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Chasing Shadows: Myths of Engagement in American Education Abroad

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Abstract

The idea that communities host American students is problematic. In the fractured nature of contemporary reality, communities, where and if they exist, tend to be less visible and, often, less accessible. The argument for the centrality of community engagement in education abroad does not recognize the dynamics of urban change. Discovering community may more realistically involve a kind of archaeology, digging out versions of constructed memories. It may also involve a search for marginal, sometimes hidden, vestiges of communal consciousness in complex urban spaces. That search may be undertaken in libraries and museums and in obscurer corners of the city. Finding community may be a matter of historical analysis – made in memory. Most of us belong to associations of interest that transcend geography and are not constrained by national frontiers. Prioritizing community engagement in education abroad may build unrealistic expectations, sending students out to chase shadows.

Keywords: chasing shadows, community engagement, urban space, fractured societies,

Encounters with the unfamiliar are at the heart of any educational endeavor. Exposure to new ideas and environments beyond the classroom expands consciousness and inculcates new skills. John Dewey's dictum is rooted in experiential education and situational learning. It also offers a rationale for the validity of education abroad: "There is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education" (Dewey, 1938, p.20).

The notion of intimacy creates a significant challenge for students studying abroad. In London, as in many European urban conurbations, they are temporary visitors in complex social and political spaces. Negotiating these environments is no easy matter. In the rhetoric of education abroad, however, we propagate a myth that proximity will empower students to engage with communities.

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Such expectations fail to recognize the fragmentation of the social structures that students will encounter. This essay will examine the concept of community critically and, in so doing, will argue that engagement is, for the most part, a problematic objective.

In education abroad, the location of the student experience is other than home – an alternative version of reality. Students meet new ideas, different assumptions, and diverse people in unfamiliar places; disruptions stimulate those senses through which, as Proust taught us, we construct meaning and memory. Encounters are physical as well as intellectual. The inter-connection of body, mind, and space in situational learning is critical in the discourse of education abroad. Leaving home involves crossing literal and metaphorical frontiers and, at best, involves transcending the most difficult barrier of all: that which separates the self from others.

The impact of encounters with the new is inevitably subject to a number of variables: going beyond inherited stereotypes is no easy matter; there are environments in which foreign visitors may encounter a range of ambiguous attitudes, and so on. These realities suggest that we need to avoid concepts that generate unrealistic expectations.

What students can expect is an opportunity to encounter, not necessarily engage with, the unfamiliar. The term "encounter" is neutral; it makes no presumption about outcomes. In contrast, "engagement" implies some level of participation. The common collocation "community engagement" in the language of education abroad raises problematic and complex questions, most critically what is the nature of community in the contemporary world? Does engagement impose an expectation of untroubled involvement?

In our century, technology has redefined the boundaries of community; voluntary and forced mobilities have disrupted modes of association. A collective implication is that communities are no longer necessarily defined by proximity. For good and ill, globalization, in many ambiguous shapes, has altered how we meet and interact with each other,

Consequently, the notion of engagement is a more complex proposition than our rhetoric may suggest. Search for community better reflects the realities we inhabit. Seeking encounters with individuals is more likely to bring the benefits envisaged. That approach is less likely to enforce reductive stereotypes based upon assumptions that those we meet are representative types. Instead, being open to the complexities of the individuals we encounter will teach us, and our students, to recognize that we, and they, are more than the sum of collective associations.

Maybe it's Because I'm a Londoner

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
T. S. Eliot "The Waste Land"

The community in which I was born has evaporated. London has been transformed in my life in ways that would make a good deal of it unrecognizable, even to my father. For my grandfather, much of the city would be alien territory in which familiar landmarks have been hidden or obliterated. They were both taxi drivers with an in-depth knowledge of the city, its alleyways and hidden byways. Were they to return to the neighborhood in which we lived, they would be astonished by the changes in buildings and people. What had been a predominantly White working-class community is now a diverse space in which Black British residents coexist with Muslim and Hassidic families. Simultaneously, young upwardly mobile couples have, because of proximity to the business district, begun to gentrify houses in creeping encroachment.

Areas a little further to the east, bombed heavily in World War II, have been reconstructed as Docklands, a modern glass and concrete metropolis. International capital has been invested to create a space dedicated to transnational corporate life. There are few remnants of the close-knit communities

who lived and worked on the old docks. Commercial shipping no longer brings cargo to this stretch of the River Thames. The boats moored here now are mostly the yachts of the wealthy who come in the summer to avoid the heat of Dubai or other far centers of luxury and commerce.

I am not being nostalgic about the landscapes of my childhood. Many areas of east London were squalid and deprived. Income, for many, was dependent on casual labor. Life could be difficult in many and various ways. Those levels of deprivation are much less visible now, but far from eradicated. Nevertheless, for ill and for good, London is probably the most radically altered city in Europe though similar patterns of transformation can be seen in other urban spaces.

The dynamics of change, driven by globalization and migration, have created, and continue to create, vibrant environments. Money and mobility have, in combination, reshaped the fabric of London life. Traditional communities may exist in the corners of the city, but they are not what the visitor sees in the streets and buildings. London has always been a magnet for tourists and students attracted by, among other things, the lure of tradition and history, iconic representations of the past. They are still there but you may need to look for them rather more closely than before. The Shard is the tallest building in Western Europe. Its needle like structure houses luxury apartments, offices, and restaurants. From most directions it obscures the view of Christopher Wren's masterpiece, St Paul's Cathedral.

Students may find other such obstructions in the search for London's fabled histories and traditions. They are more likely to discover a landscape of conjunction and collision where myths coexist with realities, where civilizations meet, and where diversity in all its manifestations brings creative, intellectual energy, and conflict. Something like 300 languages are spoken in the city. About 37% of the population was born outside of the UK. Circa 40% are categorized as non-white. In 2016, a Muslim, Sadiq Khan, was elected Mayor of London with almost 60% of the final vote. This exposes the fallacy that the city is somehow a "traditional" location in education abroad. Paddington Bear offered a relevant perspective: "In London, everyone is different, and that means anyone can fit in".

In Search of Communities

The city's transformation makes the idea that there are "communities" that "host" American students problematic. In the fractured nature of contemporary reality, communities, where and if they exist, tend to be less visible and, often, less accessible. The argument for the centrality of community engagement in education abroad derives from a largely conservative, static perspective that does not recognize the dynamics of urban change. Mobility of wealth and peoples have altered the fabric of the city. A single building exemplifies the impacts of population changes. In Brick Lane, to the east of London, a fine place of worship was built by Huguenot refugees in 1743. In 1891, in response to Jewish immigration, the same building became the Spitalfields Great Synagogue. In 1976, it reopened as a mosque serving predominantly Bangladeshi residents. London has always been an international city, but post-colonial history and globalization has intensified mobility, created an environment in which social cohesion is fragile.

Nationalists, against all the evidence of history and politics, believe that countries are communities. If so, they are peculiar manifestations. Countries are constructed entities formed by war, colonial interventions, accidents, myths and all the other myriad ways in which we invent our environments. They are rarely logical or coherent spaces built upon shared values. The poet, Benjamin Zephaniah, makes a case for London as a particular kind of community in "The London Breed":

> I love dis great polluted place…
> The music of the world is here
> Dis city can play any song…
> Two hundred languages give voice
> To fifteen thousand changing years
> And all religions can rejoice
> With exiled souls and pioneers…
> We just keep melting into one…

The people here united will
Create a kind of London breed (Zephaniah, 2001, pp.109- 110).

Zephaniah envisages a paradoxical kind of unity built around diversity which, in an aspirational, optimistic vision, will lead to collective consciousness. The poem posits a utopia in which a new "breed" emerges, defined by proximity.

On a micro level, what we call home may represent a form of community. There the fortunate experience safety, security, and identity. That said, in our age of mobility, home is a place that may not be so simply found. It may be the place in which we currently live or that imagined, remembered space where we were located by human and geographical relationships. An Irish friend, who spent over forty years working in the building trade in London, returned to rural Ireland to die in the house in which he was born. That kind of continuity belongs to pre-modern experience. For most of us, home is as much an idea as it is an address.

I have lived in the same apartment block in London for over fifteen years. There are eight other identical structures on the estate. It was originally built as social housing but is now roughly equally divided between privately owned and publicly provided housing. I could certainly describe the diverse nature of the residents from African British immigrants, to Black British (mostly of Caribbean origin), those of Turkish origin, and White British and so on. What I cannot tell you is the name of many of my neighbors.

This is not at all unusual in London or in many cities that are popular destinations in education abroad. Populations in urban environments tend to be more transient than those in rural areas. Western European cities have been shaped and reconstituted by the impacts of globalization, voluntary or involuntary mobility. One self-evident consequence is that individuals tend to be less connected to particular locations. This reality should modify some of the expectations with which we burden participants in education abroad.

The Problem of Community

The family is a version of community. There was a time when family was extended into clan or tribe. Such concepts may have credibility in some parts of the world, but they mean little in the regions and countries within which most of our students study. Urban life is more often characterized by separation. The architecture is characteristically based upon small units of living designed to accommodate relatively isolated humans. High-rise buildings and tower blocks, particularly in the 1960s and 70s, were based upon the spurious idea of a "vertical village", a concept intended to suggest that social cohesion could be manufactured artificially. The reality is that, in London, at least, the notion is largely discredited. Progressively, it has been recognized that alienation is a common consequence. Metaphorically, and increasingly literally, what remains is rubble: demolished debris of a failed dream.

In contrast, villages and rural environments have tended to retain some sense of communal cohesion. However, most of the world does not live there. What we mean by community frequently crosses borders. The dual impact of technology and enhanced mobility has led to the proliferation of forms of association not constrained by space. This is demonstrably true for international educators. At any session at one of our annual conferences, I will know the names of many colleagues in the room. I will have worked with some of them and have good friends among them. That sense of community is one of the things we have all missed during the restraints arising from the pandemic.

We encourage students to "immerse" themselves in the host community as if immersion was baptism, the first step towards holy enlightenment. We tend not to consider that it may also represent drowning. In any case, seeking to identify and engage with communities is not a simple matter. Community may take many forms depending on perspective, context, and intention. It may be established by its members or imposed by others, sympathetic or hostile.

Communal identity may, for example, be defined by outsiders in terms of deficit, a source of issues and problems for the wider population. Not all people control their own identities. There are marginalized groups defined by the hostility or mistrust of others and invested with negative traits: anti-social. pariah status, criminal tendencies, and so on. Thus, Roma, Muslims, Jews, young Black men,

among many others, bear the burden of imposed identities. Generalizations lead towards prejudicial stereotyping and create the conditions in which discrimination, even persecution, is given spurious legitimacy.

"Pride" is a political response to those negative narratives. Pride in, for example, Black or gay identity asserts a positive collective consciousness as a reaction to negative constructions. Asserting community, we might deduce, is forged in the contested politics of identity.

From another perspective, what we call community may derive from a kind of comforting fantasy that we use to keep unease from intruding into the lives many of us live. This is illustrated historically by popular American TV shows that offered an alternative and seductive narrative against a background of urban riot and disorder from the 1960s onwards. *Taxi* (1978 to 1983), set in New York City, (created by James L. Brooks, Stan Daniels, David Davis, and Ed Weinberger) is an instructive example. Taxi drivers are isolated from their customers by barriers. Communication is limited by topic and duration. Thus, the action of *Taxi* is focused in the base garage where individuals react and bond with each other in significantly supportive ways. *Taxi* offered the viewer a transformation of isolation into community, an urban myth.

The television series *Cheers* (written by Judy Hart Angelo and Gary Portnoy) presented another narrative counter to that of urban isolation and displacement. Set in a bar in Boston, it ran from 1982 to 1993. It drew upon a yearning for a place where we are recognized and valued, a version of "home." The opening theme song precisely defined a place of sanctuary and security alternative to loneliness and anonymity:

Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came.
You wanna go where people know,
people are all the same,
You wanna go where everybody knows
your name.

The continuing popularity of the series for over 40 years, and the presence of a number of bars named Cheers in Boston, indicate a persistent myth of community. In contrast to racial marginalization and discrimination, at Cheers, "people are all the same". Social fractures are healed in a secure space protected from disturbing reality. The bar is in a basement. The camera shows viewers the feet of anonymous city dwellers passing hurriedly overhead. The world below is, in contrast, a sanctuary where "everybody knows your name".

Other US comedies carried similar messaging. *The Golden Girls* (Susan Harris, 1985- 1992) was set in Miami, Florida, and constructed a communal place of friendship and safety for aging women. *The Cosby Show* (Bill Cosby, 1984 to 1992 and 1996 to 2000) offered a view of African American experience that intended to undermine racial stereotypes. Bill Cosby's family, living in Brooklyn Heights, are highly successful professionals with a loving family life. It offered a vision of Black America with which White America was very comfortable, far from the angry, destructive shapes of nightmare reflected in news reports of urban disorders.

An interesting contrast was offered by *Hill Street Blues* (Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll,1981 to 1987). NBC screened 146 episodes in which the police station was an oasis in a desert of disorder. The catch phrase, "be careful out there", established a border between a supportive community and disintegrating urban conditions in which violent criminality was a norm.

However, popular TV programs such as *Cheers* and *The Crosby Show* constructed situations in which communities modify loneliness and alienation. Such environments and relationships, of course, exist, but for most of us they are elusive, not part of the reality of our daily lives. Cities across the world offer enormous potential for education and entertainment but social cohesion is not necessarily the typical experience of residents.

The rural world is different. Farmers have a relationship with land that is physical and intimate. They commonly live and work in the same place. City dwellers rarely experience such integration. The

need to commute between the places in which we live and the places in which we work signifies a disconnection that makes community based upon proximity a less natural process. Communal groups have to be built across distances.

Religious faith clearly establishes connections. However, the only growth in Christian worship in UK churches is associated primarily with Black British populations. *Faith Survey* carried out in July 2021 summarizes a significant number of sources. Key findings were that:

> UK Church membership has declined from 10.6 million in 1930 to 5.5 million in 2010, or as a percentage of the population; from about 30% to 11.2%. By 2013, this had declined further to 5.4 million (10.3%). If current trends continue, membership will fall to 8.4% of the population by 2025…Over the period 2005-2010, the major Christian denominations such as Anglican, Catholic, and Presbyterian all saw falls in membership. Orthodox, Pentecostal and other new churches (Evangelical and Charismatic) on the other hand, saw an increase in membership…For the period 1980-2015 Church attendance has declined from 6,484,300 to 3,081,500 equivalent to a decline from 11.8% to 5.0% of the population (*Faith Survey*, 2021).

What is apparent is that traditional church membership and attendance has seen very significant declines, whereas places of worship remain a significant source of association for more marginalized groups. That is a trend confirmed by the fact that the fastest growing religion in England is Islam (Office of National Statistics, 2015). In terms of access for education abroad students, these statistics confirm that there is a diminishing sense of association in mainstream Christian worship. The religions that are growing may or may not be welcoming to strangers but, in any case, they are not likely to be places in which student engagement is a simple matter of attendance.

The Past is Another Country

Another notion of community derives from nostalgia for a past in which communal values and social cohesion influenced the ways in which people related to each other. These may be based upon folk memory, the recreation of an imagined or re-imagined past, or evidence of social and political change.

The idea of working-class solidarity is exemplified in the struggles conducted over mining in England in the 1980s. Whatever view may be taken of the viability of the industry, miners and the Nation Union of Mineworkers were subject to an unprecedented, planned campaign designed to privatize the industry, close most of the pits, and destroy the unifying influence of the Union. The threat of mine closures provoked The Miners' Strike of 1984-1985 and, as intended, enabled the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, to conduct what was effectively a class war; a Conservative government mobilized the police to defeat workers through attrition, and through the power of the state.

Thirty years later the testimony of Bruce Wilson, who was 29 years old in 1984, indicates the connections between industry and community:

> In the early 1980's I/we knew it was coming, we were warned enough by our NUM [National Union of Mineworkers] leadership and other sources. Thatcher and her government wanted a showdown. Where I live there were a dozen collieries within a 20 mile radius ... I fought not just for "my pit" but for the mining community next door (Bannock, 2015).

The scale of destruction is apparent in that the number of deep coal mines fell from 174 in 1984 to 15 by 1994. The last deep coal mine in England closed in December 2015.

Mining was and is more than a job. As in Appalachia, mining generates community. Reasonably well-paid jobs supported mining villages as they had done for generations. Traditions and continuity created a sense of social cohesion. Mine workers are, like farmers, necessarily physically close to their work. Such a relationship with the immediate environment is beyond the experience of the urban commuter.

Continuity in mining villages is a theme in Ewan McColl's song "Schooldays Over" (1961). Working in the mines was a primary source of employment for young men in the locality This is indicative of a scarcity of other opportunities, but it also reflects a source of communal cohesion:

> Schooldays over, come on then John

Time to be getting your pit boots on
On with your sack and your moleskin trousers
Time you were on your way
Time you were learning the pitman's job
And earning a pitman's pay.

Following the defeat of the miners' strike, economic stability and social cohesion were destroyed in a remarkably short period of time. Remnants of the traditions of mining villages exist now in museums, monuments, memories, brass bands, tattered flags.

If we prioritize simple notions of community engagement in education abroad, we may be directing our students towards forms of archaeology, digging out versions of constructed memories, or towards marginal vestiges that may be found in urban environments. That is not an invalid exercise as long as the context is clear. Identifying community may be a matter of historical analysis – made in memory and filtered through the kinds of perception exemplified in the recollections of the English comedian Les Dawson (1931- 1993). He recalled the Manchester of his childhood in the 1930s in an interview with Louis Barfe:

> ... nobody locked their doors, old citizens never died for want of caring, no child ever lacked supervision. Every street was a commune. Each one had its amateur midwife, undertaker, judge and medical advisor... If two men fought it was with fists and fair play, and all the policemen were beefy Sons of Erin, who corrected an offender with a judicial clout, not a charge sheet (Barfe, 2012, p. 3).

An element of working-class nostalgia in Britain is for those lost worlds: spaces called home. Emanuel Litvinoff in *Journey through a Small Planet* (1972) describes a sense of loss:

> Until I was sixteen I lived in the East London borough of Bethnal Green, in a small street that is now just a name on the map. Almost every house in it has gone and it exists, if at all, only in the pages of this book (Litvinoff, 1993, p.8).

The search for community may, therefore, directs students towards the library and museum as well as to the buildings and streets beyond.

Community and African American Identity

The lenses of nostalgia and a yearning to belong resonates with an atavistic desire for connection, security, and home. Africa functions in this manner in the construction of African American identities. The collocation of African and American establishes a transaction between myths of origin and life in the present. Africa is both a geographical space (albeit a generalized location that does not distinguish between diverse countries) and a dreamed landscape. In the real worlds we inhabit, home may be a form of imagined community. This is expressed in Maya Angelou's memoir of her return to Ghana, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*:

> We had come home, and if home was not what we had expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination (Angelou, 2008, p.19).

In this respect, it parallels the notion of Zion for diaspora Jews: a metaphor for space in which persecuted minorities belong without the need to justify, defend, or hide identity for fear of hostility from the world outside. Angelou summarizes a relationship between biblical origins and the desire for location that contains an implicit recognition of aspiration beyond possibility:

> Our people had always longed for home. For centuries we had sung about a place not built with hands, where the streets were paved with gold, and were washed with honey and milk. There the saints would march around wearing white robes and jeweled crowns. There at last, we would study war no more and, more important, no one would wage war against us again (Angelou, 2008, p.20).

Africa is history, myth, poetry, music, art, origin, and imagined community consciousness. There is an inevitable fracture between dreamed landscapes and realities of place. Barack Obama precisely contemplates this Africa as he prepares to visit Kenya, his father's homeland:

> I had been forced to look inside myself and had found only a great emptiness there…Would this trip to Kenya finally fill that emptiness? The folks back in Chicago thought so. It'll be just like Roots, Will had said at my going-away party. A pilgrimage, Asante had called it. For them, as for me, Africa had become an idea more than an actual place, a new promised land, full of ancient traditions and sweeping vistas, noble struggles and talking drums (Obama, 2004, p. 302).

Thomas Wolfe wrote of his protagonist in *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940):

> …he never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began (Wolfe, 1990, p.50).

If home eludes us, how do we find community?

Community in Geographical Locations

It would, of course, be wrong to argue that it is impossible for students to engage with communities within the countries in which they study. However, it is equally misleading to suggest that access will be a simple matter or that those who students encounter are somehow representative of more than themselves.

Students might anticipate untroubled engagement partly as a consequence of the rhetoric of education abroad, and because they have experience of a kind of constructed community: the campus. They will study at another academic community in another country whether it is a university or a study center. Students may also wear distinctive clothing that declares their membership of a group. However, that membership is temporary and fragile. It derives from accidents of location rather than shared belief or experience. American universities and colleges have stronger alumni associations than are customarily found in Europe but, for the most part, the degree of commitment is uneven and conditional.

What people wear, the college t-shirt and scarf for example, may indicate some form of alignment with a collective identity. This may be enforced by how they adorn and display their bodies. Dark clothing and make- up identify young people as Goths. The zoot suit in the USA in the 1930s and 1940s indicated alliance initially with urban Black males though it was adopted by other ethnic groups. Zoot suit riots in 1943 were the result of a war time prohibition on manufacture because the fashion was felt to be wasteful of cloth required for army uniforms. The passionate confrontations between soldiers in uniform and those wearing zoot suits reflect its importance as a symbol of community. Conflicts between Mods and Rockers in England in the 1950s similarly derived from the fact that a choice of distinctive clothing made alliances visible and excluded others.

In religious contexts, uniform is a common way of signalling community by, for example, some Islamic groups, the Amish, and others. Hassidic clothing reflects eastern European origins and indicates distinction from the norms of the environment. Hassidic men grow beards and side curls while married women cover their hair (or shaven head) with a wig. The hijab or burka similarly locates the female wearer within a Muslim community. These are indicators of both membership of a group and some degree of separation from the rest of society. Encounters with these communities may not be impossible but engagement, if it can be facilitated, will be limited, controlled, and potentially complex.

Marginalized people may also gather together as a response to real or imagined hostility. Geographical proximity may be a consequence of discrimination or segregation, formal or informal, legalized or economic. The transition from Apartheid in South Africa has not, for example, created many truly integrated spaces. Western Europe is not free from communities created by prejudice. Algerian immigration into France has been substantial as a legacy of colonial history. From the 1950s onwards, shantytowns (*bidonvilles*) grew in the suburbs of Paris, Lyons, and Marseilles. Tourists and students rarely visit these sites which are literally and metaphorically peripheral, beyond the archetypal Paris of wide boulevards, quaint streets, and pavement cafes. Roma in Europe are also often excluded from urban centers. They are seen, as they have been for hundreds of years, as anti-social pariahs – a community defined by exclusion.

There are, then, quasi-hidden in many of the cities in which our students study. They may be created by religious faith, distinctive habits or ideologies, desire for protection, the prejudices of others. The common factors are they do not reflect mainstream experiences of most of us in contemporary

reality; access may be problematic or impossible; outsiders may be unwelcome; they may be hidden from the visitor as a matter of choice, perceived necessity, or the actions of hostile authorities.

Exceptional communities are accessible in some contexts. Most places of religious practice will welcome outsiders to a variable degree. Political groups similarly may be open to forms of engagement. Students may join sports clubs assuming they have an appropriate level of skill. Pubs in London or Dublin are informal communities, but it would be irresponsible to encourage students to spend too much time there. In both locations, alcohol has a role in creating group alliances but, for any number of reasons, students may be excluded from access.

Students engage, of course, with the people they meet, and we encourage those encounters. However, these are not engagements with communities except in some limited circumstances. In any case, treating individuals as representative leads towards generalizations in which personal characteristics may be taken as communal traits. Any statement that begins with Americans are, the English like, the French have, the Irish believe, represents a way of not seeing the individual, a simplification that may lead towards harmful stereotyping.

We would do better to ask students to consider what has happened to community instead of assuming that they can engage with something that may or may not be there. The impacts of globalization, in its many manifestations, have led to the fragmentation of traditional modes of association. That focus may give students insights into the social dynamics that have transformed contemporary urban realities.

Host Communities

The concept of "host" raises another set of implications which distort students' experience. There is a body of thoughtful, well-intentioned work that examines the relationships between students from elsewhere and the situations they encounter. What is rarely considered is that the rhetoric itself imposes demands that exceed what might be considered reasonable. A number of thoughtful essays in *the Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* have analyzed problematic relations between students studying abroad and the communities they encounter (see, for example, Katz, J.et al., 2021, and Asada, S, 2019). Despite the quality of those discussions, a key omission, as in much of the literature, is the degree to which "host" defines relationships unrealistically.

In education abroad, the term host creates a misleading metaphor. Host and guest are voluntarily assumed roles. A host invites you into their home as someone who is welcomed and offered hospitality in one form or another. Host and guest suggest a kind of intimacy in a domestic environment. A host acts with kindness and generosity; a guest is the privileged recipient of those gestures of friendship.

The relationship between host and guest does not describe the manner in which education abroad is constructed. The student may well be welcome, and we hope does not experience hostility or aggression, micro or otherwise. However, the transaction enacted between the foreign country and the education abroad student is not accurately represented in host-guest terms and may generate misleading expectations. Students abroad are individuals who by personality and curiosity might become welcome guests. They may also generate resentment by inappropriate forms of behavior. Welcome and hostility are at the extreme ends of a potential spectrum of response but either, and all points along the spectrum, are conditional upon both the nature of the people encountered and the way the student enters the unfamiliar environment. The collocation of host and community distorts the nature of encounters. Students studying abroad are not exceptional guests entering into space in which they will inevitably enjoy privileges and unconditional welcome.

This is not just an issue relevant to the experience of American students abroad. The ambiguity of welcome for Chinese and other foreign students on US campuses raises related issues. Integrating with American students is sometimes problematic, and any number of explanations and solutions are proposed. Barriers to smooth integration include the obvious: language, exclusionary American behavior, Chinese students remaining in their linguistic and social groups, American campuses do not do enough etc. What is rarely considered is that unrealistic expectations are created by anticipating

interactions based upon host–guest relationships. The consequences are widely discussed, in particular by Quinton (2019), Glass et. al. (2013), and Fischer (2012).

The idea of a host family creates further ambiguities and exacerbates potential misunderstanding. Living with a family in a second-language environment might aid language acquisition. There are mutual benefits from the arrangement, but the relationship is based on a commercial transaction in almost every case. Responsible education abroad organizations will ensure that the family treats the student well and that the environment is clean, safe, and comfortable. The family will, in all likelihood, be friendly as that is both a natural human response and a means of ensuring repeat business. Over time, a friendship may well develop but it is not a requirement on either side of the transaction. The relationship is better thought of as that between landlord/landlady and lodger. However enjoyable and successful the experience is for both parties, it is essentially based on buying and selling services.

Education abroad offers a powerful opportunity to learn about similarities and differences, to engage with unfamiliar places and people, to learn from human contact. Nothing is gained by employing metaphors that impose artificial roles and generate false expectations.

How We Really Live: Conclusion

For most of us, community, where it exists, tends to be defined by function or interest not by geography. The world we inhabit is not characterized by a stable sense of belonging within a single location.

The positive consequence of this is that we move more readily and easily than the generations before us. More unsettlingly, though, an impact of globalization, urbanization, and enhanced technologies have also tended to dislocate rather than locate human experience. This paradox is expressed succinctly by Yuval Noah Harari: "people live ever more lonely lives in an ever more connected planet" (2018, p.103). Myths of community are seductive in so far as they modify our innate fears of individual isolation and collective social disintegration. They resonate with an atavistic desire for identity, security, and home.

Our forebearers worked the land in a fashion that they believed was timeless. The skills they taught their children were passed on through generations. Knowledge was rooted in place. We do not have that surety or security. For us, time is no longer measured by the rising and setting of the sun. The core of the modern, Karl Marx wrote, is that "all that is solid melts into air" (Marx, 1888, p.16). The ways in which we now live and work are fluid and mutable. We do not have the luxury of continuity; the canon of necessary knowledge that the older generation hands on to the younger has become conditional, of fragile utility and limited relevance. We are, like it or not, and in some sense or another, orphaned.

There was a time when the place in which we were born, lived, and died was our community. An important element of working-class nostalgia in Britain is for those lost worlds. In the experience of most urban dwellers, if we have a sense of belonging to something, it tends to be dislocated from place. That process has been intensified by globalization, unprecedented growth in mobility, and the ways in which technologies have reduced the significance of physical distance. Social media ensure that friendship is no longer dependent on physical contact. Even the youngest, or those who never leave their home country, can have any number of "friends" they will never meet in places they will never visit. Virtual communities recall the allegory of Plato's cave wherein the residents confuse the shadows they see with the world beyond. We do not love the people we never see or touch. We barely notice when they disappear.

We can, however, belong to communities defined not by where you happen to be at a given point in time but by race, gender, profession, sexual preference, religion, interests, accidents, or any of the other ways in which we seek common contact. These transcend geography and are not constrained by frontiers.

It is also possible for international educators to manufacture engagement with some communities in controlled environments. We take students into mosques for example, where they attend talks, ask questions, and learn something of other lives. There is nothing spontaneous about this

encounter which does not mean it is without value. We also ensure that students can gain access to local universities, but proximity does not make interactions inevitable. Education abroad students enter an environment where relationships are formed, communities of interest are well-established. Our students are temporary visitors with limited time. Access is by no means easy. It requires special effort and commitment beyond the norm.

Engagement with host communities is embedded as an aspiration and intended outcome in education abroad. Problematic issues raised by this objective rarely trouble practitioners but can be a cause of student frustration. Students may anticipate unproblematic engagements with groups who, in practice, are not easily found and/or who may not be open to outsiders. The concept of "host" also raises misleading expectations of a specially elevated welcome.

It is not unusual for students to express some disappointment at what they perceive as their "failure" to "immerse" themselves in overseas spaces. It is not their failure; it is ours. We have not explained that education abroad students are privileged visitors (unlike immigrants or refugees). They are the fortunate beneficiaries of a combination of relative wealth, political freedom to travel, and a national identity that bestows some privilege. We have not taught them to understand that communities may have eroded or disintegrated through a combination of urban development, globalization, secularization, and other social alterations. What they seek to find may reside predominantly in history, memory and myth, libraries, and images that have begun to fade. They may be chasing shadows.

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