Alone With Five Others: Dispatches from a Changing World

2006 Ethics Center Student Fellows

The International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life

Brandeis University
Table of Contents

3
Introduction
Daniel Terris

4
Perform for a Change
William Chalmus ’07

12
Autonomy, Representation and Lekil Kuxlejal in Highland Chiapas
Daniel Duffy ’07

30
The Politics of History Education in the Balkans: The Young Generation as Transmitter of Reconciliation
Kosmas Kaprinis ’07

38
The End of Transition? Information and Democracy on the Brink of Bulgaria’s Accession to the European Union
Josh Rosenthal ’07

50
The Art Therapy Centre: A Portrait
Naomi Safran-Hon ’08

62
Finding What’s “Right”: Understanding Women’s Rights in Senegal through Multiple Identities
Dana Sawitz ’08
When Josh Rosenthal proposed the title “Alone With Five Others” for this volume, it resonated immediately with the other Ethics Center Student Fellows. The phrase somehow captured a feeling familiar to all of them – a sense of isolation, being far away from friends and family, moderated by a sense of mutual support and common purpose among the six members of the group. Letters, journal entries, snippets of interviews and ideas – dozens of emails traveling thousands of miles transformed six individual experiences into a small but vital global community.

As much as their common experience meant to the Fellows, I believe that the title resonated for another reason as well: it speaks to something about the contemporary human condition. As these intrepid Brandeis undergraduates got to know men and women on four continents, they discovered and wrote about the ways in which so many people are simultaneously intensely connected and intensely isolated. Josh Rosenthal encountered democracy activists in Bulgaria who were finding common cause with others around Europe and around the world, but who still struggled with the depersonalizing nature of their country’s past. Dana Sawitz met women in Senegal who were part of an active, successful human rights community, yet who were often cut off from other women in their home country. Will Chalmus learned about the ways that the art of performance can create a powerful spirit of harmony, but he also discovered that this “love bubble” cannot protect the individual performer from darkness and solitude.

The narratives in this volume are the work of six Brandeis University undergraduates, the 2006 Ethics Center Student Fellows. Over the past nine years, more than 50 Brandeis students have served as fellows of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. They are chosen during the fall of their sophomore or junior years in a competitive application process, based on their academic achievement and their previous experience in working for social change. As part of the application process, students identify and line up field placements for a summer experience supported by the Center.

The fellowship consists of three parts. First, students choose a course in their spring term that will prepare them intellectually for the work that they will be doing in the summer field project; they also participate in a series of meetings and retreats designed to prepare them for the challenges of living in unfamiliar and sometimes difficult environments. In the summer, students work for eight to ten weeks in a non-governmental organization (NGO), where they have the opportunity to learn “in the field” about how practitioners address issues of coexistence, development, democracy, education and other approaches to social change. Finally, in the fall term, students return to campus and enroll in a writing workshop where they have the opportunity to integrate their academic and practical learning.

Students produced these writings during this fall course, which I led, sharing their work with one another and exploring in our weekly meetings issues and problems of common concern. The students were far-flung geographically, with placements in Greece, South Africa, Australia, Bulgaria, Mexico and Senegal. Their areas of interest also varied widely. Naomi Safran-Hon and Will Chalmus are deeply committed artists, most comfortable in forms of creative expression. Kosmas Kaprinis and Josh Rosenthal brought to their work finely-honed political sensibilities. Daniel Duffy and Dana Sawitz, steeped in the study of anthropology, are attuned to the nuances of human society and the delicate position of outsiders. This variety of perspectives and skills fueled a set of animated discussions about such issues as the ownership of words and images, the costs of democracy and the complexities of the study of history.

The narratives in this volume oscillate between big ideas and detailed descriptions of small moments in the lives of the students and of the people whom they came to know over the course of the summer. They represent simultaneous commitments to the tools of scholarship, learning through experience and a passion for social justice.

Special thanks, as always, to Marci McPhee, associate director of the Center, who organizes the fellowship process and provides vital support for the students before, during and after their field experience. It is Marci, as much as anyone, who constructs the frame that allows a select group of Brandeis undergraduates to experience the special intensity of being “alone with others.”
Perform for a Change

WILLIAM CHALMUS ’07

How can performance art be used as a means of educating societies about culture, communities and conflict in a way that leads to long-lasting positive change within the communities in question? This has been a serious inquiry for me as a theater practitioner, hip-hop artist and playwright raised in some of the most under-resourced and compromised communities in the city of Boston, Massachusetts. I recently, as one of six Brandeis Ethics Center Student Fellows, had the chance to search for an answer to the question of how performance could be used to create a more positive community.

In the piece that follows I will explore the positive and negative issues that arise when you combine the theories raised in John Lederach’s book *The Moral Imagination* with my practical experiences during the summer of 2006 at the International School of Playback in Poughkeepsie, New York, and the youth art program Contact Inc. in Brisbane, Australia.

For five weeks, I worked as an intern at the School of Playback, helping organize the office and integrating the international students to their new surroundings. I also participated as a student in three of the Playback courses. I then traveled to Brisbane where I interned at Contact Inc. for three-and-a-half weeks in the month of August. My duties at Contact Inc. were to lead and help with the community workshops for various projects in addition to witnessing the processes used by Contact Inc. employees in order to achieve their mission statement goals. The organizations will be discussed in further detail later.

Moral Imagination

The first thing to clarify is who John Lederach is, and what is the “moral imagination.” John Lederach is a distinguished professor of international peacebuilding. According to Lederach, the moral imagination is “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.” Morality provides a checks and balances system with imagination, where the morals keep the imagination locked in reality while the imagination leaves room for the individual to realize that his or her reality is not locked into a single pattern. The term “imagination” is used in order to “emphasize the necessity of the creative act.”

Fulfilling the need for a creative act is more important than simply doing the creative act itself. The creative act stimulates the imagination to envision everyday life in a new way. This new perception of everyday life provides logic-driven opportunities for a reasoned exploration of which daily habits are beneficial and which are harmful. Lederach further develops his definition of the moral imagination by comparing multiple authors’ meaning of the same subject. He states that the moral imagination “develops a capacity to perceive things beyond and at a deeper level than what initially meets the eye.” Lederach believes that the moral imagination comes with a quality of transcendence — the ability to surpass the ordinary range of perception. With this ability to transcend, people are able to generate a more pleasant future for all members of society motivated by their transcendent revelations. Lederach points out four mandates for the moral imagination: the centrality of relationships, the practice of paradoxical curiosity, providing space for the creative act and willingness to risk.

The concept of the “Moral Imagination” plays heavily in reference to my summer internship experiences. Both organizations where I worked as a summer intern have performance as an end product, whether in live or recorded media. By making the art a performance for an audience, members of society who witness the act are drawn into the creative act often without knowing the “moral” themes they are expected to connect with. This latter statement will become more translucent as we move deeper into what the organizations aim for and the ways in which they attempt to achieve their aims.

Performance is a form that requires the audience to transcend, or, in theater terms, “suspend their disbelief” in order to empathize with the production and connect to its themes. Most performance productions deal with more than the aesthetic enjoyment that...
they are portraying: i.e. a love song is about more than the melody, a Shakespeare play is about more than peeking into the lives of strangers, a choreographed dance is usually praised when a story is clearly expressed via the visual movements, etc. The aesthetics are useful in shaping a future that transcends but it is only a small part of those processes. So the question of how to use the aesthetics of performance in order to lead society to a positive transformation presents itself. Here are two potential answers.

Playback Theatre

Thirty-one years ago, Jonathan Fox planted a seed in the theater realm called Playback Theatre. The purpose at the time was for members of a community to act out the real stories of others of that same community with a goal to build dialogue and empathy, which in turn will create an improved and better-connected community. The stories are to be told by the audience members on the spot, with the actors having no foreknowledge of the story before they are required to enact what the “teller” voluntarily shares with everyone. Since 1975, the Playback seed has blossomed into a form of theater practiced in over 50 countries. Jonathan now runs the School of Playback in Poughkeepsie, New York, that trains international students who desire to use Playback forms in their communities. The school is working on executing plans to expand to a position in the political world related to reconciliation and positive connections with the other, while simultaneously offering a variety of workshops in a globally diverse way.

Contact Inc.

Contact Inc. started in 1989 as a youth theater company that encouraged primarily Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander youths toward success in the theater. A year later the organization adopted the Third Place Policy, which strives to create “a safe space where cultures can safely and meaningfully meet.” This idea of connecting cultures led Contact Inc. to shift its mission to one concerning community development and the youth arts. Contact Inc. has currently developed into a leader in regards to helping disadvantaged youths find meaningful, cross-cultural connections while stimulating the arts in the participants and their communities. There is always a vast amount of work to be done at the Contact office, which offers a variety of programs for youth, consisting of different community-building processes and artistic outcomes. The artistic outcomes range from music videos, DVD documentaries, live theatrical performances, songs recorded on CD, and graffiti images.

What makes a community? There are many specifics that aid labeling individual communities. The nature of a performance production blurs the lines that segregate communities and allow the space for social change. The School of Playback serves as a center, combining Playbackers from all over the world as one community. The programs at Contact Inc. identify ethnic communities separately for some projects and fuse the communities together for others. Collectively a production’s staff, cast and crew make up a separate community within society. This performance community may be diverse in age, race, ethnicity or even experience, but it is connected by the goals of the production. The performing arts create a community among the participants regardless of the specific communities that the participants are coming from. This new community, consisting of the members of the production, creates the platform needed in order to invoke social change, first among the production participants during the pre-performance phase, and then is passed on to the audience witnessing the production. The production process stimulates the participants to work together and deal with the drama that surrounds community teamwork. The outcome of this teamwork, the production, serves as a clear indication to the audience of the creative ways in which we as a community can all come together and find a transcendent reality. There is good that arises with the bad in this process, which shows that careful calibration of the aesthetics of the performing art is needed in order for peacebuilding and community development to be successful.

“Performance is a form that requires the audience to transcend, or, in theater terms, “suspend their disbelief” in order to empathize with the production and connect to its themes.”
The Centrality of Relationships

John Lederach believes that an intense web of relationships that is inclusive of enemies as well as loved ones is a requisite part of peace building. He argues that the centrality of relationships must have elements of “humility and self-recognition” in order to be effective. Since successful reconciliation is based upon continuing platforms consisting of opposing parties in conflict, the initial establishment of the relationship is of great importance. If the initial development of the relationship is skewed, then the conflict is prone to show itself again over time. “Taking personal responsibility and acknowledging relational mutuality” is equally important. Each person has a part to play in the continuance and resolution of conflict, no matter which side the individual in the conflict identifies with. Once people are open to this idea and each other, they can take the necessary steps to find a solution for their conflict.

At the School of Playback, centrality of relationships is a fact of everyday life. This past summer there were over 80 student participants registered to the School of Playback, representing 17 countries. Self-recognition naturally followed the frequent conversations about differences in cultures. It was important for me to hear how my international peers considered Americans as a result of the media they witness at home, and how their perspectives changed over the course of time they spent studying in Poughkeepsie, New York. Listening to people voice their perceptions of me, or rather how I was being represented, took great humbleness. The picnic table outside of the Playback students’ summer lodging often provided space for international potluck dinners and meaningful political, personal and social status conversation. The intense relationships that formed in numerous settings over the summer created empathy and a desire to learn the stories of others. These relationships were the seeds of an ongoing platform of conversation and empathy. But realistically, how many of these relationships last?

It is very difficult to maintain the 80 international relationships stemming from the Playback workshop setting. I have contacted about 20 of my Playback peers since my arrival back in the United States at the end of August. These e-mails and phone calls help continue the relationship that developed over the summer, yet the continuance of the relationship lacks the depth of the relationship upon its birth. Attempting to stay in touch with my new Australian contacts does not allow me the time to engage in dialogue with the remaining members of my Playback classes as of now, although my heart desires it. This lapse in the connection is less vital in the workshop setting than in a one-time production of a Playback. In the workshop setting of the school students are expected to build positive relationships in addition to learning the core materials; we live together, eat together and work on bettering our Playback skills collectively. In a one-time production, the length of time that the production’s participants (including the audience) have is significantly shorter.

Playback productions have slightly different set of determinates for success. One of the things to look for at the end of a successful Playback production is a lingering audience that takes the time to meet and greet each other before returning to their “normal” lives. I can clearly remember chatting after a Playback show with a young girl who shared a story of a rough childhood. I personally identified with her story of struggling to be functional in a dysfunctional family and sought her out. Since that conversation I have not seen her, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that the post-Playback setting is not a good space for developing the intense web of relationships Lederach is referring to. It is important to remember that Playback was intended for members of a community to perform for members of that same community; therefore my experience is as a visitor and not entirely genuine to the Playback form. I may have encountered this teenage girl again if we lived in the same community, yet since all my Playback production experience is as a visiting audience member, I am not able to say whether the relationships made have the potential of becoming deeply rooted and long lasting. I can say, however, that the workshop space set the platform for deep, interpersonal connections with greater ease than the one-time performance. I will discuss the appropriate parameters of a safe space in a section that follows shortly.

Contact Inc. also links a variety of ethnicities in their projects. I left Brisbane at the beginning of the production process called The Hope Tour. This production included members of over 15 ethnicities and dealt with combining their hopes for a hip-hop theater performance. This project helps diversify the intense web of relationships. As an intern at Contact Inc. I was able to benefit from the past networking of the organization with other youth arts organization in the sector. The day after my arrival at Brisbane International Airport I found myself in a Youth Arts Queensland (YAQ) meeting. YAQ links all of the youth arts organizations in Queensland, ensuring they are collectively making the greatest positive imprint on the state’s youth. Being a witness to these organizations and their mission statements allowed me to show the student participants of the workshops I led the resources available to them with hopes that they would continue making use of these resources after I left. I borrowed a laptop with audio recording software for a week, a performance opportunity for my workshop participants in a cultural talent showcase, and workshop space from various organizations. It’s safe to say that without the
help from various Australian organizations, including Visible Ink, Speak Out, B.E.M.A.C., Harmony Place and Transit Lounge, much of the impact I made in Australia would not have been possible.

I was overly conscious of the accessibility I had as an African-American male in Brisbane. In America I do not have access to many of the resources I received for free in Australia. My ethnicity, mission and hip-hop credentials made me a hot commodity in Brisbane, and people’s natural response was to offer help if they could. Although I was unsure if the minority groups of Brisbane would have the same access to these resources as I did, it was imperative for me to, at the very least, show them where these resources lie. This is important to mention; different people receive resources with varying difficulties. This gap is what I am attempting to bridge through performance, yet the nature of auditioning for performances is often critically selective in terms of what is good art or bad. The notions of good and bad must be set aside, with the focus being placed upon the collaborative usage of the most influential sources available.

**The Practice of Paradoxical Curiosity**

The superficial nature of dualistic polarities, such as good vs. bad, hinders the moral imagination. The view of representing a side in a conflict, or a section of society, slows the process of finding a solution for the conflict or a better society as a whole. Lederach breaks paradoxical curiosity down to the Greek and Latin roots: *paradoxa,* “contrary to common belief,” and *cura,* “literally meaning to care...as in spiritual and physical healing.” In this neutral state free of societal norms, the individual frees his or her emotional capacity for empathy with the other. This curiosity invites complex stories, refuses dualistic categories of truth, and inquires about what holds “contradictory social energies” together.

There needs to be an understanding that the situation is larger than what initially meets the eye, and that the only way the issue can be resolved is if all parties “suspend judgment...and live with a high degree of ambiguity.” The ambiguity serves as a tool to turn uncertainty and doubt to a positive pessimistic reality check, and not as a memory lapse of the issues that led to the ambiguous state.

Since most experiences are relative to the person and the position they are in at the time, it is important not to pass personal judgment on another based on one person’s belief system. Instead, one must empathize with and understand another’s belief system in order to be equipped with the tools necessary to find a peaceful system for compromise. This is an important issue with regard to the African refugees I worked with in Australia. I ran a series of workshops with a teenage group of African rappers. In one of the workshops, questions arose in regards to making mainstream music versus personal music. The workshop participants generally agreed that they preferred to make mainstream music for financial reasons. This was a huge blow to my workshop aims. I went to Australia to teach the youth how positive hip-hop lyrics could be as entertaining as mainstream rap without filling, surrounding and exemplifying their community with negativity. I did, however, understand where they were coming from. These kids witnessed and survived ordeals that jeopardized their lives in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan and other African countries. To them their salvation lies in the money that could be generated by the “gangsta” rap mainstream scene; with the money earned from the music they would be able to provide a happy life for themselves and their families, something unimaginable to them back in Africa.

Playback also uses notions of paradoxical curiosity in performance. As a Playback actor you cannot let your bias influence the teller’s truth mentioned in their stories, as it will hinder the ability to empathize in the audience, and production members. I encountered this problem in a class titled “Playback Experience.” I was asked to play the role of a father who had passed away as a result of a heart attack. The teller’s story ended with the new widow finding a gift that the husband intended to give her in the husband’s clothing six months later. In my portrayal of the father, I grabbed my heart, screamed, and lay on the boxes placed in the back of the acting space. I was covered with a black cloth by my grandfather and mourning. I was no longer that point on I was immobilized by images of my grandfather who died in a similar way. From the black cloth my thoughts wandered to my grandfather who died in a similar way. From that point on I was immobilized by images of my grandfather and mourning. I was no longer present in the story with the other Playback actors, which was immediately apparent to me.
once I finally pulled the cloth from my head and saw the faces of the teller and audience. The acting team was accurately criticized for portraying the story too morbidly; the essence of the story was the mother’s and father’s connection in spite of his death, not his death itself. Since my acting didn’t allow the teller to see the true situation they were in, the cathartic release that tends to happen never did. We repeated the story, with slight changes, until the teller was happy with her story told and witnessed. In this situation, my paradoxical curiosity required me to “numb” my personal perspective in order to do justice to the teller’s story. I portrayed what my grandfather’s heart attack meant to me instead of what the father’s heart attack meant to the teller. By including my personal emotional baggage to the teller’s story I unfairly tainted the way in which the teller perceived his or her own story; I saw the heart attack as entirely awful and the essence of the teller’s story, while the teller found beauty in the events that followed the heart attack. Once we re-did the story appropriately, everyone in the room better empathized with the teller, which is the goal. As an actor I needed my paradoxical curiosity to steer me away from what I consider the accurate emotional response for the ordeal that happened. It is the job of the performers and production staff to create the environment that is accepting to all individual perspectives of every story; if this does not happen and the perspectives allowed in the physical space are limited, then the transcendence will also be limited, which is detrimental to peaceful resolution planning.

Provide Space for the Creative Act

“The Moral Imagination,” according to Lederach, “finds its clearest expression in the appearance of the creative act.” The creative act sparks something new that is transcendent while deriving from something grounded in reality. Most often people are not able to transcend reality, which is why providing space for the creative act is so important. The space should create the belief that “the creative act and response are permanently within reach and, most importantly are always accessible, even in settings where violence dominates.” The creative act empowers people to challenge their beliefs about what is real and tangible against their beliefs about what seems impossible. The space suggests that a resolution to the issues at hand is outside the scope of the troubled reality that created the issue, and it gives the individual a safe space to ponder his or her transcendent future reality. The reality pondered is personal as well as the reality of society. “People who display a deep quality of moral imagination in…settings of violence demonstrate a capacity to live in a personal and social space that gives birth to the unexpected.”

The audience of a performance has a group reaction particular to the audience of that production and personal reactions particular to the individual witnessing it. As a result, each night has an unexpected outcome.

A large portion of the success of Playback comes from its theatrical spectacle. The spectacle begins with the ritualistic set-up of the minimal Playback set. The placement of chairs, musical instruments, and colored cloths all play a part in defining the space as safe for the stories and holding the audience to the safe space standard. The cathartic feeling of seeing yourself in a situation outside of the situation is established by the creative act of Playback. Yet the teller will not tell his or her story if the physical space does not allow a search for emotional and educational space. At the end of my second Playback class, “The Knowing Listener,” I made a brief statement that demonstrated this phenomenon of the unheard stories because of a lack of comfort. I was asked to put this idea into the song that follows. It is a critique of the tight connections made at the School of Playback and questions whether it is a good or bad thing.

Love Bubble

Chorus:
This is a love bubble
Meaning double the trouble
And I’m skeptic ’cause my life is so hectic
It could feel good to leave the hood
And get the love I should have got…
Or maybe not // What you mean?

Verse 1:
I mean the school of playback to me is like a dream
An average of 4 actors acting out a scene
Instruments with a musician to make them sing
A conductor connecting and protecting all things
International peers here for similar things
How for five weeks my lips to cheeks beamed
Although I’ve never been part of a playback team
But my past life and this life is kind of hard to bridge
This bubble of love I’m in is such a switch
And so rich. How can these opportunities mix?
This love bubble is such a big privilege
But too much of any privilege is bullshit so,
Were my reality go? Is it far or near?
Here or there? Is it close or on another coast?
Is what I feel real? Or the fact that Lovingness is one way playback heals and gives back?
Is it safe to say that we come from all across the map
To Vassar to study at a place where the bubble stays safe and intact?
Isn’t that a trap if in fact our study bubble is sealed?
I’m head over heels with these questions, and no answers
Despite really good lessons, which I consider a blessing.
I’ll stop stressing and share what I know
When it comes to Playback, there’s much I don’t know

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Verse 2:
I got a pair over here. Yeah, I got a pair
And I'ma share this pair real simple
Playback is so gentle / hip-hop hooray
Playback is too gentle / take it away
Criticism and praise at the way
Some stories never find their way
While others shock and amaze
Once they're put on display
In the essential way
Cleverly capturing everything the tellers say
But the love bubble can't be all wrong
Only when we overplay the good and don't show the wrong
As if participants are weak and not strong
And the story shown is too sweet. But who are we
To make the judgment call to paint over the wall
When the graffiti we see will make you pause
And drop your jaw and not in awe.
A better plan is to work harder beforehand
And start to expand, and understand
Who's reaching out for our helping hand,
And who doesn't give a damn. And why is it
during that heightened theatrical state, that
we're known to make
They too don't feel the foreground of something great?
They may feel the fear of telling too much
But in our workshop setting we don't feel like such, cause

Chorus

Verse 3:
The bubble builds up trust within us
Trust brings honesty between you and me
Working through honesty honestly breaks the bubble
Being less bubbly means less connection troubles
And once we're all aware of our love and our pain
It's clear we're all connected but none of us are the same
In this love bubble.
But I'm going back to my block when the classes stop
To wait and watch for the bubble to POP!

The love bubble theory developed during the last day of the "Knowing Listener." I left class with a few other students on my lunch break and went to a little eatery called Baby Cakes, slightly off campus. I had to pee really badly, yet Baby Cakes had no public restroom. I didn't want to leave the company of my classmates; I was enjoying the time we were spending together and knew from the experience of my previous class our time together wouldn't last. After we ate I felt like my bladder would explode. I went to neighboring stores and restaurants and ran into the same problem: "no public bathrooms." Panicked, I chose the abandoned alley method. I walked deeper and deeper down this alley until I met a wall...a wall on which the words "Die Nigger" were spray-painted. I decided this was the perfect place to pee. Seeing the wall snapped me out of the "love bubble" that I had been in since I stared my Playback classes. It reminded me that everyone in the world didn't have the same agenda of coexistence. It is really fortunate for a love bubble to develop in the workshops, yet if the bubble is too lovey-dovey then there is no space left for the most tragic and complex stories. I remember a number of stories that I wished to tell but did not feel the essence of the story could be dealt with in an accurate way, not out of others' spite but out of their need to maintain the bubble of love; I didn't want my story to be the one to end the love. On the flipside, there were many stories that I did tell because of the loving way they would be interpreted and enacted by the members of the love bubble. There is an in-between point that is the creative space Lederach would strive for.

At Contact Inc. the workshops require the participants to do activities expressing themselves in artistic ways that they normally would not. Creating a space where the participants feel safe to share and explore themselves though engaging in the creative act is just as important. Contact Inc. understood the importance when it developed the Third Place Policy. Since the policy defines the space as a safe environment where cultures can meaningfully meet, the safe space structure is held together strongly in the workshops. This allows the participants to be more diverse, which leads to more transcendent visions.

Having to collaborate on a project with members of another culture will open the imagination to the benefits of foreign concepts with the use of paradoxical curiosity. But sometimes finding the space comes with its difficulties.

Just outside of Brisbane City one can find Milperra State High School. This school is for migrant, refugee and immigrant students between the ages of 12 and 18 who wish to have enough proficiency in the English language to become successful in other high schools and in the community in which they live. I left Contact Inc. at the beginning of their collaboration with Milperra State students on a Third Place hip-hop theater project called The Hope Tour. Half of the participants of the project were from Milperra State and the other half were students coming from various schools or from their post-school lives.

One of the concerns mentioned when taking the Milperra children out of school to rehearse hip-hop theater dealt with what their culture considers academic space. In many cultures the performing arts are not valued as a means of education in the same way that a math or science class is. I have no knowledge of any the Milperra students unable to participate in the project, but I also didn't stick around for the duration of the process. I wish to emphasize the amount of risk it takes to go against what is normally academically acceptable in a particular community. The decision has to be made though use of paradoxical curiosity in a headspace that transcends what is acceptable and what is not.

"I walked deeper and deeper down this alley until I met a wall...a wall on which the words ‘Die Nigger’ were spray-painted. I decided this was the perfect place to pee."

International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life | 9
The Willingness to Risk
Lederach’s final discipline deals with the ability to risk – “to step into the unknown without any guarantee of success or even safety.” Out of this ability comes a method for crafting a better life. “The journey toward change... requires more than a strategy of good ideas or techniques. Fundamentally it requires a willingness to risk and great vulnerability.” The vulnerability is the key that opens the door of reconciliation.

Performing is a risk in itself. To stand in front of an audience and be judged is a risk actors and musicians take all the time. Playback performances and risk go hand in hand; improvisation is a huge risk. The storyteller is putting his story at risk in plain view of the audience. The risk is easier for the teller to take once the safe space is established, yet it is still a substantial risk. The audience takes a risk by hearing, seeing, and empathizing with a story that they may or may not be ready to witness. The actors take a risk every time they embody the stories. An actor can be personally or emotionally tied up into a scene, which raises the question “Is it good for them to act in the story?” (Fox). It also is not good for a particular actor to continuously play the same archetype. The actor is burdened and the audience is caught in an expected way of perceiving things. A successful production is one in which the nature of the risks taken in the production keeps the audience members guessing about their normal way of perceiving. This shift in perception can also be influenced by the aesthetics of the performing arts. Improvisation as a form is usually a comedic source of entertainment. The in-depth, serious nature of Playback improvisation already shifts people’s ordinary perception of what the improvisational form should consist of. The new perception in the safe space should shock the audience into a state of vulnerability useful for the moral imagination. Demonstrating the story in a way that simultaneously nurtures the vulnerabilities of the teller, audience, and actors is a difficult balance to achieve and takes careful calibration.

In Australia, the workshops leading up to the creation of the production are a risk. The activities are full of self-exploration and vocalization to the group of the realizations made in those explorations. It is a risk for these teenagers to express their self-learning to one another at a point when popularity is in high demand with a supply that is never sufficient. In many of the workshops I ran with the local rap groups, breaking down the “gangsta” image to get to the real person was risky work; no one wanted to appear un-cool in the eyes of their peers. A few breakthroughs did happen, which most often had a domino effect on the other participants of the workshop. It’s a risk to break the threshold and show your true self. For the last workshop I did I organized a barbecue and invited all the members of three rap groups for an evening of coming together. One of the groups didn’t show up. As a result of them not taking the risk in being present, the peaceful connection, which could have potentially led to a better-linked hip-hop community among the Brisbane youth, never happened.

Conclusion
So what does all this mean? It means that performance can be used as a tool to educate and build communities, but the process has to include the centrality of relationships, the practice of paradoxical curiosity, space for the creative act and the willingness to risk. An easy mistake is to believe that the performances are the hardest part of the work. In my opinion, the hardest part of the work is connecting the content of the values learned in the rehearsals to the actual performance. The workshops and rehearsals have to take place in such a way that the themes the performance wishes to explore are always readily available in the process. This means that much of the hard work resides in the planning of the rehearsal needs before they begin. By doing this detailed work beforehand, the perception the audience is being directed toward is shown through their witnessing it happen, as opposed to being instructed as to what they should be perceiving in a lecturing style. The process of production creates social change among the participants, and the audience is a witness to the final outcome of that social change, giving audience members a new transcendent idea of how social change can happen and what positive results can come from it. As a result, the participants will receive the tools necessary to continue their activism and positive relationships with the other when confronted by conflict, or community development issues in the future.
## Bibliography


## Notes

1. Lederach, John, *The Moral Imagination*, Pg. 9
2. Lederach, John, *The Moral Imagination*, Pg. 27
5. Lederach, John, *The Moral Imagination*, Pg. 35
When I stayed in the indigenous communities in the highland region of Chiapas, Mexico, I would always be the first in the particular group I was working with to go to bed. Then in the morning, the same group would wake me up, smiling and making breakfast. I should have felt disoriented, I guess, but everything and everyone was as familiar as I had left them when I fell asleep, only the sun was up. It was never clear to me when a day ended and when a day began in the tiny indigenous communities. Chiapas must follow the same cycles of night and day as the rest of the world. But if day is also something between periods of sleep, then that makes things trickier, because in my stays in the communities I never saw anyone in the act of sleep. I don’t know if I would go so far as to say that they did not sleep, because I have heard that without sleep one goes crazy. And I don’t want anyone to think that the indigenous of Chiapas are ghosts. There are too many people who think that already. Still, one’s original impressions of Chiapas are that space and time are something inherently different there. Somehow a night of sleep for them fits in between the late night festivals and the early morning routine of campesino life.

One morning while staying in Guacutepec, I hoped to catch everyone in the community in bed and witness their awakening. I woke up at 4:00 in the morning, but most of the community was already preparing for the light. The sun began to penetrate through the mountains, dispersing clouds and warming the chilly air. It illuminated fields where men and boys were already working with machetes, it came through the cracks of wooden houses, making lines of light on dirt floors where children played and women fried tortillas. Groups of men were already digging out trenches alongside dirt roads and speaking a locally specific dialect of Tseltal. They wore sheepskin cloaks and milk-white robes. The robes are cut off just above the knees, like short kilts. Others wore less traditional collared shirts. Women walked past the men without speaking to them. They led children by the hands and wore brilliant satin purple blouses with heavily embroidered yokes. Narrow coral-colored stripes laced their skirts just below the place where tightly knit belts held them in place. Other women wore an entirely different traditional black sheepskin skirt. They all clung to shawls which fell over their shoulders.

“The physicality of this region, squeezed in a tiny space between mountains and sky, follows its own laws of proportion.”

To the few people I spoke with there the air was nice and cool, but it made me shiver. They laughed at the gringo. Parts of Chiapas are more highly elevated than many of the United States’ white-capped mountains. Its hills have little headroom under low clouds. The physicality of this region, squeezed in a tiny space between mountains and sky, follows its own laws of proportion. Small plots of corn, beans, coffee, peaches and peanuts, and tiny indigenous communities of little brown cabins cling to mountainsides above clouds. Taxis and beds of trucks so full of people that some cling to the outside share the same narrow roads with stray dogs, children and small indigenous men and women carrying enormous sacks of wood and corn on their backs by belts secured onto their foreheads. I find myself looking down when I speak with many of them. One comments in Spanish to another about how tall I am. Yes, I bump my head on the door frames, I say.

Besides proportion, this part of the world defies physics and scientific explanation as well. My first exposure to this phenomenon left me secretly making last minute deals with God as I drove through the northern highlands region with fellow volunteer Pablo one evening. I felt embarrassed being so cheap about faith, but I could have sworn there were some other forces at play there, and I was afraid for myself. The forces seemed to erupt as we passed an overturned truck in our car. A man lay beside it, bloody in nothing but his underwear. Medics had him strapped to a gurney, and they were holding his neck to
protect his spine. Pablo mumbled something. I kept nervously wondering what out here in the mountains had ripped the man’s clothes off like that. While I tried to figure this out in my head, a rift in the hills opened up again, and a car flung someone off a cliff. We drove past where the car had come to a stop against a guardrail. A group helplessly looked over the edge, a man comforted a child and another screamed into a telephone. As the fog thickened, I hoped that the woods wouldn’t open up and suck us into it as well. My palms were sweating and left a streak on the window when I touched the glass.

In a pinch-me—I-think—I’m-dreaming sort of way, I later asked my friends in the communities if my superstitions were correct about Chiapas. Their responses would suggest that I had merely scratched the surface. However despite the tangibility and often times violent nature of what one might call magic in Chiapas, it didn’t seem to confuse other people as much as it did me. I thought the myths I heard from people to be bizarre, weird and folksy. But slowly I began to see that I was the crazy one, and everyone else was sane.

There is humanity in all of the madness there. It is important to stress that the indigenous people of Chiapas themselves are human. They are always growing, changing loving and struggling. They are active individuals in their culture and society. Every time I blinked my eyes in the communities I reopened them to a completely different world. This might seem obvious to some, but to others it is surprising that the indigenous of southern Mexico are not actually timeless statues, relics of Mayan history. I doubt those others would admit that they think this way, or are even aware of it. My experiences with them tell me I need to start from scratch, from the basics, to show that the indigenous communities are made up of people with needs, desires and meaningful lives.

desde San Cristóbal a Guaquitepec

In Chiapas I worked with Red de Comunicadores ‘Boca de Polen’ (The ‘Pollen Mouth’ Communicators Network), a group based in the small city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas that provides resources for indigenous communities that are developing their own forms of independent media. I helped the organization to translate films and documents, seek out funding and develop educational materials on the topic of migration. With the materials I gave workshops in communities where Boca de Polen sought to maintain close relationships with community radio stations, video producers and a school. Many of the indigenous people that Boca de Polen works alongside are in resistance, in a struggle for the autonomy of their own systems of governance, economy, culture and self-representation. Boca de Polen means to develop this last area by providing technology and training. They have helped to set up radio stations in the indigenous languages of Tzotzil and Tseltal. The Las Abejas station, Radio Chanul Pom, is a computer and some audio equipment stacked on a small wooden table, all in a small cabin. Outside the cabin a mangled wire serves as transmitter. Radio T’sumbal broadcasts from a small cement house at the edge of a field where horses and cows graze. Communities are developing films about their lives and struggles in local languages as well and Boca de Polen has a tiny but growing video program.

I gave a workshop with Boca de Polen to students in Guaquitepec, a larger community in the Ocosingo Municipality of Chiapas, where Tseltal is the primary language. The community’s secondary school, Bachillerato Técnico Bivalente Bartolomé de Las Casas, is autonomous. It is made up of four buildings, which form a rectangle around a courtyard full of ten-foot leafy agronomy projects and a muddy irrigation system that makes its way to the lower corner of the school, spilling out over exposed rocks. During the day the buildings are not lit by electricity, but by an arrangement of windows and open shutters. In one room the light coming in makes skewed triangles and quadrilaterals, framing desks and chairs in a constellation of light and weathered, cracking, empty furniture on the dusty cement floors. The walls are nearly barren but for chalkboards and a length of construction paper, scribbled with class notes, hanging sadly by a last remaining tack. When I arrived there late one morning, echoes of a film in Spanish came in through the window along with a warm breeze that caused the shutters to shift restlessly and slam against each other.

I walked into the cafeteria where the students were watching a movie on a giant screen at the end of the room. I had picked up the film in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas where I was based in Chiapas. I walked toward the TV and sat down, facing the students. There were over
50 of them, straddling window sills, standing against walls with their arms crossed, sitting on benches, sprawling on the floor and peering in through the windows. Every face was fixed on the screen, which was barking rapid Spanish. All at once the faces smiled, made confused faces or chuckled. Then they all laughed. Then all at once their jaws dropped, they grimaced or covered their eyes. I turned to Miguel Cruz, a young man in the community with whom I worked and pointed out that everyone seemed to be friendly with each other there. Although I would later find this to be the norm, it had struck me that the two boys sitting across the table had been trading affection.

“This Miguel whispered back to me that everyone in the community was friendly and pretty much got along together. I found it hard to believe exactly that, but then again I also grew up in an environment of exclusive groups and merciless gossip.”

This surprised me for a place uncomfortable with homosexuality. They were both straddling a bench, one in front of the other. The one in front was leaning back, the one behind holding him around the waist and saying something softly into his ear. In the communities men and boys sometimes put their arms around each other and comfortably rest their heads in each other’s laps. Girls are friendly too. They joke with each other and giggle, but rarely talk with boys. The only clear divide I could see in the students is that of gender, and there was almost nothing of cliques. Miguel whispered back to me that everyone in the community was friendly and pretty much got along together. I found it hard to believe exactly that, but then again I also grew up in an environment of exclusive groups and merciless gossip.

Contrast the colder, more impersonal institutions of our school systems to the profoundly personal and warm system there, and it is clearer why the students seem mostly genial, why they wrap their arms around each other, and discipline and organize themselves. The Bachillerato school in Guaquepec is voluntary and works independently of government funding — it is autonomous. The only sign of government presence in the school are the diplomas that are handed out to graduates every year. The documents make it easier for students to get into college. But this doesn’t mean that the school wants the students to leave the communities. Every year the students take a test, which asks them what they want out of life. Do they want to drive a taxi in the city, or be a farmer or doctor in their community? Do they want to make money for themselves, or provide for their family and friends? Do they want to live with the Spanish-speaking mestizos, or the Tesaltales? Students who say they would prefer a more urban life are encouraged to leave for another school. Those who finish are encouraged to go to college and come back, if it is possible.

By taking control of the school’s curriculum ten years ago, the community vowed to strengthen itself, rather than continue a path of disintegration. Students are taught material that is useful to maintaining the economic and political vibrancy of the community. Rather than study only basic chemistry or biology, which have little application in the communities but are part of paternalistic government curriculums, the students learn sustainable agriculture. Members of the community, which meets to make decisions about the school routinely, are elected to design the curriculum and are liable to the community’s demands. The community empowers itself by forming the education of its young people. On one hand they strengthen the knowledge base in creative and productive ways. On the other they cut their ties with the outside forces that have long determined the dissolution of communities.

The students ate together after the film and I ate with them. After we finished our meal of beans and tortillas, I stayed as the students trickled outside to talk with some of the teachers and counselors, most of whom were barely older than myself. I asked them why they chose to work there over more high-paying and high-status jobs in the city. The question seemed to give them a little bit of anxiety. Work in the cities was a marker of high-status in the more capitalistic and class-oriented paradigms. Where they felt this pressure, they seemed to have faith that staying in the community was something noble. Some of the counselors there said they stayed because they never wanted to leave after graduating, despite the low pay. Because the school refuses funding from the government, it always needs to seek funding from donors and barely gets by. But in this place where the line between community and educational institution is blurred, the warmth of the school and its struggle for autonomy draw them into it.

Iekil kuxlejal

Before the end of 1993, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari made an appearance on Mexican television. Sitting perfectly upright next to a Mexican flag and speaking slowly, he announced that Mexico was finally going to be given the opportunity to rise up in the world. Mexico was about to enter into the North American Free Trade Agreement, also known as NAFTA, with the United States and Canada to free up trade in the region. According to Salinas, the new free market doctrine would help to stimulate trade with the other countries by eliminating trade barriers, helping the Mexican economy to grow.1 Mexico would finally become, according to Salinas, a “First World country,” leaving its humiliating “underdeveloped” status behind. The words “First World” indicated a league of nations characterized by economic independence and power. They resonated well in the ears of people accustomed to playing little brother to one of the world’s most wealthy and powerful countries.
But the convincing language that sold NAFTA broke apart on harsh realities. On January 1, 1994, the day NAFTA was instituted, images of bandana and balaclava-clad indigenous rebels called the Zapatista Army for National Liberation appeared on the news. Images were broadcast of the rebels kicking in doors and sneaking around city alleys with crude rifles, sticks and WWII-era machine guns. The guerrilla army captured three towns and San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas, claiming that the trade liberalization written into NAFTA would lead to increasing economic problems for indigenous communities. As some of the poorest people in Mexico, they claimed the right to the basic necessities that had historically been withheld from them. Mexicans “were shocked.” Much of the West had been capital-happy following the Soviet Union’s collapse and had begun to believe that market discipline would solve problems of “underdevelopment.” But the rebellion, timed perfectly to coincide with the institutionalization of the terms in the agreement, revealed the sobering underbelly of economic globalization. As Mexico’s outcasts, riff-raff, marginalized and forgotten peoples came pouring out of the jungle and the forest, they crashed in on its day of renewal, its day of rebirth, its entrance into the high society of the “developed” world.

Within a few days the Mexican military chased the rebels back into the mountains, and NAFTA remained. The message of the rebels fell on stubborn ears. Mexico’s government is like many others in the “underdeveloped” world, in that the elites in charge have a history of fixation and even fanaticism for modern development schemes in hopes that they will elevate their status. In these projects there is sometimes enough logic and flexibility to succeed at meeting the real needs of people. And sometimes not. For example, between 1973 and 1976, Tanzanian officials forced country-dwellers, most of whom were pastoralists and subsistence farmers, into agricultural settlements. They believed that by moving the country toward agricultural production they would accelerate its progress, moving it to a more superior level of development. But the project failed, in part because of its dedication to a symbolic idea of what a development project should look like rather than flexibility to the existing economic situation. The settlements were organized into perfect grids to appear modern, despite the impracticality of such a scheme. Likewise the capital of Brasil, Brasília, was designed with bland, flat colors and enormous boxy buildings with no flair or character, to convey a seemingly rational, and thus advanced exterior. The city is shaped like an airplane when seen from the sky, giving literal presence to the development scheme of “takeoff.”

The aesthetic of modernism gives away the ideal that developers have in mind; that of advanced technology and industrialism. The initiative to achieve this ideal, at however superficial a level, can supersede all other needs and agendas. It can come to the forefront and trample all other priorities underfoot. Politicians risk their careers and lives for it. Populations are threatened in its name. Embedded in the language of NAFTA was this jewel that needed to be obtained. The promise of this ideal, the temptation, lay in the free market rhetoric of economists, U.S. leaders, developers and a technocratic president. Mexican officials quashed dissent and marginalized voices to finally reach the first day in 1994. Salinas, a less popular candidate, rigged his 1988 election to push forward economic reforms that threatened the livelihoods of small producers. NAFTA representatives agreed to remove tariffs that protected southern Mexican corn producers from flooded markets and displacement. The indigenous in Chiapas found these decisions were made beyond their reach, but the effects were intimate.

There is frustration with the indigenous autonomists and rebels in Chiapas among many strata of Mexican society, not only politicians and policymakers. While speaking with my Spanish teacher in my first week there, she explained to me why she thought the movement, although justified by existing conditions of poverty, was flawed. She said, “Even though people are starving, they refuse help from the government!” When I talked with conservative Mexicans, they expressed frustration with the movement. I was told that the indigenous were confused, like children. Because they simply did not know what was good for them, they did not deserve self-determination. In their ideas of development, I heard resonance of W.W. Rostow’s standard model for human progress that follows a linear process of industrialization toward a free consumer society. By not falling in line, it was thought that the indigenous rebels of Chiapas retarded this process. To some they were only a burden, slowing the nation down from arriving at its idyllic end of history, which was somehow always receding over the horizon.

It seems that to a lot of the indigenous in Chiapas, this attitude is overbearing. They feel caught in an economic and political dragnet, which they have little control over. José Alfredo Jiménez Pérez, a friend I worked with, said, “The aesthetic of modernism gives away the ideal that developers have in mind; that of advanced technology and industrialism. The initiative to achieve this ideal, at however superficial a level, can supersede all other needs and agendas. It can come to the forefront and trample all other priorities underfoot. Politicians risk their careers and lives for it. Populations are threatened in its name.”
The kind of globalization that we fight against is the kind that wants to impose. For example, Coca-Cola. The clearest and most well known example is Coca-Cola . . . Yeah, we’re against capitalism and neo-liberalism in general. Because all of it is politics. The economy, all of it. It comes in one package. That’s its objective — although they don’t say it like this. It all comes disguised. Like, “Drink Coca-Cola. It’s so good. You need it!” But really when you buy a Coke, you don’t know what you are drinking. And the money that you pay — you don’t know it goes to a foreign county. A lot of people don’t know where the money goes.5

The economic changes facing indigenous communities in Chiapas come in through the back door like this. According to José Alfredo, before people know it they are endorsing mainstream capitalist markets through their participation in them. This onslaught of change seeks to rearrange life in the communities.

“For the outsider, this inward focus among many in the communities puts up a blank impenetrable exterior. Coming to indigenous communities for the first time, I found myself looking over a lot of shoulders, trying to follow exactly what was going on.”

in Spanish. In the same way that a snail shell spirals inward, power is ostensibly supposed to flow inward from the individual communities into the autonomous government centers. The Zapatistas are part of a larger movement. Also involved is the Las Abejas (The Bees) Civil Society. Begun in 1992 as a pacifist Christian organization, Las Abejas have organized their own autonomous infrastructural base as well. Both Las Abejas and the Zapatistas have strong independent judicial committees that oversee dilemmas within the region. Although many of their members are extremely poor, they refuse government aid that is oftentimes awarded to other indigenous communities. These groups as well as various cooperatives, communities and schools are struggling for the ability to exist independently of the encroaching modern capitalist economy and state. They want to choose their own progress, or pluralistic forms of progress that will give them economic stability and increased control in their lives.

They follow a different ideal, what has been called a “world in which all worlds fit.” Many times I heard people claim to seek little more than a dignified life, or as they say in Tzeltal, lekil kuxlejal. This life doesn’t render other forms of living impossible; rather it turns in toward itself, looking inward. Many of the Mayans I spoke with talked about the virtue of being oriented inward, toward the heart of the community, rather than outwardly into other communities. This is not to say that nobody is concerned with the outside world. But for the outsider, this inward focus among many in the communities puts up a blank impenetrable exterior. Coming to indigenous communities for the first time, I found myself looking over a lot of shoulders, trying to follow exactly what was going on. When I would ask questions about people’s communities, their answers were short, polite and blunt. They left these conversations out to dry but I struggled to revive them. A few times I felt like the only one excluded from some huge elaborate secret. The symbol of the caracol, popular in many more aspects of Mesoamerican Maya life than just the Zapatista political centers, also represents this model of community. The outside shell is solid, protecting the interior. The idea is that an outsider has to work his or her way to the heart of the community, just like a snail’s shell spirals into the center.

What is it that many people are facing, turned inward away from outsiders? In an interview with Miguel Cruz I tried to find out. In the sound room at Boca de Polen, he sat across from me, sitting upright and seeming more fidgety than usual. Normally I wouldn’t be putting him on the spot like I was then. He began to speak when Vladimir, a tall and lanky colete (person from San Cristóbal de Las Casas) threw the door open and greeted us both, grinning. We humored him for a minute, chatting, and then I held up the tape recorder so that he could see we were doing an interview. He jumped, apologized and closed the door behind him. Miguel started,

So, the question is “What is lekil kuxlejal?” It is a word we say in Tzeltal, and that has a lot of meanings, no? It can mean, “for a good life,” or “a good life,” or “living better.” You are content and happy. It represents a series of values that encapsulate everything. Lekil kuxlejal expresses absolutely this: a life of harmony and dignity. We say that in the communities this is what we strive for. They replace it a lot with “autonomy of lekil kuxlejal.” Because this is what they want. This is equality within the community. There is a good deal of respect. This is what lekil kuxlejal stands for. Because if you have respect for the people that live within the community, everyone will respect you. If you show affection, you show confidence, you show some of the values that the people share and help to coexist in this context, then in this way you demonstrate that you have lekil kuxlejal — a good life. A good respect. It’s a life more, as we say, dignified. Well done, then. Well lived.6
I heard this rhetoric quite a bit—that a community needed a degree of self-determination. Autonomy was not a marginal political cause, but instead essential to the collective dignity and fulfillment of chiapaneco indigenous communities. In the faces of neo-liberals who want to impose outside development initiatives, they demanded control of their own communities. To them it did not demand any explanation of what they would do with their control because outsiders had no stock or role in the communities in the first place.

That day Miguel and I had recently returned from Guaquitepec, having given our workshop on migration. In an interim break I had sat down where several kids were talking. I spoke with them for a little bit to get to know them personally. I asked about their community, the school and autonomy. Why is it important that the school is independent? Even after becoming accustomed to short and sweet answers, I anticipated more than what they told me. They explained to me simply that autonomy was best for the school because it could respond directly to the community’s needs. Being in control of the school, they were proud of it and it dignified and validated their identities.

When I sat there speaking with the few of them I was not satisfied with their answer. I thought maybe something had been lost in translation because of my inability to completely articulate what I was thinking in Spanish. Accustomed to the theorizing of activists where I live, I had expected long conceptual and abstract answers to my questions. How does someone come to understand a society’s needs, let alone the things that should be done to fulfill them without a lot of theorizing and arguing about it? The need for autonomy to them was somehow self-evident in a puzzle I hadn’t really assembled entirely. For me it lay in an intellectual blind spot. Either they didn’t want to talk about it at length, or they thought it simply didn’t need any explanation. Although people within my context generally come to this from a different angle, it is common knowledge within the communities that autonomy is part of a fulfilling good life.

**la otra**

Influence does not flow in only one direction from outside communities onto the Mayan communities of Chiapas. In the summer of 2005, the Zapatistas decided they would broaden their scope to all of Mexico. While presidential candidates would be campaigning for the 2006 elections, the indigenous group would send its major spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, on a campaign to every state in Chiapas. Instead of encouraging people to vote, he would advocate for participation in local organizing efforts, “another form of politics.” Marcos is not indigenous by blood, but joined militant indigenous groups in Chiapas in the early 80’s after leaving a teaching job at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). He has since worked alongside the Zapatistas through the uprising, rumored assassination attempts and the movement for autonomy.

Smoking a pipe through a hole in his ski mask, Marcos sat in the back of a stage in an auditorium on UNAM’s campus in Mexico City. Wearing fatigues and enormous black boots he blew clouds of smoke that lingered around his head. He stared through them pensively toward the floor. In front of him a table of activists with microphones flipped through piles of documents and notes. In front of them on the floor a line of farmers, sex workers, queer activists, anarchists, students, punks, communists, middle-class activists and unionists waited for a microphone that was currently in the hands of a man raising his fist and yelling. In front of him a barely attentive audience of a few hundred people talked amongst themselves and walked around. Occasionally someone would yell back at the speaker, disrespectfully but necessarily interrupting his rant.

I walked in with dozens of activists, volunteers, academics and indigenous men and women from San Cristóbal, crossing the middle of the auditorium slowly, disoriented and stiff. We had left for Mexico City 23 hours before, packing into three decrepit buses. Until we finally pulled up to the auditorium in Mexico City, we slept against the metal frames of tattered seats, sang songs and stomped down the floor hatch that occasionally popped open a crack until we finally pulled up to the auditorium in Mexico City. They were there for a meeting to plan a march on Mexico’s election day as part of the Other Campaign, advocating popular, participative democracy while everyone’s mind would be on electoral politics. In this election the left-leaning candidate would lose by a tiny margin, pointing to evidence of fraud against him and calling for a recount. The election committee’s refusal would catalyze a several-month-long standoff, with protesters overtaking the city’s central plaza and over one million people protesting in the streets.

I sat down in the Chiapas section toward the back of the auditorium. People on the floor in front were each speaking on behalf of their own demographic, talking about their struggles and suggesting ways in which the march should represent their interests. Those sitting at the table on stage made proposals to the assembly. I couldn’t always understand what they were saying through the echo in the speaker, but it elicited furious responses out of some people. One man across the auditorium was possessed and screamed at the table, waving a trembling fist. The anger took over his entire body, and he lunged his weight into every word from his seat, falling over the people in the row in front of him. Those at the table shifted uncomfortably. Marcos puffed his pipe.

Moving closer to the floor I could hear that the issue on the table had changed to whether decisions should be made by votes or consensus. I chuckled to myself at this realization. It seemed that the voting vs. consensus argument is pretty common among the left, regardless of place.

As I was standing against a handrail, a familiar face passed me. It was Marino Astrada Aguilera, a man I had met at an indigenous film festival in Oaxaca. His eyes lit up when he saw me,
and he pulled over to where I was standing. He was an indigenous filmmaker from the Palenque area in Chiapas. He talked about his work. I asked him what he thought of the ensuing voting vs. consensus debate. This clearly set in motion something in his mind that had built up and had needed to be let out. He smiled and thought to himself, wondering how to start. Then he said that in some of the Mayan communities in Chiapas, decisions were made by consensus. The mutual agreement of everyone was generally a priority. However in other communities, decisions tended to be made with votes. A majority was enough for a decision to be made, even if it excluded some opinions. However even when using votes to make decisions, communities were sometimes still thinking about catering to the needs of everyone. As he put it, people needed to have a consensus mentality, regardless of whether it was possible or not.

Trying to come to consensus that day with hundreds of people probably would have been impossible. Although many people seemed reasonable, a few in front were pushing their own agendas, only to get booted from the microphone or invite responses from other fiery egoists coaxed enough to try leading the vastly diverse group in their own specific direction.

After a while the meeting seemed to be going nowhere. As the meeting grew increasingly stale and the people around me began to grumble, I thought about Mikhail Bakunin, who said that someone seeking revolutionary change, “does not find another man’s (sic) freedom a boundary, but a confirmation and vast extension of his own own.” Working to understand others and come up with creative ways to reconcile difference would allow for dynamic, individual expression within the whole. But I think there is an inevitable drama in our interactions with other people that comes out of our anxious need to impress, manipulate, control, dominate. The potential for unity that is collectively empowering lies in people's ability to overcome this, rather than exploit it. Rather than trying to realize one’s own rigid, dogmatic vision by convincing other people, there is the potential for a vision that is shared. In the auditorium, the power that supposedly comes with numbers kept crumbling as individuals tried to harness it but could do little but let it slip through their fingers. I thought that undoubtedly the Maya of Chiapas faced some of the same problems that I was seeing in the auditorium, but were onto something in following a mindset of consensus.

Marcos continued to blow smoke throughout the scene that began to look like a nightmare. He stared ahead through the hole in his ski mask. His eyes looked older than in most photos. From a distance it seemed that age marks mere appearing above his brow. Also he had clearly put on weight. What was he doing there? I wondered. What was anyone doing there? The Zapatistas had decided to use their moral legitimacy to bring various isolated groups from the left together. Unfortunately, putting vastly dissimilar people in a room doesn’t guarantee that anything constructive will come of it. But I also knew that I shouldn’t assume that the Zapatistas had such demanding or simplistic expectations.

“I sat down beside a woman who looked to be a middle-class soccer mom, and together we listened to a sex worker talk about how all of our struggles were bound up together. In what other context would a gringo student, a Mexican soccer mom and a sex worker be listening to each other talk about their own struggles? How else would we learn what all the rhetoric about collective liberation really meant if we were not first forced through an excruciating process of watching each other’s egotistical behavior hit brick wall after brick wall? I could only be sure that we had to be put at the helm, in control of everything. But I couldn’t think of another way to continue from there, and I doubt Marcos could either. He just patiently smoked his pipe.

La grabación

Speaking in terms of the mass media in Mexico, mestizos and whites generally control representations of indigenous people from outside of their communities. The outsiders’ control has given them the upper hand in defining the Native American in Mexico. After its 1910 revolution, Mexico underwent a period of heavy industrialization and increasing nationalism. In this transition to a more modern economy, iconography of indigenous people played an important part in the creation of nationalist identities. Most Mexicans were a racial mix of white and Indian, mestizo. The two identities needed to be reconciled. Mexicans sought to explain what it meant to have indigenous blood inside of them and live on native land. The indigenous identity was generally embraced, although the actual people were left by the wayside.

There is an inherent contradiction in this, where the person is ignored, but what they represent is embraced. I was told in Chiapas that until the 1994 uprising, walking down San Cristóbal's narrow sidewalks was humiliating for indigenous people. They were expected to step into the street to allow whites and mestizos pass them. Also it was only recently that the word indio (Indian) had stopped being
Films from the industrializing period tried to distill the identity of the Indian, to pin it down and categorize it. In the 1931 film "¡Que viva México!" indigenous people are shown wearing next to nothing, posing alongside ruins. The filmmaker blurs the line between statues and actual people by making the latter mimic the former. Their nakedness evokes a certain sense of commonality with the bare stones around them. Their lifeless expressions are as cold. A boy poses alongside a statue of a man. The figure lies comfortably on its side, propping itself up onto its elbow. The boy is reclined in the same way, gazing out into the same direction with a serious expression. Instead of dynamic individuals, the indigenous are presented as relics and the sense that there are people behind their expressions is left out. In the film they took on the quality of spirits in other ways as well, like through their romanticization. A later segment portrays a group living in an utopian Garden of Eden. We only see the protagonists in an environment full of love, abundant resources and free time. Children in colorful dress perform elaborate dances and lovers lie together in hammocks. Their society is free of blemishes, which is partially to say free of evidence of Western conquest. Many Mexicans idealize natives before conquest, before they were forced to change course at the hands of imperialists. These images are deceptively beautiful; they seem perfectly benevolent. Likewise the filmmakers’ intentions may have been benign, even as they carried racist undertones. But regardless of intentions or the aesthetic value of the images, they were not taken by indigenous people themselves but by other people who meant to convey something by taking control of the representations. Historically, when in the hands of colonial and post-colonial outsiders, representations have been presented in such a way that serves their positions of power. The representations are not situated in a manner that helps to understand indigenous people on their own terms. Traditions and worldviews are not looked at within their own contexts, and much of the time they are not represented as dynamic, complicated humans with individual needs. Rather outsiders have sought to explain the indigenous people in the terms of the outsider. They are fit within the outsider’s worldview in order to reinforce it. This generally means redefining indigenous people within a dominant logic of legitimacy and power.

It should not be completely surprising that a society concerned with the advent of industrial capitalism sees those who are supposedly “lagging behind” this form of progress as either immature people or ancient relics. In the film just mentioned, they were not depicted as people, but instead as archaeological remains or idealized children. With films like these the humanness of the Indian is written out of the national consciousness, and an essential identity takes its place. In Mexican society the actual people are marginalized, but the ideal they stand for remains. Even when it takes seemingly benign forms the inequality of representation can be harmful.

But what happens when outsiders mean to represent indigenous people for the purpose of doing good things or representing them in a positive light? Leftists from outside indigenous communities have certainly idealized the Indian as well. In the song “Tierra Humeda,” Amparo Ochoa sings,

| In the damp earth he was born |
| In the damp earth he was born |
| The Indian Manuel |
| In the light of the morning |
| With the skin of mud |
| And obsidian eyes |
| On the damp earth he grew |
| On the damp earth he grew |
| In a sea of colors, coffee, and beans, |
| Silence, incense and pain |

In this abridged version of Ochoa’s version she romanticizes the idealized struggle of indigenous people, manifested in one man. The Indian’s relationship to the earth is intimate, which is emphasized by the exclusion of any other protagonists in the song. The idealized quintessential Native American male struggles against the invisible imposing outside forces, “they,” that mean to dislodge his natural relationship to the earth. When Manuel dies, justice reveals itself in the tears of the sky, which further life and a struggle between the natural realm (the indigenous and their land) and the unnatural modern European realm.

There is the sense here that there is natural value in the traditions of indigenous peoples that need to be protected. It seems that there is a tendency of representations made by outsiders with good intentions to focus on loss in traditional indigenous culture. And many indigenous filmmakers are concerned with this as well. They portray culture as threatened by processes of economic globalization and Mayan assimilation to modern Mexico. However trying to grasp, recapture and protect culture becomes problematic. It is an uncontested truth that Native American cultures have been changing since contact with colonizers. But is culture lost? Our initial reaction is that yes, it becomes lost within past generations. Indigenous languages disappear almost daily, customs and traditions are forgotten. Their full glory of expression and meaning are cut off from the present day.
This understanding of loss is linked with an objective understanding of culture. But we should ask ourselves whether culture really disappears like a physical object would, or whether it merely transforms into something different. However different culture seems, it still remains as culture, albeit in different forms. Undoubtedly cultural practices and ways of seeing the world fade out, but as human beings we are culture- and meaning-makers, constantly trying to explain and understand the environments we live in.

After the 1989 Exxon Valdez accident, which spilled over 11 million tons of crude oil off the coast of Alaska, Alutiik people living there were no longer able to practice subsistence production. The oil spill polluted the waters to such an extent that sustainable fishing became impossible. The group tried to collect in court for special damages from the Exxon oil company, claiming that the harm done to their economy extended beyond the material effects. They claimed that their loss was distinct from the sufferings of other fishermen in that their very culture had been damaged, being so closely intertwined with fishing. Although the company paid the indigenous group in a settlement, the ruling judge, “refused to recognize cultural differences between native and non-native fisherman with respect to the impact of the oil spill.”

He sided with anthropologist Paul Bohannon who described culture not as something objective or concrete, but rather as a “strategy for adaptation.” According to his theory of culture as a fluid way of interacting with the world, the Alutiik would integrate themselves into a capitalist economy, finding new meaning in life there. In this sense we can never lose parts of our culture, nor all of it, since it is not as much a thing as a way of acting or being. We are always participating in and renegotiating it.

The film “Meu primeiro contato” contrasts Amazonian indigenous people before and after contact with white Brazilians, wearing almost nothing but beads, to the present time when they smoke cigarettes and wear Salvation Army t-shirts. From this standpoint our cultures seem to be standing still and the cultures of indigenous Brazilians seem to be changing drastically. We understand its change in relation to our sensation of static motionlessness. But our own culture is not motionless at all. To use a metaphor, even when we feel physically still, we are spinning around the earth’s axis at over a thousand miles per hour. Likewise, although we have the sensation of our culture being still, it is in constant flux. Like the sense of motionlessness we get on Earth, we Westerners are oftentimes not aware of our culture’s perpetual movement.

We think it is static, although at every moment we are active members in its change.

We have a concept of culture that is in large part developed through seeing other people’s movement, not our own. Through colonial processes Westerners have noted differences in other people and defined it as culture. Much of the time we impose this concept where it does not already exist. For instance, the Kayapo of Brazil had no concept of culture until after increased contact with outside Brazilians. Before, they had viewed themselves as the center of the universe. Life was oriented around the creation and recreation of beauty, and the Kayapo as its beholder. But increased integration into Brazilian economies and political systems relegated them to lower status within Brazil’s pluralistic society. They began to find themselves no longer at the center of the universe, but at the bottom rungs of a ladder. Also they found themselves in a world of multiple truths where before there had only been one. No longer unquestioned reality, Kayapo worldviews became less true as “culture.”

It is not only outsiders who treat culture not as fluid but as static. Different indigenous peoples have done it as well. The Kayapo eventually found themselves as possessors of a culture that was politically valuable to the outside world for its uniqueness and distinctiveness. Along with anthropologist Terence Turner, the Kayapo learned that they could use images of their traditions, dress, lifestyles and general appearance to their political advantage. Threatened by a dam project that would flood their lands, the Kayapo harnessed their cultural images to show outsiders the importance of maintaining their lifestyles. They filmed themselves and allowed journalists to take pictures of them dressed entirely in traditional clothing and jewelry. Environmentalists used the images of beautifully-dressed natives as testimony as to why their way of life should be protected, attracting international support for their cause.

But are the Kayapo absorbed in some sort of false consciousness of culture by objectifying it, as Paul Bohannon might suggest? If culture is indeed fluid, then is it incorrect to treat it as something that we could grasp, or even draw close to our hearts, as is common to hear amongst the indigenous of Chiapas? Going back to the earth metaphor, a helpful way to conceptualize the question is to ask, “Can we still call the idea of no movement on the earth’s surface ‘stillness’ when everything is spinning around the earth’s axis?” Stillness is defined as the absence of movement, but it is experienced as the absence of change in movement. We would only become acutely aware of our movement around the earth’s axis if it suddenly slowed down or sped up. We would need to feel the change that would indicate to us that we are no longer stationary in our perpetual, steady movement. Likewise we can experience, conceptualize and define culture’s movement with shifts in the speed of change. When cultural traditions and the historical contexts that give them meaning dissipate quickly into the past, the sensation of their absence becomes acute with the memory of their presence. And what is false or less real about our understanding of stillness or objective culture if they are understood within the same logic that we use to understand our physical presence on the earth’s surface? Although Paul Bohannon might say otherwise, if we consider our movement around the earth’s axis stillness, then even in culture’s perpetual motion one...
can understand it as still. Furthermore feeling it pass, its “loss” can also be very real, as we saw with the Alutiik.

el eco

The office of Red de Comunicadores Boca de Polen where I worked is the second story of a house in the outskirts of San Cristóbal de las Casas. The office was quiet or even vacant sometimes, as most of the people involved with the organization, including myself, spent a good deal time giving workshops in the field. The office’s primary component is a large front room with a computer, several workspaces and Zapatista posters on the walls. The back room is sectioned off as a sound and production studio. Lazy late afternoon aimless wandering, chatting and kicking around the office sometimes brought us all to that dim, soundproofed room, hunched around the computer, camera, microphones, editing equipment and stacks of video tapes.

On a particularly quiet day I sat there, leaning against the back wall while Vladimir and José Alfredo developed a film in Adobe Premiere, speaking softly to each other in Spanish about where to cut and splice certain scenes. Before them the screen took them on a virtual tour through an indigenous man’s field, passing through rows of corn. The frame of view jerked around unsteadily, depicting indigenous farmers working quickly, grasping the stalks and stripping them, then repeating the motions while José’s voice boomed from the speakers in Tzotzil. At one point, José turned his attention to me, smiling and seeking my approval on some aspect of the film. I grinned and agreed with him, but not wholeheartedly. Although I wanted to see the aspect of the film that was so compelling to him, I secretly missed the point and had to pretend the film was as meaningful. From my perspective the film lacked the dynamic of conflict and resolution that made good storytelling and inspiring film. José’s films, however, caught my attention more than some of the other indigenous productions I saw in Mexico.

I was surprised to see the films, and even more surprised that I didn’t find many of them to be personally inspiring. But this is not to say that I had nothing to learn from the films. Instead the films had much more to teach me than I could possibly understand. Comprehending them was largely a matter of knowing where they came from in order to understand why filmmakers chose to highlight certain figures, images and identities.

A common characteristic among the styles of some filmmakers was to show seemingly mundane aspects of life, such as different techniques of farming, town markets or traditional music. One of José Alfredo’s films is a tour through a market where locally grown foods are sold. The camera pans across sacks of beans, corn and women selling their produce. The scenes are explained but the significance and meaning of each shot is allowed to speak for itself. Images of trading locally-grown crops, index small-scale markets that are centered around what indigenous people grow themselves. Traditional, or more personal economies are more ideal. The placement of these people and crops in the film, rather than outsiders selling food from abroad, is no accident. They represent the values of an indigenous identity, humble and close to the land and production. Capitalization and corporatization, on the other hand, would probably represent more alienated relationships, between people and people as well as between people and production. So in highlighting positive aspects of Mayan culture, José puts it on a pedestal, treating it as something to be valued.

If the films are most meaningful to the indigenous people who make them, what are the prospects of getting the images out to broader audiences? Just because the films are not meaningful in the same ways to most whites and mestizos does not mean that the films cannot be interpreted outside of the communities. Public film festivals put on indigenous movies occasionally. In June, I traveled with both Vladimir and José Alfredo to Oaxaca for an indigenous film festival that showcased hundreds of indigenous films, including films from anglophone North America, Africa and Latin America. Mostly white and mestizo audiences discussed the significance of the movies with directors after each film. But the potential to distribute the representations on a broader scale is weak. The grim reality for indigenous filmmakers in Mexico is that avenues of mass communication, broadcast television and mainstream cinema, are largely closed to them. Likewise for radio broadcasters; there is little space on most commercial airwaves for indigenous productions.

So what practical purposes do the films serve, if any? If the finalized representations are to help achieve political ends, they cannot just sit on a shelf and accumulate dust between random screenings in different parts of the world. Like a family photo album, the reordered representations of our collective past can get pulled out to help us see the present differently. Video and radio function politically within communities just as profoundly, if not more so, than outside of them.

In the community of X’oyep I gave a workshop with Vladimir at the Las Abejas autonomous radio station Radio Chanul Pom. That afternoon we, along with the Chanul Pom radialistas set up a television underneath the enormous corrugated roof of a partly-completed church. As the community began to file through the empty frame that would later become the church’s front door, they sat on several dozen benches. For reasons unbeknownst to me, they sat as far away from the screen as possible. We showed films on indigenous migrants in the United States, and as the sun began to go down rain started to pour, thundering on the roof. Our films on migration ran out, but we were stranded there in the rain, and everyone still sat on their benches expectantly. Vladimir put in a DVD about Radio Chanul Pom filmed in the region by him and José Alfredo. When words in Tzotzil began to come from the speakers, people leaned in closer to see the screen better, smiling. Where they had originally sat quietly, they began to interact with each other and with the film. A woman
sitting amongst us appeared on camera, working tortillas in her hands and throwing them over a fire as she talked about the radio station. People around me shrieked with joy, turning to the woman and grabbing her by the arm. The film depicted a protest down the road from us in which tiny girls literally shook soldiers with full armor and rifles at their sides, holding them by the collars of their jackets. The room buzzed with excitement at the defiance embodied in young girls who resisted fully grown men. Toward the end of the film a group of curious children examine the camera as it films them, blabbering in Tzotzil. One of the children was present, and people shook him laughing. By the end of the images depicting Mayan cultural practices (for example making tortillas by hand), resistance and community, people were chatting excitedly.

While the consumption of indigenous media can be politically important outside of communities, they are most meaningful within communities. By representing aspects of indigenous life on a medium like film, the represented are elevated to another level. Perspective changes when these images are rearranged and recontextualized to make a point. With indigenous media, merely highlighting certain aspects of life is enough to evoke pride. Just as filming the women in market takes the act of selling produce and makes it tangible, valued by itself, the evocation of local values can elevate and glorify them.

el gringo

In much of Mexico, the United States citizen or estadounidense barely fits the criteria of a whole person. Another Mexican, or Latin American is someone else to whom one can relate, but generally a gringo is not, at least not in a meaningful way. It is not just the stereotypical ignorant bumbling tourist that makes Mexicans turn their noses up. The identity of “gringo” is hard for Mexicans to pin down – it means many things. The uncertainty, not the certainty, of exactly what gringos are complicates their relationship with Mexicans.

On the one hand there is a certain fixation with middle class life in the United States. In San Cristóbal, a man stands in front of a used clothes store, announcing into a microphone rapidly like an auctioneer that the style of clothes there is “American.” Just the fact of their origin is enough to draw people. It is said that those few Mexicans who live close to the border with the privilege to enter the United States sometimes cross it to binge shop in middle class clothing stores. Immigrants often send back clothing, toys and electronics to their friends back home. The family washing machine, video games and milk in a box, all indicative of gringo consumerism and convenience, are popular.

But also we represent opportunities to be taken advantage of. When a taxi driver in Mexico sees a well-dressed white tourist walking down the street, that driver feels cheated out of business. We represent capital. Gringo tourists are expected to bring capital to the region, but not to give in other ways. Indeed if a gringo tourist is doing anything else but spending money, they are automatically suspect. For instance, in trying to explain my purpose to immigration officials at the airport, I stupidly let on that my trip might include volunteer work of some sort. Volunteers and businesspeople have visas different from tourists, but I had applied for a tourist visa. The woman behind the immigration counter looked at me skeptically with her eyebrows cocked. She half smiled and chuckled, turning to her counterpart, a darker-skinned man with thin eyelids that framed dark eyes. He commanded my mind with his stern expression. I stuttered and insisted that I only had intentions of traveling, of staying on the beaten path and of blessing Mexico with my fruitful debit card.

But where tourists can only spend money it would seem that gringo businesses do little more than suck up resources. A “gringo” is also a symbol of status and an agent of empire, which is oftentimes not at all discernable from capital or the spread of consumer culture. Even before arriving I was familiar with what it entailed to be a part of Mexico’s paternalistic neighbor located in its own back yard. But still I was shocked when, within 24 hours of landing in Mexico City, I was told that there was no place for me there, that people wanted to chase me out across the border. They said I was loathed not for personal reasons, but for what I represented. Maybe, they said, the Mexicans in Chiapas would be more accepting since the people there are more indirect with expressing the way they feel. However this did not mean that chiapanecos would be any less resentful of my identity as gringo. They explained to me that all Mexicans, secretly or openly, whether they would admit it to themselves or not, despised gringos for the empire we represent.

It is unclear where the word gringo comes from, but according to one story, it was first uttered by Pancho Villa, a leader in the Mexican Revolution. Hollywood filmmakers are said to have documented his life for a time, having seen money to be made in his image and name. Apparently their uptight, demanding and hurried ways during filming annoyed Villa. Because they kept shouting “green” to mark the beginning of each scene they were filming, he exclaimed, “Green, go!” drawing from the little English he knew to get rid of the filmmakers. As the story goes the poorly pronounced term eventually became “gringo,” although the word’s true origins are unclear. And to whom exactly it refers is at least as hard to say, as it depends a great deal on context. For example, in San Cristóbal, the word usually signified someone specifically from the United States. However in the indigenous communities, even my Mexican friends were gringos merely because they were outsiders.

And how do Mexicans generally interact with gringos? Two other gringo friends from Brandeis, Josh and Neena, were volunteering and doing research in Chiapas while I was there. They stayed in the hostel where I was located for all of my time in San Cristóbal. A few times we traded ideas or helped each other to find interviews or work, which is why Neena invited me one day to accompany her to volunteer in an indigenous community. Neither
of us knew anything about the volunteer organization, although it was located only two blocks up the hill from our hostel. Not even the director at our hostel, Carmen, knew anything about it, and she was something of an expert in San Cristóbal’s civil society. Neena had simply walked into their office right off the street while looking for volunteer opportunities and with her interest to visit an indigenous community she signed up to volunteer, despite the “sketchy” appearance of the place.

Waiting on the curb with Neena at 6:10 a.m. for the organization to pick us up from in front of their building, you could still see our breaths in the shadows under shop overhangs, but the sun coming over the mountains was beginning to warm our bodies. Having waited for ten minutes and being intoxicated by our early-morning sleepiness, we laughed and joked that the whole organization was really a hoax and we would be waiting there all morning.

“What is this place called anyway?” I asked Neena.

I turned to the building’s wall and was startled into sobriety when I read the sign painted there. Around an insignia of a chapel topped with a cross read a halo of words, all of which I have since forgotten except for “renacimiento” (rebirth).

“Neena, this is a church group – I think they are Evangelicals!”

She turned from her seat on the curb and frowned, and at that moment a truck pulled up in front of us, with two men in front. They came out and introduced themselves, the fatter man with his hair slicked back the director of the program, the other skinnier man his assistant. The fatter man unlocked the door and led us into his office. Seeing the inside, it was clear that “sketchy” was an understatement. The office was a grey, vacant, single-room warehouse, lit only by a few light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Instead of walls, signs on the ceiling banisters told us where the rooms were. We walked over to the one that said “oficina.” The fatter man invited us to sit down in two plastic chairs with Coca-Cola logos on them. We took our seats. A sticker of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which reigned in Mexico for over 60 despotic years of both subtle and overtly violent repression, was on the wall above his head. He spoke to Neena in a suave, disingenuous Spanish in such a way that alerted me I couldn’t trust him, even if he were telling the truth. Restless, I buttered in and asked if the organization was affiliated with the church. I was suspicious because many church groups in the region have the intentions of maintaining dependence in poor communities in order to draw people into the faith. The question had an obvious answer, which is why I was surprised when he said “no.” I waited a moment for him to explain more. He sat there quietly. I burst out laughing at such a poor attempt to convince us. He laughed along nervously, but looked confused, as if I had asked a silly question.

“So then how do you explain the cross painted out front? What affiliations does the group have? What will we actually be doing, anyway?”

To all of these questions the fat man had no responses, but according to him we shouldn’t have been worrying about it anyway. This resonated with me in a bad way. But despite this Neena and I both had free time. We were both still hoping to see an indigenous community, and I was curious to see what would happen. So we signed on, nudging and winking at each other, partly to express how ridiculous we thought the situation was, and partly to quell our nervousness.

We all stuffed ourselves in the front seat of the truck. Bound for the outskirts of town, the fat man told us that we were on our way to a women’s cooperative meeting. I finally felt a bit relieved to know where we were going, but apparently the fat man decided to take us through a detour, and we pulled off the highway into San Cristóbal’s poverty belt. Neena and I were silent as we passed shacks and stray dogs along a dirt road. There was no one out to be seen, but the fat man assured us that the people there were extremely poor.

Then we merged back onto the same highway before we had gotten out of the truck to do anything. Neena frankly and confusedly asked what we were really doing. The man assured us that we were going to a meeting of the PRI.

“But you told us we were going to a women’s cooperative and that this wasn’t a political excursion!” we protested, half laughing. The man seemed confused as to why we gringos were demanding so much information. I think he realized, based on our protest, that he had said something we didn’t want to hear. Seeing that this lie hadn’t worked, he bypassed our questions and changed gears, channeling the discussion in a direction that would likely shut us up. In order to win the favor of us activist gringos, he said that he had been involved with the Zapatistas and was shot by the Mexican military for supporting them in 1994. This had the desired effect. Like infants with pacifiers Neena and I quietly chewed on his fantastic stories, staring ahead wide-eyed in awe. They were likely fabricated, considering the history of the Zapatista rebellion, but made their way through back doors into our imaginations.

After driving up into the mountains, we pulled off the highway, again for reasons unknown to us at the time, and entered an ejido. The truck pulled up in front of a small white house, more upscale than usual for a mostly poor, indigenous area. By the time we got out of the car, asking each other why we stopped, the fat man had already gone over to the front door of the house and was talking to an indigenous woman. We approached smiling, not wanting to intrude and keeping our distance. Getting closer I could tell that their conversation was more or less pointless and forced by the fat man, as if they were distant acquaintances who met accidentally and were obligated to keep conversation for nothing more than to avoid awkward silence. Except we had come
to this place deliberately and the fat man had engaged this woman in conversation having nothing to say. As Neena and I drew nearer to them, he smiled and introduced us as volunteers for the day. For reasons unknown to us we became the center of discussion.

“Neena turned to the woman and said she didn’t want to bother her. With her eyes the woman pleaded back for Neena to stay away. But the man answered verbally for her that she would be happy to have her camera from her bag and was taking pictures. The fat man asked if she wanted him to take a picture for her. She said fine, crouching near the rabbit to pose and handing him the camera. But when he took it she realized what he had really meant as he motioned for her to stand next to the indigenous woman to get in a picture. The woman looked embarrassed and stared at the ground. Both Neena and I protested politely at first, and then stubbornly said no, but the fat man insisted. Neena turned to the woman and said she didn’t want to bother her. With her eyes the woman pleaded back for Neena to stay away. But the man answered verbally for her that the she would be happy to have her photo taken with Neena. I wondered why it was his place to say that, and not the woman’s.

As we drove further on in the truck Neena and I looked at the end result on her digital camera, completely confused. “That was so horrible!” she said in English. I nodded in agreement. On the screen she and the indigenous woman faced the ground, both looking humiliated and standing as if they were naked.

Along a dirt road the truck stopped again at the bottom of a hill with green manicured grass. Neena and I were already exhausted. We were almost to the point of demanding that we return to the city. However in the distance music beckoned us. As we trudged up the hill and over a ridge we found ourselves facing a beautifully landscaped schoolyard, teeming with indigenous children and several white nuns. Behind them sat a small school. From an enormous loudspeaker protruding from the school’s overhang, a symphony version of “The Sound of Silence” played. The nuns, all of them white missionaries, came to greet us smiling with their bonnets bouncing along as they walked. We were introduced to them as volunteers, although I hadn’t done anything to be called that, and was beginning to wonder if I even knew what the word meant since it had been miscontextualized already that day. The sisters led us, both stumbling disoriented behind, in the direction of basketball courts where the children had begun to line up according to gender and age.

Simon and Garfunkel had faded out and The Sound of Music began to play from the loudspeaker. It added an aesthetic of European purity to a place peopled by brown bodies in shabby clothes, augmenting the cruelly ironic facade that hopelessly failed at obscuring the racist paternalism there. It was screaming at me from places and faces. I was too distracted by it to focus on a single person, or on where I was going. I became fixated on a smiling nun patting a boy on the head, nuns correcting children’s postures. It all carried striking tones of conquest, residual traces of colonial attempts to convert a native race of people in order to control them. The missionaries kept pulling me by the hand, insisting that I come with them, but every instant they let go I was again too dumb to move. The soft music felt shrill in my ears.

Suddenly the music stopped. I felt lucid again, standing there beside Neena, who seemed dazed. As the fat man spoke through a microphone to the lines of children, it became partly clear to me why we had been brought to that place: because we were gringos. Or it might be more accurate to say that we would not have been brought there in such a fashion if we were not gringos. The fat man likely expected us to romanticize the indigenous there, to identify with the missionaries, to proudly soak up every moment in which we were called “volunteers” despite the fact that we did no such work that day. We were not so much people who deserved explanation, but instead opportunities of which he was happy to take advantage. When Neena walked into his office, he likely saw the potential to capitalize on us, not monetarily, but by selling us the church. He meant to draw us closer to the church through flattery.

This concept of “gringo” is made by gringos just as much as by Mexicans. Although it is unclear what the fat man was trying to accomplish with driving us around that morning, it is clear that he saw himself as a patron to his imaginary, yet informed idea of gringo. And now it always drives me crazy to see other Americans complaining of the way they are treated in different countries. Much of the time such behavior is just a dialectical response to our own. The dehumanization can go both ways. Where we exploit other countries and fetishize their cultures, our tourists are manipulated. The reality sometimes is that what bothers us is not the people there, but the reflection we see in them, that of ourselves.

una lagrima

It is striking to realize that nearly every person praying in Acteal’s tiny dilapidated church on the morning of December 22, 1997 – almost a
quarter of the people living and taking refuge in that community — was murdered in a five-hour period. Paramilitaries in cahoots with the then powerful PRI party in Chiapas chased people out of the community’s church and killed 45 of them as they fled toward the community center and into the brush. They had stepped over the line in their struggle for indigenous autonomy, to live outside of the domain of the government and wealthy landowners.

Almost ten years later their torsos are frozen in stone. They all reach up toward the sky, forming a giant black obelisk. There are no eyes in their decomposing and agonized faces, just blind vacant pits. The statue depicting the victims draws the attention of passers-by and visitors to Acteal, a neighborhood in the municipality of Chenalhó, alongside a mountain road that skirts the community’s highest elevated limits. Despite the statue’s terrifying appearance, ladies perched around it selling apples and tamales are somehow able to ignore it, speaking softly in Tzotzil among each other. From this high point a break in the banana and pine trees gives way to a view of the valley below. The grids of tiny farm plots and patches of clouds fill the valley floor like cereal and milk fill a bowl.

I arrived there in August with a handful of noisy European tourists in the bed of a truck. We had careened through the mountains for two hours, whistling into the wind and letting the extra material on our sleeves flap like sails on a boat. As the truck came to a standstill, I jumped down, teary-eyed, and descended a cement staircase through banana trees to the amphitheater where priests and the Mesa Directiva, Las Abejas’ judicial and steering committee, were leading a service commemorating the deaths of the 45 victims killed on that same day in December of 1997. On the 22nd of every month, hundreds of members of Las Abejas fill the small amphitheater that serves as the group’s organizational center. There they pay their respects to the dead in a customary Catholic ritual.

Luckily I was able to set myself apart from the horde of tourists who took photos and video of the service. Although we knew that it commemorated a massacre, we did not understand it. Running into Clemente, with whom I worked back in San Cristóbal, I felt relieved to separate from them. The two of us sat together on a stoop and he explained to me in Spanish what was being said in the mainly Tzotzil ceremony. He pointed out the Mesa Directiva. They sat on the amphitheater floor, all wearing enormous hats with multicolored strips of tape cascading on all sides. Then he pointed me in the direction of the community’s church, where the paramilitaries had arrived and had begun to shoot the praying community members and refugees. The refugees had being taken shelter in the community under enormous tarps, having been uprooted from their own communities by the same violence that would ultimately catch up with them. Throughout late 1997 and 1998, paramilitary groups with names such as Peace and Justice, Red Mask and Anti-Zapatista Revolutionary Movement terrorized the Zapatistas, Las Abejas and their supporters. The paramilitaries were indigenous people, oftentimes from the same communities they terrorized. The ruling PRI party in Chiapas funded the groups in order that they might burn houses, kill civilians and chase the survivors into the forest.

Although the indigenous have historically had some autonomy under colonial and post-colonial regimes, powerful groups in Mexico cannot tolerate the indigenous people that slip beyond their realm of control. In the legacy of conquest, the indigenous are good to the elite for the resources, symbolic and material, that can be cheaply extracted from them. Indigenous people who cease to serve that role are inherently at odds with elite power, which relies on their complacency and docility. The Zapatistas, Las Abejas and others involved in autonomous movements are usually not repressed because they are aggressors to the state or wealthy landowners. For example, those killed in Acteal were all pacifists, yet they still represented a threat to the government of Chiapas. Autonomous groups are threatening in that they are more committed to making revolutionary change happen themselves than they are to asking the government for change. They are repressed because they do not ask for permission—for the fact that their growth and development is not filtered through or endorsed by the state.

But when a movement can be drawn into the state apparatus or paid off, betraying its ideals and followers, there is little need for police force or physical violence. All of Mexico has a history of cooptation and betrayal that dates back to the last years of the Mexican Revolution, when opponents lured Emiliano Zapata into a trap, saying they wanted to make an agreement with him but instead murdering him in their own territory. They took a photo of themselves with his dead body and sent it back to his supporters as testimony to the death of radical land reform. The same elite co-opted Zapata’s vital image, not that of the pale, dead face sent back to his supporters, and built the PRI party on revolutionary ideals as a way to “institutionalize” the revolutionary changes set into motion (PRI stands for Institutional Revolutionary Party). The PRI pulled virtually all unions and institutions under its wing, ostensibly to give the revolution permanence and solidity. Where progressive reforms were written into the new constitution, such as the ejido system that granted farming communities collective ownership of lands, a hierarchy of corruption and impunity emerged. Efforts of progressive movements were drawn into it to serve the interests of the party rather than the revolution. Now in Chiapas, co-optation reigns. For example, several leaders of leftist peasant organizations in the 80’s eventually joined the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari who led free-market restructuring of the economy. Also NGOs with government ties try to convince Zapatista leaders to take less militant positions to get government aid.

Historically wealthy landowners in Chiapas have hired thugs and gunmen to act as the arms of capital, securing or stealing land...
for large ranches and plantations on which indigenous people are employed. Likewise, the government has violently repressed the more militant elements of indigenous communities.

However, where actual acts of violence destroy significant parts of the population, be it a chunk of the community or central figure, the violence in Chiapas has not been as significant as a full-out genocide, as in Guatemala. The point of violence in Chiapas is not so much that a state takes control of a community by literally killing it, but rather by intimidating people. Violence might kill leaders, but more importantly to the life of organized struggle, it kills the will of supporters.

By getting preoccupied with death and terrorism, were Las Abejas becoming docile—essentially doing what the paramilitaries wanted? Was death haunting these people so much that it became an obsession obscuring their struggles? Were they being controlled? I couldn’t say for sure, because although Clemente translated, I still didn’t understand the service. I was more or less bored. However I was still more committed to the service than the tourists who had given up and were smoking cigarettes together in the back of the amphitheater. Having heard of a monument for those killed beneath the amphitheater I ventured along its side, looking for an opening. Descending steps I slipped underneath the amphitheater’s floor. My eyes adjusting to the light, I was further disappointed to find very little there besides barren concrete floors and bare brick walls. A cross painted with small praying figures leaned against a far wall and a candle offered a tiny warm glow in the vast cold chamber.

Over my shoulder I noticed eyes fixed on me and quickly turned my head to see that the wall from which I entered was covered in photos of unsmil ing faces. Squinting and moving closely I noticed that most of the dark-faced figures wore brilliant dresses. In fact at a closer glance I could see that almost all of the victims pictured were women and children. In other memorials to tragic events I had forced myself to identify with the victim. Since my range of experiences with loss has been so limited, I would become self-aware of how ridiculously privileged I was to be forcing myself to feel bad, and I would end up feeling more guilty than anything else. But staring at me closely from their faded photos on the wall the thin faces of the victims had a certain familiarity. They leapt out at me and held me in their gaze. The floor above me began to rumble and, suddenly conscious of where I was, I realized the air had become heavy. I walked outside into the light.

A hump of earth just outside the memorial gave me a view of the amphitheater floor where most of the men and women present stepped slowly to a band of men who were plucking discord out of some fiddles and a harp. People shook maracas and tiredly moved their shoulders into the slow, persistent rhythm. Watching everyone there in this act, I finally made the connection that the faces in the photos below were those of families and friends. Before everyone had been passive in the ritual. I understood it only as restriction because to me enduring the hours of Tzotzil was little more than that. But seeing each person plodding along I became aware that they were celebrating, healing wounds and nurturing memory. It was no longer spectacle. The memories of the dead were embodied, making themselves alive, present and real.

The dancers formed a procession that passed down steps in front of me and under the amphitheater floor. Gathering myself I entered again, following them. The music stopped, and they all knelted. Realizing that I was the last one standing, I fell to the ground as well. I entered into prayer with them, but in the dark my thoughts were distracted by the hum of prayer around me. Still bowing I opened my eyes a little bit to see if anyone was watching me. No one was. I opened my eyes completely, still feigning prayer. Around me a sea of hunched shoulders bent over the cold concrete in which bodies of the 45 victims of the December 22 massacre were entombed below. Eventually the prayer ceased and man raised his fist in the air out of the shoulders, screaming,

“¡Viva the mothers of the resistance!”
“¡Viva!” they responded.
“¡Viva Las Abejas!”
“¡Viva!” they responded.
“¡Viva the insurgents for autonomy!”
“¡Viva!”

Family Albums

Understandings or strategies for describing human differences have helped recreate and reproduce social hierarchies. At the least, those hierarchies have created small humiliations and rejections, and have lessened opportunities. At the worst, they have abetted wars of extermination, lynchings and rape. Representations may be deployed for or against such horrors or indifferently in relation to them, but they are never irrelevant, never unconnected to the world of actual social relations. Images of the non-Western world draw on and articulate ideas and thus, like all conceptual work, become cultural and historical, mutable and political in intent and/or effect.17

I left the hostel one night with my friend Marga, a Guatemalan university student doing the civil service work required of all university students in Mexico. Across the street passed an indigenous woman wearing a sheepskin skirt and a sash cradling a child against her back. Mid-sentence Marga stopped, producing a black camera from her bag. By the time I had also stopped to turn to her she had it against her eye and was skillfully turning the lens. As the woman passed directly underneath a street lamp, the shutter snapped, and she was frozen in that moment, silhouetted against colonial red adobe brick. Marga disappeared the camera into her bag, grinning as uncomfortable as it had made me. I wasn’t tactful at all in telling her how angry I was.
“Why did you do that?” I demanded, deliberately blowing her cover. “You didn’t ask first!” My outburst annoyed her, and she seemed suddenly uncomfortable around me, an overbearing blonde boy drawing attention to his fragmented Spanish. She hurried along past me, performing the part of young woman accosted by disorderly male stranger. Unciously I persisted. She asked me what I meant. I hadn’t expected to have to explain myself because the injustice seemed self-evident, and I hadn’t prepared a way to articulate my thoughts. She responded to my silence, saying simply that the best photographers didn’t ask before taking photos.

“My professor in college would be walking along side you like this, then jump in front of you, and BOOM!” She blocked my path, thrusting the lens in my face. In it I could see my frowning reflection. The shutter snapped open and then closed again. She pulled the camera away from her eye and the frown in my reflection had displaced onto her face. Clearly I hadn’t taken her point. I could tell already that arguing with her was going to make me feel self-righteous and probably alienate her. I knew also that our friendship was delicate and precarious under the strain of differences in opinion. But I couldn’t help myself from speaking my mind, as the issue that brought me to Chiapas in the first place had just manifested itself before my eyes. It had taken a very simple form, that of the unequal control of representations between tourists and local indigenous people. I explained that white and mestizo people are almost always the ones who choose the ways in which indigenous people are represented. By taking a picture, even the tourist is assuming a degree of power over the subject of the photograph. Photos make it into family albums, alongside other images of ancient ruins and landscapes.

She was patient as I spoke and agreed with me that recontextualizing images could have a harmful effect. She used the example of publishing a photograph of someone in a newspaper. A person could be cast in a negative light as the photographer has the power to highlight certain elements of a person to express something about them. Also photos have a reciprocal relationship with articles, headlines and captions in the way the former help us to understand the latter, and vice versa. Together the photos and text create a total message. This presentation can have a harmful effect when explanations of photos appeal to people’s prejudices or reinsert them into negative contexts. But, she said, her situation was different. Certainly with the news media, the represented peoples’ public reputations were at stake. However, she only wanted to keep the photos for her own personal use. So what harm could be done?

I knew we were talking about something more than the public image of a few people, but I couldn’t respond at the time. I still felt uncomfortable with the whole situation and concluded that I must be paranoid. But even though what we do with the images that we take is important, an even more serious issue lay beneath the entire discussion of how they are manipulated. We are constantly representing things. For example, with language we substitute the word for a thing, concept or action. It might scare some people to think that a word is not a concrete or static concept. Every time we use a word, we recontextualize it and redefine it. In a sense we are always misrepresenting what we want to talk about because the thing, concept or action is understood within a totally new context. The gravity of realizing that this imperfection in language has a potential to do good things as well as horrible things can be frightening. But Marga probably would have said that if we thought about this every time we spoke, we would get paralyzed, so afraid that we might misrepresent something with our language. Then we would never be able to say anything. To her it was probably all right that language would misrepresent something else at times, or all the time. That is the nature of language as well as representations in general.

But still, my own personal inability to “speak” about indigenous people did not come so much from the fear that I would say the wrong thing, although this is sometimes a concern. What troubled me more than how people speak is who exactly is doing the speaking, or who is able to speak and be heard. They call the Zapatista radio station Radio Insurgente, “the voice of the voiceless,” because it is an outlet for people who cannot usually make their own representations heard. They are voiceless, not in the sense that they are mute, but in the sense that their voice isn’t afforded the same legitimacy or can’t be projected in the same way.

Vocalized sounds make a voice when they understood as such, when they cut into the multitude of voices and asserts themselves as truth. In Mexico and in most places, some voices are audible and understood while others are not as much. I thought there was something inherently wrong with this imbalance. The ways in which we explain ideas, situations and other people through the use of representation is critical, but no matter what we do, the harm has already been done before we even open our mouths, put a pen to paper, click on a tape recorder, or reach for a camera.

But this is not to say that the harm is irreversible. Because although there are deep systematic problems that precede everything
we do, change can come when marginalized people put more pens to paper, click on more tape recorders and use more cameras. The indigenous media activists in Chiapas know that control of major media will not simply fall into their laps. But they know that for the most part they don’t have to fight over it either. Instead they make their own.

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Eisenstein, S. (1931). ¡Que viva México!


Notes


12. Ibid.


I was not sure of how concise my definition of the terms “Balkans” would be, so I resorted to the Oxford dictionary for a more accurate result. Even for somebody unfamiliar with contemporary world politics, Balkans is synonymous with ethnic antagonism, political and military upheaval. Political scientists and policy makers, in terms of promoting a new image for the region, initiated the use of the term “Southeastern Europe” to describe the same geographical area. The name change, though, cannot delete historical memory. Narratives of numerous wars, relocation of borders, exchanges of territory and people, and inter-ethnic conflicts are prevalent within every ethnic group in the region.

Are we citizens of the countries of the Balkans to consider ourselves as a unique case, as ill-fated peoples who should be pitied because they are destined never to see the light of day? The post-1990 era has provided no sustainable solution for the region. Devastated economies, dysfunctional political systems and ethnic tensions comprise the image of the contemporary Balkans. The recent shift of interest of the international community to other parts of the world left most of the Balkan disputes unresolved. With the European Union membership being a far dream for most of the region’s countries, Balkan people see their lives doomed in this everlasting narrative of warfare. Indicative of this situation is that immigration to Western Europe is the aspiration of the majority of the population.

My belief is that we should abolish any metaphysical determinism that the Balkans have been historically a venue of warfare and will remain so in the future. Young people, constituting the most dynamic group in the society, can bring the desired change. My aspiration is that young Balkans will maturely manage their historical heritage and get actively involved in forging modern Balkan states.

Throughout history, the Balkans have been a crossroad, a zone of endless military, cultural, and economic mixing and clashing between Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, Catholicism and Orthodoxy. (Mark Mazower)

The history of the Balkans is depicted in the narratives of its people: personal stories of individuals who confront the issues of ethnic identity and historical heritage in their everyday lives. My life scenario constitutes a microcosm of the complexity of Macedonia, a sub-region of the Balkans with a rich multiethnic heritage of more than 3,000 years. The geographer H. R. Wilkinson, in his book on the area, comments on the complexity of the region, contending that the term Macedonia “defies a definition.” The post-1990 nationalist era, in the wider region, revived the questions regarding Macedonian history and identity which were set aside for many decades. My personal situation illustrates the quest of every Macedonian for ethnic and cultural self-determination in this new age.

I was born in Thessaloniki, the capital of historic Macedonia and birthplace of Alexander the Great. Thessaloniki has been, for the last century, part of the republic of Greece, with a population of whom 95 percent identify as Greek-Macedonians. The Macedonian atmosphere is prevalent all over the place: ancient temples, statues, venues of Ancient Macedonia remind everybody of a glorious Macedonian cultural heritage. Consequently, it is inevitable that this population feels detached from its history and is confronted with an international environment that denies its right for self-determination as Macedonians.
Slavic Macedonians comprise the majority in the neighboring state, the Former Yugoslavic Republic Of Macedonia (FYROM), established in 1991. This group has different cultural characteristics from other ethnic groups in the region. They proclaim their distinct ethnic origin, declaring that they are the only ethnic Macedonian group, something that is heavily disputed by Greeks and Bulgarians.

...a Macedonian salad, in the end, is just a mixed salad. A salad with a diversity of similar ingredients—fruits, veggies, warring ethnicities, whatever.

Whenever I identify myself as an ethnic Macedonian, an international would assume that I am of Slavic origin and not Greek. I would definitely not consider this an insult, since every civilization has its cultural heritage that one is proud of. I feel, though, deprived of a vital part of my national identity. My situation exemplifies the complexity that arises from the content of the rule of self-determination, the situation where the rights of two different ethnic groups conflict. There are no legal procedures by which one can protect his right to a national identity. All international charters denote the supremacy of the right of self-determination, assuming this is the main principle, which will regulate the relations between neighboring states.

Besides its political aspects, this situation brings many practical problems to everyday issues. An ethnic Macedonian may be a citizen of FYROM, but the airport of Macedonia and the University of Macedonia are located in Thessaloniki, Greece. Macedonian is the language spoken in South Bulgaria. I think that it may make some sense to a foreigner now why we refer to the situation as a Macedonian salad.

The history of the Balkans was more than a plain historical inquiry for me, as I was raised in a period of ethnic tension that emerged after the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Questions that dealt with contemporary regional politics and history were considered taboo, even in an academic environment. After ten years of high school and college education in history as well as personal readings, I was convinced that I had a solid background in Balkan history and was open-minded enough to discuss these topics; my summer internship at the Kokkalis Foundation was a unique chance for me to be "exposed" to an environment of people with the same interests and concerns as me.

I thought myself as extremely privileged that I could form my own inquiry in respect to the Ethics Center Student Fellowship. I chose to work for the Olympia 2006 Balkan Seminars organized by the Kokkalis foundation in Greece. The central mission of the Kokkalis Foundation is the promotion of a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Southeastern Europe through the development of public, cultural and scientific life in the region. Through its various initiatives, it seeks to leverage the region’s human capital and cultural heritage in order to develop a democratic polity, a new economy and a civic society that provide opportunities to all nations. The Foundation sponsors numerous initiatives relative to the region, including the organization of public fora, international conferences, the development of human networks for the promotion of inter-ethnic understanding and the advancement of knowledge with an emphasis on public policy. It is widely regarded today as the most prominent institute in terms of research on Balkan politics and economics. The Balkans Studies Seminars constitute a unique (for the region) educational initiative of high quality, organized in collaboration with Yale and Duke Universities. The main thematic unit of the 2006 seminars was entitled “War, Conflict and Identity.” A number of acknowledged academics and researchers addressed the above theme with respect to the current developments in Southeastern Europe.

“We should abolish any metaphysical determinism that the Balkans have been historically a venue of warfare and will remain so in the future. Young people, constituting the most dynamic group in the society, can bring the desired change.”

My return to the Balkans

I spent the first part of the internship in the headquarters of the Kokkalis foundation in Athens, welcomed by my supervisor and the rest of the academic staff. Although my assignment there entailed a series of administrative issues, I was able to get
valuable feedback on the formulation of my proposal. The staff of the institute was comprised of experts on issues of public policy and politics of the Balkan region. They expressed their interest in my project and provided their insight in terms of the issues that were expressed in my proposal. Their practical experience and perennial engagement with the Balkans was an invaluable source for me. Although frustrated by the administrative workload at the beginning, I felt privileged to interact with these individuals. They were highly qualified scholars, who returned to the region and devoted their careers to the prospect of a better future for the Balkans. Even tasks that might originally seem trivial and of no particular interest for my research helped me conceptualize the real socio-political situation of the contemporary Balkans. For example, I spent a considerable amount of time every day helping out participants with the visa documentation and the procedures at the Greek embassies in Southeastern Europe. Having myself a passport of the Republic of Greece and the European Union, I have traveled extensively in the region without the burden of issuing a visa. This was not the case, though, with the citizens of the other Balkan states who wanted to travel to Greece; they cannot travel freely around and their visa authorization procedures can take many months. There were cases of students who were awarded fellowships to attend the seminars and were not granted visas in time to come to Greece. It seems that in the Balkans of 2006, we are not as close as the travel signs indicate. There are still barriers that keep us apart from reconciliation.

Another task that I was assigned, while in Athens, was to assist the Committee in the evaluation of the applicants. University students and recent graduates from different backgrounds comprised a group of highly motivated young people, bringing in different experiences from academia, government and civil service. Their application form asked for their personal views in terms of the current political status in Southeastern Europe. I was very interested to read pieces that comment on Balkan politics in a very moderate manner; many of the applicants included their personal experience in terms of the recent events in the region, such as cases where their families were displaced because of warfare. I felt like an “outsider”; I belonged to the “privileged side” of the Balkans, since my generation in Greece did not experience any warfare. The Balkan controversy was an academic issue for me, whereas for others was an everyday reality.

Besides the administrative aspect of my duties, I was able to devote some personal time to my research project. It set the question of whether the contemporary young generation (the age group of 15 to 30 years old) has the potential of transition or such a goal would be unrealistic for the near future. The proposed research project examined the attitude of a group of young Balkans (these are participants of the seminars, who identified themselves as coming from countries of the Balkan region) towards the issues of reconciliation within the framework of the already existing nation-states in the area. During this internship, I would have the chance to interact with a solid group of young individuals from the Balkans and get concurrently academic training on issues of Balkan history. The researchers of the foundation assisted in formulating my research inquiry; they proposed a less structured model of research, since the body of participants was not a representative sample of contemporary Balkan youth (they were “community leaders,” having already demonstrated commitment to the reconciliation process). They expressed their concerns over the structure of the survey (I was in favor of a quantitative written survey, whereas they proposed an open discussion in a form of workshop); they helped me address my topics in a politically correct manner, in order to comply with a respectful attitude towards every participant’s view. It is challenging to address individuals who have different opinions on the topics, as a result of personal experience and national sentiment.

Then came June 30th; my last day at the office filled me with anxiety for what was going to follow. It was time for the seminar to start, to put into action all the theoretical preparation of the previous period.

Moments from the seminar
July 1st, 2006. We were on the bus from Athens International Airport heading to Olympia. I felt like a tourist guide, and crowd control was certainly not my forte. Thirty-five students from ten different countries were selected from a pool of more than 120. I had worked towards their selection process for the past three weeks and read extensively about their backgrounds. I talked with some of them on the phone, helping them with their travel arrangements. Although we had done extensive research on their backgrounds, I felt that there was a lot more to know about them. All of them were leaders in their communities and had demonstrated extensive interest in the field of political activism. I anticipated our first meeting with great anxiety, since I didn’t know what to expect.

Our responsibilities would primarily demand from our side (the host organization) a politically correct approach to a number of issues; history is still in the making in the Balkans and many of the participants are personally involved in the events that were going to be discussed. We needed to make them feel comfortable, in order to establish a truly multi-cultural environment in which students would be able to express their views freely. (This is the main reason why the seminars are conducted in a hotel detached from an urban area: to decrease the impact of the local community, Greece, on the work done at the seminar.) I got advice to be prepared even for a possible tension between students. Having all this feedback, I expected a rather challenging two weeks ahead.
One main goal of the first days was to achieve the cohesion of the group. The ice-breaking practice I got in the States was definitely useful; but would this work with a group of people from Eastern Europe? (I have to admit that I did not think highly of those techniques when I first came to the U.S.) My original plan was to assign seats for the four-hour bus trip and roaming assignments at the hotel, “forcing” participants to socialize with people of different nationalities. I was really surprised to see that little effort was required in this field. Without even following a procedure of introducing everybody publicly before getting on the bus, students themselves took the initiative of introducing themselves to the rest of the group. They dashed to the back of the bus, making jokes with each other; the bus ride resembled a high school field trip rather than a politics seminar. The stamina of participants was something that really surprised me. Although our meeting point was the airport, most of the participants had arrived in Athens by train or bus, after very long journeys. It was definitely a smooth beginning for the group.

As though at a class reunion, some of the students asked for music during the bus ride; besides being a bit skeptical at the beginning, I went forward with it. Listening to them singing all together, I could not imagine all these “tension scenarios” that we were prepared for. The power of rock music certainly had a bigger impact than I could have imagined. You could hear “heated” arguments – not about politics but about bands and concerts.

The seminar hall was located opposite from our hotel. A picturesque school building, used as the local high school during the school year, had been lavishly refurbished by the local council in order to host the seminar. The freshly painted walls and the brand new projector contrasted with the casual spirit of the participants, who reluctantly woke up at 7 a.m. to attend the first day of the seminar. The orientation of the seminar was towards contemporary problems of the region and less on the historical side of it. Being occupied with a number of administrative issues, I was not able to attend the full session during the first day. At dinner, I got positive reactions about the quality of the course from the students.

Seeing the group around the dinner table, I was reminded of the Balkan villages of the Ottoman Empire. A Balkan community isolated from the outside world had existed for more than five hundred years during the previous millennium. The people of the region were not separated into Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians or Yugoslavs. In Olympia, the participants were free of skepticism and resistance caused by their national environment. They had the chance to redefine themselves in terms of a collective Balkan identity. For them, in comparison to their ancestors, the bonding factors might not be the Balkan folklore music or past historic experience. A new Balkan identity can arise from the new Balkan cinema, contemporary literature and music of the region. All we need is to bring young people together and let them interact without a hitch. Give them voice, give them ownership of their future and the process for reconciliation might be simpler than we think it is.

It was a great privilege for us to have world-class faculty from U.S. universities coming to Greece, providing their insight on the politics of the Balkan region. The sessions were organized in a discussion mode, as the participants had already had some exposure to the topics addressed. The second part of the seminar was bringing in the most provocative issue of the seminar, the workshop on the “Macedonian” issue. The subject, which is of prime concern for most countries in the region, constitutes not only a historic inquiry, but brings up many controversies on the current status quo of the Balkan region. The conference program included a series of lectures, which were to be followed by a discussion by the participants.

The lectures were really very interesting. The lecturers were highly knowledgeable and captured the attention of the audience.

Their politically correct approach was really remarkable (sometimes humor is the best way to address “sensitive” issues in politics). The comparative analysis of the problems of the Balkans with the ones in other countries in the world was something really innovative. (I think that it was the first time that most participants saw the Balkan conflict expressed by a mathematical-statistic equation.) For me, though, what was going to be more interesting was the discussion that followed. (At this point I should note that the participants of the congress were selected in terms of their academic background and personal involvement in Balkan politics from among a big pool of applicants. They were expected to have an active role in the discussions, which were led by the academic experts.)

“Give them voice, give them ownership of their future and the process for reconciliation might be simpler than we think it is.”

At the same time, I was involved in organizing my workshops; from the first moment I would have to deal with my dual role. My supervisor had advised me to “keep some distance” from the group; the fact that I was at the same age as most of the participants would potentially hinder me from exercising control over the flow of the conversation. I would have to behave as a student, integrating into the group, and, at the same time, acting as an administrator of the workshop.
My overall impression from the discussions was below my expectations. I definitely did not witness a true political debate; I thought of most participants as part of their national delegations, rolling out their pre-rehearsed speeches. There was no real exchange of articulated argument between young people, who supposedly would bring innovative ideas on the current issues. This is certainly a paradox for people who have committed their lives to studying political science and are engaged in public service for their local communities. It was depressing to see that the future leaders of the Balkans were not much different from the ones who had brought so many calamities to our region. It was my sense that the participants had no real interest in politics and had already adopted a bureaucratic approach, with no real interest in the essence of political activism. My above argument is not against the specific group of students, but reflects the general standing of my generation towards political issues.

It is almost 1 a.m. after a very tiring day working the seminar. Wandering around the hotel, I stop by the computer room. I see Dusan, a senior politics student from Belgrade, Serbia, still working. Waving his hand, he asks me to come to see his PC. Noticing that he is browsing the pages of UK universities, I ask him if he is interested in continuing his studies there. “Masters in Politics in London?” I ask.

“No, my friend, politics is interesting, but business is where all the money is” he replies. “Come with me to do business in the Balkans.”

Doing some thinking that night, I acknowledged that my initial impression of the group might have been an easy generalization. Maybe they were materializing their reconciliation with a more practical mindset, avoiding a pretentious political approach. Since all traditional political norms have failed in the Balkans, we might need to experiment. As my friend from Belgrade illustrated, inter-Balkan business might bring us closer than peace initiatives.

The right question is not “Is it true?” but “what is it intended to do?” (S.H.Hooke)

From an academic standpoint, the focus of my inquiry was the developments that followed the disintegration of the Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. This was a period of gross human rights violations in the area, with the first priority of the international community to be the cessation of violence. The long-term planning for a sustainable Balkan community should not have been, though, limited to a ceasefire, but should have implemented a radical social reconstruction. The question of how to deal with the legacy of past wars is acute; the past in the Balkans entails traumatic experience for all communities, since a high percentage of the current population has had personal involvement in such events.

Reconciliation is a concept used by politicians and political scientists to describe the progress towards peaceful and democratic societies. But what is reconciliation all about? Most interpretations include the themes of international justice, apology of politicians, forgiveness, individual heeling, commemoration of grievances, reform of history education. Many historians argue that history education cannot be disarmed; history classes are experienced as training for citizens, in order to effectively argue in favor of the nation’s interest. The various initiatives around the world are attempting to set up new standards and principles in history teaching. They have examined a vast range of violence, from the protracted cases in Northern Ireland and South Africa to civil war in Guatemala and Somalia. All these attempts can be helpful in establishing a framework for the case of the Balkans. The ultimate goal is to transform history education from a cause of conflict to a means of mutual understanding. It is certainly challenging to confront a reality different from the national historiography and the family narratives, facing a very different perception of the same historic events. This transformation, though, is an essential precondition for the establishment of sustainable democratic societies.

Trade is incompatible with War. (Immanuel Kant)

As in most cases in world politics, businessmen are ahead of politicians in attempts of rapprochement between conflicting nations. The post-communist economic opportunities attracted a large number of businessmen to engage in inter-Balkan trade. In spite of the big business opportunities, companies had to face a hostile environment, stemming from inadequate and irrational historical arguments from the local communities. This environment has obstructed their economic activities and growth potential; they realized that a normalized present for the Balkans presupposed the arrangement of the past. Using their pressure towards local governments, they succeeded in putting the issue of reforming history education on public agendas. Local governments, in cooperation with the international community, started a series of initiatives towards history education.

The Balkans produce more history than they can consume. (Winston Churchill)

Among the various initiatives regarding the politics of history education in the Balkans, I focused on the very systematic work done by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeastern Europe, in Thessaloniki, Greece. This project was a result of capital and personal involvement invested by Kostas Karras, a Greek ship owner and an Oxford history graduate who made the change in the approach to history his mission, acting within the Center initiatives. The CDRSEE three-year project on the politics of history education in the Balkans produced interesting findings. The comparative analysis of national educational systems revealed that, regardless of the education and democratization standards of each community, history education had some common problems in the region. First of all, they indicated that there was no will towards knowing anything about each other. History books, focusing on the broader European perspective, were geared towards the history of Western European...
nations, omitting any developments in the neighboring countries; they were depicted with “dim colors on the maps,” giving the impression of an area that does not need to be studied. Furthermore, these books transmitted to the student bodies the sense of victimization, through simplified and biased presentations of military events. The project identified a common pattern according to which “we have never done anything to harm our neighbors and have never waged wars to conquer.” Textbooks create the notion that we have always been winners and our neighbors losers, or that we are the eternal victims, providing an “excellent psychological background for generation of conflicts of varying intensity” (Elizabeth Cole).

The experts in the field agree on some common recommendations in terms of reforms in the area of history education, applicable in the case of the Balkans. First of all, we should denote the primary role of school as an agent of social transmission. Especially in cases of fragmented societies, where ethnic division, mistrust and propaganda are prevalent, the school can be a place of responsible and democratic education. It should be an agent of positive values, promoting critical thinking towards politics.

Another aspect of reconciliation, which is related to my personal inquiry, is the issue of time; sociologists argue that the idea that hatred fades as time passes by is not necessarily true (see Elizabeth Cole, “History Education and Sociopolitical Reconciliation after Mass Crimes”). Time does not heal all wounds; communities tend to return to past events to address their current and future political standing. Consequently, this would be a problem, not only for my generation but for all the forthcoming ones. We need to approach with maturity the origins of the conflict, since historical disputes will be a source of instability for the future of the Balkans. It takes a number of years from the time that a change is initiated until it reaches the classroom (this is the time needed for the consensus of academic historians to make its way into history textbooks), constituting schools as long-term agents in the process of reconciliation. As stated by Elizabeth Cole (world expert in the politics of history education), “five or ten years can make a difference.” My generation has had direct experience from the warfare; the next one will have vague memories of it and might consider it irrelevant to its political standing. The situation in the Balkans is even more complex, as ethnic tension still prevails in certain regions, undermining any systematic attempt for a regional reform in history education.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial to connect the regional and domestic conflicts with examples of fragmented societies and reconciliation processes around the globe. The legitimacy of international organizations and the credibility of academics from the West can be helpful in overcoming the local political disputes of who will be in charge of the reform, bringing all groups to work together. “Outsiders” can bring their wisdom from similar cases abroad, add professionalism to the projects and attract funding from foreign governments. We should not, though, overlook the local teaching methodology and knowledge; in many instances, foreign aid failed to adapt to the regional circumstances, producing overall very poor results.

In terms of the actual history curriculum and its revision, one should note that this is primarily a political issue. In most of the Balkan counties, the revision of history books is a highly formalized procedure that is administered by government officials. The extent of the revision is often a debate between political parties. As a result, debatable narratives that deal with highly sensitive national issues are usually absent from history books. The major problem of a reform would be to reach an agreement on historical narratives; ethnic groups have interests in retaining narratives that glorify their past and promote current national cohesion. They denote sharp divergences between themselves and the other ethnic groups, with no interest to present the conflicting narratives. Additionally, we should acknowledge that historical research does not always result in objective findings, but is strongly related to the viewpoint of the historian and his audience. The controversies over the events during the Yugoslav wars make consensus a very difficult task.

Special attention should be given not only to the content but to the methodological approach as well. Teachers should promote critical thinking, which will motivate students to seek the truth between the various narratives. Teachers of history in post-conflict areas are more than instructors. They need to become mediators between the political reality and objective history. We should help teachers to gain the necessary skills that will enable them to handle a comparative approach to history. Whereas official history reforms require years to pass, teachers can promptly embrace change in their teaching methods. As past experience indicates, though, it is extremely difficult for them to cope with this task; it is irrational to ask high school teachers to become leading figures in the struggle for social change.

It is generally acknowledged that history education is undervalued as a means of providing transitional justice and reconciliation. Current administrations in the region have set history education as a decreasing priority in their agenda, because of its long-term character and its costly implementation. The education is geared towards practical skills that will enable students compete in the marketplace, implying that less practical initiatives like reforming history education are a luxury for
“The younger generation has adopted a much more realistic approach in terms of political activism. Through their stance, they expressed the view that the economic development and social reconstruction of their local communities is a prerequisite for any attempt for reconciliation.”

And yet, if the Balkans were no more than horror, why is it, when we leave and make for this part of the world, why is it we feel a kind of fall — an admirable one, it is true — into the abyss? (Emil Cioran)

In order for Balkans to escape the tyranny of the past, our role is to restore hope to younger generations, who are morally and spiritually enervated. My overall experience from the fellowship gave me reason to hope for a better future. It is high time we spoke openly about all painful subjects, setting aside our nationalist sentiments. Instead we should try to revive the spirit of the traditional “Balkan village” of the Ottoman Empire; a community of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding of all ethnic and religious groups. And maybe the future generations will find a different definition for the term Balkans in their dictionary.
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Change at the Foot of Continuity

A Soviet soldier’s strong, iron fist thrusts into the sky, clenching the rifle that liberated the Bulgarian people from the Nazis. Standing atop a tower several stories tall, he is flanked by a brave man and a woman carrying a baby, and all three look forward into a proud Communist future. Around the base of the tower, proletarians in bas relief toil and fight, carrying flags, guns, blueprints and hammers courageously. Dark metal wreaths line a pathway from the monument to the street. Halfway down the path on the platforms on either side, frozen men, women and children coming back from war cheerfully greet each other, the children bearing baskets of food for the undoubtedly hungry soldiers.

At the end of the pathway lies Boulevard Tsar Osvoboditel, or Tsar Liberator, named for Alexander II of Russia in honor of his role in liberating Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in the late 1870s. At the corner of the park where the monument stands, the road is divided into two halves: leading south, the road is asphalt, but as you move north, the asphalt gives way to yellow Viennese bricks, which lead to the old National Palace, which once housed a royal family from Bavaria, and the old Party Headquarters, dedicated to leaders loyal to the Soviets. Nearby, the golden domes of Alexander Nevsky Cathedral glint in the sun, memorializing the Russian soldiers that died in the process of Bulgarian liberation.

On the asphalt end of the boulevard, the monuments celebrate less foreign figures. The white edifice of Sofia University “St Kliment of Ohrid” takes up an entire block, memorializing the priest who codified the Cyrillic alphabet. The national stadium on the other side serves to recognize both the Bulgarian man’s pride in his country’s footballers and its namesake Vassil Levski. Levski is a martyr of the Bulgarian national movement, hanged for organizing networks of fellow revolutionaries five years before Bulgaria would gain its statehood.

But the monument of the Soviet soldier is not only surrounded by other colossal memorials of the past. To the right, a ramp descends from the base of one of the cheerful proletarian groups. There, you’re likely to see a teenager on a bike or skateboard performing some complicated trick that probably has an equally complicated name. At almost any time of day, at least one or two kids are maneuvering the maze of ramps, rails, and obstacles that have been built up here. At night, the baggy-shirted high-schoolers seem like they could be anywhere, drinking beer on the benches surrounding the skate park. When they can get their hands on them, they like to shoot off fireworks that seem to shake apartment buildings for blocks around.

On the left side of the path, the other group of immortalized proletarians stands surrounded by prefabricated metal walls. Where these barriers aren’t covered in posters announcing a Depeche Mode concert on Wednesday or the strippers at a nearby club, they’re decorated with brightly colored graffiti, mostly in Latin lettering. (The crowd has a large white speech bubble saying “Yeah!”) A sign rises from behind the barriers announcing that this is where the Taisei Corporation, a Japanese company, is building an extension to the Sofia Metro system, a one-line subway that goes out to the city’s far suburbs. More than one Sofian will proudly claim that it’s cleaner than any subway they’d seen in the states. More noticeable, however, are the commercials that are projected onto each station wall at rush hour. These commercials are mirrored in the glass storefronts that line nearly every underground street crossing, displaying a narrow strip of goods and accompanying salesperson.

Back above ground, the park that contains the statue is filled with carts and small buildings that sell food or drinks. Each vendor has at least a few tables, sheltered from the sun by umbrellas. When a football match is being played in the stadium, the park fills with old
women, sitting behind card tables. Some of them are Romani (more commonly known by the derogatory term, gypsies) and some of them came from their small village farms or gardens nearby, but the peanuts and sunflower seeds they are selling all look the same. A few blocks away at Nevsky Cathedral, the card tables are more permanent, and more uniformly manned by Romani. They use their sparse English to hock old Socialist license plates, musical instruments, and rose oil to tourists and passersby.

Little of this commerce would have been allowed before the fall of communism in 1990. Teenagers would have little access to the Western subculture of skateboarding, let alone permission to skateboard around one of Sofia’s main monuments. There is no chance that a Japanese company would have been constructing a public works project. As each of these activities occur around the monument, the meaning of the monument changes. Of course, there is no longer a Soviet Union for Bulgaria to pledge friendship to, but the monument has taken on other significance. It has become a skate park, a gathering place and a market. For executives halfway around the world, it is a building site. For the few Western tourists who come to Sofia, it is an opportunity for a souvenir photo – a photo that could say to disbelieving friends, “I was really there, and they really were Communists!”

Although this monument and counterparts in other aspects of Bulgarian life celebrate history and mark continuity with the past, everyday actions and the developments at their feet continue to define how they are understood and experienced.

1. “Maybe it was just an interesting time”: An Oral History of Transition

As I tried to prepare myself to travel to Sofia, I tried to read as much as I could, whether travel book or academic volume. Although I had decided to spend the summer interning for a Bulgarian non-governmental organization (or NGO), I still felt largely ignorant of the place. Few Americans know much about this small country, wedged between the former Yugoslav states, Turkey, Greece and Romania. Yet I would be traveling to this hidden place and working with the Access to Information Programme, an organization of Bulgarians who try to increase the availability of government records, documents, and reports for citizens.

While preparing myself to leave, I kept seeing one metaphor over and over again. In its geography and its cultural history, Bulgaria is perpetually portrayed as a crossroads between East and West. In the early middle ages, this played itself out in Bulgaria’s leadership within the Orthodox Church, in opposition to the Roman pope. After the rise of the Ottomans in Turkey (its neighbor to the south), Bulgaria became a site of contestation between Christianity in general and the “threat” of Islam and the Orient. As soon as Bulgaria gained its independence, the people realigned themselves with the West, highly valuing Western European thought and high culture, even as they paid their allegiance to the Russians for successfully liberating the country from Ottoman rule. During World War II, the Bulgarian state swung from supporting the fascists to supporting the Soviets, cementing the relationship that would last for the next 45 years. Although all of this history is frequently recreated by Bulgarians through rituals and holidays, the years under Communist Party rule and those years since “the changes” of 1989 and 1990 have actively formed the perspectives and lives of the founding generation of the Access to Information Programme (AIP) and many other organizations.

Looking at Gergana Jouleva, founder and executive director of AIP, as she sips freshly squeezed grapefruit juice at a chic café, it is not hard to imagine her when she was in her early 20s. She wears the matching jewelry, shoulder-length hair, and stylish clothes of a young woman. At the same time, a few strands of graying hair and bags under her eyes indicate the nearly constant stream of work, phone calls and meetings with a stream of journalists, clients and others. After ordering a vodka (and pressuring me to do the same), she begins to describe the turbulence she felt at the time. Bulgaria was one of the most closely tied satellite states to the USSR, even applying to be one of the Soviet Socialist Republics at one point. This led some of the best and brightest students to study there, including Gergana. This time in the USSR in the 1970s laid the seeds of her tendency to dissent.

“In its geography and its cultural history, Bulgaria is perpetually portrayed as a crossroads between East and West.”
Gergana: I was in the faculty of philosophy and there were professors who had just come back from the camps in Siberia. And they talked about their experiences. One of them had lost an eye, and he was teaching the class on History of Marxism. Soon, I decided to start a discussion group in the Philosophy faculty, because the Engineering faculty had created a very good one. We couldn’t criticize socialism too explicitly, but we talked about all sorts of things. I’m glad that I got to learn from them, because a few years later they were banned from teaching again. There was a lot going on at Moscow University. Maybe it was just an interesting time.1

For most summers, we had to go work in the farms, repaying our debt to the Russian people for financing our education. After a couple of years, we didn’t have to go on these trips, but I was friends with several Jewish students at the time, and they still had to go work. I remember thinking and talking about how unfair that was. My father was always really apathetic, but my grandfather was a strong Communist who died trying to protect Spain from fascism in the Spanish Civil War.

Alexander Kashumov, or Sasho, the head of AIP’s legal team, carries a similar youth. His salt-and-pepper hair seems to have grayed prematurely, perhaps from too much hard work. Nonetheless, he retains a useful excitement about the specifics of law, philosophy and religion. He found the start to his questioning character while going to high school, or gymnasium, in Sofia in the late 1980s.

Sasho: I attended the Classics Gymnasia, which is where I hope my son can get in. The teachers were largely professors from the university, where they were under strict surveillance, but no one was paying attention to what they taught the younger students. So we could talk about anything. Even in the philosophy class, we only read an early piece by Marx, which the teacher described as “the last worthwhile piece he wrote.” As I continued with protests and NGO work, students from my gymnasia who had gotten a similar education were often at the forefront.

Just as Sasho entered high school, the Chernobyl disaster struck, spreading clouds of radioactive materials across Europe. Upon learning about this crisis, Gergana started to become more involved in the budding environmental movement out of concern for her and her family’s health.

Gergana: The Bulgarian government did not inform the Bulgarian population about pollution after Chernobyl disaster. I was pregnant at that time and I worried a lot about what will happen, because in the beginning of May at that time in 1986, we heard from Radio Belgrade and other radio stations about the pollutions. We realized as a family, my husband and I, that Bulgaria had, obviously there was pollution. And I was pregnant. I worried about the future, how it will be for my child. It was somehow one of factors which were the reason I was involved in the environmental movement, first in Rousse Committee and after that in Eko Glasnost. One of the main purposes and objectives of these dissident organizations was to have more information about environmental issues. Of course it is somehow connected with the social and political changes in Bulgaria because it was obvious that without normal government and elected government and change in the political system, we would not have normal information or normal environmental policy.

Under the leadership of long-time Communist dictator Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian government’s secrecy with environmental information from was not its only violation of citizens’ rights. In the 1980s, the state also initiated the “regenerative process.” Intended to bolster Bulgarian nationalism, the government claimed that all Bulgarian citizens were ethnically Bulgarian, forcing ethnic Turks and others to choose Christian, “Bulgarian” names. As glasnost, or openness and transparency, became the buzzword in the USSR, Bulgarian dissidents made their meetings and actions more public. An environmental group piled dead birds in front of parliament to protest rodenticide use, and a protest against the regenerative process ended in violence when the government bussed in anti-Turkish counter-protestors.

In May 1989, facing intense opposition over the “regenerative process,” Zhivkov opened the border to Turkey. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Turks left Bulgaria, depriving several vital agricultural sectors of workers. That autumn, at a heavily publicized ecological demonstration, police beat and harassed protesters. On November 10, the day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was time for Zhivkov to fall as well. The Communist Party chose Petar Mladenov as his successor.

Sasho: All of the democratic-thinking people were very disappointed by this fact. And then, the students from Sofia University started their first strike, because they wanted to force the Socialist’s president [Mladenov] to resign. A tape had been spread out about protests that had happened several months before and the record showed that the president had actually suggested that the military come, the tanks, to deal with the protesting people. And he was taped by an amateur’s camera, video camera, and this information was spread out during the elections or right after the elections.
Gergana’s husband ran for the National Assembly to help determine the structure of a new government for Bulgaria. Meanwhile, Gergana was involved in several groups advocating for democratic and market reform.

Gergana: Of course everything was on a voluntary basis, because people were very enthusiastic. You had to have been there in order to have this impression. It is somehow the feeling that you are involved in very radical changes in society, because we were moving from an authoritarian regime to a new society.

Sasho: After that, in summer 1980, they formed a socialist government and in October 1980, a new student strike started. It was just in my beginning. I was a freshman in university. The goal of the strike was asking the Socialist government to resign. It was a purely political aim, but at the same time, in these months, Bulgaria was put in great isolation. The economy was in very bad condition, and the crisis was great. The government introduced coupons for food. We had to wake up early in the morning, actually night, to go and to buy bread or cheese or something like that. And in December 1980, the strike turned into a national strike of everyone because the trade unions joined. We started occupation of the streets, I mean we the students. The trade unions were helping us, but people there because they were not as young as we, they had more fear, they were more afraid of what is happening.

Power switched hands frequently between the UDF ("democratic") and Socialist forces in the early 1990s. Finally, in 1992, a UDF government failed a vote of no confidence, and the Bulgarians went to the polls again. The emerging government was led by the Socialists, but they were maintained in power by the Turkish party, Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Little more than a century after achieving independence from the Ottomans, many Bulgarians were uncomfortable with this privileged position of the Turkish minority. And former dissidents like Gergana were disappointed with the approach to liberalization that the Socialists took.

Gergana: This Socialist Party, when they came to power again three years after changes, they had new arrogant leaders. They blamed a very weak Democratic government which was ruling for two years for all problems in Bulgarian society. Everything wrong in Bulgaria from their point of view, it was because of Democratic government. Of course it wasn’t true. They ruled Bulgaria that way, so we had a collapse of the economy, of the bank system, of everything. That’s why at that time, in this period, I think more active people who understand things or pretended to understand or has somehow the feeling that they may help, returned to some kind of NGO work. I think all these people who established organizations, NGOs of different kinds, different advocacy groups or think tanks, they were somehow involved in the first movement for democratic society. That’s why I think it was time in Bulgaria in which NGOs were more powerful than the government. Powerful meaning that they had a more clear understanding of the agenda of society. Because they somehow have more permanent work on these issues. Because government in that time, 1997, we did not have stable government. Every two years, new government.

For Sasho, this was less a time for NGOs than for movements. And instead of ideology, he was most concerned with the practical impacts of the Socialist government enacted.

Sasho: They [the people in the Socialist cabinet] were introduced as experts. Then in the beginning of ‘94, the Minister of Education said that it’s not possible to have free education, and that students should pay for their [higher] education. And this was announced that they were starting to introduce fees for students. This was the reason for the next strike, which I participated considerably more in.

We had some elections and we elected a board of people who are in charge of the policymaking of the strikers. But this board actually did nothing, they were just there, they didn’t do anything. However, one of those people was quite experienced, he was in the past in one of the students’ organizations. And also, he was in the fifth-year class of the law faculty and he was out of my gymnasium as well. He suggested that we form an expert group of mainly lawyers and other people who like to think on the rationale of things. We formed this group and we started to develop the reasoning of the claims of the students, so we relied on some laws giving arguments that it’s not only unfair but also unlawful to shift to paid higher education and some other things.

In the beginning when we only had about 50 people who were actively striking, everyone was nervous. Some bad professors were making groups of anti-strikers who were giving trouble for us. And the ministry was saying “Who are you, we don’t like to negotiate with you or do anything with you.” In the end, I really don’t know how it happened, it just happened. We succeeded. We got the signatures of the minister and one of the deputy ministers, I think. We got the...
agreement that the government will not introduce fees as long as we were there.

During this period of political unrest, Gergana recognized a need for targeted advocacy on a specific issue: freedom for citizens to access information. Out of this need, the Access to Information Program was created.

Gergana: In the beginning of the political changes, I used to work in National Public Opinion Polls Center and after that in a marketing agency. It was in early ’90s, and a new Socialist government started political campaign for mass privatizations. Our market agency where I used to work in that time, were involved in an association of sociological and marketing agencies. Social Change was the name of this organization. My personal involvement in this organization was a survey of public attitudes to mass privatization. At that time I realized again how it was important to have informed public opinion to have knowledge of every ordinary citizen what is the policy of government. To know what are the projects of government in order to have normal public participation. Otherwise it is propaganda, these decisions of government and political parties without access of ordinary people and citizens to the documents, the information which influenced the decision. That’s why it was my somehow personal belief that it is important issue. Several people, sociologists, three lawyers, we applied for our first project in 1995.

You have to know that the second Socialist government in 1994 started again very typical socialist behavior as a government. That’s why it was in the end of 1996, it was hyperinflation in Bulgaria. It was bankrupts. The entire bank system was in catastrophe and for three months people went on the streets in the beginning of 1997. People surrounded parliament. It was an interesting time again.

2. “The Time for Discussion”: Democratic Theory and Practice in Bulgaria

As hardship threatened the country and riots overtook the cities, Bulgaria’s seemingly inevitable movement toward “democracy” became more complicated. With the government switching so frequently, it became more relevant to understand what kind of democracy Bulgaria would be. Recognizing the ambivalent nature of “democracy” in any context, not just a time of transition, I took a particular interest in the perspective of political theory toward this vague term. In trying to understand how political theory is understood and can be applied to the Eastern European case, I found Ellen Comisso’s presentation of three streams of thought on the subject to be a useful starting point. The first stream, procedural democracy, is the most limited in its requirements, looking only toward how leaders are selected and the rules by which they set policy. Liberal democracy is often conflated with pure procedural democracy, but it prioritizes certain outcomes of the process, especially the liberalization of the market. Similarly, egalitarian, or “strong,” democracy requires specific attention to the way decisions are made and how social and economic inequities are corrected.

Joseph Schumpeter is the most prominent theorist associated with a procedural approach to democracy. With an eye toward the USSR and radical social movements of the American Great Depression, Schumpeter avoids ascribing very much meaning to democracy. Instead, he treats democracy primarily as a method for society to choose between elite groups that are competing for power. He has little hope, or even interest, in the possibility for ordinary citizens to have any more control over the policy and governance of their state. All that matters is that there is some mechanism for the citizens to change who is in power. In developing Schumpeter’s theory into a broader and more contemporary one, Ellen Comisso includes a few other basic procedural measures. According to her, elections must be accurately administered, but need not register high turnouts. Additionally, the government must operate according to some sort of set of rules, including rule-of-law precedent. Beyond these basic guidelines, however, Comisso shares Schumpeter’s disregard for the outcomes of the process.

Many other models of democracy, including the two I will discuss, share this basic procedural framework. However, these “substantive” forms, as Comisso calls them, add a concern for the results that come out of the process. Liberal – or libertarian – democratic thought works from the assumption that political freedom requires property rights to maintain itself. Led by theorists like Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, who wrote during the height of the ideological Cold War, this movement discredits social democratic states for their willingness to plan or even regulate the market. Democracy is valuable inasmuch as it leaves people alone and to their own devices. The major goal of this stream of thought is liberty in an absolute sense, with the protection of property rights the paramount and only goal of government. In this context, elections exist less to express the people’s will than to keep the government in check from becoming too large.

The final stream of thought in democratic theory, egalitarian democracy, takes an opposite stance toward the outcomes of the process of governing. Rather than valuing most highly the right to be left alone, egalitarian democrats, according to Comisso, prioritize political, social and economic equality, encouraging outcomes that reduce inequality among citizens. In order to achieve this end, groups affected by policy must be involved in the decision-making process to ensure that their needs and opinions are taken into account. Although Comisso presents this as instrumental to the real goal of social equality, other theorists discuss this involvement in policymaking as valuable for its own sake. Benjamin Barber speaks from his experience in the American New Left movement of the late 1960s and 1970s about democratic...
involvement’s potential to change how a person approaches the political community and public interest. By speaking with more people and becoming more involved in the political process she should gain a greater appreciation for the community as a whole and be more willing to make compromises for the sake of the community. Similarly, Amartya Sen discusses the “constructive function” of democracy, which leads a community to discuss its values, goals and even needs. In the end, these theories are useful in two ways. The aspects of the theories that focus on results, whether the libertarian dedication to property rights or the egalitarian quest for social equality, serve more accurately as ideologies that guide the actions of citizens and governments than as accurate descriptions of democracy as enacted in the world. For an American “progressive” like myself, concerned for social justice, the transition into the libertarian environment at AIP was a shock. For them, the state was necessarily construed as enemy of society, blocking the people’s right to exercise control over their own property and live their own lives. From working on grassroots electoral campaigns like Howard Dean’s unsuccessful run for presidency and Deval Patrick’s successful bid to be governor of Massachusetts, I was much more accustomed to rhetoric about working together toward a common good through government.

In practice, the situation appeared to be just as strange for a hard-line American progressive. At first glance, many of the people I spoke with in Sofia had little trust in the accountability of the political process. The political parties seem essentially interchangeable, and politicians reinforce this belief by frequently switching parties and ideologies. Even among active groups like AIP, there was little faith in the ability of anyone who was not a member of parliament, or even a member of one of the ruling parties, to actually generate policy. Publicly declaring legislation as a goal, whether in a funding application or a statement to the press, was considered very irresponsible. However, to look only at these factors in Bulgarian democracy would be a mistake. Sasho’s experience as a leader of the student protest movements in the early 1990s illustrates the more active side of Bulgarian democracy. At first, student strikes and protests were more general, demanding that entire governments step down or striking for human rights. As the political situation “normalized,” the reasons for striking became more and more narrowly defined. As Sasho said with regard to the student strike against tuition:

This was the first time when we had the feeling that we were doing something for ourselves, not for political reasons. The first discussion was what would be the aim of the strike. There was a big discussion whether to have the aim be to ask the government to resign, but we decided not to have this claim because of at least two reasons. The first reason was that the students participating had different political views and some of them did not like to have political statements and claims. The second reason was that there was not much justification. We didn’t face any kind of crisis or something like that, so it was not justified to have political claims. And the real reason we were there was these damn fees and the fact that it’s not fair, when you went to the university, when you had your plans, you bear in mind that you have free education. This is the ground on which you make your plans and suddenly they change the rules, that’s not fair.

Many of the people I talked to echoed this sense that personal issues should be prioritized over broader, “political” ones. Protests still occur on specific issues and are organized by specific affected groups, like the protests in towns that are in consideration to be the site of the next Sofia City Dump. But general protests are often viewed with suspicion. When students this summer began to campaign against the re-zoning of a protected beach named Irakli, I heard many other people hypothesize that they only wanted the beach to stay protected so they could continue to camp there illegally, not because they feared the detrimental effects to the beach’s environment and wildlife.

Even as I heard about the declining impact and occurrence of these protests, I also heard about how important they were for the people involved. The students who were working on the Irakli campaign saw themselves as hope for the future of meaningful democracy in their country, and were generally amazed at the attention that they could garner. Sasho’s experiences as a student helped him to understand his goals as a lawyer, so that he not only addresses public concerns as head of AIP’s legal team, but tries to address corruption and injustice in private practice as well.

These effects confirm some of Barber’s and Sen’s ideas about the transformative and constructive potential of democratic practice, but they also seem to disprove others. They line up well with how the Irakli protesters described themselves, but Sasho doesn’t seem to fit well into Barber’s paradigm. As he and his friends from school became more active in politics, their concerns became more and more specific, and more and more parochial.

In order to understand this paradox, it is helpful to look further back into the history of political thought, to Benjamin Constant. Constant, a French liberal (libertarian) of the 19th century, arguing against the participatory democracy and violence of the French Revolution, claims that with the advent of capitalism, participatory democracy has less of a place in modern society. The market has a fundamentally privatizing logic, promoting a division between the public and private spheres of interest and...
activity. Beyond that, it promotes an ever-expanding private, commercial sector with which the public is expected not to interfere. In a context where democratization is so closely intertwined with movement toward market capitalism, this effect would be even stronger. Progress would be associated with more and more “privatized” political involvement, representing narrower issues and interests.

Taking Constant’s point to another level may explain the dynamic of competing elites in the political scene. The market operates primarily on the basis of choice between pre-existing options, rather than a more abstract sort of voice or participation in creating those options. The most direct application of this kind of choice to politics would be a system like the one Schumpeter describes. Bulgarians today choose products and parties from among those that are provided by economic and political elites. Considering that these elites frequently overlap, consolidating power further, it’s unsurprising that many Bulgarians are pessimistic and apathetic about politics and their abilities to effect significant change.

“Transparency merely entails the government’s choice not to actively hide information, but information cannot be free in and of itself, in some passive way.”

A coordinator at the Red House Center for Culture and Debate told me, “Then, it was the time for protests, but now we are in the time for discussion.” Unfortunately, the discussions still only happen among small groups, like the concerned citizens that meet at the Red House or the members of the business/political elite who discuss real estate and banking reform at their mountain villas. As Bulgaria goes further in this age of discussion and the Irakli generation takes the reins, it is hard to say which direction “democratization” will go.

3. “They have to be interested more.”

The Whys and Hows of Freedom of Information Advocacy

If concerned citizens want to find out what the projected environmental impact of a nuclear power plant will be, they need access to the government reports that led to that choice of location. When others raise questions of government corruption in the financing of NGOs, the right to know allows them to examine the contracts for signs of foul play. And after a controversial vote within the United Nations, the freedom of information allows any organization or person to leaf through the position papers commissioned by their country’s U.N. ambassador.

Whether approaching democracy from a liberal or egalitarian perspective, it is necessary to secure this right to freedom of information. The AIP website, written by staunch liberal democrats, states, “As information is a resource of vital importance at the present time, public servants must not be held in privilege because of their advantage of possessing it.” As a vital resource, information should not be greedily held by the state.

But AIP also has a streak of Barber’s “Strong Democracy,” recognizing the importance of an involved and participative citizenry. For this reason, Gergana hates to discuss “transparency.” “Transparency is somehow the policy of the government. Access to Information is more important for citizens because it is a right of citizens. They’re interested more in the right to information; they have to be interested more.” Transparency merely entails the government’s choice not to actively hide information, but information cannot be free in and of itself, in some passive way. Citizens have the right to know what the government knows, and therefore to speak, publish, petition, and protest with just as much information. This right has only been recognized recently, with legislatures worldwide only starting to recognize it during the 20th century. Nonetheless, concerned democracy activists at the Grand National Assembly of 1990, which restructured Bulgarian government, enshrined the right “to seek, obtain and disseminate information” as Article 41 of the Bulgarian constitution. This guarantee, without specific laws clarifying its procedures and limitations, proved largely ineffective.

When AIP was founded in 1996, most Bulgarian journalists, the most natural exploiters of the right to know, were hesitant to pursue the creation of formalized structures for provision of public information. They were more willing to rely on the informal networks they had established under late socialism and since then, and concerned that a law would merely create more difficulty and bureaucracy in the search for information. Even if there had to be a law, they thought that they should retain a monopoly on access, with no other citizens allowed to make requests. In this harsh context, AIP began its campaign for an Access to Information law, modeled after the American Freedom of Information Act. Thanks to AIP’s efforts, Bulgaria’s Access to Public Information Act (APIA) was enacted in 2000, one of the earliest in Eastern Europe.

As pioneering as this law was, it could only be as useful as it was implemented. In order to ensure that this implementation fulfilled the potential of the law, AIP has continued activity along several lines. Foremost among these is litigation and legal advice. Cases pour into the AIP office by a variety of means. Journalists in towns across the country form a network of coordinators that gather cases of information requests and refusals from government agencies that require legal advice. Thanks to AIP’s prominent position among many local advocacy NGO’s, groups from all corners of the country and a wide variety of issue interests contact AIP for help finding information. Finally, a small group of individuals also employ AIP’s legal services.

All of these cases are important on a number of levels. First and foremost is the significance to the requestors of the information. With AIP’s help, they can uncover information of
public interest about highway contracts, environmental impact plans or conflicts of interest of elected officials. Furthermore, by setting an official judicial precedent, each successful case makes future information requests easier. Thanks to laws passed quickly after the fall of communism that require high levels of experience to serve in the court, many of the court officials remain statist and old-fashioned. This leads to tensions between precedent and the personal preferences or interests of the judges involved. While early rulings were remarkably erratic, it is now more likely that precedent will be followed on freedom of information cases. Judges have begun to define the difficult balances between protecting non-governmental persons and releasing information of national interest or between national security and the citizens’ right to know. From early in AIP’s history, these cases were put to even further use.

Even before the Access to Public Information Act was passed, Gergana and the other founders determined that AIP must be a “Programme,” incorporating a wide range of activities. They realized that the best way to improve understanding and exercise of the right to know among Bulgarian society was through individual stories of information refusal. People were skeptical of broad political ideologies and abstract campaigns, but specific stories and people could still speak to them. Sometimes the cases appear to be trivial, as with the artist whose design was not chosen for Bulgaria’s new official seal and wanted to know why. Other times, the cases highlight important questions for Bulgaria as a whole, such as the issues raised with regard to the building of a nuclear plant in Belene. Over the summer that I was there, the stories from these cases were publicized through interviews and stories in the mainstream media, a monthly online newsletter and a weekly radio show. (Because the radio station that had hosted this show is converting from public radio to entertainment radio, it is unlikely that the radio show will survive.) It has now become trendy among journalists to make a high profile information request and write about the extensive process of litigation that follows, which has the side effect of further educating the public about their information rights.

Along with all of these efforts on the demand side, AIP pays constant attention to the institutions and agencies that hold public information. For several years, they have organized trainings for public servants at the local, regional, and national levels of government. At the training I attended for regional government officials in the Southeast area of the country around the coastal city of Bourgas, specific cases clarified some of the complicated nuances of the Access to Public Information Act’s exceptions and requirements. At the end, all of the officials participated in a simulation, deciding how to respond to real cases that AIP has brought to the court. In addition to these trainings, AIP staff, particularly the younger coordinators, Nikolay and Diana, conduct monitoring surveys of government institutions to see how well they are meeting international and Bulgarian standards of information provision. For example, many of these surveys are coordinated with organizations in other countries, so as to provide a comprehensive picture of the state of active provision of information over the internet or reactions to information requests by ethnic minority representatives.

Although AIP has been pursuing these litigation, education, training and monitoring activities for 10 years, the right to know still faces serious challenges in Bulgaria. Ministries and agencies often use excuses like the protection of a third party’s (often commercial) interests or the protection of personal data. Where they could merely block out a page or two of sensitive information, sometimes as little as a sentence, they block the release of the entire document. Even worse, an entire category of internal, “administrative” information is exempted from APIA, in order to “protect the decision-making process.” This information, which includes any documents produced leading up to a final report or action, often contains vital data or is the only knowledge available before a government action, but it is frequently kept secret by institutions, supported by the courts.

4. “A Spirit of Common Work”: Sustainability, Leadership, and Communities in the Day-to-day Life of AIP

As funding grows scarcer for NGOs in Bulgaria, AIP is looking at diversifying its funding sources and its activities. Although the litigation program is permanently funded by the Open Society Justice Initiative, all the other activities are funded by limited-term projects. Because of their frequently oppositional stance toward the government, it would be difficult and problematic to provide government services beyond the implementation trainings. While I was in Sofia, the staff discussed possibilities such as long-term corporate sponsorship to remedy this problem. In addition, AIP is enhancing its visibility on the international level as a leader and successful model for information rights campaign. Many staff members hope that they can leverage this status to become consultants for organizations currently pushing for information rights legislation. With more academic “experts” floating around the world of freedom of information access, AIP’s focus on practical experience would be less problematic than imported theoretical models.

One of the primary networks that organizes this community of activists, NGOs and academics is FOIANet. FOIANet, the Freedom of Information Advocates Network, most commonly interacts over an internet listserve maintained by AIP. Several times a week, an organization will ask the 90 or so organizations and individuals in countries around the world for advice or information about the state of the right to know in their countries. FOIANet members also meet at regional meetings and conferences. Diana, my supervisor and friend, described how one meeting of Southeastern and Eastern European
organizations convinced her to continue to work for AIP. “I felt like I belonged to something, that I was a part of something bigger.” Through the cooperation of these groups, individual organizations can easily find facts and support to bring “global/European standards” and the “global community of FOI advocates” into discussions with reluctant governments. These groups lean left, right, and center, attaching many different values on ideas like democracy and human rights, but on this issue they can find consensus and work together.

In addition to this wide-ranging group, Gergana maintains contact with a community of NGO leaders who she had known during her days as a dissident before 1989, particularly environmental movements and those opposing the government’s “regenerative process.” This community can be difficult to define. Certainly, some individuals and the organizations they represent are obvious members, such as Kapka Panayotova’s Center for Independent Living (CIL) and Yuriy Ivanov’s Public Barometer in Silven. After the early changes, this group quickly became disenchanted with the corrupted politics of the United Democratic Forces and sought ways to effect change in the “third sector” of civil society. Other individuals and organizations in the community, like Dessislava and the Bulgarian Gay Organization-Gemini were influenced strongly by these former dissidents (in the Gay Organization’s case, Panayotova and CIL). Although there are no official networks, conferences or meetings connecting these organizations, their common memories and the value they place on self-sufficiency encourage them to cooperate and use each other’s resources. This is why a conference on archives of the totalitarian security services was sponsored by Zelevi Balkani (Green Balkans, an environmental group), and AIP was formed in the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee’s offices. The reciprocity involved in these relationships is particularly illustrated by CIL, who uses AIP’s legal services extensively and also volunteered to be in the trial group of AIP’s NGO trainings on the right to information.

Beyond Bulgaria’s borders, a broader ideological movement, the right-wing libertarian movement, connects Gergana along yet other lines. She joined somewhat by accident. Her husband, Krassen, had been friends with members of the American right wing for years, since America first sent political experts to him in 1989 to help him build the Institute for Market Economics, Bulgaria’s first free think tank. Thus, Gergana encountered these American “democracy” experts in a social capacity, at dinners and parties after conferences. At one of these dinners, Gergana was energetically explaining the work of AIP to representatives of the Heritage Foundation and the Atlas Economic Research Foundation (named from Ayn Rand’s novel Atlas Shrugged), and Krassen, one of the AIP lawyers, walked into the restaurant with a group of friends. This chance meeting illustrated the concreteness of the work of AIP, and before long, Gergana was invited to apply for Atlas’s Templeton Awards. That year, AIP won the Templeton Freedom Prize in Ethics and Values and a Templeton Freedom Award Grant. (Ironically, Diana, the member of the staff most notably associated with the Left, wrote this application as one of her first jobs at AIP. Winning the grant solidified her decision to work there.) At the award presentation and following a conference in Miami, as well as later conferences in Colorado, Gergana learned more about fundraising and organizational strategies, and connected with other individuals working for free governments and markets from the Philippines to Nigeria. Thus, beyond the organizational tools that Gergana takes from these annual meetings, she also gains a sense of less tangible support from following others’ activities around the world.

Within the office, Gergana continues to display a remarkable sense of initiative. Moving quickly around the office, she grows in frustration or excitedly points out an article that quotes her in the International Herald Tribune. Although she talks about maintaining a “spirit of common work,” she is definitely the boss of the office and the regional expert on freedom of information. All decisions inevitably defer to her.

This expertise can be so strong as to be intimidating. When Diana stayed home to work on her thesis, Gergana was still not far away. Diana sat surrounded by freedom of information legislation from around the world. Some Midwestern American state’s law on electronic publication was now a bookmark in the South African access law. In the margins of these scattered books and sheets of paper, short notes in small, neat handwriting extracted important facts in Bulgarian or English. As she rose to make a cup of tea, she began to discuss her anxieties about finishing her thesis before the deadline and taking time off work to write it. She explained that Gergana hadn’t wanted her to take on this Master’s in the first place. As she spoke, her dark eyes grew wide. “Josh, Gergana knows so much about freedom of information. There’s no way I can teach her anything new.”

Nonetheless, Gergana frequently is successful in having a “spirit of common work” in the office. Sharing whiskey and peanuts in the kitchen-turned-smoking room. Standing together at a wedding, whispering about how beautiful the bride is. Furtively chatting across the office on ICQ while the boss thinks you’re working. All of these activities, ranging from official and sanctioned to informal and probably forbidden, reinforce the sense of social connection within the AIP office.

The internet, in particular, appears to serve Gergana’s purpose of “common work.” Internet chat programs help to combat the spatial
divisions between the different working groups. Although the general “coordinators,” lawyers and Mariana the accountant are only a few feet apart from each other, their separate offices could easily limit communication without ICQ, their chat program of choice. Furthermore, the conversations that take place over those programs and in person use lighthearted criticism and joking to flatten the office hierarchy and make a horizontal workspace. These relationships provide a welcoming and informal base to which AIP employees can bring ideas and from which they can draw support to pursue organizational goals.

5. Opening the Box: Dossiers and the Past

One of the first displays of Bulgaria’s ability to be healthy enough to join the European Union was a far-reaching 1997 report that documented the past involvement that many public figures had had with the Socialist government or even its security services. With the European Commission ready to vote on whether Bulgaria was ready to enter the Union in the fall, the next major step to transparency in the country’s past happened on May 15. The Minister of the Interior announced that he would finally implement the decision to open the archives, inspiring journalist Angelina Petrova to request the dossiers of many leading journalists, editors and owners of media outlets. The results from her request revealed that four current leading journalists had been agents in the totalitarian security services. Media organizations expressed outrage, creating an organization named Clean Voices for the explicit purpose of ridding the media of former collaborators. In the next weeks, the government slowly opened files implicating several more prominent individuals in the activities of the security services. As political parties wheatpasted conflicting demands across Sofia’s walls (“Open the dossiers,” “Protect personal information”), the conflict simmered over the summer. For some of my colleagues, the scandal was very important for Bulgaria’s future. For others, and many of the Bulgarians I talked to, the opening of some dossiers was merely a political ploy to discredit enemies, suck up to the European Union, or both. Finally, as I was preparing to leave Bulgaria, there seemed to be developments. The Green/European Free Alliance block in the European Parliament was sponsoring a conference, along with AIP and several other organizations, to discuss the opening of the archives, and Roumen Petkov, the interior minister was attending.

I was very excited as I approached the National Palace of Culture, or NDK, a massive structure that dominates the southern half of the city center. This maze of conference halls, performance spaces and exhibitions was created at the desire of Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of Todor Zhivkov. She believed that the children of Bulgaria needed a palace to celebrate arts and culture, so she bulldozed a small central neighborhood to build it. Today, the building echoes the rise of the Vitosha mountain behind it. Billboards, banners and a giant television screen advertise products and events, while semi-permanent food vendors hawk pizza, ice cream, beer and sausages. Old men and women sit on the benches, watching the skateboarders and bicyclists negotiate Zhivkova’s landscape design. Stairs lead down to a shopping center and bus stop below NDK and security guards wait just inside the doors of the building. Diana and I approached the main entrance of the building, only to be directed around the back to what looked like a service entrance. Slipping between news vans, we wandered through back hallways, asked directions to two oddly placed security guards, and finally arrived at Hall 6, where the conference was being held. A tall, elaborate mural in the social realist style appeared to document the history of the tortured Bulgarian proletariat, as archivists from across Central Europe lined up in front of it.

At first, reporters were buzzing around the entrance and the front of the room, but most of them disappeared soon after Minister Petkov’s address, which predictably paid lip service to the idea of opening the files while reserving the government’s right to keep some personal dossiers secret. As the microphones followed Petkov out the door, hoping for a sound bite, the remaining journalists were woed out by a series of presentations on the logistical and methodological issues of dealing with totalitarian archives, a topic which I think only Diana found interesting. By the afternoon session, there were no journalists left.

At this point I began to realize how unusual my presence at this conference was. For one thing, there were so few non-Bulgarians that one friendly woman, upon noticing that I was listening to the English translation, tried to tell me that I was on the wrong channel. More specifically, I noticed how old the attendees for the conference were. The average age seemed to be around 70, and most of them were men. Furthermore, all of the individuals who spoke appeared to be former dissidents. One man, who called himself a “client” of the security services, broke into tears as he described the torture he had experienced and questioned whether “my children will be governed by the people who sent me to prison.” In fact, not all of the old men were victims of the security services. Sasho, one of my colleagues, pointed out to me that many of them were actually former agents of the totalitarian regime, currently on state pension rolls. This was the first conference any of my colleagues had seen with such high attendance from this group. Although they remained too stigmatized to voice their opinions, any victim who spoke graphically about his experiences or angrily regarding the future got applauded loudly — drowning out the rest of his speech.

The one young person who asked a question, a student, blamed the notable absence of other young people on the excuses that all ruling governments have made for keeping the files secret, claiming a lack of “political will.” This sentiment resounded throughout the conference. Even the host of conference, a Member of European Parliament from Belgium, spoke disdainfully of “European
Socialists who don’t realize that changing a C [for Communist] to an S [for Socialist] does not create democratic, legitimate socialism.” Yanko Yankov, a law professor who Amnesty International called Bulgaria’s foremost political prisoner in the 1980s, compared the conference itself to players performing for Hamlet’s uncle, with the king remaining unguilty. While his analogy may not quite fit most understandings of Shakespeare’s play, the sense of futility which he described, with all the speakers and attendees merely entertaining the elite, was clear. Without any real hope for progress, it was unsurprising that no one without a personal stake in the proceedings would show up.

As the conference went later into the afternoon, the civility and tedium that had dominated the morning session soon disappeared. Screaming, crying men would speak out of turn, unable to get to a microphone. Over and over, the men expressed their distrust of the current government, despair of the future and disgust at the European Union for not pushing the Bulgarian government more visibly. Although they often seemed to say the same things, there were many arguments. At times, disagreements were so loud and frequent that in order to understand, I had to look at the translator, trying to read his lips. In the midst of this chaotic scene, one victim of the dissidents approached a microphone and waited his turn. When it came, he introduced himself, and asked whether information concerning the contemporary persecution of persons claiming Macedonian ethnicity would also be published. Before he could finish, he was booed and pushed away from his microphone. Only two participants went to speak with him afterward, both affiliated with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, a human rights group. Apparently, the one thing that all of the participants could agree on, whether dissident or agent, was the illegitimacy of Macedonian ethnicity.

As I left the conference, I stopped to take one of the conference posters as a souvenir. Between the title and the long string of sponsors’ logos, there is a picture of a statue against a black background. An ancient Pandora leans over her ornately decorated box, poised to open it. Undoubtedly, some social ills will escape when she opens the box, like political unrest and discrimination on the basis of people’s pasts. But the box also holds something incredibly valuable: hope for Bulgaria to be able to move beyond its past and into a future without fear of neo-totalitarian mafias or governments.

### Epilogue: “Make our Capital a European One”

On September 26, 2006, the European Commission’s Monitoring Report on Bulgaria and Romania confirmed that Bulgaria will enter the European Union on January 1, 2007. Although there are some official safeguards in place and Great Britain has already announced that Bulgarians will not enjoy free movement to their country, many questions are left unanswered. Will the exodus of the productive generation of Bulgarians to the West that started in 1990 grow even worse? Will all of the Bulgarian small businesses that are not run into the ground by more developed competition simply be bought out by multinational corporations from Germany and the Netherlands? Will shkembe, a soup of tripe that is practically the national dish, pass muster for EU food safety laws?

With all of these questions looming, one last set is particularly appropriate for AIP and many other NGOs. A brochure for the Sofia public transportation company, begging residents to follow the rules of the buses and trams, exhorts, “Make our capital a European one!” Now that Sofia and Bulgaria have been accepted into the club of European capitals and countries, will the pressure be off the people and government? Without the threat of “European standards,” will citizens and groups be able to affect the actions of the state, or has joining the European Union removed the last carrot and stick from the NGOs’ arsenal? Now that Bulgaria is a member of all the European and Atlantic organizations it had aspired toward, what is next on the horizon? Is the transition that lasted a decade-and-a-half finally over? At this point, these questions are unanswerable. No matter what else, I am certain that on January 2, 2007, as the debris from New Year’s and Accession celebrations is cleaned up from around Nevsky Cathedral, a staunch Soviet soldier will continue to fix his iron gaze over the changes below, his cold fist raising a rifle high into the air.
Further Reading


Notes

1. Although the other passages in this section are transcripts from taped interviews, this passage and the one that follows are reconstructed from notes taken after un-taped interviews.

2. The Bulgarian Communist Party quickly changed its name to the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

3. Blame for the hyperinflation and economic crisis of the mid-1990’s lies on both political parties, as well as on forces beyond their control. Faced with external, internal, and ideological pressures, both sides implemented hastily constructed policies, especially with regard to privatization. The Socialist government’s refusal to accept IMF guidelines made the crisis inevitable.


8. The uniqueness of Macedonian ethnicity, nationhood, and language are heavily disputed by two of its neighbors, Bulgaria and Greece. When the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) declared its independence in 1991, Bulgaria recognized it as a state, but refused to recognize the nation or language. Even this step was highly controversial among Bulgarian citizens.
To be creative a person must exist and have a feeling of existing, not in conscious awareness, but as a basic place to operate from. Creativity is then the doing that arises out of being. It indicates that he who is, is alive.


The summer of 2006 I spent in Johannesburg’s dry winter. That summer/winter I got the opportunity to work at The Art Therapy Centre, a small NGO doing an ambitious job of contributing to the healing of the South African community. I was doing my internship with the Centre as part of my fellowship at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis University.

The Art Therapy Centre works mainly with survivors of the Apartheid regime and offers healing in a social context. Although Apartheid was officially over with the first democratic elections in 1994, almost thirteen years ago, there is still a lot of need for emotional support. The Centre offers group counseling as well as training to people from the community to become art counselors.

This collection of photographs and personal stories brings together the people who make the Art Therapy Centre what it is. Without them, there would be no art and no healing. Their portraits and stories represent not only the Centre’s work but also the story of South Africa. The anthropologist Lindsay French writes that photographs have a unique way of capturing reality:

Photographs – especially portraits – really contain very little information. They cannot tell us very much. They are mostly suggestive – as Roland Barthes says, “Photographs make novelists of us all.” … But photographs can suggest something … They establish a human link with someone whose experience is distant from ours and difficult for us to imagine, and in that way bring us closer to something that is otherwise very hard to think about.1

The portraits together with the written text try to capture the vibrant community which makes The Art Therapy Centre. At the same time, these people represent different segments of the society in South Africa. Hopefully, it will enable the reader to experience some of what is difficult to imagine.

Many people, including the staff and teachers of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, helped in making this project possible. To them and to the people who let me capture a part of their lives and soul by sharing their life stories and letting me take photographs for this project, I am thankful. I especially want to thank Danny Myburgh, who drove me all around Johannesburg and welcomed me into her life. I also thank Pam Allara, Daniel Terris, the ECSF of 2006, Marci McPhee, Alfredo Gisholt, Hannah Safran and Giora Hon, who helped me create this work.

The following portraits and narratives are part of a larger photography project.
Mokgadi Ratable, who lives with her three children in Hoodsport
Hayley Berman
37 Galway Road
Parkview

Hayley Berman lives with her husband, son, daughter and two dogs.

I grew up in Johannesburg, in a big house in Sandhurst, which at the time was like a remote suburb which is now the elite suburb, and it was a really lovely big, big thatch roofed house, with a big garden, lots of dogs, three sisters, mom and a dad, and I think I had a very privileged life. I think the fact that I had three older sisters was useful because they started asking the questions before I could start asking the questions. So I sort of understood from quite early, I think, what Apartheid was and what indoctrination was.

When I was in my matric, just before matric, when I was 17, I had a car accident. In the accident I broke my back and I was burnt so I was in hospital for about two months in traction, and so I missed my first term of school, really of my matric year. When I did go back to school, I didn’t go to school much because I was having lots of operations and surgery. The power relations that I was sensitive to as a child around black and white, I sort of experienced as a patient in a hospital with doctors that didn’t speak to me as a person but rather as an object or as a thing or talked past me or through my parents.

When I moved schools, so I was in King David School, which is a Jewish school. I went for my last two years, and it was the first time I had experienced any kind of liberal democratic thinking about the country or having a history teacher that was a politician and had done history at Wits. We used to go on marches as part of our history classes and deconstruct cartoons that were written by government, so it was a very exciting year. I had an art teacher who was British and really supported me making art as part of healing and understanding where I was coming from.

When I did art for matric, I got a distinction for art and got the art award and it was the first time that I sort of felt like I was – that my art had meaning. I think before that it was my sister who was the artist and I wasn’t. I mean I didn’t think I would pursue art. Then I knew about art therapy and did some. Even then I started reading books about art therapy and decided that was what I wanted to do. When I started my fine arts degree, I did it with the aim of becoming an art therapist and my initial interview was – I said I wanted to be an art therapist, and they said, “Well, by the time you finish, you will forget you ever wanted to do that.” I didn’t.

When I finished the training in London, I came back to South Africa. It was 1992. It was about coming back and sharing the work. I think it’s always been from the beginning about creating spaces for people to create and be all they want to be and make it available and accessible to everybody.

The Art Therapy Centre was my studio; I just called it that because when I had to write for proposals or when I was asked to do a job I would have a letterhead that said Art Therapy Centre. So it was not formalized as an NGO. In 1994, I started training people and laying a foundation course in art therapy, and that is how the NGO came about.

— From an interview with Hayley Berman
21 July 200
Phumzile Rakosa
19 Moepel Street
Elspark, Germiston

Phumzile Rakosa lives with her two sons, Katheo and Siphiwe, and her daughter, Lebohamg. (Phumzile’s two nephews, Swazi and Lesego, are also in the photograph.)

I was born and grew up in Soweto, Johannesburg. We were nine at home. There were a lot of us there and although we struggled, it was fun. It was a very notorious place to be in. So many things were happening in Soweto. It was a place with a lot of gangsters and riots. Everything that happened, happened in Soweto. We were always kept at home. We had to be home before six, because after that time it was very dangerous outside.

We used to go to church on Sunday. That was our source of survival, which I think it still is. I go every Sunday to church; it is in Vosloorus, about ten kilometers from here. My priest has been a very important person in my life.

When I was doing Std 5, I was removed from Soweto to come to Vosloorus because it was very dangerous for me to stay in Soweto. Girls were raped and a lot of things were happening there so we had to move to Vosloorus. My sister got married and got a house, so I moved in with her and somehow raised by her until I finished college. I was doing a diploma in education. I met my husband at the college. We had children, got married and I stayed with him in Vosloorus.

We had a house in Vosloorus, and then he passed away in 1998. He was involved in a car accident. He was with my kids. I had two kids then and I was expecting my little girl. So he passed away during that time and both my children were injured in the accident. After he passed away I stayed for about three years in Vosloorus, and then in 2001 I moved to this house, because it was not easy for me to stay in that house. Because of him, knowing that he was there and he is not there anymore. Living here is very quiet. My life is mine, no one to intrude. I am just happy.

I got involved in the Art Therapy Centre immediately when my husband got injured in the accident. I was identified by the department of education to go there for a support group for educators. I went there for getting my own support, and when I got there I realized how it helped me and I felt like I needed to help others.

Before I went to art therapy I felt like I was alone and then all these things were happening to me because I was… I don’t know how to put it, but I felt there was something wrong with me. But now after I have been to art therapy I realized that it was not only me. I would like to have more time to do art therapy, but I am finding it very difficult because I have to be an educator in the morning, I teach at school for children with mental illnesses in Katlehong, and then in the afternoon I have to go to art spaces and work there. At the end of the day I get very tired, but because I am enjoying it I am not finding it hard for me to continue. I feel like if I could have more time; maybe I would leave teaching to do only art therapy. I think that it is what I do best and I know when I have touched those children’s lives I can notice a difference.

— From an interview with Phumzile Rakosa
11 July 2006
Danny Myburgh
10 Armgh Road
Parkview

_Danny Myburgh lives with her husband, two sons and four dogs._

I was born in Cape Town but grew up in Johannesburg. I am a white South African. I have had a privileged upbringing and went to private schools. My parents were not supporters of the Nationalist Party and we were very critical of the politics in the country at the time. My parents were not activists but they were liberal, old fashioned liberal. So they criticized but did nothing.

I went to a white Afrikaans University. I studied law. It was in the early ’80s and Apartheid was still very much entrenched, but there was a lot of resistance and the student organizations were active in resistance politics. I was a member of a number of student organizations, and that was very difficult because the student body supported the Apartheid government and friends of mine were very critical of what I had done and in retrospect I also realized that some of my class mates that befriended me were actually spies and they were trying to find out from me what was going on.

After I graduated I worked as a judge’s clerk. I worked for a very enlightened judge called Judge Richard Goldstone. At the time he was known as a very liberal judge. Although he was enforcing the Apartheid legislation, if ever he could find a reason not to uphold it, he would, and it was very often based on some sort of international law. So I did that for about three years and then he went to the Appeal Court and I went and worked for the _Weekly Mail_. They were also a “resistance newspaper.” There were lots and lots of censorship laws, so they had to abide by the censorship laws if they wanted to print, and they often got banned and they often got into trouble and they were often taken to court, and so I worked for them because I had a legal background.

I worked there until I had my first son, Simon. Three years later, Thomas was born in 1995. At that time I stopped working and concentrated more on my artwork. I painted for many years. And then at some stage, when Thomas was about 3, that was in 1998, I started teaching children art at my home. I was doing what I felt like doing, just being creative, having fun with them and in the process I noticed things about these kids that came up through their artwork.

Also I decided to go into therapy. Someone connected me with Hayley, and I became part of a group that did art therapy together. After about two years I realized that I wanted to be an art therapist. Up until then I had regarded it as my therapy. That is how I got involved with the center work.

At one point I put together a proposal. It was like a dream that I think that all children should have access to art therapy in schools because art therapy is able to address so many internal problems in a non-threatening way. That is the way that children relate to and I had done some research on what happens in community centers in England and I thought that this was what one should do in South African schools.

—from an interview with Danny Myburgh
8 July 2006
I grew up here in Kathlehong in this house. I was born in a two-room house and we grew up in this house. We were five. Later on, my eldest sister assisted us to build two rooms, then it became four rooms, and when I started working, I was helped by my other sister to build the other two rooms that was outside. This is how we expanded.

Growing up in Kathlehong has been wonderful, although there have been ups and downs when we grew up, later on, when there was violence in the late 90s. It was tough, very challenging growing up in the Apartheid situation. There was so much segregation and less opportunity, and so we black people couldn’t do what we wanted to do at the time, and it was very difficult.

I started working at the age of 9 as a gardener as well as carrying parcels for people in town in order to get cash and bring it home. I was being supported by my mother who was a domestic servant, she worked in Germiston and Boksburg, but my sisters as well were working on part-time basis in some shops.

I did join the struggle but without my parents knowing that. They only knew later that I was part of the struggle. I was distributing the information for the organization for the student movement. I was a teenager then.

I was an angry young man. I was angry about the system because it prevented us being yourself and exploring in the way that you wanted to be and it is only now that, at my age, I can go back and do some of the things that I wanted to do.

It was only through art therapy that I realized my potential. Art therapy became a healing process for me. I got involved with the Centre in 1998. I was invited to attend a workshop where there was a discussion about art and art therapy at the school level. I loved it. Getting involved with the center brought quite a lot of understanding emotionally how you can live and how you can survive and you can change things for the better. I grew emotionally and there was a great shift in my emotional status.

We were too apart as a nation, so I have got a lot of white friends now as regard of being involved in the art therapy. If I was not involved in the art therapy I could not have met quite a lot of people that contributed to the change of my life. I was angry, but the anger slowly moved away and I could see life in a positive way.

— From an interview with Samuel Ntuli
11 July 2006
## Bibliography


## Notes

Finding What’s “Right”: Understanding Women’s Rights in Senegal Through Multiple Identities

DANA SAWITZ ’08

“Man gui dem Ndakaar”
I’m going to Dakar

The road from the airport stretches along la corniche as a long tear in the orange sand that would otherwise cover everything – the feet and bony knees of the child standing at its edge, the patterned dress of the woman walking with a younger girl, the backpacks which seem to be perched precariously on the shoulders of a young student wearing a stark white boubou. It is the rue à l’aéroport, bustling with activity even at 6:30 in the morning.

I look out the windows in every direction, eyes darting past restaurants, unfinished buildings and glorified mosques, already trying to take note of the landmarks that will eventually form my map of Dakar. We enter a traffic circle, then merge onto a new road. Stopped at an intersection with no traffic lights, we wait for a break in the endless line of black and yellow taxis, imported cars, buses and small, toy-like painted public transportation vans called cars rapides. Exhaust and the smells of Dakar that are still unfamiliar to me seep in through the open window that, just minutes before, had allowed the sea breeze to rush through the car as we had sped down the highway. A young boy reaches his open hand into our stopped car through the window, calling to me, “Madame, Madame, cent francs, Madame.” I shift my eyes away and shuffle uncomfortably in my seat, not yet having any currency to give this poor street boy, even the equivalent of twenty cents that he demands, and not yet knowing how to respond to his begging.

To Abdoulaye, my supervisor, nothing is new; he drives along this road every day to and from the office. To him, I am the spectacle: the petite, light-skinned American girl sitting cautiously in his passenger seat, with a purse clutched tightly in her lap and way too much luggage packed into the back seat of the tiny European car.

After a few hours of rest, he picks me up from the humble little hotel room where he had brought me this morning after picking me up from the airport. It is now lunchtime, just 13:00, and he plans to take me to the office for a meal with the rest of the staff. “Past l’École Franco-Sénégalaise, a left at the tall yellow sign that marks the DHL office…” He narrates the way as he drives, knowing that soon I will have to learn to walk to the office on my own or face the challenge of giving directions to a taximan. Passing the boutique on the corner, he waves to the boutique, a friendly man named Boubacar Diop. “You can buy soda, Coke, Fanta, biscuits, Nescafé there if you would like, but we have a restaurant,” Abdoulaye informs me.

Turning right after the boutique, finally, he pulls the car to one sandy shoulder of the quiet street. Looking westward down the street, only three blocks away, there is an intersection with a perpendicular road, and beyond that, one can see the ocean painted on the horizon. Despite the impressive vista, this is not a tourist spot; after all, the whole of Dakar is on the coast. Here is a residential area, and the only people who seem to be on the street are those coming in and out of the research center for lunch, and the two men chatting leisurely outside the public télécentre.

The entrance to the West African Research Center is nothing elaborate: a simple mosaic of tiles, red and blue, flank the short walkway from the street to the gate entrance. In the center of the mosaic on the ground is pieced together the logo for WARC: an image of the chiwara, a half-antelope half-man who is said to have saved the Bamana people of Mali by introducing agriculture. Depicted in the shaped blue tile, the chiwara’s antlers strategically form the “W” in “WARC.” Each glossed tile, carefully polished and artistically arranged, creates a humble display to greet those who enter. I awkwardly step over this little bit of sidewalk art and enter through the gateway, relieved finally not to be trekking once again through the sand pits that seem to serve as sidewalks along the streets everywhere else.

The plastered cinderblocks and high green hedges surrounding the center serve as a containing wall. Looking about, I wonder if...
this wall is meant more to keep unwanted guests out or the buzzing whirling minds of the researchers inside where they can contemplate without the bustle of the city. The center itself seems to be more of a complex of offices than a single, concise building: the exterior “hallways” and staircases connect the small gardens of leaning palm trees and magenta hibiscus bushes to the computer lab, the multiple rooms of the library, the administrative offices, and an assortment of conference rooms and temporary resident researcher offices. Although the layout of the center may seem backward to the visiting foreigner, with the reception lobby tucked away at the back of the complex and the restaurant at the entrance, this organization is perfectly indicative of Senegalese society: the meal and general niceties must always precede the serious business.

The restaurant, a portable metal trailer with red paint faded from the sun, bears an image of a bursting bottle of Coca-Cola next to the word “Soif?” (“Thirsty?”). Men and women line up at the small window in the trailer and tell the restaurant servers which of the two plates of the day they will choose. Inside the open doorway to the kitchen, a group of women sit on short wooden stools. In the afternoon heat, they are perched around a pot that rests over a charcoal grill, preparing and watching over the cooking that will feed the researchers, hungry and tired from a morning of academic exercise. The regular staff are seated already, waiting for the arrival of Abdoulaye and myself, the new American whom they are told is “spéciale” and different from the other American students who pass through the center. Leigh Swigart and John Hutchison, members of WARC’s American-based sister institution, WARÁ at Boston University, are there to welcome me as well. I am introduced to the group, one unfamiliar name after another, and finally take a seat in my own white plastic chair. Mame Coumba, the secretary, jokes that her placemat is not as pretty as mine, hardly being able to read the now faint “Bon appetit!” that was once printed in script on its center, welcoming the diner to enjoy her meal. Leigh turns to the waitress, a smiling woman named Angel, and tells her that we all will be having the “soupe kànja.” An American student wearing a modified hijab and a long skirt pulls over a chair and joins the already crowded table. She is a Fulbright scholar, preparing to leave Senegal in the next two weeks after spending the last nine months in the country. Introductions are brief, and though we are both Americans, we speak to each other only in French in this mixed company. The food is served, and the conversation eases seamlessly from French to Wolof to English.

After lunch, I sit down in the upholstered desk chair in my personal air-conditioned office. I am relieved to have the time and space to myself. I try to absorb and make sense of the mix of people, buildings and resources here that have all seemed to be thrown together and contained by the high surrounding wall. The mix seems deliberate, with a delicate balance of contradictory and complementary ideas, items and identities. Already “To Abdoulaye, my supervisor, nothing is new; he drives along this road every day to and from the office. To him, I am the spectacle: the petite, light-skinned American girl sitting cautiously in his passenger seat, with a purse clutched tightly in her lap and way too much luggage packed into the back seat of the tiny European car.”
exhausted from my day’s travel, I open the laptop that Abdoulaye has just told me will be mine for the duration of my internship, and I stare above the blank Word document at the palm tree just outside my window, wondering if I too can learn to become part of this mosaic that I have stumbled upon.

II. “I think this tension in society is necessary. It’s necessary. And it is perhaps the conflict in the society that can make some progress and push for society to change and the mind to shift, of course. This tension is very important.”

— Mme. Penda Mbow, Director of Mouvement Citoyenne
June 22, 2006, Dakar

I had just arrived in Dakar, Senegal. It would be Leigh Swigart’s last night there after her short trip, and my first, and she and John Hutchison invited me to join them for dinner. We sat at a table of the coastal cuisine restaurant in the patio dining “room.” Over heaping portions of rice and fresh fish, the conversation jumped from Senegalese cuisine to Brandeis, to social justice, to anecdotes of past experience, to a quick things-you-need-to-know orientation to Dakar. About to take the last bite of fish that my already full stomach could handle, I was interrupted by an object hitting my arm. Now in my lap lay a mango, its skin split open where it had fallen onto my arm. Looking up to trace the source of this falling fruit, I realized that I was sitting closer than I thought to the trunk of the mango tree under which our table was positioned. Laughing together over my message from above, Leigh and John exclaimed with smiles, “Bienvenue au Sénégal!,” giving me the official welcome to the country that would become my home for the next ten weeks.

Such was my baptism to Senegal, the beginning of a summer in Dakar learning to keep my eyes and ears open and yes, now being wise enough to look up as well. At WARC, my primary responsibility was in assisting the development of a research project entitled, “Know Your Rights!” The project, still in its conception, is an initiative of Leigh and John, members of the Center’s Boston-based sister institution, the West African Research Association, and in cooperation with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. Know Your Rights! has the primary objective of assisting in the sensitization and education of the rights afforded by national and international legislation, charters and conventions within eighteen countries of West Africa. As an effort to reach the masses of West Africa with information on human rights, the process entails the collection of relevant legislation, publications and documentation outlining human rights for the region and in each country respectively. The innovative twist: Know Your Rights! is focused on translating this documentation into select languages of West Africa. Most obvious, this breaking away from the colonial languages of French and English is viewed to be an effective way to legitimize these African languages that have for so long been unrecognized or deemed as merely devalued “dialects” that are secondary to colonial languages. Moreover, the extra step of translation that Know Your Rights! is pursuing will be done in hopes of broadening the populations that generally have knowledge of and access to such documents: namely, to reach beyond the politicians, the formally educated and the international scholars. Ultimately, these translations and summaries will be digitized and made accessible to the public via the internet. Recognizing that internet access only applies to a minority of the region’s population, and certainly not to those who are most vulnerable to human rights abuses (i.e. women, children, rural communities, the most impoverished, ethnic minorities, refugees, etc.), the hope is that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), schools and other institutions directly in touch with communities would be then able to dispense the information through dialogue, workshops, formal education programs and even radio broadcasts.

For obvious geographic reasons, the West African Research Center in Dakar is to serve as the home base for the project and the researchers involved. As an ECSF intern at WARC, my role was to begin the background work for the project. Recognizing the relatively short duration of my internship in Dakar (less than three months), it was logical that I be assigned a particular focus within human rights. In the end, my site supervisor as well as the founders of Know Your Rights! back in Massachusetts suggested that my focus be women’s rights. Therefore, I was charged with discovering the current actualities of the women’s rights scene in Senegal: what are the most important issues, what activities are already being initiated, what publications are available to other NGOs and to the general public and in what languages, how to best make these important legislations and documents available to the larger public, what is the degree of networking between NGOs, etc. Most importantly, my question became: To what extent and how does the legislation and official discourse pertaining to the women of Senegal actually reach the homes and daily lives of individuals of the civil society?

Formally, my attention was to women’s organizations and other NGOs that had a particular branch or project concerning women. The list of organizations I pursued ranged from the grassroots human rights education organization Tostan, known internationally for its work in eradicating female genital cutting village by village, to the Senegal chapter of the German international Foundation Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, working for social democracy, to a neighborhood tontine or private microfinance-type group of women in the city of St. Louis. Each day I sought out a different contact or organization, one leading to another, in search of publications concerning women’s rights and a general sense of the perceptions and activities concerning women’s rights among the circles of urban activists.

It is through these formal interviews as well as the not-so-formal discussions over lunch at the workplaces or homes of the scholars and activists that I was able to gain the information...
I needed to assist with the Know Your Rights! project. Who is leading the movement? What are the ideologies informing the movement? And most simply, what is “right” for the Senegalese woman?

III. “Tout le monde participe dans le mouvement” Everyone participates in the [women’s] movement.

– Mme Naffie Sow, Coordinator for women’s local tontine or informal finance group
July 08, 2008, St. Louis Senegal.

June 29, 2006

The wife of one of the employees who works at WARC had her first baby today. Amdy met myself and Abdoulaye as we returned from our morning of rendezvous, and told us the good news: “Je suis un père!” He walked quickly toward us, with a lift in his step, coming to Abdoulaye to receive a handshake in congratulations. “J’ai une fille!” (“I have a daughter!”), he uttered, finally allowing his joy and pride to show through a great grin. Abdoulaye pulled closer to his friend and colleague to embrace him, the handshake not being enough.

Congratulations were exchanged throughout the offices, and Amdy seemed to be glowing all day. There is going to be a party for the newborn at his house next Thursday. All the staff of WARC are invited, and that includes myself as well. Amdy personally invited me, with great pride in his voice — a voice that suddenly seemed more gentle, perhaps fatherly. Silently, I wondered if there were certain traditions for a newborn Muslim child. Had she been named the moment she was born, or would she receive a name after some time had passed, perhaps at a naming ceremony, as in some other traditions? Do the guests at a reception for the newborn present the family with gifts? Perhaps they give gifts to the family of the father, or perhaps even the child herself? What kind of gift should I bring if this is the case?

I began to muse over the baby showers and baptism parties that I had been to in my life in the States, calling to mind all the amusing traditions and gifts that become part of the festivities. There are gag gifts and jokes and games, and it seems as if the adults themselves have reverted back to their own childhood, cooing and oogling in the newborn’s face.

Surely the celebration may not be same here, but I expect it to be one filled with great joy. A woman is valued according to the family she raises, from her first child’s birth to the day her children have children of their own. As I contemplated the great significance of this event, I noted that the birth of a boy is much more celebrated than that of a girl. And yet I remember how Amdy’s smile broke loose after he revealed that he was not only a father, but that he is the father of a girl.

Now, as I wonder who I should ask to find out what kind of gift, if any, I should present at the party, I begin to think more of the child and her future. With perfect innocence, she does not yet know the travails that many West African girls and women face: she has not yet had to carry her baby brother on her back, with her tiny and frail five-year-old body, begging for spare change in the streets; she has not yet felt the power of the beating sun as she sits on the ground all morning, scrubbing clothes clean over a bowl of soapy water; she has not yet felt the weeks of agony and bleeding after excision at the onset of puberty; she has not yet spent hours in front of a shard of broken mirror, tugging at her hair to make it straight and applying pastels to her lips and eyebrows and cheeks to give more color to her already beautiful skin; she has not yet been forced to put down her books and end her studies after secondary school to be married off to a man almost twice her age; she has not yet felt the shame and loss of miscarriage from malnutrition or even abuse from her husband; she has not yet felt the burden of carrying her own child for a full nine months without once seeing the rain to ease the heat of the sun; she has not yet felt near death after being in labor and delivering a child with no assistance because the husband is not home to give permission for her to go to a midwife or hospital; she has not yet known rape as a “war crime” committed by the soldiers or officers of some rebel forces; she has not yet spent hours in the house waiting for her husband to return home with only meager spendings to feed her six children; she has not yet had to confront the reality that her husband, whom she had cooked for and taken after for the past ten years, is about to take a second, much younger wife, despite the fact that they both selected “monogamy” on their signed marriage contract; she has not yet felt the back aches she will receive in old age as a result of carrying heavy groceries atop her head returning home from the market and working so many hours in the house, and she has not yet known what it is to see one of her grown and married daughters give birth to a daughter of her own, knowing that she too may live the same life. And incha’allah, God willing, Amdy’s newborn daughter never will come to know these pains.

On the day of this baby girl’s birth, all of the WARC employees gathered and excitedly discussed the news that had so quickly spread. Congratulations were given by every person that passed Amdy, and he could hardly stop smiling to eat the plate of rice and fish in front of him. Already he was talking about his daughter’s future, referring to her as a princess and vowing to protect her for...
his life. She will go to school, “only the best,” and have the opportunity to seek out a job. Undoubtedly, with Andy’s and his wife’s support, this particular child will live not live her life as a Senegalese woman, but more so, as a Senegalese citizen.5

It is true that my painful imaginings about this child’s future are not necessarily a depiction of the life of every woman in Senegal. These descriptions of a woman at various stages of her life have come in bits and pieces from the very diverse intimate conversations, interviews and witnesses that I have had throughout my time in Senegal. However, it seems to me now that if even one woman has known such pains, it is too much.

I have never considered myself to be a feminist. In fact, I have often found myself disturbed by the current talk of women’s rights in the United States. Perhaps the director of WARC, Professor Sene, and my site supervisor, Abdoulaye, had suggested that I do research of women’s rights in particular because they assumed that as an American young woman from a liberal arts university, this would be my obvious interest. I took the assignment not necessarily because I wanted to support feminism or women’s rights activism, but more because I wanted to find out if perhaps there was an alternative way to address the women’s situation. I was prepared to ask questions and make challenges.

“Suddenly, the question of whether or not, I, as a female, could jump over a gutter the same way that he, a male, had done so, became a window into the larger questions that I had been exploring through my research interviews.”

At its very roots, the women’s rights movements in the States began as a way to break down walls and to open doors to the full citizenship of women. However, with great regret, I have personally come to experience that while the goal was to disassemble prejudices, stereotypes and restrictions toward women, the movement has since created new stereotypes in other areas. “Get the women out of the kitchen and into the work place.” had been the rallying cry, and now, according to some, the woman who chooses to stay at home with her family is seen as the woman who has given up her rights. I had always perceived “rights” to be the ability to be afforded the chance to make a choice — and now, I question the extent to which there is a greater element of choice here in the discourse of today’s movement in the States than when the movement made its first achievements with suffrage and the advances toward equal wages and affirmative action. In this context, the empowerment of woman seems to be defined more by her academic and economic achievements than by her own personal integrity.

I admit that I had not extensively studied either feminism or the women’s movements in the States prior to going to Senegal, but it was these acquired perceptions that led me to question what really was at stake when talking about “women’s rights” in the States. This mentality had driven me away from feminism and convinced me that “women’s rights” as distinct from “human rights” could not produce positive relationships between men and women in society — until I had come to be a witness to that very reality in Senegal.

Surely, there are those Senegalese activists deemed as “radical feminists” who, against the perceived majority, declare that woman must be entirely independent from man, breaking away from the nature of symbiotic relationships that at least ideally govern social and family structures. However, after speaking with those men and women who are advocating for the empowerment of the Senegalese woman, it seems that the more general understanding of “women’s rights” is the application of “human rights” to women as equally to men.

It has become most obvious to me that “women’s rights” and even phrases such as “the liberation” or the “empowerment of women” can mean something entirely different in Senegal than it does in the States. The debate is not only about parity in the economic sector or a fight for freedom from restricting or harmful stereotypes imposed on women as it often is today in the States; rather, for many Senegalese, “liberation of the woman” often means allowing her to achieve full citizenship, including everything from having access to the courts to having the personal authority to act without requiring permission first from her husband or other male authority.

Perhaps a brief account of an interview with Mme Oumou Lam, Directrice of the Réseau de la Femme (Women’s Network) for ANAFAL (an NGO that approaches social, economic and political development through literacy education) best illustrates the potential severity in gender disparities to which the “women’s rights” discourse in Senegal may refer. Mme Lam told me of one extreme case that Réseau worked on concerning a woman who almost died from delivering a baby with no assistance. The laboring woman was not forced to attempt to give birth on her own because she was alone. Rather, living in the house of her husband, she had been surrounded by her female in-laws at the time of her labor. However, these women who were present had refused to take her to a hospital or midwife until the husband returned to the house to grant his permission. Considering the tone of voice with which Mme Lam narrated this story, I got the impression that this example was neither surprising nor rare, despite my own shock.

Regardless of whether or not this particular account is an anomaly or a general representation, it speaks volumes about the extent to which Senegalese women are able to participate in decision-making in day-
to-day life, let alone to be regarded as full citizens in the public sphere as political or economic actors. In fact, for many activists in Senegal, “women’s rights” are perceived to be inseparable from the larger goal of making human rights accessible to the entire population: many have reiterated that women need to become citizens in order to enter into partnership with men. Only through this dialogue, this partnership, can the nation as a whole strive toward greater development: “the role of the movement is to improve the society and to improve, of course, the role played by the individual and the shared responsibility and giving opportunity to everybody to participate in the development of the society. I think it is one of the goals that we are trying to achieve.”

IV “Égalité”

We cross the street to walk up the hill to the schoolyard. Ousseyou walks next to me, not needing to lead the way; for the past month, I have been coming here almost daily. With ease, he jumps over the deep rut in the sidewalk that has been carved in the earth to channel the waters that would otherwise flood the streets in the rainy season. Once on the other side, he looks back to me, cautioning, “Girls can’t jump. Go slowly.” Ignoring his “advice,” I jump easily over the gutter. Landing next to him, I shoot him a grin. He returns the joking smile, and together, we say the word “égalité” (“equality”), miming the word by each holding both hands out in front of us, the left and the right hand side by side at the same level.

For now, it is a jovial challenge about whether or not males and females are both physically capable of making the small jump (or large step) over the gutter. Really, this became the punch line to end so many of the conversations that we had as he helped me explore Dakar. Ousseyou is a colleague of mine at WARC. Working as the assistant in the library there, he interacted with me daily. After a month of being in Senegal, he had invited me to his home in one of the villages that comprises the greater Dakar district, saying that “my mother will prepare lunch and you can come take dinner with the family.” After the initial tour of his village and the introduction to what seemed to be all of his family and friends, it became my second home outside of WARC.

In the time that I spent with him, both in the office and out, we talked often of the progress of my research. “Where are you going today?” “What’s the next organization?” The conversation was most often light-hearted, not delving into the greater issues and conflicts within the field. However, it was in his knowing my focus on women’s rights, thought to be the classic choice of an American female anthropology major, that the commentary about égalité between genders developed.

From the beginning, he pegged me as a feminist – again, a label that I myself would not use to categorize my own ideologies — and I, interested in raising questions about his own perceptions of the role of Senegalese women, often prompted him from this viewpoint. Suddenly, the question of whether or not, I, as a female, could jump over a gutter the same way that he, a male, had done so, became a window into the larger questions that I had been exploring through my research interviews. Yes, this may seem to be only a trivial example of the discussion of equality of capability and social expectations. But then again, I reasoned that if the view is that it is not proper for a woman to act in such a way, jumping over rather than walking around the gutter, or even that she is physically not able to do so — an action so seemingly meaningless — then how would a woman be able to pursue the larger questions of rights to inheritance, education, health care and employment, that are already outlined in law?

For myself, the interviews were only half of the research. From them, I was able to absorb the perspectives and histories constructed by the women (and a few men) that were active in the field of empowering the Senegalese women. However, this did not seem to be enough. Rather than simply providing answers about the rights, status and needs of women in Senegalese societies, the interviews led me to formulate new questions. Over and over, those whom I interviewed expressed the view that men had the power to make decisions in the public sphere as political and religious leaders, and in the private sphere as fathers, uncles and sons. If this was indeed the reality, or even the perceived reality, it became apparent to me that it would also be necessary to explore the first-person perspectives of these males, collectively identified as the final decision-makers.

It was at this realization that I chose to diverge from what my undergraduate anthropological training on how to properly engage in “participant observation” would otherwise dictate. The ethnohistorians would teach that in order to complete my research, I would need to see the views and actualities in everyday life as well as those brought forth through the appointed interviews, to live among the people with whom my studies concerned.

“Over and over, those whom I interviewed expressed the view that men had the power to make decisions in the public sphere as political and religious leaders, and in the private sphere as fathers, uncles and sons. If this was indeed the reality, or even the perceived reality, it became apparent to me that it would also be necessary to explore the first-person perspectives of these males, collectively identified as the final decision-makers.”
As a female American student arriving in Senegal, I was faced with two choices: 1. to listen to the voices of the women in day to day life, spending my social time in the home with the Senegalese women, or 2. to associate myself with the male population, another option available to me due to my own identity as an American and due to the overall visibility of the life of men in Dakar. The men sitting on benches on the corners, drinking tea and discussing life; younger and older boys gathered around foosball tables that were commonly set up along the street sides in the villages; the businessmen; the street vendors; the taxi drivers – to some degree, the public nature of the male population seemed more accessible than the woman’s life, which is largely private and confined to certain spaces. Additionally, as an American student, or even as a light-skinned foreigner, I was perceived by many to have a higher status than many Senegalese women within the society. For example, while some older religious men would refuse to shake the hand of a woman, considering it an improper and unclean action, I was always expected to initiate greetings with these same men, complete with handshakes. Although bewildering to me, I learned quickly that my identity as a foreigner often had more weight in determining the way I was perceived and received by Senegalese society than did my identity as a woman. In many cases, this identity granted me access to interact within social networks that were predominantly male, predominantly female, or even those not defined by gendered lines (i.e. my environment interning at WARC). Both the relative visibility of the life of the Senegalese man and the fact that being an American student granted me a certain respected status allowed me the ability to engage in and to witness male social life.

However, more than just these factors alone, it was the very fact that it is precisely these men who are viewed by the women with which I spoke to be the power holders – and I note, seldom the malicious enemies of women’s rights, although this view was occasionally expressed – that led me to seek their voices as well. From the Family Code, a legal document that outlines the roles, rights, and responsibilities of the woman and the young girl within the family, to the numerous international charters for human rights that Senegal has signed and ratified, it seems that the legal framework already provides for the full citizenship of the woman in Senegalese society. Yet each woman I interviewed would cite gaps between this legislation and the reality. After all, this gap is the focus of most of their work as activists and scholars, whether from an educational, economical, legal, cultural, political or even interpersonal perspective. And if it is the men who are those cited as governing the popular ideologies and the ways that they are played out in daily interactions, I was curious to find out what their views were.

To study the actuality of women’s rights in Senegal, in a society that recognizes men’s and women’s roles as opposite but also complementary, it would be naïve to only listen to the voices of the women. Surely, women may be among those most commonly vulnerable, and I do not mean to deny the importance of giving them voice. However, in order to even begin to formulate the appropriate questions about the roles of women, I needed to discover more about the notions that create and enforce such a gendered power hierarchy. If many of the activists I spoke with were at all correct in stating that development of the nation must include the participation and efforts of both men and women, then so too are the voices of both women and men needed to conceive of and to fully understand the realization of rights for all Senegalese citizens. Therefore, I felt it just as necessary to be highly attuned to the opinions, actions, and histories of Senegalese men as well.

It is for this reason that I had gone with Ousseynou almost every day to the schoolyard. Since it was summer vacation, the children were no longer in classes, but the plot of land designated as the school grounds was hardly void of people. In addition to the schoolhouse, there was a family whose home was also on the property. They were friends and family of Ousseynou’s, his grandfather having founded the school, and they now were designated to be the guardians, holding all keys to the buildings and outhouses. Next to the one-story school and this family’s house was another, taller building, resembling more of a warehouse than an education facility. This building, with its raw cinderblock construction not yet concealed under plaster and paint, was also a part of the school. Apparently, it was an addition that was started but, due to a lack of funding, time and/or labor, was left incomplete.

In the meantime, this abandoned second “school house” had become extra living quarters for the family who lived on the property. The older son, who went by the name Vieux, had pulled his mattress up to the second floor where he would often sleep to escape the heat and commotion of being cramped into the humble house with the rest of the family.
As I became more and more integrated into their tea-time conversations through language, I also gained an increasing opportunity to engage in some of the informal aspects of my research, the true “participant observation.” I often teased and provoked these men by adopting the views of the women I was speaking with in the interviews. My first try at this was by interrupting a conversation that they were having in front of me, but did not think I could understand. One of the men had turned to Ousseynou, and, raising his eyebrows in my direction, told Ousseynou in Wolof that if I returned to Senegal, he should ask me to bring a girl just like myself for him to take as a second wife. Understanding clearly, I waved my index finger and speaking in a firm voice, uttered the first sentence that I had attempted to form in Wolof: “Deedit. Bena ngoor. Bena jigeen.” Simply, “No. One man: one woman.”

Surely, their surprise was undoubtedly due in part to the fact that not only had I followed their Wolof, but was also able to respond in their own language for the first time. However, as my face remained stern and they began to understand the firmness of my statement, the brief comment that one of my friends had made — perhaps even a light-hearted joke — opened the way for discussion about the practice of polygamy. They argued that polygamy was legal in Senegal, and therefore, man had the right to take up to four wives as outlined by the Family Code. I asked why they thought the practice should be legal, and their responses ranged from the classic “c’est comme ça” (“that’s just the way it is”) to justifications through certain interpretations of the Koran and the life of Mohammed. Citing the Koran, they explained that if man could not be faithful to his one wife, he should take a total of two, three or four wives as long as each was afforded equal treatment. Besides, seeing as there are more women than men in the country, and many widows, they reasoned that it was necessary for man to take more than one woman, lest these women not be taken care of. Challenging them further, I asked them if this was a reality, if the polygamous families that they knew of in Senegal could be described as being composed of many wives with equal households, properties and attention from their shared husband. After having this debate on many occasions, I chose to push them even further, asking if it was really possible for polygamy to even serve women.

In the end, their responses varied, certainly not taking a unanimous side as “the male viewpoint.” However, it seemed obvious through their reactions to my poking and prodding that these were not questions that they would expect to be asked so bluntly, especially by a friend with whom typical gendered hierarchies had seemed to dissolve. In developing friendships with these men, my identity as an American reigned over my identity as a woman, although both were obviously visible.

Through these ideological and political, and even at times personal, discussions in the school house, I walked a thin line. I was able to maintain their trust and respect while at the same time challenge their ideas of the norms that govern domestic and public life between men and women. Often, as the first conversation about polygamy had begun, the
debate ended with friendly joking. Knowing the topic of my research, they would poke fun at me, saying, “You, you are my friend, my sister, but sometimes you are crazy,” and we would laugh. This is not to say that the issues discussed were not serious matters, but I too had to play various roles, using my own privilege as an American student to give voice to the women who were so often pressured into silence within Senegalese society. Ultimately, by embodying the voices of the Senegalese feminists, I was able to enter into the dialogue that so many women were calling for: men and women engaging together in relationship toward social betterment. In order to understand how this can be made a possibility, there must be consideration of all the peoples within society. Listening sincerely to both men and women without distinction must be seen as a fundamental step if the progress of the movement is truly to reach the Senegalese people.

“When discussing women’s rights in Senegal, it becomes impossible not also to talk about the ways in which Islam, traditional culture, contemporary culture, globalization and the changes to African culture by the colonial system are involved in constant dialogue (and more often, I would say, argument) with each other to define the women’s rights movements in Senegal.”

V. “It’s part of who we think we are”

— Mme Khady Ba, Volunteer Coordinator for Tostan, referring to reasons for the practice of female genital cutting July 14, 2006, Dakar.

As a student with at least eight semesters of undergraduate training in anthropology, I must say that I was quite absorbed in the ethnographic process during my internship for Know Your Rights! at WARC as well as in my daily social interactions. However, reflecting now, I would rather call the result of my daily studying “ethnographic conflict” than simply “ethnography.” I make this distinction because, rather than trying to understand a single notion of culture that would inform women’s rights, I found myself more and more facing multiple understandings of culture, ideologies and frameworks that shifted from person to person, community to community, and context to context. In doing research on human rights, specifically women’s rights, these multiple notions and aspects of culture seemed to be everything. While there are many institutions at play, it is certain that cultural phenomena are a huge influence in shaping these different understandings of women’s rights. Particularly, when discussing women’s rights in Senegal, it becomes impossible not also to talk about the ways in which Islam, traditional culture, contemporary culture, globalization and the changes to African culture by the colonial system are involved in constant dialogue (and more often, I would say, argument) with each other to define the women’s rights movements in Senegal.

Hoping to further my knowledge of the country’s population before arriving, I took note of the fact that reportedly 95 percent of the population is Muslim. Islam was a religion that I knew about more from the negative images and language in American media sources than from serious personal inquiry. In the spring of 2006, I chose to take a course at Brandeis that could better prepare me before going to the country. Going to Senegal as an Ethics Center Fellow to research human rights and particularly women’s rights with relation to legislation and charters, this background knowledge seemed essential. Considering the complex and perhaps inseparable tie that is often evoked between religion and the state in the view of Islam, it would be necessary to have a basis in the ideology of politics and Islam in West Africa before even beginning to understand the status of the woman. Additionally, recognizing once again the influence of identities and communities in shaping viewpoints on responsibilities, especially in the ever-debated domain of human rights, it is certain that Islam is one of the possible institutions that would play a role in shaping ideologies.

The course that I chose to take in preparation, called “The History of Islam in West Africa: Tolerance and Coexistence,” seemed to be the perfect fit to allow me to explore these realities. The professor, a Muslim scholar who had been born in Guinea, lived in Senegal, and lived and traveled extensively in the United States, France and throughout Europe, was well known in his field, and the course syllabus was promising. First, for myself and as well as for the other students in the class, the course served as an in-depth introduction to the basic principles of Islam. Second, although I had studied colonization of the African continent as well as some pre-colonial history, the course provided me with a background in the pre-colonial history of West Africa in particular, ranging from issues of statehood to trade and finally to the colonial impact on a micro scale. Third, by learning a history of how Islam first spread throughout the region, arguably mostly via vast trade networks and self-conversions, I was able to identify the originating principles behind Muslim faith in West Africa. Fourth, as a counter-argument to the way that Islam is perceived and addressed in the States, especially in a post-9/11 world, the course provided the idea that: 1) Islam, as it is understood and practiced in West Africa, is very particular to the region, partly for historical reasons of how/why it even reached Afrique Noire; and 2) despite the fact that
that I have been a religious minority. And yet, I
perhaps more so than I had felt anywhere else
I felt and saw was certainly one of tolerance,
walking on my own in the city. The Islam that
I got oriented to the area and got used to
least for the first two or three Sundays until
church and pick me up after the services, at
later, he volunteered to drive me to
distance of my homestay family’s house,
me around to the two churches within walking
Muslim himself, volunteered happily to take
Senegalese friend of Leigh Swigart’s, a devout
tension, or negativity passed. Likewise, a
have Jewish family, there was no judgment,
suspicion that based on my appearance I must
toward me. Even as they confirmed their
negative feelings or commentary to dispense
me initially. My colleagues at WARC, for one,
as being peaceful and tolerant proved true to
the course’s emphasis on West African Islam
Dakar, Senegal. Quite simply, or so it seemed,
in regards to human rights in the daily life of
Islam in West Africa is an Islam characterized
by peace, coexistence and tolerance. Of
course, the syllabus also delved into issues
of slavery in Islam and of the jihadic wars
that were fought in the 17th and 18th centuries
as the religion really took hold of the region.
However, according to the course instruction,
these instances of violence and human rights
abuses were looked upon as being anomalies,
not consistent enough to tarnish the region’s
culture.

I took this information with an analytical lens,
trying to draw my own conclusion about how
to reconcile this historical evidence with the
somewhat apologetic tone of the course.
Regardless, the course prepared me with the
knowledge base to seek out evidences and
understandings of tolerance and coexistence
in regards to human rights in the daily life of
Dakar, Senegal. Quite simply, or so it seemed,
the course’s emphasis on West African Islam
as being peaceful and tolerant proved true to
me initially. My colleagues at WARC, for one,
seeing the cross I wore around my neck had no
negative feelings or commentary to dispense
toward me. Even as they confirmed their
suspicion that based on my appearance I must
have Jewish family, there was no judgment,
tension, or negativity passed. Likewise, a
Senegalese friend of Leigh Swigart’s, a devout
Muslim himself, volunteered happily to take
me around to the two churches within walking
distance of my homestay family’s house,
encouraging me to find which church I preferred
to attend. Later, he volunteered to drive me to
church and pick me up after the services, at
least for the first two or three Sundays until
I got oriented to the area and got used to
walking on my own in the city. The Islam that
I felt and saw was certainly one of tolerance,
perhaps more so than I had felt anywhere else
that I have been a religious minority. And yet, I
was not too much surprised. After all, as it was
explained by my new friends and colleagues,
I am a practicing Catholic — something,
according to those I met, “rare” among
Americans — and I was respected for being part
of one of the Abrahamic faiths.

Of course, it was not only my own faith and
differing beliefs/practices that made me so
attentive to the role of Islam in every day life in
Dakar. In fact, it seemed virtually inescapable.
My colleagues would stop working to shower or
at least wash their hands, face, and feet before
and after lunch and again at 6 p.m. if they were
still in the office, take out a prayer mat (the
women would cover their head and tie on a
wrap skirt if they were wearing pants), and fulfill
their obligation to the five daily prayers. In fact,
as I went from office to office to do interviews
for my research, I found it was not uncommon
to see showers in the bathrooms of work places,
in part for this purpose specifically. Come Friday,
many offices were closed for the holy day. As an
international research center, WARC operated
on Fridays, but the atmosphere was somehow
quieter, more gentle, more reverent on these
days. Many of the researchers did not return
after leaving for the mosque at around 1:00. My
colleagues, the permanent employees, at least
those who were men, even left to go to mosque,
certainly adding to the general quiet. And every
man and woman, employer, Senegalese student
or researcher came to WARC on Fridays wearing
their best clothing (I too made the extra effort
on Fridays, wearing my own tailored boubou, or
Senegalese dress).

Initially, I had assumed that I would have to do
a lot of digging or engage in deep theological
conversation in order to explore the question
that I asked after my Spring 2006 course: How
do the beliefs, practices and histories of Islam
in Senegal translate into shaping the ideologies
that govern day to day life, particularly in
regard to development and human rights? The
class had prepared me for the idea of Islam
being quite central to daily life, but perhaps I
still expected religion to be only one influence,
one of many. However, as I quickly experienced
the religiosity of Sufi Dakar, I had to reform
my views. It seemed as if there was a mosque
on every corner; one could hear the muezzin’s
call to prayer from any location, and it was not
uncommon to see people praying on sidewalks
along even the busiest streets.

Yet Islam was apparent not only in those
activities that were a part of religious obligation,
the five principles including daily prayers. From
the public transportation, with each bus having
Alhamdoulillah (“thanks be to God”) painted
across the hood, to learning to say incha’allah
(“God willing”) after every discussion of a future
planned event, it became quite clear that Islam
 pervaded everyday conversation and thought.
Even for the names of the days of the week,
Wolof speakers use the Arabic words, reflecting
once again the influence of Islam and the way
that it spread to the people of Senegal.

Suddenly, my question about Islam’s influence
in the manifestation and understanding of
human rights in Senegal became central. I
could not ask questions about the
status, roles and identities of the
Senegalese woman
without also
hearing responses
that referenced
religion. Indeed,
Sufi Islam is not
just a key
influence in the process,
not just one of many.
Rather, I came to learn that
it is deeply embedded in
other cultural, historical,
and social influences as
well, truly inseparable for
other factors, especially
from my vantage point in
Dakar.”
For example, many “cultural” practices in Senegal that are sometimes deemed harmful to women, from female genital cutting to polygamous marriages, are said to have their root in Islam. Most intelligent readers would point out that Islam was brought to the people of Senegal and is no more “traditional” than colonial architecture and eating with forks and knives. However, the spring 2006 course enabled me to understand the connection between “traditional cultures” and Islam. While yes, Islam was not widely accepted among the ethnic groups that now inhabit Senegal until the 19th century, local marabouts were present as early as the 7th century, and the religion had firmly taken its root by the time the French were beginning to gain social, economic and political influence. In fact, Islam was used as a destabilizing force to fight against colonizers until the country’s independence in 1960. To this day, especially in light of a post-9/11 world in which divisions between Islam and “the West” have been so pronounced, some Senegalese still regard Islam as being an internal mechanism for fighting the lasting impact of colonialism. The Sufi sect of Islam, with which the majority of Senegalese Muslims identify, has a particular history of accommodation to and absorption of many earlier “traditional” practices and beliefs. Thus, when discussing movements toward gender-sensitive views and practices that do not subjugate women, one must consider equally understandings of traditional cultures as well as those of Sufi Islam.

Interpretations of both “traditional cultures” and Islam engage in a dialectic that sets the foundation for the role of woman in today’s Senegalese society. The result is a perception of tradition not as “a culture of the past,” but rather, a concept of culture that is very much a part of modern life. In part, it is precisely this blending and remembering of cultures and beliefs that further complicates questions about change; practices are not only seen to be rooted in history and identity, but also in religion in very complex ways. Surely, some women’s activists would argue that Senegal’s 1999 outlawing of female genital cutting (FGC) as stated by the Penal Code is a great advancement in terms of questioning the perceived religious component of such practices. Previously, and even today, some hold the notion that FGC acts as a ritual performed so that women may further aspire to Islamic notions of purity, cleanliness and chastity, as well as marriageability. The prevalence of this rationale is evidenced by the fact that several non-government groups that continue to educate about or even eradicate FGC in Senegal have often targeted religious leaders in their campaigns and workshops for change. One such organization, Tostan, has made significant efforts and has received quite a positive response by involving religious leaders (namely, marabouts, or leaders of local Sufi brotherhoods) in the process of human rights education, especially those programs concerning FGC.

However despite these “successes” in lessening the dangers and threats to Senegalese women, there remain great obstacles in the debate. In the effort to eradicate the practice of female genital cutting, these challenges have now been further problematized by issues of stigma and fear of talking about an “illegal” activity. Tostan Volunteer Coordinator, Khady Bâ, has indicated that these silences have provided Tostan’s education program with even more obstacles. Having a non-imperialistic policy that requires that communities or villages to invite Tostan to teach them, the very reach of Tostan’s activities has been jeopardized by the legislation that was put forth with good intent. “What we are seeing more and more is that people are scared to talk about it. Now it is not just ‘bad’ or dangerous. FGC is illegal.” Indeed, as with any other practices and ideologies that impede the full realization of citizenship for the Senegalese woman, open dialogue is a necessary component to education and even steps toward reform.

Once again, Islam plays an important role, interpreted as granting men a God-given superiority over women, and therefore a louder voice in both the home and in public policy enforcement. This assumed gendered power hierarchy seems to lie at the base of many issues concerning women’s rights, from access to education and economic means to decision-making capabilities within a polygamous family. In common discourse, this hierarchy is actually more cited to be a derivative of Islam than colonial or traditional ideologies.

For example, Mme Penda Mbow, a well-respected professor at University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar and founding director of Mouvement Citoyenne, noted the role of certain interpretations of Islam in the progress of the women’s rights movement during an interview in her home. She commented that while the 1973 Family Code legislation had initially encouraged dialogue about women’s domestic roles and responsibilities by outlining legal terms for polygamy, inheritance rights, divorce and child custody, the local political nature of Muslim communities had since provided obstacles for any real change in the home:

“What Islam is bringing is, for example, is the situation of the hegemony of man over woman. I think it is something ideologically you can find in Islam. And it is what is happening and shifted the status of the African woman, specifically in the area where woman is Islamized. … Especially, religion. People used the religion, manipulated the religion, put woman in a situation behind man. I used to say the best example of that is … a Muslim leader [who] is more strong, is strongest, and more powerful than, for example, the figure of a father. I think the Family Code played a great role. But now, in my opinion, the role played by the marabout system is very strong and for example, constitutes an obstacle to promoting and using the Family Code.”

Using the words of Mme. Mbow, a voice that was often echoed in many of the interviews and discussions that I held, these “uses” and “manipulations” of Islam cannot simply be dismissed as false reasoning. Regardless of their truth and validity, this ideology to which
Mbow refers is nonetheless a reality for some circles of both men and women Muslims in Senegal. The attention must be paid toward realizing that the "uses" and "manipulations" left so often unquestioned remain to be significant influences of determining gender politics in the street, in the government, in offices, and even in the home.

This is not to say, however, that Islam itself is encouraging these arguably negative consequences that are felt by Senegalese women and young girls. In fact, the activists whom I spoke with as well as many scholars of Islam have used the basic principles of Islam to point to the value of the woman, drawing examples from the Koran and the life of Mohammad. So too did Prof Lansiné Kaba, who taught the course "History of Islam in West Africa" at Brandeis in spring 2006, highlight positive powers that the doctrines of Islam may grant women. In the words of a Senegalese sociologist, founder of the Association of African Women for Research and Development (1977) and member of the women's association Yewwu-Yewwwi ("Awake"), "the kinds of Muslims who see the feminist movement as a threat are not the only type of Muslims around." I am not denying the reality of these understandings of Islam. In fact, through these arguments, it becomes obvious that Islam, like most religions and institutionalized belief systems, is subject to individual and collective interpretations and manipulations. However, in the context of Senegal, especially in the local politics that influence these collective ideologies, headed often by allegiances to a particular imam or marabout, it becomes necessary to consider the perceived reality of the understandings of Islam that justify and even encourage the power structures and behaviors that others have deemed harmful to women.

Ultimately, the course that I took about Islam in West Africa did provide me with a further background to better understand how Islam came to hold a dominant position in past and present formation of communities and gender politics in Senegal. In accordance with the course, I did in fact experience an "Islam of tolerance and coexistence" in regard to relations with other religious groups and peoples. After all, the first president of independent Senegal was the much-loved Leopold Senghor, a Catholic Serer from Senegal. As an American student living and researching in a post-9/11 world, it would certainly be necessary to realize these realities in order to break down any preconceived negativities or nervousness that I admittedly had in living amidst Muslim communities. However, the reality that was significant in discovering what roles the foundations of Islam played in Senegal's human rights development was not so much that which came through in inter-religious dialogue and interactions. Rather, I quickly came to understand that when questioning how notions of identity and group-belonging contribute to forming ideologies, one must look inward. This meant not only identifying the numerous factors that were at play in this process, but also the relationships between these influences. How does Islam relate to conceptions of traditional culture? How does Islam relate to notions of political power? How does Islam generate general notions of about the roles and responsibilities of woman in Senegalese societies, communities and families? Highly contested by definition and in practice, the realm of women's rights lies at the intersection between these multiple understandings of political, religious, historical and social ideologies.

Certainly, as in the case with many social movements, especially women's movements, the situation can be assessed on many levels. Cultural, social, political, economic, religious and familial relationships and definitions are considered, questioned and redefined. Therefore, in speaking of the role of Islam within the women's movement in Senegal, I do not mean to oversimplify the complex nature of debate and progress. Rather, my intent is to highlight that Islam is only one of many of the viewpoints that is informing the movement, and as I illustrate here, contains within it many different understandings.

Indeed, while there are those who use Islam to justify the "natural" power hierarchy that places men above women and to cite the historical tradition behind this manner of social organization, there are also those who find solace for women in Islam, noting the doctrine that God created all human beings in His own likeness. The purpose for my discussion on Islam and women's rights is to explore the multiple ways in which interpretations of Islam and its role in Senegalese societies and identities have served as a hegemonic force in Senegal to define the place of the woman. The role of Islam in women's rights development demonstrates the complexities that have arisen when cultural, historical, familial, political, and religious viewpoints collide (or at times, even converge) in defining who a Senegalese woman may be and what roles she is allowed and expected to fulfill.

VI. "Unification of rights in our society means for woman to get citizenship, more and more citizenship, and of course, to put all the citizens in the same level."

— Mme. Penda Mbow,
Director of Mouvement Citoyenne
June 22, 2006, Dakar

The children run up and down the beach, flirting with the tide that rushes up to their ankles. One small group kicks around a soccer ball, barely noticing the sand that sticks to their bare, wet bodies. Beachside “fast-food” stands sell overflowing chawarma-filled pitas and hamburgers, stuffed as always with lettuce, French fries, and a boiled egg, for the equivalent of $1.50 each. The people sitting at tables take swigs from their glass bottles of Coca-Cola or Fanta soda to cool their mouths from the spicy red pepper sauce. The unrelenting African sun beams down, hot and bright as ever, from blue skies. There are families, couples, groups of teenage boys affirming their independence as older kids at the beach on their own. Everyone has come out to enjoy the clear waters and the white sand — but I have come here for another reason.
I came with my friend and colleague, Ousseynou, arriving just in time at the port in downtown Dakar to take the ferry to the island. He approaches the ticket booth and speaks to the man in Wolof. He gives the man 1000CFA (US $2) to pay for his ticket on the “Coumba Castel” that will carry us the short two kilometers or so to the island. I am next in line, and without me saying a word, the ticket man at the window says to me in English, “5000CFA, please” (US $10). I hand the man the crisp bills that I just retrieved from the ATM, take my ticket, and my friend and I board the ferry where we sit together and wait silently for the other passengers to find a seat. Somehow I am not bothered by the higher price that I am charged because the light coloring of my skin suggests that I am a foreigner. My only thought is my destination: Gorée Island.

Once the home to one of the two largest slave trade ports in West Africa through which hundreds of thousands of Africans were sold, Gorée is now home to tourist attractions and people who want to escape the chaos of Dakar. I came in part to continue my research and in part because I could not visit the country without making the short trip to Gorée as well. I had an interview scheduled for 2 p.m., and it was hardly 11 a.m. For both Ousseynou and I, it is our first time here, arriving early so we could explore the island before my appointment. The man who helped us step off the ferry onto the dock that led to the beautiful coastline was calling out the locations of various “attractions” that we could see. We listen for the name of the island’s most infamous landmark, La Maison des Esclaves, and head down the pathway in the indicated direction.

The architecture is colonial. The rust, sea-green and marigold-colored plaster houses stand two or three stories high with large shuttered windows that open to balconies overgrown with vines and hibiscus blossoms. The paint is chipped, the walls are cracked, and the gardens grow wild, yet it is impossible not to appreciate the beauty of the color that abounds from every structure and cobblestone pathway that graces the island. There is not a single motor vehicle here — only walking paths, just wide enough to accommodate a passing tour group or a horse-drawn cart. One cannot tell if the silence that hangs in the air is a peaceful serenity or a solemn remembrance of the painful history that these lands bear.

At the very center of the house is a courtyard with the two infamous curved staircases. They rise ominously to the balconies from which dealers would come to place bids on the dark-skinned men, women and children wearing nothing but the weighted iron balls shackled to their ankles. Upstairs, once the slave house owner’s pristine residence, is now a tidy exhibit of the tools and tales that are left from the grotesque history that unraveled on the ground level below.

Somewhere in the house, someone is crying out, “Why?!... why?!...” and for myself, flashback images of tortured faces appear with each look into another chamber of the house. Ousseynou wants to take pictures, and I give in, trying to let the camera speak for me, as I have lost all capacity for words. With each mechanical snap of my digital camera, I frame another image, hoping that framing what I see will somehow allow me to box out my own emotions, making them easier to comprehend. The “door of no return” looms before us like a light at the end of a dark tunnel — only this is not the gate to salvation that people speak of. This is the door from which the slaves, after being kept in La Maison for up to three months — stripped, weighed and evaluated by European purchasers — made their final walk to the ship that would carry them to foreign land, if they lived that long. Men to southern Louisiana, children to Haiti and the West Indies, women to Brazil. Ousseynou and I take turns standing in the open door frame. He clicks away at my camera and then I do the same, capturing each other as we look out into the Atlantic Ocean to the same abyss of blue sea that each person who passed before us had seen. A last glimpse at the free world. Later, Ousseynou told me that he couldn’t stop asking himself, “If I was alive then, this would have been me. What would I have done?” For myself, the question seemed more difficult, because my own identity afforded me a real element of choice: “If I was alive then, this would not have been me. What would I have done? Would I be one of the women standing up on the balcony, side by side with my
husband as he made bids on the man with the most muscle mass and the sturdiest teeth?"

At last, it is almost 2 p.m. We ask the man at the entrance to La Maison where the Women's Museum is, the site of my interview. Without a word, he points just across the narrow path to the doorway right before us. There, directly facing the House of Slaves is the Women's Museum. Certainly both buildings are equally old, with the distinct colonial influence, but the Women's Museum bears an entirely different atmosphere. The walls look as if they have been recently repainted, the floor has been swept, and each surface has been tenderly cared for. The courtyard opens to a garden where women chat amongst themselves while stitching embroidery pieces to be sold in the museum shop. The humming of a woman who is hand-dying pieces of fabric comes from a room adjacent to the courtyard. Two curved staircases rise up to the main parts of the Museum, the director's offices and a small library that is still under construction. Each room houses a different exhibit to pay tribute to the women influential in the women's movement. They are divided by theme: fashion, agriculture, culinary traditions, and then rooms dedicated to women influential in the women's movement. The rooms are brightly lit by the large open windows, unlike the dark stone chambers of the slave house just across the way. The plastered walls, adorned with artifacts and images of female politicians, famous activists, writers and musicians, are alive.

Here in the Museum, across the path from the House of Slaves, there is life and energy. However, one cannot easily forget the legacy of oppression that looms so near in spatial and temporal proximity. After taking a tour of the exhibits, I have my interview with the directrice of the museum. She speaks of the history of its founding, its mission in education today, the role that she sees it playing in the modern Senegalese society. And yet she uses the same discourse as the men who gave the tours at the slave house. She talks about matters of being denied citizenship, human rights violations, crimes against the true heart and culture of the country, the rape of woman, both literally and in reference to the stripping away of human dignity. Of course, she mentions that there has been increased activity in the movement to pay tribute to the women who give their lives for the cultural reproduction of the Senegalese people and the foundation of the Senegalese family; indeed there has been liberation, such as the legal abolition of female genital cutting. However, oppression remains as history and collective memories of the people beg for the preservation of those "cultural" and "religious" traditions deemed harmful to women.

As I leave the museum, I see a large painting propped against one wall. It is of a woman with twelve or so arms, each doing a different activity to fulfill her many roles as woman: washing laundry, tending a crop, balancing fruit and vegetables that another arm is depicted cooking to prepare a meal, feeding her husband, breast-feeding the child she cradles in one arm, while supporting another child tied onto her back. The artist, a woman herself, seemed to express pain and fatigue in the overworked woman's eyes that she had painted here. In this image, woman is a slave, bound to her duties and her identity, which seem so unquestionable by social and cultural standards. Indeed, by the discourse taken up by the museum directrice and curators, it seems that the woman's movement has become a modern day cry against slavery. Surely in its early stages, the movement for the "libération de la femme" is a new page in the country's history of fighting against oppression of patriarchal colonial powers and toward independence and citizenship.

Amidst the House of Slaves, the Women's Museum, and the laughing children basking in the natural beauty of the tiny island coast, one sees painful irony in juxtaposition of history and the present. Even the name of the island, by its first colonizing proprietors after the Dutch phrase, “Goode Reede” meaning “good harbor,” makes one recall the horrific ignorance that has left such a mark on the world today. Making my final pass around the island with Ousseynou, we walk through the small artisan market on the east side. Jewelry of cowrie shells, traditional hand-carved djembé drums, wooden carvings, batiks and canvases painted by various techniques and artists flank the pathway, all for sale by the artists who created them. We carouse through the colorful stalls, stopping to have friendly conversation with an artist whose work catches our eyes. I marvel at the creative energy that has been brought forth from this island and wonder silently if the name of the island, Good Harbor, may actually have been fulfilled.

Gorée has become an honored place which, at least symbolically, any person — man, woman, modernist, traditionalist, Muslim, Christian — can rally around to recognize suffering, human dignity, and finally, human liberty. It bears a history that cannot be forgotten by the vacationers relaxing at the beach. The painful cries of oppression cannot be overpowered by the young men who gather to teach a djembé lesson to the tourist purchasing a drum. And yet by remembering, that memory has allowed for new life on Gorée Island: once home for new life on Gorée Island: once home to a center from which hundreds of thousands of Africans were sold into slavery, now home to a new hope that the demand for liberation may once again yield freedoms — this time, for the women of Senegal.
Further Reading


Web links


The Musée de la Femme “Henriette Bathily” – http://www.museevirtuel.ca/Exhibitions/Francophonie/An-/MFHBS/Muse.htm

Tostan – www.tostan.org


West African Research Center – www.warc-croa.org

Notes

1. Colloquial term for the proprietor of any small boutique or street shop that are commonly found in urban Senegal.

2. West African Research Association

3. Wolof is one of the many languages spoken in Senegal, and the most widely spoken in the greater Dakar region. In Dakar, and increasingly in other regions throughout Senegal, one can find individuals and entire communities of other ethnic groups that also speak Wolof.

4. The general term “women’s rights” in Senegal does not exclude those cultural, social, and interpersonal rights that are also afforded to girls or young women. In fact, much of the debate concerning women’s rights to education as well as bodily integrity (relevant to discussion of female genital cutting) and marriage rights (i.e. marriage consent as opposed to arranged and/or forced marriages at young ages) are particularly relevant to girls from between birth to age 16 (age of consent for legal marriage is 16 for females and 20 for males according to the Family Code). Therefore, when one uses “women’s rights” as a catchall category, it is assumed that young
girls are also considered without distinction from adult women.


6. Association Nationale pour l’Alphabétisation et la Formation des Adultes


8. For decades, this argument has been one most frequently referenced in casual conversation as well as religious and political debate: “A number of religious leaders assert that nowhere does the Coran provide justification for polygamy whereas others categorically point out that it is God himself who has authorized polygamy when he said in vers. 3 ‘Sorate’: ‘Marry those women who please you. Two, three or four.’ The only restriction imposed by Islam is that ‘if you are apprehensive of not being fair, take only one’” (Association of African Women for Research and Development. 1986. “Debates on Feminism in Senegal: Visions vs. Nostalgia.” ECHO. Vol. 1, N. 2-3. Pp. 9-10).

