was knowledgeable of her Indian heritage, she realized that her "Indianness" materialized in her differently from someone who grew up in her birth country. Roohi viewed this exercise, her orientation, and participation in Global Communities as a pathway to understanding her cultural makeup and the transnational spaces in her life:

Before joining Global I didn't actually realize that I had three different cultures in me. I always thought it was the Indian culture I guess or maybe the Indian-Saudi Arabian culture. But at that point I didn't realize that it was a different thing. I just thought it was the normal thing. But then I did Global Communities and they were asking us to define cultures. Before I never thought about what a culture is or how you have culture and how you deal with it and how it is different from other people. It never came to my mind. But when they asked us to write what our cultural habits are, like while eating, drinking, sleeping, shaking hands, talking to people, facial expressions, movements. I went to write about that. How you would greet someone in Saudi Arabia is like you would kiss the person on the right cheek, left cheek, right cheek. You don't kiss them, but you have your cheek right there. And in India it would just be a formal greeting, like a handshake or something, or just verbal, so that's different. But I would always greet verbally and then do the kiss thing. I am like, wow that is different. That is Saudi and that is

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<sup>43</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 18, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 22, 2007.

Indian, in between. So they would ask, what do you say. We always said hi. Even in school we would do that. So, wow that's American.<sup>45</sup>

Roohi continued to negotiate her cultural identity and came to realize throughout the semester instances where she was actively negotiating transnational spaces. Students often navigated the foreign and the familiar at the university's international coffee hour which is held in the Global Communities dormitory and is attended by students from across campus. Roohi often participated and recognized the juxtapositions of cultures at coffee hour and shared one particular story that further illustrated how her personal history and cultural identity influenced how she positioned herself on campus and her interactions with other students:

I was down there with my friend getting coffee and there were three Arab people there and I could understand most of what they were saying and I was going to ask them where they were from. It's like you go and approach a guy from different parts of the world, but you wouldn't go and approach a Saudi Arabian guy because you don't do it in their country and you know about their country. I know how they would feel. I guess I am more conscious because I know they don't do that there and they would be really either overwhelmed or confused or whatever when I talk to them. They might just not talk or talk very weirdly...If this was happening in Riyadh, I wouldn't even be looking at them. But since it is happening here I could have actually gone and approached them and we could have had a conversation and they would have had a conversation with me. But if this whole thing was moved to Saudi Arabia, this would not have taken place. There would have been walls and everything.<sup>46</sup>

Roohi described living as an Indian in a largely expatriate community of Indians, Pakistanis, and Americans in Saudi Arabia; attending an international high school; rooming with foreign exchange students in Global Communities; and interacting with other students at international coffee hours as third spaces and third

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<sup>45</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 22, 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

cultures. “Even though I am a part of it, I didn’t realize it then but if I think about it now, I’ve always seen that whole third culture in between.”<sup>47</sup> Roohi described her negotiations in transnational spaces with her family, roommates, and friends as always occurring in a third space or a third culture:

If there is more globalization there is more diversity in culture...Culture is a sense of rules and norms or things that people do. If there are more different kinds of people I guess there would be more different things that you would do, different ways that you would talk, ways of sitting and standing and stuff. That would make it more diverse, more heterogeneous. It reminds me of genetics. And since you have reminded me of genetics, there would be more mutations. There would be more people interacting with each other, my culture and your culture, and then there would be a different culture in between us. Because if I am adjusting to your culture and you are adjusting to my culture, we might end up having a different culture that is not your culture or my culture, but a third culture. A culture that involves everyone in it. So I guess globalization is directly proportional to culture.<sup>48</sup>

Roohi used her academic grounding in bioengineering to provide a useful analogy for how she envisioned the relationship of globalization to her culture. Roohi welcomed these third spaces or transnational mutations and enthusiastically described how the ambiguity she encountered as a result helped her discover a way to describe her culture. She envisioned globalization contributing to the creation of heterogeneous cultures or spaces, not homogenous culture, where she could explore individual configurations of diversity. In fact, she admitted “not having problems with culture shock or problems interacting with people”<sup>49</sup> as she continued transversing cultural, national, linguistic, and educational boundaries.

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<sup>47</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 18, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 18, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 21, 2007.

The Global Communities Handbook states that program participants join a “community of University of Maryland students committed to exploring diversity, developing intercultural understanding, and broadening their world perspective.”<sup>50</sup> Roohi was a model student for the program and elaborated on how living in Global Communities helped her address questions about her evolving identities and cultures in the third spaces she created through her interactions.

### DENIZ

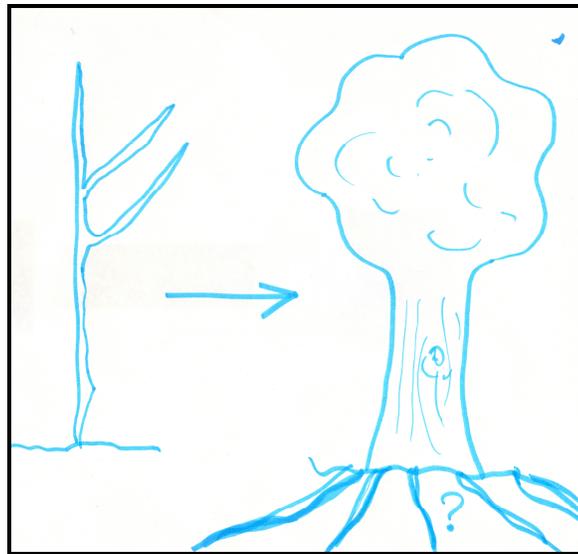


Figure 3: Deniz

This is a Turkish grub tree. And there are roots and there is a question mark, meaning I don't know my roots anymore. Not my roots. Actually this is wrong. I know my roots, where I come from. But I need to grow my roots. I need to find somewhere that I can grow my roots. Somewhere that I can grow.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> International Education Services, Global Communities Handbook (University of Maryland, 2007, accessed February 15, 2007); available from <http://www.international.umd.edu/gc>.

<sup>51</sup> Deniz, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

*Deniz: "I just say I'm an international student all the time."*

Deniz came from a family with a previous understanding of American higher education. Although she began her studies at the university with expectations that developed largely in part through conversations with her family about their time abroad, as she began crafting a place for herself on campus she soon realized that her experiences, largely grounded in Turkish traditions, were unique.

Deniz believed nothing travels between cultures without being transformed by the cultures and people that it comes in contact with and essentially "deforms it, changes it."<sup>52</sup> Deniz subscribed to this same sentiment when she spoke about her identities, the cultures that she envisioned are a part of her, and her insatiable desire to travel. "Culture is everything. It sticks to you. It's part of you. If you never want to leave it, you never leave it. I want to be that way. I never want to leave any culture that I've seen. I want to be a part of everything and get the things that I like from other people. That's why I'm studying in the United States."<sup>53</sup> The same cross-cultural experiences she described finding so much value in and that provided a rationale for her studies in the U.S. created a lens through which she viewed her identities and her place on campus.

Deniz used one word to describe her experience as an international student, tension. "Tension is sometimes bad, but tension is also sometimes good. Because you are always in two cultures and always pulled away. And you are also growing up, so you are changing too. You are trying to adapt yourself to what's here and

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<sup>52</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 13, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

what's back home waiting for you."<sup>54</sup> Deniz succinctly described her position in a transnational space and the challenges she associated with having to actively negotiate her positionality. "I think tension makes you think more about your life, especially begin here. Here I have to think more. What is more believable for my future? What can I do best to serve my people or people generally in the world? What is the best thing to do? How can I use my time really wisely? Things like that. There good things, but I always feel tension."<sup>55</sup> Deniz actively questioned many things, yet only occasionally really found any answers.

Deniz further demonstrated her conceptualization of tension as she articulated her positionality as a Turkish international student. Deniz thrived on the ambiguity surrounding Turkey's place in the world at this time, not yet part of the European Union, teetering on belonging to the Middle East and Asia. Deniz paralleled her own identity with that of her birth country, one of being "in the middle."<sup>56</sup>

Actually my mom would always tell us because she lived in Germany when she was a teenager, that when she would come back for vacations she would feel really disconnected to Istanbul because you have very different things in Germany. But in Turkey you have your family and other people too. So you are always in the middle. She would always mention this. But now I know what it feels like. It is horrible. I mean it is good because you get to know a lot of things, but then you can never go back to that feeling of belonging somewhere because you are always going to miss somewhere.<sup>57</sup>

Deniz believed a sense of belonging somewhere was important and she continued searching for a place to lay down her roots while reconciling her desire to travel. "I

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<sup>54</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 21, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

think traveling makes me happy. Sitting in a place, sitting at home, visiting with relatives, it just doesn't do it. I want to see more and new things. I don't want to see old things because the lives they live are the same. I don't see any difference, so I don't want to be among them. Because they are so close they don't want anything."<sup>58</sup>

Deniz's realization that the familiar was not as exciting to her as the foreign illustrated her desire to develop a more mobile lifestyle. Deniz, however, associated a sense of dread with not belonging. Although she reveled in exploration and travel, she was also driven to belong to a place.

Deniz was, however, certain of two things, the saliency of her Turkish and international student identities and affiliations. Deniz doubted her grounding in one place and recognized the need to negotiate a transnational space, yet she certainly did not question the saliency of her Turkish and international student affiliations. "I like to put my side about being international out there...Like when we first meet, I always say I'm Turkish. I'm a Turkish international student. That's how I identify myself."<sup>59</sup> Although Deniz did not question the saliency of her identity as an international student she did question the ways in which she identified herself as an international student and the perceptions others developed of her:

At the first class in the beginning of the semester, you always introduce yourself to the class and I always think, should I say I am an international student? How is it going to change the people's thinking against me or in favor of me? But I always feel like I should say it because I am going to say something really stupid and my accent sometimes doesn't give me away as an international student. So I always want to say it in case I say something stupid then they'll know that she is okay, she is an international student.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

Deniz assumed that others “see you first by your language”<sup>61</sup> and that her friendships were always based on her being international, “because we always talk about Turkey or their country, so it is always two different personalities sharing something.”<sup>62</sup> On campus, Deniz believed an identity as an international student provided a safe haven for her interactions with others and created a forgiving space where she could call on her international background to alter others perceptions of her.

Deniz recognized that she drew upon the same aspect of her identity that provided a refuge from scrutiny to also create a self-imposed separation from the larger student body. Deniz acknowledged her sense of not belonging to the campus community was of her own making and an aspect of her positionality on campus that she questioned. “There is one thing that always makes me think I am an international student and that is that I don’t belong to here and one day I’ll just go away. But then recently I started to think about it. I’m taking the same classes as these people. I’m doing the same things. There is no difference between them and me. So why am I making myself separate from them.”<sup>63</sup> Her ideas about “that international student thing...being a part of that community”<sup>64</sup> and being a part of a recognized foreign community evolved throughout her time at the university as she continued to actively negotiate her identities. While she was actively involved in the international student

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<sup>61</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

body at the community college she attend, that aspect of her college experience did not transfer to the University of Maryland.

Deniz continued her search for a community that would provide her with a sense of purpose and an aspect of her identity that could justify her rationale for coming to study in the U.S. While she was active in the Turkish Student Association and the Ballroom Dance Club, two organizations that socially grounded her, she did not know where she belonged academically at the university and was without an academic home or identity. “I still don’t know where I belong in this school. It is huge and I am lost in it. I think I just need something...I think I just need some department to say, okay we need you.”<sup>65</sup> Deniz was one of many students at the university that have yet to declare a major, a place of ambiguity that Deniz admitted she found no comfort in at all. Her lack of belonging at the university was heavily tied to her academic identity. Deniz believed that once she found an academic home, she would finally feel like she belonged here. “In my head that is the issue right now. I feel so bad. I don’t even want to come to school.”<sup>66</sup> Teetering on a major decision about her academic trajectory, Deniz found it difficult to reconcile how she was connected to the university, a feeling that trickled over to her sense of belonging in other contexts as well.

Deniz admitted while her past was grounded in Turkey it was hard to answer some questions about her birth country because she resided “in the middle,”<sup>67</sup> having

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<sup>65</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 6, 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 6, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 21, 2007.

left when she was only eighteen and having spent the last four years shuttling back and forth in a transnational space that included both Turkey and the U.S. Yet, Deniz described the ambassadorial role she assumed for her birth country. “People tend to look at one person and think, she represents Turkey for me in my head. She is the only one I know. It is really important. That is why I try to be careful. I try to be in the middle and I try to explain what I know from both sides of any story.”<sup>68</sup> Serving as an ambassador for Turkey is an obligation that she assumed, but not a responsibility she anticipated:

I have a broader knowledge base about my country. Because I came here and people ask me questions about my own country, so I stop and I think, oh I never really thought about that. I don’t know those things...So I want to know more about my own country. I know more about my country because I look for information. I read more so I can answer questions from my friends.<sup>69</sup>

Deniz was involved in a variety of transitions. She physically moved from Turkey to the U.S. She transferred from a branch of the University of Maryland to the main campus in College Park. She moved out of her brother’s family home into the dormitories. Deniz wrangled with the idea of accepting herself as an international student or representing herself as any other domestic student as she progressed in her thinking about her positionality and sense of belonging on campus. She resided in a space of academic ambiguity and was embarking on a decision that would determine her future academic identity. While Deniz clearly understood where she came from, she saw her experience at the university as temporary and questioned the range of

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<sup>68</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

transitions in which she engaged as sought a place to reestablish her roots. She resided in the middle, a space full of tension.

### PABLO

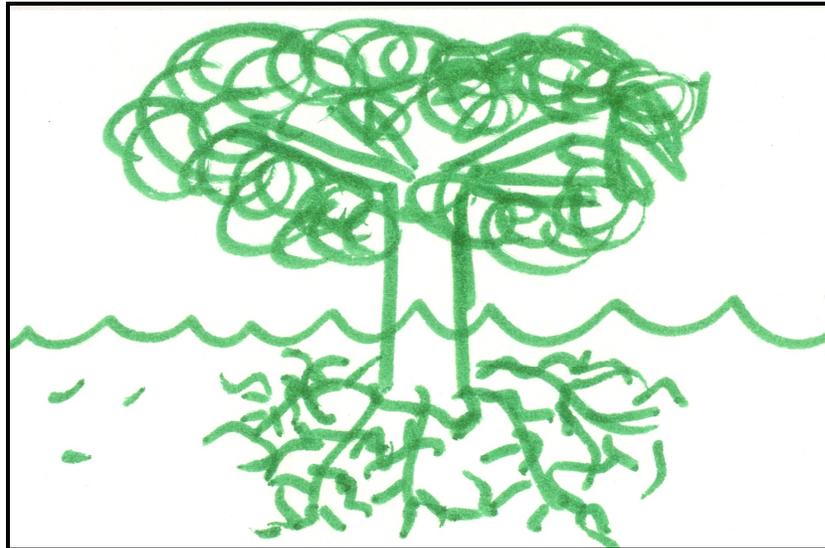


Figure 4: Pablo

It's a plant in water. So the roots are growing in the water, which means it is trying to root itself, but it doesn't matter because it is in the water and it could go anywhere. You could take it one place and then put it in another. That is more or less how I felt for a number of years, for a while. I kept trying to root myself in one place, but that would not work. So I had to think that in this world, in this day and age I had to realize that I can't really find a place to put roots. And it's dangerous now to try and find a place I think, because I just won't be able to no matter how hard I've tried. I just think that I've been growing in a place where I can't root myself.<sup>70</sup>

*Pablo: "I am a fellow pilgrim under the traveling stars."*

Pablo came to campus laden with a sense of his past and entered into an experience that was going to define his future. He brought an enormously well developed localized Venezuelan identity, an exceptional sensibility of the meaning of public service, and an extraordinary language capacity to navigate in Spanish and

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<sup>70</sup> Pablo, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

English. His traditions and sense of the past came to bear on how he made sense of his surroundings on campus and the challenges that he came up against.

Pablo did not initially assume an identity as an international student at the beginning of his freshman year at the University of Maryland, but as he crossed the threshold of Walter Johnson High School four years before. He did not think his identity as a foreign student was salient or a defining factor in how others viewed him at the university due to the fact that he did not fit the traditional mold of an international student. Yet he sought to reconcile his international background on a daily basis as he struggled with language and became more cognizant of the educational, social, and linguistic borders he was crossing.

Pablo acknowledged that “there is no uniform image of Venezuela”<sup>71</sup> and that “Venezuela does like to import the culture of America and America is a big exporter of its own culture,”<sup>72</sup> so it was normal for him to have exposure to a variety of U.S. cultural experiences throughout his youth. Furthermore, attending summer camp in New England and high school in the U.S., Pablo acquired much of the same cultural understandings or common knowledge of students who grew up in the U.S., which allowed him to pass for a domestic student. After all, Pablo doesn’t really “carry the international student banner”<sup>73</sup> or present himself as one:

I think there are some people who do perceive me as an international student, but again the image that they have of international students is someone who is struggling with their English, someone who just came recently to the United States for a certain temporary experience and then they’re going to go back

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<sup>71</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

and all that. And then I come along and say, I've lived here for six years and am probably going to go to grad school here. I decided to come here. So it's a different image I guess. It's a different conception of what an international student is like. But in the simplest definition of an international student by all means I think I will fall in that definition. I've been here for so long and I'm probably going to be here for that much longer, people don't really think, international student.<sup>74</sup>

Pablo was cognizant of his international background, regardless of how others perceived him. "I don't have the same experiences as most international students at the university. But I still think of myself more or less as an international student."<sup>75</sup>

Pablo identified himself as an international student based on his membership in a transnational family grounded in Caracas. "I try to see myself as a member of a family there. And in answering the question of why I am the way I am, I look at my family for that answer."<sup>76</sup> Pablo drew a social map to compare a sense of belonging between his life in Caracas, his life in the Maryland suburbs, and his life on campus. He attended the same private Roman Catholic school throughout his youth which created strong sense of nostalgic belonging that contrasted the relationships he experienced in college. Throughout his school years in Venezuela, Pablo was a very active student. He was a student delegate and wrote speeches for school events. Yet Pablo was uncertain why "none of that really translated"<sup>77</sup> when he came to high school in the U.S., an experience that left him with few true friends. Pablo ruminated about how he wasn't that involved or active in high school and only when his two

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<sup>74</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

worlds collided during a recent visit from an old school friend did Pablo realize he “was almost kind of a completely different person back in Venezuela:”<sup>78</sup>

My friend Alberto came here to visit me. For a while I was concerned because I thought this is the first time these two worlds that I normally keep separated and normally are separated and I've grown to like it that way, are going to sort of meet and interact and I was very concerned of what that was going to be like. Because my friend Alberto is not really anything at all like the friends that live with or like my other friends. So I thought, what is it going to be like? Are they going to see me differently because of him or is he going to see me differently because of them?<sup>79</sup>

As Pablo continued to negotiate what he conceived of as two social worlds, he recounted story after story about the differences between not only the people, but the evolving contexts as well.

Pablo saw his birth country as a place in transition and described the U.S. as embroiled in change. Pablo was an international student during a time in Venezuela when there were conflicting views about students or professionals leaving the country to seek out an education or opportunities elsewhere:

There is a scare right now that professionals are not finding enough work in Venezuela, so our best minds and the youngest too are leaving the country to seek opportunities elsewhere. So some people may admonish them and say, well what are you doing? You are abandoning the ship. Other people just sympathize a little bit and say, well if they can't find their opportunities here then don't stop them from finding opportunities elsewhere. There are people that may consider them traitors. I can certainly see how people from the hard-line, the official storyline, from the government saying we don't really need those people. Let them leave. We are building our revolution here and this is what we are doing. We don't need those imperialist traitors. And everyone is an imperialist if you are not with them or against them. But other people see it as something natural and as a consequence of the times we are living in....Many people are concerned for the future of the nation.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>79</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>80</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

Recognizing that some in Venezuela doubted his patriotism and viewed him as a traitor, Pablo at times questioned whether he was losing his connection to his birth country.

Pablo's narrative was consistently grounded in the political discourse of Venezuela, while his daily life was grounded in the educational and social spaces of the university. Due to his family, social and political ties, and educational pursuits, Pablo still felt as if he was transcending the shifting boundaries in both Venezuela and the U.S.:

I'm still part of both contexts. They are not mutually exclusive, so I feel like I can be part of both. I mean invariably I have to sacrifice a little bit of one for the other, mostly Venezuela because I am not there and I am not embroiled in that change. I don't have to adapt to that change so much. But I think the way I negotiate it is just day by day. I just do what I feel like I have to do. I'm going to college. I'm learning. I'm getting my degree. That's what I am doing.<sup>81</sup>

Pablo was a searcher of meaning by nature and demonstrated great insight into how negotiating transnational spaces and the interactions of those that inhabited these spaces helped him construct an identity as an international student. As a psychology major, minoring in Spanish language and culture, Pablo painted a picture of himself constantly negotiating linguistic borders in his mind, in his writing, and in his everyday conversations. He conceived himself through language. With such a heightened linguistic sensibility, Pablo critically reflected on how he perceived language defined him.

He spoke calmly, eloquently, and with a great command of the English language about his previous educational experiences, the meaning he gave to his

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<sup>81</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

interactions on campus, and his identity as a writer. Yet ironically it was the difficulty he perceived having with language that he felt defined him as an international student. Overall, Pablo sensed that “in the language realm my experience is different from a native English speaker I guess. I heard that phrase for first time the other day...Someone referred to me as a ‘non-native English speaker’ and I thought it was hilarious. It was funny. No one ever called me that before and that sort of does it doesn’t it. It describes it in a way.”<sup>82</sup> Pablo used his struggles with language to describe how he differentiated himself from other students and how he envisioned his persona as a international student.

Pablo crossed linguistic borders on a daily basis in the geography of his mind, not something particularly unusual for someone who grew up speaking Spanish and learned English as a second language. “There are some times when I catch myself having a conversation in multiple languages in my head. A thought would come out in English and then something else comes out in Spanish. And there are days when I wake up and my English is not up to par. And then there are times when I’m talking to my mom and my Spanish is sub par also.”<sup>83</sup> Pablo described living in a Spanglish borderland that did not only affect his mental conversations, but created a struggle that influenced his writing as well. “I struggle with language everyday in a way. I mean it’s a good struggle I think. And I’ve had to ask myself the question also, because they tell you when you write you have to have your audience in mind. Well alright, what’s my audience? Once I reply to that, does it then mean I should write a

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<sup>82</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

poem in Spanish or in English? What's the best vessel for these words?"<sup>84</sup> Pablo's struggles produced positive results, publishing poems in both Spanish and English.

Pablo believed he could pass for a domestic student and transcend Hispanic stereotypes based on his self classification as a "very pale"<sup>85</sup> or "white"<sup>86</sup> Hispanic. However, it was his occasional accent or inability to locate just the right word in English that he believed determined how others saw him:

There's the context of me as a Hispanic, I guess. And you mostly hear all the stereotypes and all that, but jokingly... There's a Mexican character in the movie Stagecoach, and he's always talking about, 'oh I thiiiink the Indians are coming, I thiiiink.' So I have a friend of mine, sometimes when we're talking about something or if I say something or mispronounce something or my accent is particularly strong, he would just bust that out and he would say, 'what did you say? I thiiiink.' Things like that. Sometimes it gets little annoying and other times it's just funny and I can appreciate the humor. Sometimes I do it myself and I play with that. For my Halloween costume, I asked a friend if I could borrow her Mexican hat. And I didn't shave that day. I was just going to be a Mexican. Why was that funny? Because I'm not really a Mexican. There's a tendency for so many people to see Latin Americans or South Americans as one big blob of Latinos I guess.<sup>87</sup>

Pablo clearly employed language as a way of making sense and describing his experiences with other students. He also used his experiences crossing linguistic borders to create a sense of belonging and try out new identities as he envisioned himself as a member of a literary campus community. Pablo, whose uncle is a well known poet in Venezuela, was a member of the Jiménez-Porter Writer's House, a living and learning "campus-wide literary center to study creative writing in its cross-

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<sup>84</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

<sup>85</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

cultural and multilingual dimensions.”<sup>88</sup> His identity as a writer, contributor to a literary journal, and member of a “mini literary community”<sup>89</sup> on campus largely defined him and gave him an opportunity to assume new identities. “I’ve introduce myself a poet and that’s interesting because up until recently I never considered that title, Pablo the poet.”<sup>90</sup> Pablo extended the identities he associated with his writing to that of mentor, role model, and creative collaborator though his work with non native English speakers.

Pablo saw himself and his experiences with language reflected in the lives of the students he worked with in the Prince George’s Country Public Schools. He volunteered through a program at the Writer’s House that worked with public school students to develop creative writing skills and English language abilities while writing about their pasts and where they came from. It was a diverse group of non-native English speaking students. Some experienced horrible atrocities and others were the nieces and nephews of public officials in the countries that they came from, forcing them to leave as a result of a political situation outside of their control. They ranged in age from twelve to twenty. One was already a mother and another was the nephew of a prime minister. While students were instructed to write about their countries and the places that they come from, Pablo recognized that most of their stories were about the people they left behind, a sentiment he shared as he reflected on his early school days and the difficulty he had transitioning to the U.S. Pablo drew

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<sup>88</sup> Department of Resident Life, *Jimenez-Porter Writer's House*(University of Maryland, 2007, accessed February 22, 2007); available from [http://www.writershouse.umd.edu/highres\\_aboutus.php](http://www.writershouse.umd.edu/highres_aboutus.php).

<sup>89</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>90</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

on his own identity as a non-native English speaker when he collaborated with these students. He wanted them to see that they could transverse language barriers and succeed regardless of the obstacles they found in their path and to expand their idea of how poetry served as an outlet of self-expression. “They all have this idea of what poetry should be like. And one of the questions that I get asked the most is, I want to say this, but can I really say this in a poem? And I’m like yeah. You can say anything in a poem.”<sup>91</sup> It is this freedom of expression where Pablo found comfort to reflect on his own past and look toward an imagined world.

Pablo recalled one critical incident that shed light on how he situated himself on campus and among the general student body. It was a conversation with his mother that was the epitome of Pablo’s sense of operating in a transnational learning space and his identity as an international student. “A few weeks ago I was talking to my mom about the possibility of studying abroad. And she sort of jokingly said, what are you talking about, you are studying abroad. And well, I guess that is kind of true. I’m already practicing a foreign language abroad, already immersed in another culture.”<sup>92</sup> Pablo teetered between being cognizant of his international background and identifying himself as an international student, and blending into the student body as he passed for a domestic student.

Pablo described himself as a “fellow pilgrim under the traveling stars,” an inscription poet Li Young Lee wrote to Pablo during a book signing on campus. Whether he saw himself as traveling the world or for the time being watching the stars circle above him, Pablo negotiated his identity as an international student among

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<sup>91</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 19, 2007.

<sup>92</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

the shifting contexts of the U.S. and Venezuela, and the linguistic borderlands between Spanish and English. He saw himself as a person with roots, just no where to grow them.

### KAORI

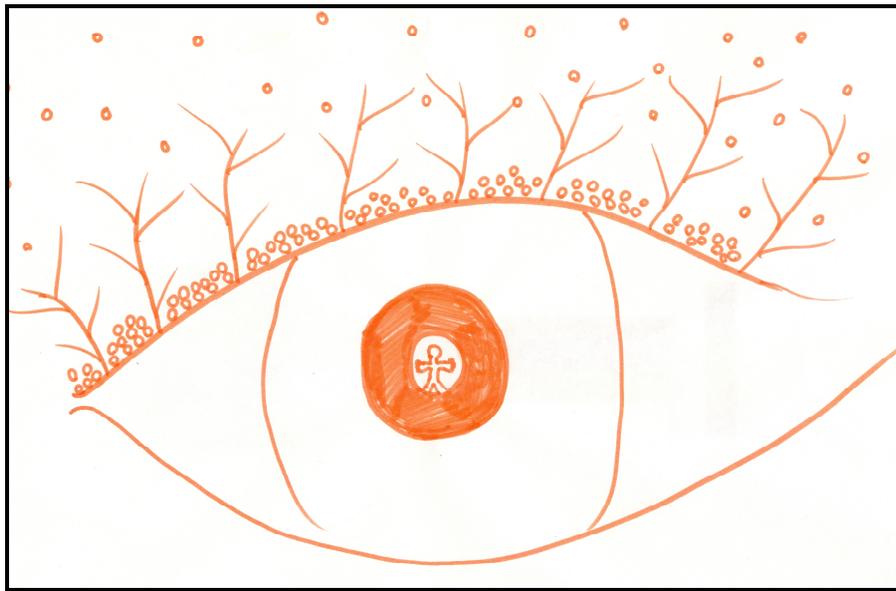


Figure 5: Kaori

This you can tell is an eye. I think if you can't see anything, even if you are in a country, you don't get the culture or the opportunities. I can't grow as a human. Basically, I learned so much and I met a lot of people and all the experiences are through eyes. If I couldn't see anything, I couldn't experience anything. I experience a lot. So the eye is the most important. Here, these are like eyelashes, but I changed to so many branches. You see all the dots, those are the opportunities. I don't know if you can see the small dots on the bottom, but those are the opportunities that I missed. I had opportunities, but I wasn't ready or I wasn't there when the opportunities were there, so there are so many opportunities that I missed. And there are other opportunities still coming, so they are going through the branches. And then in the middle of the eye, I'm here in the middle. I know what I want to do in the future, so that's the only thing I'm looking straight at. That's what I want.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Kaori, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

*Kaori: "I'm in the middle."*

Kaori came to campus armed with an appreciation for all of the people who helped her along her pathway to the University of Maryland and a deep determination to succeed. She brought a realistic understanding of the challenges that came along with crossing borders and possessed an amazing amount of insight to overcome the obstacles along the way. With a tradition of self-sufficiency and well developed command of the English language, Kaori did not question her ability accomplish the goals she set for herself.

She came to the university by way of a language school in Wisconsin and a community college in Maryland and enrolled in the university's music program to fulfill her lifelong dream of "learning how to sing."<sup>94</sup> She laughed at the jokes about Asians being unable to drive because of their squinty eyes, overlooked the times when she felt taken advantage of by her roommates and coworkers, and overcame her fear of speaking in class, all to further her dream of finding a place for herself in the U.S. While Kaori worked toward her goals, she continued to negotiate a middle ground between identities, languages, and representations of herself as an educational sojourner in both the U.S. and Japan.

Kaori's dream to study in the U.S. was fueled by the images and people she encountered throughout her youth, yet was challenged by the realities she faced when she arrived. "In Japan, people watch American movies. People listen to American music. People imitate how American people dress and stuff like that. So we are adapting to American culture, importing American culture... We have always been

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<sup>94</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 2, 2007.

looking at America as, wow. America is much better than Japan. People dream of America.”<sup>95</sup> However, Kaori and her ideas about the U.S. changed as a result of her experiences here. She contended that although “100 percent pure Japanese”<sup>96</sup> may know about America, “they don’t know anything about American culture.”<sup>97</sup> She was not naïve or disillusioned about the U.S. and the difficulties she encountered throughout her studies, but was disenchanted by the nature of her social interactions and the harsh reality of being “a really lonely person”<sup>98</sup> and become “much more quiet”<sup>99</sup> as a result of negotiating a place at the university.

Kaori was very active in redefining her identity. Because of the diversity on campus, Kaori believed she could deny her international student identity when she needed to and call upon it when she wanted to. She constructed her international student identity and did not rely upon others to define her:

Since there are so many international students here...I can’t say international students, because there are people from different countries who grew up here, you can’t tell. If I just introduce myself and I say my name is Kaori and I don’t say that I am from Japan, just a simple conversation, people can’t really tell. People will say I thought you grew up here. A lot of people say that. So people don’t really look at me as an international student until I say I am from Japan. I don’t think it is about them, I think it is about how I look at myself or how I treat myself.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 27, 2007.

<sup>96</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>97</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>98</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

<sup>99</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 2, 2007.

<sup>100</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 2, 2007.

The fact that Kaori looked inward to understand aspects of her international student identity was empowering and allowed her to position herself among the campus community and her friends. “American students don’t really talk to international students. I mean like American, American. They don’t feel comfortable around us, so I have more international friends, different people from different countries. They understand what I am going through and they may be going through the same stuff.”<sup>101</sup> Kaori’s association with other international students brought her comfort and helped her find the value in her international background that others did not always recognize.

Kaori believed there are two types of international students at the university, yet did not identify with either group but located herself “in the middle”<sup>102</sup> due to the people she surrounded herself with and her ability to oscillate between groups of affiliation:

I don’t really know much about international students here. I felt like there are two different types of international students. I’m kind of in the middle, but there is this huge separation. International students have student visas. They came from different country. They might come from different countries but still international student is one group. They are in American but they don’t want to lose or they aren’t even trying to be a part of American people. They are studying here but their goal is just to get an American degree, so they are always hanging out with people from the same country. They are always speaking the same language and they always complain ‘I can’t speak English’ or ‘I can’t write a paper.’ They always make excuse...But the other people know that they have this disadvantage but still they are trying to be a part of America. They don’t want to completely change. They are from a different country and are proud of their country, but still they understand. They have to admit that they are in America. It was their choice. They decided to come to the United States to study. So you have to adapt. You can’t say in my country we don’t do this. It doesn’t really work like this. In

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<sup>101</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 2, 2007.

<sup>102</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

this country you have to adapt. They might make excuses, but they are actually trying to work hard to be a part of it and they understand this culture. They don't want anyone to look at them as an international student. They don't want people to compare them and say I can't write a paper because I am an international student. So they are trying to bring themselves up to that level where it might be higher. So I see two totally different groups. I'm in the middle.<sup>103</sup>

Kaori was not daunted by residing in the middle. She reveled in the idea of being able to maneuver between networks of affiliation, transnational spaces, and languages. Yet her ability to articulate and translate her ideas in a transnational space further contributed to Kaori's understanding of herself in the middle and the ways others perceived her as "Americanized."<sup>104</sup>

For Japanese people who live in Japan, they think I am Americanized. But I am living here and people look at me as a foreigner. I am Japanese. So I feel like I am in the middle. I don't want to say I don't belong to Japan or America, but I'm in the middle in that I don't feel fully comfortable in American culture and in Japanese culture too...I live in America and that I am adjusting to American culture, but I have not totally lost Japanese culture either. That's why I feel I am in the middle. I mean I am half Japanese, half American or something.<sup>105</sup>

Not only did Kaori locate herself in the middle of the spectrum of international students as she described them, but also constructed a middle ground between the perceptions of Japanese friends and family in her contexts of origin and American students she engaged on campus. She described being perceived as a foreigner wherever she went and residing in a space where she had yet to carve out a sense of belonging. "When I am here people call me Asian, people look at me as an outsider. But when I go back to Japan, people look at me as an outsider too, like you are from a

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<sup>103</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>104</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 2, 2007.

<sup>105</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 2, 2007.

different place. So I am from the middle. It's not that I don't belong to Japan or I don't belong to America. I am comfortable with both. I am okay."<sup>106</sup> Kaori owned and authored her own narrative in a space she continued to create for herself.

Kaori tried to create a sense of belonging in order to overcome her suspension in the middle of student communities, languages, and nations. She recognized that she needed to adapt, yet still be herself. For Kaori finding that balance was difficult. "I live in American culture and Japanese culture. It is really hard to live in America using Japanese...not using Japanese culture...but being myself. It's really hard."<sup>107</sup> Exactly how she adapted and acculturated to her surroundings was a constant negotiation. The idea of not losing herself or her culture, but selecting aspects of her life in the U.S. to adopt or reject was a process that although she described in terms of nationality she did not equate solely with culture:

I am in America and the majority of people are Americans so we try to imitate or be like Americans without noticing. That's personally what I have to do in order to belong. I have to change and adapt. I have to be like Americans to adapt and in order to be in this country. That's what I thought. But that means I am losing...if I change I feel like I am disrespecting my culture. That's how I feel. So I think we don't have to change, we should be the way we are. It's not like we came here to please Americans. We came here to learn. We came here to study. So just be yourself. If you think it is right, just do it. If you think it is wrong, don't do it. And then if I pick up something from American culture that we don't have in Japan and I think it is good, I should pick it up and try to use it. But if I think it is wrong, I don't have to force myself to adapt or to change. If I don't like it, I should just be myself.<sup>108</sup>

But Kaori questioned who she really was, questioning her perceived "Americanness" and doubting at times her "Japaneseness." Her cultural negotiations

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<sup>106</sup> Kaori, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 2, 2007.

<sup>108</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 2, 2007.

and interactions with other students brought light to bear on a lack of knowledge about the culture she associated with her contexts of origin. Kaori felt uninformed and unable to answer the questions posed to her about Japanese traditions, customs, and values and at times ill-equipped to carry out her ambassadorial role:

Each country should have their own culture. They shouldn't lose their history. They built the past. Each country has a history and I think each country should keep their own culture and traditions...I am Japanese and I should share my Japanese culture, but I don't really know my Japanese history and I don't know how to wear a kimono. I was talking to someone yesterday and they asked me the difference between Shinto and Buddhism and I don't really know the difference. I was so embarrassed. I'm Japanese. I call myself Japanese, but I don't really know Japanese culture.<sup>109</sup>

Kaori grounded her cultural identity as a Japanese in a landscape of unique national traditions that defined for her what being Japanese is all about. While she at times doubted her ability to explain aspects of her culture, Kaori possessed a great deal of determination. While she positioned herself in the middle, Kaori felt comfortable with the haze that shrouded her life and her identity, knowing that the haze could be dispersed only by continuing to move forward toward her dreams.

Kaori wrote, translated, and vocally recorded a song about her transition to campus and into her identity as an international student entitled, "But now..." Kaori believed this song epitomized for her what becoming an international student at the university was all about, "starting a second life"<sup>110</sup> and "moving onto the next step"<sup>111</sup> as she shaped her educational sojourn into a meaningful experience, took advantage of the opportunities available to her, and looked toward her future.

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<sup>109</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 27, 2007.

<sup>110</sup> Kaori, song lyrics, May 28, 2007.

<sup>111</sup> Kaori, song lyrics, May 28, 2007.

## SACHIN

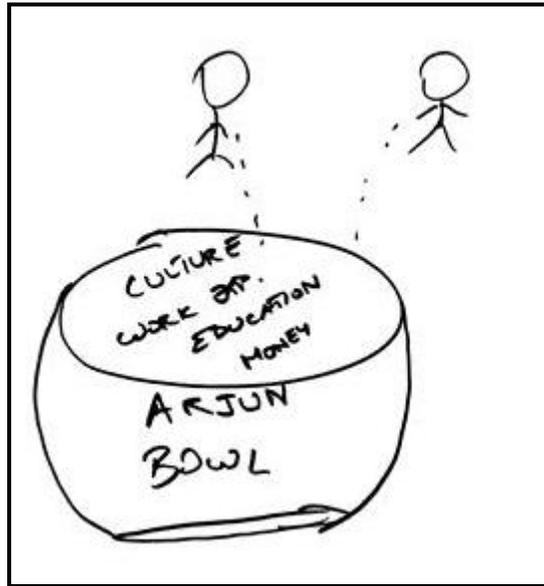


Figure 6: Sachin

Everyone puts in a little bit of everything. Now I am gaining different cultures. Not just cultures, but activities and experiences.<sup>112</sup>

*Sachin: "I think nothing distinguishes me here from anyone else other than my passport."*

Sachin came to campus with an acute economic sensibility grounded in the traditions of a business family. He came to the university to gain the professional experience he did not conceive was possible in India. Along the way Sachin became aware of what else he was gaining from studying at the University of Maryland. He conceived of his educational sojourn as a bowl or depository for the cultures, values, and ideas of the people he interacted with. For Sachin studying in the U.S. was about engaging in new activities, accumulating knowledge about different people he would not have come in contact with in India, and expanding his understanding of diversity.

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<sup>112</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 4, 2007.

Sachin was not losing himself, his culture, or his identity as a result of his educational sojourn, but in fact was doing just the opposite, gaining a great deal.

Sachin readily assumed his identity as a student. “My presence in this country is because of my school, because I am a student. That’s my label. That’s why I’m here.”<sup>113</sup> However, he vehemently challenged being labeled an international student. For Sachin there were no distinct differences between domestic students studying at the university and himself. “It’s not anything special. I wouldn’t think it is anything different from a local student. The same thing, nothing different. We have to study. Same goals.”<sup>114</sup> In his mind, it was only his citizenship that qualified him as an international student. “I think nothing distinguishes me here from anyone else other than my passport.”<sup>115</sup> While Sachin perceived himself as just another student, he admitted that not everyone looked at him the same way. His interactions and relationships were “different actually with a lot of people.”<sup>116</sup> When he interacted with other international students he felt a sense of camaraderie. Yet in his dormitory and among the domestic students he was treated as the “special kid,”<sup>117</sup> a label that Sachin eventually overcame with time to develop a place for himself on campus.

Sachin felt a strong sense of belonging to the university as a whole and positioned himself alongside other students on campus. He was a resident advisor in a campus dormitory, the events chair for the Business Information Technology

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<sup>113</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 15, 2007.

<sup>114</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 15, 2007.

<sup>115</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>116</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>117</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

Studies Club, and a member of the Hindu Student Council. Yet there were times when he distanced himself not from domestic students, but students of his own ethnic background. He was not involved in the Indian Student Association because they were ABCDs or American Born Confused Desis. “Most of them are American born. They were born here and I think they’ve lost their roots. They have nothing Indian in them other than their skin color.”<sup>118</sup> Being aware of and honoring his roots was important for Sachin. “I keep my own roots.”<sup>119</sup> Living in the U.S. made him more cognizant of his Indian heritage:

I consider myself more Indian that I used to. Because here you see people that are Jewish, they have their Israeli flags in their rooms. They consider themselves Israelis. Even Indian people that are born here, they consider themselves Indian. They don’t say, no I’m just American. They say I’m of Indian heritage. Here I see students going to these religious meetings and they are doing stuff. So I think I should do that too. It’s my own religion. Whereas in India, I never did any of that. If someone would have come to me and said join this club that celebrates Hindu festivals, I would have said I have my family. They do that too. I don’t need to be with you. I would have never done that back there...Right now I have an Indian flag in my room. I never did that earlier.<sup>120</sup>

Yet, he believed he did not represent his birth country and was unwilling to undertake the ambassadorial role that was often assumed of him by others from outside of India’s borders. “I don’t think this is how I am, this is Indian culture. I don’t think I portray myself as if I am the image of India, because I am not. I do a lot of things that normal Indian people wouldn’t do.”<sup>121</sup> Sachin attributed his well-established roots to his parents and his family and considered himself Indian in every shape and

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<sup>118</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>120</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>121</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 4, 2007.

form, yet recognized that he developed the habits of heart and mind that differed from traditional Indians as a result of his time abroad.

Sachin left Delhi, a large metropolitan city, to study in another large metropolitan area, perhaps why he described it as an easy transition. “I didn’t really have to give up that much to adapt to the American culture. It’s just really not that hard here...I didn’t really have any culture shock because things in India are also pretty, I don’t want to say bad, but Americanized. I mean we get Mc Donald’s in India and everything. There was no culture shock. I pretty much expected it as it is.”<sup>122</sup> Although he “didn’t expect it to be as academically oriented as it is here”<sup>123</sup> and admitted “for the first semester it was hard to keep up with all the studies, the extracurriculars, and going out with friends,”<sup>124</sup> he recognized that his experience was “really dynamic”<sup>125</sup> and changed over time as he continued to negotiate the expectations of his family and his educational pursuits on campus.

Sachin’s view of studying in the U.S. was located within a context dominated by business family values that emphasized personal wealth through financial gains and opportunities. His ideas of success were constructed through a lens deeply grounded in economics and supported by the family values instilled in him throughout his youth in India, and were not challenged by his experiences at the University of Maryland. He took great pride in his relative financial independence, demonstrated by that fact he was able to purchase a new car, support himself while in

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<sup>122</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>123</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>124</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

school, and attain a level of financial success that he realized many domestic students did not.

Sachin saw his graduation from the University of Maryland as a springboard for a job in corporate America. Having completed various internships and located a company who was willing to sponsor him after graduation, he acknowledged the value of these professional experiences and the networks he was generating. “I’ve achieved a lot. I’m proud of what I’ve been able to accomplish. The things I’ve achieved here I would never have been able to achieve in India. You get a lot of exposure here, real work experiences. You can get all of that here.”<sup>126</sup> Sachin believed he would not have benefited from the same professional and social opportunities by obtaining a degree in India.

Sachin, however, viewed Delhi as a modern city and India as a growing superpower due to the government’s efforts and the growing educated population. He recognized that most people learn about India the same way he learned about the U.S, through movies, television, travel, and sharing stories. However, he challenged the representations of India outside its borders and disputed the common understanding most people developed of his birth country as a result. “They think we have cows everywhere. My friends always ask me, do you have cows in the streets? There are not cows everywhere. It is really different now. They think that they don’t teach English in India. And when they hear people from India speaking English, they are a little surprised. Almost every school in India teaches English.”<sup>127</sup> While Sachin was

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<sup>126</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>127</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 4, 2007.

crafting a place for himself on campus, he was constantly battling the stereotypes and misconceptions he believed people had of his birth country.

He was a student, yes. But he was not an international student. According to Sachin, why make it harder by setting yourself apart from other students. “Life is a challenge in itself.”<sup>128</sup> Without dwelling on differences, Sachin easily operated in transnational spaces and crossed boundaries. He did not deny his identity as an Indian, but denied how his background was used by others to generate representations of him on campus as an Indian or international student.

His eyes were on the final prize, the job, the salary, and the time when he could share with everyone his successes. Perhaps it was because he was in his junior year, which is certainly the time to be thinking about what to do after graduation and looking ahead to the future. He used his vision for the future to develop a justification for jumping through the hoops of formal education. Sachin had a clear sense of his roots, and an even clearer understanding of how to use his international background and education to attain his own definition of success.

### **Ambiguous Spaces**

These six students were experienced border crossers who came to the university with an understanding of diversity and what it meant to be an international student, yet still encountered challenges along the way. Each found different levels of comfort in the labels ascribed to them and the ambiguous spaces they inhabited. The meanings students ascribed to their educational sojourns and their socially constructed identities emerged in a range of ways that, while not solely of their own

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<sup>128</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 15, 2007.

making, were actively conceived by students and informed by the images and ideas that circulated throughout their transnational social fields, the campus, and beyond.

Students encountered a policy discourse that elevated their importance as international students from top to bottom. Students heard repeated messages from the administration touted throughout speeches and the university newspaper that proclaimed their importance on campus. They were aware of the high rankings the university received for its internationalization efforts. With support from the upper level administration, students encountered university departments, academic programs, and research centers focused on providing services for border crossers, developing cross-cultural exchanges, and fostering international collaboration.

Sachin visited the office of International Education Services for assistance with immigration paperwork and for information on acquiring a driver's license. Although already an international student, Zara visited the Study Abroad Office as she sorted through her options for studying in yet another international destination.

Interdisciplinary and internationally oriented academic degree programs allowed Pablo to pursue a program of study that included Spanish language and psychology.

Roohi participated in Engineers Without Borders, an organization concentrated around a scholarly discipline that provide outlets for continued involvement in academics outside of the classroom. Deniz attended social programs such as international coffee hour, international films, and lecture series on campus. Kaori benefited from studying music under one of the 100 international visiting faculty members at the university. Yet these students were still searching out a space where their backgrounds, identities, and diversity of experiences were recognized. Through

their narratives, these six students created cultural portraits of what it was like to negotiate an international student identity, even if selves of momentary completion, and demonstrated the ways in which their narratives were influenced by the work of their imaginations.

Enacting an identity as an international student was not a new experience for all students due to their social networks and previous educational experiences. For students who grew up in locales other than their birth countries, went to high school in the United States, or attended community a college before coming to the University of Maryland, an international student identity was not new to them.

These students described occupying transitional spaces where they reconstructed and reenacted positions of dynamic in-betweenness. An analytical lens grounded in the work of the imagination reveals differences between ways of being and ways of belonging in transnational spaces. For these students a sense of belonging and identity was closely tied to family and contexts of origin. The importance of roots and the reestablishment of roots were narrative threads that continued to influence students (re)constructions of selves as international students, a sentiment exemplified by Zara who stated, “I think my identity is basically I’ve realized all hitched to my family.”<sup>129</sup> Transnational family affiliations continued to play an important role in how students saw themselves.

International students inhabited transnational social fields but did not find all the labels or identities within these transnational spaces crossed borders with them. They enacted different ways of being and belonging that were constructed outside the realm of nationality and illuminated aspects of their identities that did not commonly

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<sup>129</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 12, 2007.

rely on citizenship. Each of the students expressed different levels of comfort with labels. For Zara, the concept or notion of “home” was difficult to define. For Roohi, adopting the label of a “global nomad” felt as if she had found a space for herself and a way of expressing her identities. Pablo was surprised at others conceptualization of him as a “non-native English” speaker. Kaori struggled with being branded by other Japanese as “American.” Deniz fought her designation as an “undecided student” as she sought an academic home on campus. Sachin rebelled at being tagged “fresh off the boat” as he worked hard to integrate himself into the campus community. Even the label of “international student” required some sorting out. These students were not stumbling on a sense of belonging but were actively constructing a space of acceptance. The perceptions and interactions that students acknowledged differentiated them as international students, also influenced when, where, and how students did or did not enact an international student identity.

Students engaged in processes of cultural transmission and cultural transformation through the creation and exchange of identity capital<sup>130</sup> in these ambiguously defined spaces. Through successful identity exchanges students gained identity capital or exhibited an “increase in some aspect of who they are.”<sup>131</sup>

Although students came to the university with existing identities and resources,

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<sup>130</sup> James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychology Synthesis* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 2002). Identity capital is a concept that originated from attempts to understand the identity formations of university students and how these identity constructions influenced their future. While much of the international higher education literature subscribes to the banking model of education with inputs and outputs, Cote and Levine coined the concept of identity capital to further explore how students actively engage in identity exchanges and employ resources to negotiate the acquisition of identity capital, representing the investments in “who they are.” Students generate identity capital by invoking assets brought with them to campus or assets created as a result of the context in which they interact. Identity capital assets can be tangible, such as group membership, or intangible, such as a sense of purpose in life.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

identity capital was compounded through participation in academic and social activities and contributed to the accumulation of identity capital or students' "toolkit of resources"<sup>132</sup> for denying, adopting, or creating selves. Students navigated transnational spaces and nurtured transculturing selves.<sup>133</sup> Students authored their own biographies, assumed responsibility for their decisions, and generated meanings from their experiences that allowed them to create narratives grounded in the past and linked to the present, all the while anticipating the future.

Students enacted cultural identities that were not fixed or mutually exclusive and differed in saliency and intensity depending on contexts. The relationship between cultures and identities was not so much about stagnant cultural values and ideals as much as it was about understanding contexts and student resources and how adept they were in leveraging these resources to accumulate identity capital. Students were not reliant on others to define them, but were reliant on interactions with others to make sense of their evolving and alternating salient identities. Most students were aware of differences between themselves and others, although they allowed these differences to influence their identities and interactions to varying degrees and in various ways.

Students were actively engaged in the work of the imagination. Characterized by an inherent movement of information, ideas, images, and people, global cultural flows served as the bedrock for student's work of the imagination and influenced how

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Margaret Parry, "Transcultured selves under scrutiny: W(h)ither languages?," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 3, no. 2: 102. A transcultured self is one who "can dwell in travel, that is who can temporarily acculturate to the other's world, *but* without losing a hold of the self. It is not a hybrid identity, but a being in becoming, one which is brought to a fuller recognition of itself through confrontation with difference and, simultaneously, to the sense of its own limitations."

students constructed identities and positioned themselves on campus. The mobile and transient nature of international student experiences combined with the advancing availability of new communication technologies emphasized the opportunities for international students to be exposed to a plethora of images and ideas. Student conceptualizations of themselves as international students relied upon changing interpersonal dynamics to challenge the rigid notion of identities.

## Chapter Five: Possibilities

Millions all over the world dream about the American Dream every night they go to bed. Most of them don't even make it to the sea shores of this great land. Most don't even have a passport, many are rejected for a visa, some are shot while crossing the borders, and quite a few die when their boats sink. The American Dream is still something everyone is running after, and so am I.

*-Sachin*

### **Futures**

Sachin crafted an image of the American dream as attainable by only a very few. Sachin, Kaori, Roohi, Zara, Deniz, and Pablo possessed the academic prowess to be considered one of the best and the brightest, came from families with the resources for them to study abroad, and found themselves among the international student population in the U.S. who were able maneuver the daunting gauntlet of visa restrictions and requirements. They each had a version of the American Dream that rested upon their personal grounding in a transnational social field and their educational preparation to craft visions of what was thinkable for the future.

These six students defined themselves through their encounters across cultures and engaged in selective adaptations of traditions, communities, and identities. They were educated individuals at a stage in their life when locality and profession emerged as defining elements of terrains of possibility. The very nature of making the choice to undertake a border crossing implies that something must be given up by choosing something else. By deciding to leave contexts of origin, engaging in an educational sojourn, and making themselves nomads of sorts, students were defining what they were able and not able to imagine.

Students, however, did not generate a panacea of options as a result of “experiments in self-making.”<sup>134</sup> Cultural settings, contexts, and traditions of students dictated stability as well. Although students described fluid personal, academic, and professional trajectories, there was also a larger life trajectory which was not subject to change and remained stable over time.

As students negotiated international student identities, they were taking classes, participating in extracurricular activities, living with roommates, meeting with professors, conducting research, seeking out academic opportunities, and joining campus communities. As students went throughout their daily lives, they became aware of the resources at the University of Maryland and the hopes and dreams of their peers, each shaping the pathways students sought to pursue. Their perspectives evolved not only through their presence on campus and their understanding of their status as international students, but also through invitations by their parents to try out new options for their futures. None of these students were expected to return to help with a family business, to financially contribute to a household, or take care of aging parents. This certainly affected what they saw as possible, their outlooks on their experiences, and the decisions they made about their education. Without these deep family demands and with a wide range of resources at the university, students were free to experiment and decide what to make of their futures.

These six students were uncertain about their destinations, yet they had ideas of what they hoped to accomplish in the future. Based on their campus experiences, invitations by their parents to explore what was possible, and the value they placed on an American degree, these students created terrains of possibility that stretched their

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<sup>134</sup> Appadurai, 3.

imaginings and encompassed new pathways they had not considered before coming to the university. Students painted a partially complete picture of what was thinkable, acknowledging that while they felt empowered, they also recognized that fate played an integral role in their destinies. Students described terrains of possibility that incorporated what they learned about themselves as a result of studying overseas to construct futures. So, how did students make sense of, articulate, and present images of what they envision becoming?

### **Terrains of Possibility**

*Pablo: "Questions about the future are always hard for me...I want to be a citizen of the world."*

Pablo was quite certain about his membership in a transnational family and that his attendance at a U.S. high school differentiated him from most international students. However, he was less certain about what this meant for his future. He originally saw the U.S. as forced upon him as he relocated with his family to Maryland, yet choose to stay and attend the University of Maryland to pursue opportunities that he believed were not available to him in Venezuela. Although "questions about the future are always hard"<sup>135</sup> for Pablo, he envisioned terrains of possibility that extended beyond the borders of any one nation, yet were shaped by his past in Venezuela, his ongoing negotiations as an international student in the U.S., his access to a wealth of information at the university, and his family connections abroad. As Pablo looked toward his future, "graduating is [was] the key goal."<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>136</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

But beyond graduation, Pablo visualized a future that included a healthy dose of fate and becoming a “citizen of the world.”<sup>137</sup>

Pablo’s decision to attend the University of Maryland and not return to Venezuela represented a belief that a degree from a U.S. institution of higher education provided a wider range of academic opportunities and ultimately the credibility that would allow him to seek out professional opportunities elsewhere in the world. He remained in the U.S. to attend college not only to stay close to his mother who lived in Maryland and to avoid returning to “a tenuous situation”<sup>138</sup> in Caracas, but also to take advantage of programs that were not available to him in Venezuela. Although Pablo saw a wider range of opportunities in the U.S., Venezuela and the political situation in the country continued to play an integral role in how Pablo envisioned his future. Pablo spoke about losing his country as a result of the political tension and current leadership in Venezuela which affected his thoughts on returning to his contexts of origin:

After the elections on December 3 and then Chavez saying, ‘Fatherland, socialism, or death,’ that very Castroesque statement, I was talking to my mom and she kept bitching about the election and how we voted and the people and this and that, and at some point I just said I couldn’t take it anymore. I just said mom, I have to go. And then I was talking to my girlfriend and I said what does a man do when he loses his country? Well, I did sort of feel like another six years or more of this mess, a situation where you have a commander in chief, a president, and what have you, with this inflammatory rhetoric and then the tension builds. I just sort of feel that I couldn’t really go back to that.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>138</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>139</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

Pablo, although somewhat uncertain about his future, came to realize through his observations about the Venezuelan elections that he did not see himself returning to Caracas. In fact, the future Pablo envisioned for himself did not include permanency in Caracas, the U.S., or elsewhere, but rather a conceptualization of himself as a cosmopolitan, global citizen, or “citizen of the world,”<sup>140</sup> which to him meant:

accepting other cultures and being aware that the distances, we’ve expanded our vision of it, our view of the world. But at the same time the distances have shrunk a little bit. Technology allows us to speak in real time from one corner of the world to the other. And that’s one thing my dad would say to me when we were moving, to calm me down and ease my nervousness. He told me, you know you can’t really expect to root yourself in one place. It may be that you have to pick up your stuff and move to different places.<sup>141</sup>

The idea of not establishing roots or needing to mobilize and reinvent oneself remained a constant aspect of Pablo’s story that extended into his vision of where he saw himself in the future.

Pablo defined home as “where my loved ones are.”<sup>142</sup> His sense of being a member of a transnational family and not being rooted in one place challenged his ability to call any one place home and ultimately influenced his ideas about where he would reside after graduation. As Pablo reflected on his youth he realized that he never had a “real specific idea of what it meant to be Venezuelan or what it means to be part of that society.”<sup>143</sup> By studying at the University of Maryland and imagining a future in foreign lands, he was giving up the opportunity to know what it meant to

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<sup>140</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>141</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>142</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>143</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

be a Venezuelan and the deep traditions that are learned by extended periods of time in a place. Yet, he still believed what was and was not thinkable for the future was partially determined by his connections to Venezuela. While at times he felt as if he belonged to both the U.S. and Venezuela, there were other times where he believed he did not belong anywhere:

I guess being abroad put me in a position where sometimes I don't feel as if I could fit in there [Caracas]. I'm also in the position sometimes where I don't feel as if I fit in here. A friend of mine actually sometimes jokes and says that your situation is kind of nice because every time you go somewhere you can always say 'I'm coming back home.' I go there and I'm coming back home. I come here and I'm going back home. And I feel at home there and I feel at home here.<sup>144</sup>

While Pablo at times questioned his sense of belonging to any given place, he felt he could make a place for himself almost anywhere:

Some people they will say, we'll I'm not from here, but I'm not from there either. And I think I felt that way for a long time. However, I do think there is a place for me here and there is a place for me in Venezuela. I can make a place for myself, I don't want to say anywhere I go, because maybe that would be wishful thinking. But I do get a sense that I could make a place for myself.<sup>145</sup>

While returning to Caracas was not an option for Pablo, he entertained the idea of remaining in the U.S. upon graduating, yet oscillated between staying close to the familiar elements in Maryland and venturing across borders once again, assured he could reinvent himself somewhere else either out of necessity or desire to do so. "I could probably do it again despite the hardships. I guess because I've been through it

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<sup>144</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>145</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

already.”<sup>146</sup> Not only has Pablo been through the challenges of moving overseas and reinventing himself, but his sister serves as a role model for what is possible:

I've been thinking about even going to Europe. Maybe Madrid since I already have a sister there and we have Spanish citizenship because my dad was born in Spain and moved to Venezuela in 1955. He was 5 years old. So in 1955 he moved to Venezuela because my family on my dad's side was escaping the Franco regime. They moved to Venezuela and they lived there since. So through my father, my sister and I got Spanish nationality. So I have a Spanish passport also. So I have dual citizenship with Venezuela and Spain. So, anywhere in the European Union would be pretty neat.<sup>147</sup>

Pablo considered his father's and sister's experiences abroad in addition to his own as he considered options for his future, but he did not ignore the fact that the information and knowledge he had access to at the university played an important role in how he conceptualized his future and created goals for himself. “There is this whole antidote in Venezuelan circles if you will, that students are such good students when they come here because they are so used to having difficulty finding what they need to find, that when they have all this access to information, they are finding all these things.”<sup>148</sup> All the “things” that Pablo was finding led him to want to learn more. As he interacted with professors and other students, attended classes, and worked in the psychology lab, he learned more about potential professional avenues. He hoped to attend graduate school and eventually become Dr. Pablo, “an accomplished psychologist.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 13, 2007.

<sup>147</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, February 9, 2007.

<sup>148</sup> Pablo, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

<sup>149</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

Pablo's options were partially shaped by his membership in a transnational family, his dual citizenship, and the plethora of information at the university.

However, he recognized that fate played a role in his destiny as well:

I like the idea of fate, but I'm not a slave to fate. It's very easy to say, I can do anything and let fate run its course. Whatever happens, happens. That's a cop out. It's almost like washing your hands. But I do like the element of, I don't want to say randomness, but of something larger than my own actions at play. Call it god, call it something else. I do get the sense that people, myself included, can do things to better situations around the world and we can affect each other. Our actions do matter. If you sit idly, you can't expect things to just fall into your lap. But I do like to think that there is an element, something that I can't control at play at the same time.<sup>150</sup>

Pablo had plans, yet recognized that these plans were continually being shaped by the academic and professional opportunities that presented themselves, his evolving sense of belonging to a place, and a healthy dose of divine guidance. While he was uncertain about exactly what his future held, he was open to a wide range of opportunities and kept moving forward toward graduation, laughing at the idea of the unknown.

*Kaori: "You can actually make your future."*

Kaori was very active in redefining her identities and crafting a specific vision for her future that included a sequence of events and a timetable that left little room for questions surrounding her visa status, relationships, profession, or failure. Kaori emphatically believed that "you can actually make your future"<sup>151</sup> and worked tirelessly to realize her vision of the future.

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<sup>150</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>151</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

Kaori dreamed of being an opera singer. A degree from the University of Maryland was not as important as her ability to sing and the notoriety that comes from being recognized as a good vocal artist. “I think degree is not really important. I want to be a singer, so I want to have more experience, more than degree. If I perform in this place or that place and it is a really huge name or a well known place, I’d be really proud.”<sup>152</sup> Although Kaori recognized that a U.S. degree opened doors and provided credentials, she did not associate graduating from the University of Maryland with any sort of prestige. She was more concerned with developing her skills and abilities than a diploma hanging on her wall. Being able to demonstrate her vocal prowess was really what it was all about. “Music, art, and stuff like that you have to show them. It’s not about a degree. Even if you graduate from Julliard, if you can’t sing no one is going to hire you.”<sup>153</sup> Long before graduation Kaori was looking ahead toward a future where she would need to continually prove herself. While Kaori’s short term goal was to graduate from the university, ultimately she wanted to participate in a two-year Young Artist Program for opera singers. According to Kaori, the “Young Artist Program gives you an opportunity to perform at all different places and then you can actually get paid. It’s not like you are paying anything. There’s a teacher and a stage and you can see if you can get the role and you practice.”<sup>154</sup> Her hard work and vocal skills would either lead her down a pathway of success or drag her kicking and screaming into a land of unknowns.

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<sup>152</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 20, 2007.

<sup>153</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>154</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

Kaori did not envision returning to Japan due to the lack of opportunities for opera singers in the music industry there. “I’m not really thinking about going back to Japan...Right now I am just trying to find a way to keep my visa. If I graduate from here, I’m not going to be able to stay in this country...If I go back what am I going to do? I want to do music, but the Japanese music industry I’m not really interested in.”<sup>155</sup> While she previously acknowledged that her experiences in Japan lead her to want to study in the U.S. and pursue a vocal career, she did not see Japan as having a pivotal role in her future. According to Kaori, the aspirations she constructed could not be realized in Japan. Kaori grounded herself in the U.S. and described this country as the place where she would live out her dreams.

Kaori, however, did not believe a future cemented in the U.S. mean losing her “Japaneseness” and adopting the “Americanness” that she was often accused of by other Japanese. “But that [being a U.S. citizen] doesn’t mean I am going to be American. I will still call myself Japanese, even if I have a green card or citizenship. I want to get citizenship. Well no, I want to get a green card so I am able to work here. It is so hard without a green card to do many things. To make things easier I want to have a green card. But I didn’t mean that I want to be American. I will still call myself Japanese until I die.”<sup>156</sup> Although Kaori saw becoming a U.S. citizen as essential to realizing her dreams, she would always consider herself Japanese based on her upbringing and blood ties to Japan.

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<sup>155</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>156</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 27, 2007.

Kaori's version of the future was reinforced by her close relationship with her professor. A woman who Kaori described as her "second mom,"<sup>157</sup> impressed upon her the amount of dedication involved in being a vocal artist and instilled in her a recognition of her own talents. Kaori saw this relationship spanning time. "I want to keep taking lessons with my teacher in Maryland. I don't think it is about where you go. I think it is all about teacher. You could go to the best music school in the world, but it's about the teacher and the relationship."<sup>158</sup> Her relationship with her professor was one Kaori imagined would be long-lasting. Again Kaori challenged the formality of an institution or a degree in favor of the skills developed through a solid relationship between student and teacher. She held her mentor in high regard and acknowledged the supportive role she had in helping her develop her vocal skills and a vision of what was thinkable. Kaori wanted to succeed not only for herself, but so that her professor, mentor, and second mom could ultimately see and hear her one day on a famous stage somewhere in the world.

Her relationships with the significant people in her life also influenced not only what she thought was possible, but her conceptualization of and approach to her future. She began planning things more and looking more actively toward constructing her future. "I always thought whatever happens, happens. But you can actually change your future...So it's not just whatever happens, happens. You can actually make your future."<sup>159</sup> Kaori recognized the passive to active shift in her thinking. As she navigated the hurdles she encountered, gained more experience, and

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<sup>157</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>158</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>159</sup> Kaori, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 14, 2007.

constructed her identities throughout her educational sojourn, she felt empowered to make plans and actively create a pathway to reach her goals.

Kaori would like to become a U.S. citizen, develop into a well-known opera singer, get married, travel, and have her first child before she is 30, all in that order. Fate does not have a role in the Kaori's future, only hard work and dedication found itself among the crescendos and diminuendos in the opera of Kaori's life. Kaori's challenges were grounded in learning a second language. Yet she overcame that major hurdle to now look forward to learning the language of the opera, Italian. She was confident in her ability to succeed and did not consider failure. In Japanese, English, or Italian, Kaori's voice will reach the walls of concert halls around the world.

*Deniz: "I am a woman who believes that anything can happen in this world."*

Deniz negotiated her identities from a space in the middle, at the intersection of tradition and change. Yet, she constructed terrains of possibility that encompassed a need to feel connected to a place and a sense of purpose. Her vision for the future was shaped by her need to be there for her family, her tolerance for the familiar and the ambiguous, and her desire to reestablish her roots. Deniz desired to feel alive and connected to something bigger than herself. At the same time she was conflicted about where she could find a sense of purpose and how she could reconcile the different priorities she created for herself.

Deniz's ideas about returning to Istanbul evolved over the semester. Initially she spoke about how her experiences at the University of Maryland helped her realize she needed to return to Turkey to help improve her country. "Now I know there are

so many things in Turkey that should be done. It is a great country. Now I want to go back for the better of my country.”<sup>160</sup> She spoke of an inadequate public educational system, a deficiency of qualified teachers, and poorly organized universities. “When I go back I will definitely do more stuff because I love contributing to something that will help the public because it makes me feel like I am alive.”<sup>161</sup> Initially Deniz explained her desire to return to Istanbul as for the betterment of her country.

Deniz, however, also spoke about returning to help her parents. She acknowledged how hard her father worked and that she hoped to help him leave the traffic and chaos of the city and realize his dream of retiring, leaving Istanbul completely and living in a little house with a garden along the Aegean coast:

So I just want to go back and help him. And I want to live with him too. I want to live with my family in a remote region, not a remote region but outside of the city. I’m planning for it, but you never know because there are so many opportunities here. I know I am speaking like I am going to do this and going to do that. But when I go back, because when you go somewhere it is like vacation. But if you are going to live there forever you are going to miss a lot of things that you had here. So those things are kind of making me think.<sup>162</sup>

Deniz began reconciling that returning to Istanbul meant giving up the life she was creating for herself in the U.S.

Deniz also wanted to return to Istanbul to be there for her mother, who she felt was leading a social life filled with emptiness and had nothing since the two children she dedicated her life to raising had moved to the U.S. Deniz recognized her

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<sup>160</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>161</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>162</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

mother's experience studying in Germany not only influenced her pathway to the University of Maryland, but also influenced her thoughts on what she did not want to become:

I don't want to become my mom either because she wanted a family and that is all that she has. She didn't work. She could have worked. I pushed her so much. But she just wanted to stay home and keep house and have meals cooked. She was waiting for us, asking us about our problems. So she just wanted to be that, but she had so much in herself. She's smart, she speaks German. She could have done so much more. I always ask, why didn't you do more? Why didn't you do this or why didn't you do that?...But right now, because we are here and we live here, she has nothing. She raised us, but I feel like they are becoming more and more lonely. We are still here and we can't really share things with them.<sup>163</sup>

Deniz described a growing distance between her and her parents due to the geographical distance that separated them. For Deniz, being able to share in the day to day lives of her family was the only way she envision recreating the closeness that they once shared. Yet, even as she thought about returning to Istanbul doubts about her ability to reacclimatize herself to life in her birth country crept into her narrative.

Deniz was at times uncomfortable with the ambiguity surrounding her future, but she also found discomfort in the decision to live out her life in one place filled with familiar people, places, and things. As the semester progressed and her uncertainty about her future became more and more evident, her ideas about where she would live out her future were challenged by the opportunities she saw for herself both in the U.S. and in Istanbul. "The more I live here the more I think about it and the more I get confused. You really never know, because of the opportunities here and the opportunities there. So I can't say for sure. I'll just wait and see."<sup>164</sup> The

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<sup>163</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

<sup>164</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

fact that Deniz saw opportunities to contribute to society and realize her dreams in both Istanbul and the U.S. continued contributing to her thinking about operating in an ambiguous space in the middle:

Between flights back home and back to school you will have difficulty addressing a place where you call ‘home.’ After you spend plenty of time in the country you study, you will make friends with whom you can share your life and professors and mentors to whom you can turn when in need. Now you have this extensive family and your home turns into this big campus. It creeps you out when you are in your native country and wish you were back where you study. And it causes more uneasiness when you try to imagine that you are going to spend your whole life in this big island away from your immediate family. So there is always this tension on both sides pulling you back.<sup>165</sup>

Deniz saw herself as constantly navigating the tension created by the constant push and pull of opportunities, unable to predict how her life may unfold.

Her vision for her future was also partially shaped by the importance she believed would be placed on the fact that she graduated from a U.S. institution. “I think it is important when you go back to Turkey. It doesn’t matter which university you studied at, but when you come back from the United States, it is a big thing.”<sup>166</sup>

A degree from the University of Maryland would increase her chances of gainful employment and provide her with a sense of prestige among potential employers not given to graduates from Turkish universities. In addition, as a result of studying at a university in the U.S. with such diversity, Deniz also found value in her increased ability to be more open and interact with people, “because you meet a lot of people

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<sup>165</sup> Deniz, journal entry, May 2, 2007.

<sup>166</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 21, 2007.

here and they have all these different backgrounds.”<sup>167</sup> The diversity she encountered at the university and the range of ways in which she negotiated these differences gave her a sense of being able to navigate the unknown as she had not been able to before.

Deniz’s ideas about her imagined career trajectory evolved over the years, including images of herself as a dancer, teacher, and architect:

I was in kindergarten and I was in the ballet. It was nothing important, but I was really good at it and our teacher was very good. There was a dance company for kids and she wanted me to join them. And I started crying. Ballet is really disciplined. It is a lot of hard work and I was only five years old. My mom is the kind of person that she is so sorry for us if we hurt, she’ll be like okay, don’t do it. If you don’t want to study, okay whatever. I cried so she didn’t push me, but it is the one thing that I really, really regret. And at one point here I also wanted to become a music teacher. I met this great Japanese-American teacher at my old school, at the University of Maryland Baltimore County...So I was thinking, in Turkey it would be great to be a teacher, an English teacher but also teach violin. At least not having a major in it, but knowing about it. I would affect kids. If they had the ability to do it, I would push them. So I wanted to do something like this. I think you become a person because of your teachers. They affect you totally. They need good teachers in Turkey.<sup>168</sup>

Deniz recognized the influence critical events and people in her life had on her ideas of what has possible. Yet, her longstanding vision for the future was ultimately shaped in middle school by hopes of being an architect. Therefore, being accepted into the architecture program at the university was paramount to realizing that dream. Deniz was exasperated as she awaited the final decision from the department and found herself again facing an uncertain future.

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<sup>167</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 21, 2007.

<sup>168</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

Deniz was left feeling as if she was operating in a “dangerous zone”<sup>169</sup> due to the uncertainty in her life surrounding what profession she would pursue and where she would create her roots. Deniz envisioned herself as needing to make life altering decisions at this point in her time abroad. “You are always in a dangerous zone because you don’t know what is going to happen, so you decide what you want to do.”<sup>170</sup> Deciding what to do did not come easy for Deniz. She was plagued with the fear of making the wrong decision, not living up to her own expectations of making a difference in the lives of her family or in country, or choosing a pathway that would ultimately lead her down a road filled with emptiness.

Deniz realized that while her life was shrouded in uncertainty, at the same time having to make decisions left her feeling more independent. As she wrote in her journal, “I can tell that my international experiences have been the most valuable of all my life’s experiences. In a way, living far away from my family and relatives, in my short history of life and my childhood helped me become a stronger woman, a woman who believes that anything can happen in this world.”<sup>171</sup> It takes a strong women to operate in a realm of uncertainty, to be open to the opportunities that might materialize, and to make the necessary decisions to create a life filled with purpose. It is hard to predict the future when you realize anything can happen in this world. Deniz gave up the stability of living and sharing her daily life with her immediate

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<sup>169</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>170</sup> Deniz, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 16, 2007.

<sup>171</sup> Deniz, journal entry, May 2, 2007.

family and a grounding in the familiar context of Istanbul as she crafted a place for herself at the University of Maryland and in the U.S.

Zara: “*I feel like America is a playground.*”

Zara’s comfort with her multiple identities served as a catalyst for the ways in which she looked at her educational sojourn and considered a wider range of possibilities as she imaged her future. Like many other students at the university, as a junior Zara read the university’s book of the year, the *World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty First Century*, which for her described a way of looking at the world and her future she had not considered before. “The world is so much smaller now. If you read the *World is Flat* it is kind of crazy how it is so much smaller. And I feel like now there is a lot more empowering of the individual. Like there are a lot more people trying to make their own change.”<sup>172</sup> Zara felt her experiences at the university and the decisions she made over time gave her a sense of empowerment, independence, and control over the evolving possibilities for her future.

Zara’s ideas about what was thinkable expanded upon her arrival at the university and as she gained a new sense of independence from assuming responsibility for the everyday events in her life:

I never thought that there were a lot of things possible. In a way I think coming here makes me believe more in myself because of the fact that this place has forced me to be more independent than I am. I think that has really worked for me. Like I would never take any initiative because it’s always been made for me. When I came here I realized that if you don’t take the initiative no one else is going to do it. It doesn’t work that way here.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 2, 2007.

<sup>173</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 5, 2007.

Zara came to the university without a clear career path. Without parental expectations to pursue one academic program or another, she was free to experiment and decide upon a career trajectory for herself. Studying at the university, interacting with students from around the globe, and learning about the diverse range of interests represented on campus allowed her to become more comfortable with considering a wider range of possibilities:

I was talking to my cousin and he said that just because you change your mind does not mean that you lack focus. It just means that you are now open to a lot more, open to new things. You've come to know about so many more things. It's something very hard to phantom. Only now have I gotten to be comfortable with it. If you saw me last semester or a year ago I was driving myself crazy. I'm like how can I not know what I am supposed to do.<sup>174</sup>

Zara initially found all of the options she was exposed to unsettling, yet she found comfort in her cousins words and realized that part of the adventure is the journey. She saw the U.S. as a playground for trying out possible careers, academic majors, and identities that all shaped what she found thinkable in the U.S. as compared to Dubai or India:

The possibilities here are different. Even doing a co-op. I would never consider it if I was in Dubai. I would never consider it if I was in India. But because I'm here, and I really think that is the only reason I would consider it. In a way I feel like America gives me the chance to take risks. I feel like over here if I mess up, it's okay. I can come back and I can work on it and be better. That's what I feel. In a way I feel like America is a playground. That I can work with all these things, like different career paths, with different internships, with job opportunities. I feel like over here there is much more mixing and matching...and in a way America allows me to do it.<sup>175</sup>

Zara found the freedom to experiment, make mistakes, and try again valuable as she crafted aspirations for her future.

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<sup>174</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

<sup>175</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

Zara's goal for herself at the beginning of the semester was just that, wading through volumes of options and figuring out what she wanted to do. She chose pre-medicine over law because medicine could be practiced anywhere, while law was specific to a particular context and limited her ability to engage in a mobile lifestyle. “One of the reasons that I chose not to go into it [law] is that it’s limited in the sense that usually law is for that one place. It’s usually for that one country. So it gets kind of hard to move around.”<sup>176</sup> As she looked toward the future, her ability to continue to be mobile clearly influenced her imagined career trajectory and the way she envisioned her terrains of possibility.

Zara had decided upon an academic program, but she still had questions about what lay beyond graduation and how she would utilize her degree. “Figuring out what I want to do, that’s a good goal. And the thing is, once I get a job and I figure out whether I want to do this or that, then I can pursue my post degree requirements. And then after that I’ll look into marriage or whatever.”<sup>177</sup> Zara was very much focused on establishing herself professionally before starting a family and establishing roots somewhere. Her conceptualization of success rested on her newly founded personal independence. And while it flew in the face of Indian traditions, she had her family’s full support.

Zara anticipated remaining in the U.S. after graduating to obtain a U.S. passport, but recognized that she is “still a teenager”<sup>178</sup> and that things can change.

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<sup>176</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

<sup>177</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

<sup>178</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

Leaving Dubai to pursue a degree in the U.S. was a conscious decision that represented the opportunity to acquire credentials that she believed were not available in Dubai. Zara traded the familiarity of an expatriate community for another diasporic community of sorts at the university. Although Zara continued to reconcile her interactions across cultures and how she conceived what was possible, she felt empowered and a great sense of independence throughout the process.

*Roohi: "This place has made me realize that nothing is impossible."*

Roohi described herself as adaptable, yet fickle-minded, traits she attributed to her difficulty in describing her future. While she gained more confidence and was more independent as a result of her educational sojourn, she acknowledged her vision for her future was shaped by her father's academic pursuits, the importance her mother placed on her Indian heritage, and her experiences as an international student both in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. While she wavered in where she will ultimately reestablish her roots, she looked forward to "being a citizen of a place."<sup>179</sup>

She saw the U.S. as a place for exploration and a place where anything is possible through hard work. "So you can explore and anything and everything is possible here. I think I can get anything. If I work for it I can get things done."<sup>180</sup> Having come to the university with a clear idea of what academic major to pursue and the support of her parents, Roohi enjoyed the challenge of figuring out just how she would take her passions and her degree and turn them into a career.

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<sup>179</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

<sup>180</sup> Roohi, group interview by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

Roohi, a bioengineering major, envisioned for herself a future in the medical instruments business, conducting research and traveling. “I don’t think I want to stay in one place and work. So I guess I would prefer going and working in other places.”<sup>181</sup> This is a vision she shared with her mother who imagined her with a “briefcase traveling around the world and going to conferences.”<sup>182</sup> But if she had to find a place to set down her roots, she would not want to deny any part of her past and her city of choice would be a amalgamation of the places she has lived:

I see myself living in Saudi Arabia and living in the U.S., and maybe in India. At one point I was thinking of settling in Dubai or something, because it is like the Gulf, where I’ve lived. It is like the U.S., internationally. And it has a lot of Indians there, so there is Indian culture. So I was thinking a good amalgamation of all three places would be the UAE. So in the future I was just thinking I might go work there after gathering more experience here. Maybe, I’m not sure.<sup>183</sup>

Roohi was not considering venturing out beyond the comfort zones she created from her past as she contemplated where to establish her roots. Yet she welcomed interludes of travel that would allow her to continue to meet and work with people from around the globe, just as she had at the American, British, and International schools in Dubai and then at the university.

Roohi recognized that graduating from the University of Maryland, one of the few universities in the country with an established program in the up and coming bioengineering field, established her credibility. Gaining professional experience in the States and ultimately U.S. citizenship were important and gave her a sense of empowerment and control over her future:

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<sup>181</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

<sup>182</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

<sup>183</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

In the future, definitely being a US citizen matters. If you study here and you work here, it definitely does matter. Everyone knows that. If I get an engineering degree from here versus a student with an engineering degree from a school in India, I might be preferred over that student. So that definitely does matter. You have more opportunities and can do more for your job search here. Like I said, this place has made me realize that nothing is impossible. I am sometimes pessimistic, but I am always optimistic.<sup>184</sup>

Situated at the crossroads of optimism and pessimism, Roohi saw the U.S. as place that would foster identities where she could be known for her professional achievements and contributions to her field. If Roohi was delivering a speech at a biomedical conference ten years from now, she would like to be introduced based on her accomplishments not for who she is, which demonstrates a switch in her thinking from the need for affiliation in her past to the achievement driven context of the U.S. “I would like to be known more for my accomplishments than who I am. I hope to accomplish a lot by then, so that I am known for that.”<sup>185</sup>

While her Indian affiliations were such a significant part of her upbringing, Roohi questioned how much of an influence this aspect of her identity would have in her future based on the changing face of the U.S. In fact, Roohi thought “the whole world is going to be brown. So I would like them to introduce me as a person from the U.S., who spent part of my life in Saudi Arabia. And then, if I’m still very Indian...I don’t look American at all. I’m not sure if I would look American then.”<sup>186</sup> With her vision of a brown world and a blending of ethnicities, Roohi believed that her accomplishments rather than her ethnicity would be more and more important for

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<sup>184</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 10, 2007.

<sup>185</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

<sup>186</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

defining herself and setting herself apart from the crowd. As part of her self-proclaimed adaptability, she envisioned the saliency of her multiple identities would change in intensity and importance over time and be partially dependent on the changing face of the U.S.

Roohi found value in the ways she was able to continually develop her cross-cultural communication skills to deal with the increased intensity of differences she forecasted encountering throughout her lifetime. “Now I can talk to anyone and everyone from every part of the world.”<sup>187</sup> She envisioned using her ability to communicate across cultural differences to bridge what she sees as a gap in the bioengineering field:

They always say that engineers are not good communicators. That’s why they have all these communications majors in engineering. Because they design, but then they don’t know how to tell you what they’ve done. So the engineers explain to them and then they can write it. I want to be the person who designs it and is able to tell. They want people who can actually explain. Your perspective of designing the thing is different. A communications major does not know what you are doing. I think now the whole idea of engineering is changing. The whole engineering field is changing. They want people who are good communicators because companies want their products to be able to cross borders.<sup>188</sup>

Roohi wanted to cross borders and design products that could do the same. One way she intended to become more attractive to employers was continuing to develop her cross-cultural skills.

Roohi described herself as more confident, independent, and relaxed than when she first arrived at her dormitory her freshman year. She admitted, “I am

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<sup>187</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 10, 2007.

<sup>188</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 11, 2007.

thinking and I am confused while thinking.”<sup>189</sup> As Roohi mulled over possible educational, professional, and physical directions for her future, she recognized the inherent uncertainty in aspects of her life. Her family, already living apart in three different countries, did not impose upon her any expectations other than to work hard, be happy, and not forget where she came from. Roohi didn’t forget where she came from, but was looking forward to navigating terrains of possibility where she was free to make her own future as a U.S. citizen to freely travel the world.

*Sachin: “Here it is achievable. There it is impossible.”*

Sachin became more independent and enamored with the prospects of his success since coming to the university. He admitted, “I never knew this place would change me so much.”<sup>190</sup> For Sachin, graduating from a U.S. institution of higher education symbolized economic success and served as a gateway to a privileged position in the global economy. He saw the U.S. as the land of opportunity, academically, professionally, and financially. He recognized that the University of Maryland with its diversity, location, curriculum, and size helped him pursue opportunities he might not have had elsewhere. He constantly compared what he believed was achievable in the U.S. to what he saw as impossible in India. Although he described India as a country teeming with growth and development, he did not see a place for himself there. He looked forward to working in the U.S. upon graduation, becoming a U.S. citizen, and “making it big.”<sup>191</sup> With parents whose only

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<sup>189</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

<sup>190</sup> Sachin, journal entry, April 25, 2007.

<sup>191</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

expectation was for him to always honor his family by succeeding in what he did, Sachin was free to explore whatever life path he chose.

Sachin often drew comparisons between what he would not be able to achieve in India and the newfound freedom and independence he experienced as a college student in the U.S.:

You get a lot more exposure than what you get in India. Back in India it is a one track field. You don't do anything except what your field is. Here you take science courses and history courses. In India you just do your major. That's it. Work experience is really considered to be something. It's part of your curriculum here. And if I was living in India I would be living at home. I wouldn't be as independent as I am here. Just learning all the things I can do on my own. If I was there I would never have experienced those things.<sup>192</sup>

Experiencing a greater sense of independence through exposure to new ways of life, engaging in academic coursework beyond his major, and managing the daily responsibilities of a college student left Sachin feeling empowered to tackle his future.

Sachin created terrains of possibility that played out in the U.S. and did not include returning to India. "I probably wouldn't go back. I like it here."<sup>193</sup> Not only did he enjoy his life at the university, but he believed he could achieve more financial independence upon graduation if he made the career choice to stay in the States:

It's better for me if I can make more out of my career... You get a lot more opportunities here. I bought my own car with my own money. I travel a lot. Now I've got a job that is going to sponsor me later on. I just wouldn't have been able to achieve this much back home. I would still be dependent on my parents for everything. Even if I did have a job, I wouldn't have been able to make enough to pay rent or even lease a car. So here it is achievable, there it is impossible.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 15, 2007.

<sup>193</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 15, 2007.

<sup>194</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

The experiences of his cousins who studied overseas before him, the stories of his aunts and uncles who have settled comfortably into a life along the east coast, and the visions shared with him by other students all helped shape what Sachin believed was thinkable for his future. His terrains of possibility were grounded in the successes and dreams of the family and friends that surrounded him and his own newly founded sense of independence.

Sachin, although he saw himself as just another student on campus and vehemently denied an international student identity, did face one major obstacle to remaining in the U.S., maintaining his visa status. By taking advantage of the many internships with Fortune 500 companies available to undergraduates, Sachin believed he overcame the first hurdle in seeking a life for himself in the U.S. “I got an internship that does sponsor international students to stay in this country on a work visa. And there is a very high chance that I will get that offer. All the interns get a full-time offer unless you do really bad. And since this is one way, one means by which I can stay here, I don’t think I am going to screw up. And if I get that, I’m not going to go back after that.”<sup>195</sup> Sachin was a careful and thoughtful planner, and recognized that his label as a student along with his visa status would fade away after graduation. Through his constant anticipation of the future and what came next, he strategically sought out the opportunities that would continue to propel him along the pathway he envisioned for himself.

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<sup>195</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 4, 2007.

Sachin's ultimate goal was to remain in the U.S. and gain citizenship. However, a new identity as a U.S. citizen did not create a conflict of affiliation for him. Even if he became a U.S. citizen, he would still consider himself Indian. "I will still consider myself Indian because that is where I was born and that is where I will still go if I want to retire. I think that is what my plan is. If I don't want to stay here, that is where I'll live...I grew up there. What I am is because of what I've received there. I cannot just leave everything because I have a U.S. passport and forget that."<sup>196</sup> While his connections to India did not influence his immediate plans for his future, he still looked toward India as the place that he ultimately belonged to and as his ultimate resting place. "But I know in the end I'm going to be back in India, like before I die. That's where I'm going to end up. I'm going to try and make it big here and then I'm going to go back. Get a big farmhouse and have my own cattle and horses."<sup>197</sup> Raising livestock is a far cry from the future Sachin described for himself after leaving the university. He was focused on his version of the "American Dream," partially developed throughout his youth as a member of a business family and throughout his exposure to the options at the university. Sachin looked forward to working for a Fortune 500 company and financial independence.

His decisions about his future are examples of his broader vision and the set of constraints he constructed for himself. By coming to study at the University of Maryland he was giving up the security of a stable family and the prolific capitalism that provides so many interesting opportunities for people who live in India to learn

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<sup>196</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, April 4, 2007.

<sup>197</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

about the world. He is missing a key time in the evolution of India. Yet with all that he is giving up, Sachin believed his is gaining much more.

### **Collective Cultural Identity**

Students were challenged during a group interview at the end of the semester to create a common symbol that represented their collective experience or expressed how they envisioned themselves as possessing a collective cultural identity.<sup>198</sup> This process raised some interesting questions for consideration as students engaged in dialogues and negotiations that resulted in a symbolic co-construction that demonstrated their understanding of how they thought about their futures. Although scholars have put forth terms such as multi-locale diaspora cultures,<sup>199</sup> translocal *mélange* cultures,<sup>200</sup> and cultural diaspora<sup>201</sup> to describe a sundry of border crosser communities, “no idiom has yet emerged to capture the collective interests of a diverse group of individuals in translocal solidarities...Such interests are many and vocal, but they are still entrapped in the linguistic imagery of the territorial state.”<sup>202</sup> These six students engaged in a valiant attempt to do what academics and scholars have yet to accomplish.

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<sup>198</sup> Timothy J. Owens, "Self and Identity," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. John Delameter (New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003), 226. A collective identity is “an interaction and shared definition produced by a number of individuals concerning the orientations of actions and fields of opportunities and constraints.” Collective identities depend on available community and individual resources, reconfigurations of resources to generate meaning, and integration into communities, and are not derived solely through repeated attempts at self-identification but through affiliations and interactions with others.

<sup>199</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>200</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Hybridity, So What?: The Anti-Hybridity Backlash and the Riddles or Recognition," *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 2-3 (2001).

<sup>201</sup> Richard Staring and others, "Localizing Cultural Identity," *Focaal* 30/31 (1997).

<sup>202</sup> Appadurai, 166.



**Figure 7: Group**

AUTHOR: So based on how you each described your identities, were there commonalities in what you shared?

ROOHI: There was water, roots, confused people.

KAORI: What about a boat?

ZARA: Maybe we need a boat with an anchor, so we can chose wherever to anchor.

ROOHI: And then a person with binoculars looking off the boat.

PABLO: This is going to be great.

ROOHI: Do we want a person who is looking around, the navigator?

DENIZ: We are the navigators.

PABLO: Yeah, we are the navigators.

KAORI: What is that?

PABLO: A sail.

DENIZ: If you have a sail, where is the wind coming from? Where is it going?

PABLO: That is a really good question.

ROOHI: Are we at sea right now or are we anchored?

KAORI: We're at sea right?

PABLO: Yeah, sure go ahead.

ROOHI: So wherever the wind comes from, we go there? Is that how it is?

PABLO: But in your case, it wasn't the wind taking you anywhere. You decided where to go.

KAORI: You know what you want.

ROOHI: Yeah, that's true.

DENIZ: You don't know where you are going, but you know what you want to do generally.

KAORI: Yeah, but sometimes I get lazy or I'm not really thinking much.

ROOHI: Go with the flow kind of thing.

KAORI: Yeah, go with the flow. The wind will take you somewhere. I like this boat, because you have the roots, and I like the going anywhere idea. I was thinking that was opportunity, but I think everyone has different opportunities.

ROOHI: So we can draw an island there?

KAORI: No. I was thinking, especially because we are in the sea, we can draw so many different type of fishes. So fishes are like opportunities.

ZARA: Yeah.

ROOHI: So are we fishing?

DENIZ: Yeah. Fish in Turkey are like luck. When you see fish it is like good luck I think.

PABLO: Do we want to keep the sails? In this day and age, don't we want a motor?

AUTHOR: So far we have a boat with an anchor, although you are not quite sure where you are going to put down the anchor. The fish and the seahorse are the opportunities. And the octopus is...

ROOHI: Just another big obstacle.

KAORI: The octopus is key. These suction cups are something that will stop you from doing something. You can take a good way or a bad way, but I think everything happens for a reason. So if you try to go somewhere, they will stop you.

DENIZ: But it could also be a good thing.

KAORI: It could be.

DENIZ: Like saving your life.

KAORI: Saving your life, but you don't know the goal.

ROOHI: So it could symbolize fate.

KAORI: Oh, okay.

AUTHOR: So the octopus represents fate. So what about the big shark looking thing?

ROOHI: That is like all the failures that are coming towards you and you are trying to avoid it.

AUTHOR: So how come the shark is the biggest thing and the opportunities are the smallest? Do you feel like the obstacles are bigger than the opportunities?

ROOHI: Sometimes yes and sometimes no. Some people have lesser obstacles and some people have more obstacles and you try to navigate through them.

KAORI: This is really important. I'm sorry, but you have to actually touch the ground.

PABLO: Isn't that what the anchor is for?

DENIZ: I think it looks good. I like it.

KAORI: You are the one walking wherever you want to go. You are walking towards whatever you want. So even though you're in a boat, you are the one controlling.

ZARA: You are the master of your own sail. You are the wind.

KAORI: Yeah, because that is your life. You are the one walking. You can take yourself wherever you want to go.

PABLO: I think that was what the rudder was there for too. I also like the wake of the boat because it is more or less what you are leaving behind, but if you turn back, it is being erased as you go, because you are turning back from something. But does it matter?

ZARA: Very poetic.

KAORI: Are we done?

PABLO: Keep modifying it.

AUTHOR: What does the sun symbolize?

KAORI: I think family, because family is the most important thing. Especially if you are on the sea, right? If it is windy or it rains.

ROOHI: Can we write down our destination?

PABLO: We don't really know our destination.<sup>203</sup>

Students were uncertain about their destinations, yet students saw themselves as navigators of their own lives on a sea that symbolized physical mobility and fluid identities. Students described a group identity or an international student ethnoscape, i.e. a “landscape of persons who make up the shifting world in which we live.”<sup>204</sup> Ethnoscapes offer a freeing of the imagination from social controls that previously manipulated and corralled a sense of group identity tied to locality and “offer the deepest possibilities for self-transformation, opening educational travelers and temporary migrants to hybrid and multiple identities.”<sup>205</sup> The sun signified the

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<sup>203</sup> Group, interviewed by author, College Park, MD, April 26, 2007.

<sup>204</sup> Appadurai, 192.

<sup>205</sup> Simon Marginson and Erlenawati Sawie, "Interrogating Global Flows in Higher Education," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 3, no. 3 (2005): 304.

importance of transnational family affiliations in crafting visions of their futures, while the octopus and shark represented the differences in the opportunities and the types of challenges faced by them as a group. While all of the students constructed terrains of possibility and images of themselves in the future that spanned borders, they all recognized the influence or importance of fate, luck, or a higher power in their ultimate realities. Students realized family, shifting contexts, and a sense of uncertainty were stable aspects of their experiences that would not change over time. However, students were in control, navigating and steering a boat called “Life” on the open seas and guided by the sun.

### **Possible Selves**

Students created malleable and dynamic images of what they hoped to become that acknowledged an array of possibilities through their conceptualization of possible selves.<sup>206</sup> Through their sojourns students developed an enormous presence of previously unimagined options and portraits of possibility for their futures. Students mobilized resources to construct identities and possibilities in quite concrete ways. They integrated past selves and current selves into an individualized set of possible selves that represented for them both their aspirations and the great uncertainty that surrounded their futures. Possible selves evolved into “sites of emergence and becoming”<sup>207</sup> enabling dynamic spaces and “moments of active

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<sup>206</sup> Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, “Possible Selves,” *American Psychologist* 41, no. 9. Possible selves “represent individual’s ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming.” Derived from past representations of the self, yet distinct from current selves, possible selves are constructed from personal experiences; social, cultural, political, economic, and historical influences; and perceived opportunities and constraints that sculpt terrains of possibility.

<sup>207</sup> Roderick Labrador, “Performing Identity: The Public Presentation of Culture and Ethnicity among Filipinos in Hawai’i,” *Cultural Values* 6, no. 3 (2002): 301.

agency, creativity, and imagination.”<sup>208</sup> For these students the melding of aspirations became important as possible selves nurtured in specific contexts needed to transcend boundaries that separated spaces with varied norms and expectations. Students acknowledged that possible selves developed in one context may be opposed, discredited, or irrelevant in another.

Students and their families inherently saw the value of a degree from the U.S., yet each envisioned this credential influencing their lives in very different ways. For some students returning to their contexts of origin would not allow them to utilize the knowledge and skills developed through participating in their chosen academic program, ultimately influencing their decision to seek out professional opportunities elsewhere. Other students recognized that returning to their contexts of origin with a degree from a U.S. institution would guarantee them employment, yet were determined to remain in the U.S. or abroad upon graduation. Still others were interested in utilizing their newly developed academic and professional qualifications to pursue additional studies. Students were explicit in how the perceptions of others were integral in determining why they choose a particular course of study or profession, where they hoped to ultimately reside, and how they would use their degrees to achieve their carefully constructed aspirations.

Students never considered forgoing a college education. Although their participation in transnational families was a major factor in their decision to study overseas, students reflected on their newly found independence to craft possible selves. They were constantly faced with decisions about what course of study to

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

pursue, what communities to join, how to maintain their visas, or where to reside. The lens through which these students made decisions and focused on their futures was shaped by their membership in transnational family networks, their involvement in campus life, their relationships with professors and classmates, the knowledge available to them through university resources, and their own sense of empowerment, all of which expanded and contracted what they conceived as possible. Students did not share unrealistic lofty goals, but rather constructed future possible selves grounded in a sense of agency with a healthy dose of fate. There are many differences between a female Christian music major from Japan and an Indian national raised in the UAE studying pre-medicine from a Venezuelan psychology student who attended high school in the U.S. Their experiences, motivations, and positionalities created an array of terrains of possibility.

All of these students believed studying at the University of Maryland would allow them to pursue opportunities not available to them in their contexts of origin. Pablo wouldn't have been able to find a creative writing program. Sachin wouldn't have been able to achieve the communion of academic and professional experiences through internships. Kaori wouldn't have been able to study under her recognized professor to prepare for the stages she dreamed about singing on as a child. Zara wouldn't have been free to experiment or try out different majors and identities. Roohi wouldn't have been able to work toward her goal of becoming a U.S. citizen. Deniz wouldn't have been able to develop her English language capabilities to the same extent. While all of these students believed that studying at the University of Maryland exposed them to experiences, people, and knowledge not accessible to in

their contexts of origin and allowed them to consider a wider set of possibilities, there was great diversity in the ways students wove together narratives of possibilities from their past through their present and into the future.

Each of these six students were pursuing their version of the “American Dream.” For Sachin that meant economic independence and success. Kaori’s American Dream was formed when she was a little girl learning English and imitating the vocals of Mariah Carey, and rested on her desire to sing on some of the great stages around the world. Pablo’s version of the American Dream came with the notoriety of a well-respected psychologist by day and a published multi-lingual poet by night. Deniz envisioned an American Dream that did not necessarily include the U.S., but on finding ways to help her country and her family from wherever she established her roots. Roohi’s American Dream was shaped by her desire to become a U.S. citizen. Zara continued to craft an evolving American Dream that utilized her inherent international background to gain an edge and secure a professional future in the global economy.

Student constructions of possibility, like their pathways to the university, were multidimensional and complex, and included aspects of professional and physical mobility. Roohi saw herself as a global nomad and was looking forward to traveling as part of her professional life, but also looked forward to belonging to a place and participating in the political process there. Pablo, with traditions grounded in Caracas and the U.S., looked toward being a citizen of the world, not rooting himself in one place but reinventing himself wherever he decided. Zara chose medicine in order to not limit herself to a certain locale. Kaori looked toward a future traveling from

performance to performance. Sachin saw remaining in the U.S. as his only opportunity to make it big. Deniz was torn between what she envisioned as her only two options, remaining in the U.S. upon graduation or returning to Istanbul to help her parents. Through the work of their imaginations, students relied upon images, meanings, and conceived opportunities to create realms of possibilities, develop expectations, and construct parameters on which they based visions of their futures. Students' understanding of what was thinkable emerged through a process of careful consideration of family expectations, professional goals, and personal aspirations.

All of these students took advantage of the freedom afforded them by their families and the range of diverse opportunities at the University of Maryland to craft terrains of possibility and envision possible selves. Their ideas about what was thinkable and what was not thinkable developed through their interpretations of their past and their ongoing negotiations as international students. Students acknowledged that their terrains of possibility were evolving, fluid, and at times unpredictable. Yet as they navigated their boats on the rolling seas, careful to acknowledge the octopus and sharks, students felt as if they were on an adventure, guided by the sun and equipped with binoculars that would help them find their way.

## **Chapter Six: A New Kind of International Student**

Roohi, Zara, Pablo, Deniz, Sachin, and Kaori all provided rich narratives of what it was like to be an international student at the University of Maryland in the spring of 2007. Students spoke eloquently and with an amazing understanding about the ways in which their pasts influenced how they made sense of their time at the university and how they envisioned their educational sojourns as a springboard for their futures. These students underwent an array of experiences that spoke meaningfully to the ways in which they constructed and managed their educational sojourns. Through their voices it became evident that being international did not mean the same thing for each of them. There were many ways to be or not to be an international student. A new understanding of what it means to study overseas centers around their voices and what they shared.

These six international students wove together cultural narratives characterized by transnational family affiliations, ambiguous spaces, evolving identities, and imagined possibilities. Students explained how they attended to the influences of reconstituted landscapes in shaping cultural identities. They described themselves as city sluts, global nomads, second culture kids, citizens of the world, and rootless ones, yet acknowledged the importance of contexts of origin and groundings in transnational families in the creation and constant negotiation of their identities. While they tended to identify themselves as international students in some situations, they denied this identity in others. Students carved out places for themselves by acknowledging the value inherently placed on their multiple identities and international backgrounds, while at the same time recognizing the

misconceptions that surrounded their international student label. The stories of these six students unearthed what it meant for them to cross borders as educational sojourners and how the convergence of shifting contexts coalesced into a singular transnational space penetrated by global flows that both fostered and challenged their sense-making.

Students described themselves in a state of dynamic in-betweenness at the intersection of tradition and change across the boundaries of geography and mind. They recognized the importance transnational family networks had on their pathways to the university and the possibilities for their futures. All relatively privileged children of educated and socio-economically comfortable families, these students represent one particular segment of the international student population, which influenced their ability to describe futures not necessarily fixed in localities or saturated with finite opportunities but filled with uncertainties and possibilities, an exciting prospect to some and a daunting obstacle to others. The meanings students ascribed to terrains of possibility did not develop in a vacuum and were not solely of their own making, which makes understanding how students interpreted their personal histories and experiences paramount for developing a deeper understanding of what students felt and thought about studying at the University of Maryland.

The perspectives of these students suggest the need for a rethinking of the assumptions that ground the international education literature. Through their stories, these six students illuminated the need to begin looking at international students in the U.S. and their experiences less as an agglomeration of similarity and more as complex experiences grounded in the spaces they create. These six students

challenged the traditional characterization of international students that has been the mainstay of programs and policies for decades. The experiences of these six students in many ways contest the understanding and categorization of a traditional international student as one who is linguistically and culturally deficient or alien, overwhelmed by culture shock, isolated from family, only periodically able to communicate with the people they left behind, and here to study and then return home. Their voices suggest a reconceptualization of the analytical apparatus surrounding educational sojourns. These six educational border crossers painted a portrait of a new kind of international student.

Students are complicated cultural carriers. They are the ones that give meaning to educational border crossings. They carry around traditions, values, and beliefs that influence how they make sense of the world right in front of them and beyond. The voices of these six students suggest a redefinition of the overseas experience is needed. These student stories provide the substance for examining the existing international education literature and illuminating the lost opportunities for understanding how students navigate the very complex and powerful terrain of educational sojourns. There is more to understanding their stories than labeling them international students and placing them what have emerged as oversimplified categories. These students call out for a redefinition of the overseas experience and a need to dispel the myriad of misunderstandings surrounding what it means to be an international student.

## Findings

The existing literature continues to paint a portrait of international students as academically challenged, culturally naïve, lacking worldly experience or global sensibilities, and unable to make sense of their surroundings. Students are cultural carriers and engage networks of influence and communicative technologies that are not what they once were and are quite different from those available to students of the past. The increasingly interconnected world we live in has changed the border crossing experience for some students.

Historically, an international student was described as being “thousands of miles from home, will be away from one to five or more years, can get a reply to a letter only once in two months, and most probably is tacitly debarred from much of the life of the school and community.”<sup>1</sup> Today, students operate in an ever changing and mobile world, quite unlike the world of the traditional international student whose experience crossing borders was very limited, who may have never before been out of the country, who was learning English for the first time, and who had limited information about his or her destination. Today, the communication technologies used by students are no longer cables, telegraph, short wave radio, or the post, but include instant messaging, e-mail, social networking sites, streaming videos, and cell phones. Today, students travel to contexts of origin, visit friends at universities throughout the U.S. and abroad, and welcome family for campus visits.

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<sup>1</sup> Reginald W. Wheeler, Henry H. King, and Alexander B. Davidson, eds., *The Foreign Student in America* (New York, NY: Association Press, 1925), 140.

International student experiences continue to be distinct from previous generations “because now the world is flat,”<sup>2</sup> illuminating and emphasizing the interconnectedness of students across geographical spaces and virtual societies. International students studying in the U.S. today have very different experiences from international students who studied here years ago. Roohi sees globalization as significantly shaping how she and other students communicate and make decisions as compared to students of different eras:

In this world right now everything is based on globalization and how things are taking place and how people from different parts are coming together and how everyone is related or interrelated...The experiences that international students had earlier are different than what they have now. They don't all get culture shock as they come in. Maybe it is there, but it is minimal. It is not like, oh my god where am I? Because when they come here they do know where they are. And if they come here and they don't know where they are going, I guess I don't understand that because now the world is flat. It is very small now. You can look at a virtual tour of the campus online. Now you have all these other people that you can talk to. You have these online chats or people from your race who have come to the same university. And they come back and they tell you oh yeah, we do this. So the experiences now are very different from the experiences thirty years ago.<sup>3</sup>

Students use technology to learn about what life as a college student in the U.S. far before setting foot on campus. Students can take a virtual tour of the campus, chat with college students online who are already studying overseas, or watch any one of several thousands of international student orientation videos on YouTube in anticipation of their arrival to the U.S. New communicative technologies are reshaping the ways students prepare for and make sense of their time abroad.

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<sup>2</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 21, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, May 21, 2007.

As a result, student perceptions and experiences problematize the conceptualization of educational sojourns as inherently alien experiences. While the metaphor of an alien is often used in literatures to describe border crossing experiences, these students struggled with the idea of being called aliens, indirectly and directly challenged that characterization, and described instead realities of dynamic in-betweenness as they lived on the margins, inhabited third spaces, or found themselves in the middle.

These six students “invest[ed] in their higher education with a strategic cosmopolitan imaginary already in mind”<sup>4</sup> and came to campus armed with a clear understanding of what to expect. Due to previous encounters with what students described as “American culture,” the images and information circulated by the media about the U.S. and conversations with family and friends who had studied abroad in the U.S. or specifically at the University of Maryland, they came to campus equipped with some knowledge and preconceived notions about what life as a college student was likely to entail:

It all banks on the context it sounds to me. And that context is really not that different anymore. I guess for me, I’m already fairly familiar with American society. My family had already lived in the States. They were already bringing some experiences to the household. I was already familiar with that context. I was not fully familiar with the context I was going to be living in, but I already had more or less an understanding. So if we follow the train of thought of the alien metaphor, I was already more or less equipped. Context for me denotes culture. I mentioned before that distances had shrunk and that we are all more or less connected than before, than ever before. So I think that metaphor [alien] is slowing going to become, what’s the word I’m looking for, deficient to describe that experience.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Fazal Rizvi, "International Education and the Production of Cosmopolitan Identities," in *Transnational Seminar Series*, Series 9 (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 2005), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Pablo, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 30, 2007.

Students acknowledged that vicarious learning and direct experience can be at times different and that cultural dissonance may exist, yet none of the students felt it was appropriate to describe their experiences in the U.S. as alien. Student perspectives on studying overseas may refute the conceptualization of alien, but doesn't refute the idea that they are outsiders. They are constructionally marginal in every shape and form, but comfortable nonetheless in the ambiguous spaces they inhabited. The experiences of these students and the perspectives they carried with them render the traditional labeling of an educational sojourn as isolating and alien, questionable.

Existing literatures, however, proceed on the assumption that the state of culture shock embedded in the conceptualization of an alien experience is an inevitable condition. None of the students alluded to an overwhelming sense of cross-cultural adaptation stress. In light of global flows and the mobility of information, images, and ideas, the perceptions of these six students suggest that culture shock is also becoming an outdated model for describing educational sojourns. "If people asked me was there much of a cultural shock, I would say there wasn't much of a cultural shock. Even with international students. Yes, there may be some culture shock, but you kind of know about all this before coming here. You don't just open the gates and we come."<sup>6</sup> Students spoke to the variety of ways in which knowledge of the U.S. seeped into their lives to shape their contexts of origin and create fluid networks of influence even before coming to the university. While decades ago students described an unsettling and isolating experience characterized by an overwhelming sense of cross-cultural adaptation stress, the stories of these

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<sup>6</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

students suggest that the idea educational sojourning is necessarily an alien experience fraught with culture shock is not necessarily true for this group of students.

The underlying assumption is that international students need to be acculturated, brought up to speed, or given help with the myriad of deficiencies that may ultimately hold them back from succeeding. International student programs focus on topics related to surviving all forms of culture shock, interacting with faculty, participating in classroom discussions, adopting an acceptable writing style, and a variety of academic skills training. International students are not a blank slate and know more before coming to campus than they are often given credit for.

Understanding where students come from and the knowledge that they bring to campus may neutralize the approach taken in the existing literature to seriously overgeneralizes the concept of nationality as an unvarying characterization of student identities. Nationality is the major categorizing agent used to describe how students experience educational sojourns. Yet, nationality alone does not acknowledge the complexity of student experiences or illuminate the counters of the various boundaries students cross.

Students were acutely aware of the multiple identities that influence the ways they constructed meaning. Through their stories, students acknowledged the deficiencies of nationality to define them, by calling attention to the diversities on the one hand, and the complexity of individual experience and meaning on the other. Each student in this study appreciated and spoke of the diversity in the specific contexts from which they came, careful not to generalize that their experience

represented everyone from their contexts of origin. As students demonstrated through their stories, nationality was not always the most salient identity in their interactions or sense of selves as international students.

There are three students who are members of Indian families in this study, yet these students have personal and educational histories that distinctly colored the ways each viewed the world, the values each employed in their relationships, and the sense each made of their experiences at the university. These three students were raised by educated parents as members of middleclass, transnational families. All three students were born in India and described attending schools with a great deal of diversity. Yet, even with connections to India, educational experiences grounded in diversity, and membership in transnational families, these students experienced being Indian on campus in different ways. Sachin realized, “I consider myself more Indian that I used to,”<sup>7</sup> exemplified by the Indian flag he hung in his room as an outward display of his nationality. Roohi considered herself Saudi Arabian-Indian and admitted, “I think about nationality whenever I am filling out a form. That’s when I think about it. That’s the only time it strikes you, what nationality you are.”<sup>8</sup> While Zara admitted to becoming more comfortable with her multiple identities since coming to the university, she also felt that “being in America has given me the confidence that I am Indian,”<sup>9</sup> an affiliation she continued to question. According to the international education literature, Roohi, Zara, and Sachin should have identical

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<sup>7</sup> Sachin, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 9, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Roohi, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 20, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Zara, interview by author, College Park, MD, March 26, 2007.

experiences and similarly make sense of their time abroad based solely on the fact that they all have Indian passports. That is clearly not the case.

It is important to expand an analytical lens beyond that of nationality and resist the urge to pigeonhole students into a box or category as a way of predefining student needs and sense-making. Proceeding with the understanding that students from a specific nation will encounter similar problems, interact with others in the same way, or come to understand their place on campus in a particular fashion, places an irrational emphasis on nationality, adopts the purview of culture as a stagnant identity, and ignores the dimensions of difference and diversity within nations and locales. Focusing solely on nationality is an approach that blinds researchers and educators to other aspects of student experiences. Student understandings of the world around them, networks of influence, and terrains of possibilities encompass a vast landscape that was unimaginable just decades ago.

An aspect of what is now imaginable comes in the form of physical mobility for these students. The international education literature focuses on the linear mobility of students between home and host countries. Yet, the six students in this study are a heterogeneous group with highly mobile aspirations and extensive diasporic links. For a long time “home” meant a geographically bounded area with membership into a family. That is not the case for these six students who operated on the margins, in the middle, in suspension, or in third spaces that enveloped contexts of origin that spanned national borders. For these international students home was not necessarily tied to a place or locality. A *context* of origin was not a singular location in which students held citizenship, but a myriad of destinations or localities

that created *contexts* of origin. The families, friends, and communities that comprised the social networks of students were spread across multiple geographic spaces, not just located in what the international education literature considers home and host countries. These students viewed “locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial,”<sup>10</sup> as they were not leaving one context behind for another but were continuing to simultaneously negotiate spaces that were clearly defined by transnational family networks.

Students occupied and shaped the complexities of transnational social spaces, keeping strong ties to their contexts of origin while simultaneously negotiating the need to succeed in new social and educational spaces. Unlike students who study abroad for a semester or pursue short-term specialized programs, undergraduate degree-seeking students are grounded in multiple social spaces for substantial periods of time, traveling to and from contexts of origin, campuses abroad, and elsewhere over a period of several years. International students simultaneously remained family members in contexts of origin, while attending classes, engaging in campus activities, and interacting with local communities abroad, thereby building and maintaining social networks that transcend national boundaries.

It is possible with this expanded understanding of student origins to break free from the bipolar conceptualization of home and host countries and recognize that mobility in all its forms is an aspect of daily life for many contemporary students. The longstanding tradition of conceiving students strictly as people who are geographically bound to their homelands and their host countries is being challenged

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<sup>10</sup> Appadurai, 178.

by the mobility of individuals, ideas, and images as aspects of ordinary life continues today.

### **Implications**

A framework composed of theoretical constructs grounded in transnational migration and globalization discourses illuminates how international students interpreted global processes, expanded transnational affiliations, created global subjectivities, and crafted possible selves. Communication technologies allowed for the mobility of the imagination, transformed daily discourses, and served as the toolkit for identity exchanges for these six students as they lead transient lives. The narratives of these six students are fluid and complex, and emerged from the intersections of cultural sites as experiments in self-making through imaginative rediscovery and the accumulation of identity capital. Yet, the “notion that identity...[can] be told as two histories, one over here, one over there, never having spoken to one another, never having anything to do with one another...is simply not tenable any more in an increasing globalized world.”<sup>11</sup> Stepping outside the traditional frameworks used to describe student sojourns is necessary to take account of the places students come from, a new kind of communicative world, the increasing cosmopolitanization of the immediate college culture, the complexity of student decisions, the individualized circumstances students find themselves in, and the multiplicity and simultaneity in student lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1997), 48.

International education can be propelled down an avenue of innovation when practitioners and scholars attend to student pathways, experiences, and negotiations. A repopulating of international education literature and a destatisticizing of the meaning of educational sojourns through a prism of daily student experiences is needed. A certain unacceptable level of generalizations and set of delusions about cross-cultural learning is embedded in international education policies and practices, thereby ignoring the value of student traditions; the expectations, limitations and possibilities in contexts of origin that continually influence students throughout their time abroad; the widespread access of students to information; and the individual combinations of student situational circumstances. Deeply studying the experiences of educational sojourns makes it clear that an understanding of how international students navigate transnational spaces reveals student sense-making in ways that calls for change and a reconceptualization of educational border crossings. This is not simple. Nonetheless it is necessary.

- In light of what these six students shared, now is the time to examine the approaches and content of training and orientation programs currently grounded in deficiency models. A new kind of student in possession of a range of global sensitivities is arriving on campus. The standard orientation programs and training requirement for international students are becoming obsolete for some students.
- It is important to get a sense of who students are before they come to institutions of higher education in the U.S. Student voices demonstrate that nationality alone is not enough to understand how they cross borders. Administrators and educators could benefit from conducting research in advance on the populations for which they are designing programs. They need to know who students are, where they come from, what global experiences they bring to campus, and the capabilities they have to cross borders. The templates and one-size-fits-all approach to campus programming no longer holds the potential for cross-cultural learning as it may have in the past.

- The diversity in ways of understanding and making sense of the world among these six students calls out for additional qualitative and localized studies. The myriad of cultural, social, and identity capital configurations differs among individuals and student populations across institutions. Therefore, many more localized and institutional studies need to be conducted with populations on campuses throughout the country to gain a more comprehensive portrait of students.
- Scholars and practitioners need to continue exploring concepts and theoretical approaches throughout their research that lay outside of the traditional international education discourse, which has remained relatively unchanged for decades. Aspects of the transnational migration, globalization, cultural studies literatures, among others, hold the potential to illuminate student experiences in ways that are not available through an analytical lens grounded in the traditional international education literature.
- Students need to be involved in the conceptualization and development of student services and programming. Some may ask, how is it possible to approach programming for such a diverse group of students? The answer, involve the students. Too often programming decisions are being made by administrators without the inclusion of student input, ultimately creating programming that international students believe are irrelevant to their needs or experiences.
- The existing international education literature is relatively silent on the new communicative technologies that create fluid networks of influence. It is imperative that practitioners are educated about the technologies that students turn to when learning about the world and interacting with others. In order to thoroughly acknowledge and consider what students bring to the college experience and how students craft futures, practitioners need to understand how students use technology to experience, learn, and grow, and then leverage that knowledge to reach out to students.

## **Conclusion**

These six students are examples, not generalizations. It is not possible to assume that the experiences of students at one university will transfer to all higher education institutions across the country. It is not possible to come to understand the negotiations of one international student and assume it is the same for all international students. It is not possible to talk to a student from one country and believe that one student's experience represents all student experiences from that country. It is not

possible to take for granted that all students will experience culture shock or alienation. It is not possible to read the accounts of students who studied in the U.S. decades ago to gain an understanding of how students today experience educational sojourns. It is not possible to presume how all educational border crossers experience studying overseas or negotiate their identities from the narratives of these six students. Yet, that is the way that the international education profession describes and creates approaches for working with international students.

It is no longer appropriate for people who are deeply involved in international education to misconstrue the power students have to understand culture. Student stories were born out of experience. The way students saw and classified the world were questioned, reorganized, affirmed, or negated as a result of studying at the University of Maryland. Student sense-making was dependent on personal histories, institutional contexts, and academic opportunities that does not allow for homogenization or generalizability.

The narratives of these six students substantially questioned many images, ideas, and approaches that have long been revered as the foundation of international education policies and practices. There are a range of assumptions that have dominated the international education literature and there is reason to believe these assumptions should be revisited in light of the realities of today's world. There is an old literature and there is a new world that suggests the existing assumptions about students crossing borders may be incorrect. Students mobilized their knowledge, experiences, and networks to define the very ways in which their cross-cultural experiences amplified a previously unrealized view of circumstances that call out for

new consideration. The international education literature needs to be brought up to date to recognize existing cosmopolitan identities and transnational networks of affiliation that require students to live their lives across a myriad of borders. These six students entered the world as learners embedded in a wide range of cultural environments and engaged in education in an infinite variety of ways to reveal the emergence of a new kind of international student.

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