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Border Crossings: Baha'i Women and Narratives of Learning to be Global Citizens

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Abstract: *This is an empirical study of how ten Baha'i women learn to cultivate a sense of global belonging through mapping and entering the world from a spiritual paradigm. Emerging from the (re)constitution of their identities across place, nations, and religion is a widening of loyalties and expanded belonging.*

Purpose of Study

Is the world one country? Is it possible to speak of one's belonging in terms of world citizenship? This study is about a group of Baha'i women who subscribe to such a vision of the world and themselves. For the approximately 5.5 million worldwide Baha'i adherents, the identification of oneself as a member of the global family or "world citizen" is not an idealistic imagination but a conviction that they strive to live out through their personal and collective actions within and outside their communities of faith. In view of its strong discourse on working towards "the oneness of humanity" and an equally clear imperative to engage in global rapprochement, ten Baha'i women were purposively invited to share and reflect upon their ideals and social actions towards such a goal. The purpose of this study is to gain insights into their worldview-making, and examine their learning experience in cultivating a global consciousness through living and working internationally across their communities of faith.

Problem Statement

Three research questions frame this study:

1. In what ways does the Baha'i discourse facilitate transnational movement?
2. How do these women experience the (re)construction of belonging and identity through transcommunity lives?
3. What implications do these transnational narratives have on education for cultivating global consciousness?

Theoretical Framework

Transnational Studies

Transnational studies contend that borders, be they physical or symbolic, are being blurred, deterritorialized and remapped as people, networks, ideas, images, and capital crisscross the world to build imagined communities. A transnational perspective therefore, interrupts stable, bounded and essentialized understanding of belonging in favor of a nuanced understanding to the (re)making of identities and belonging. Such fluidity, malleability, and porosity of identities that are reconstituted across borders comes forth from the creative and dialectical process of making sense between the "new" and "old"; the "here" and "there" (Appadurai, 1991; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999). Accordingly, this results in the emergence of an ambivalent, in-between, "third space" (Bhabha, 1994) or borderland belonging (Anzaldúa, 1987). In this regard, the role of religion as a transnational force cannot be overlooked for its importance in the construction of fluid, malleable and porosity of identity and belonging.

Citizenship and Civil Society

In Habermas' view, citizenship is associated with agency in the public sphere, mediated through the space of civil society (MacAfee, 2000). Contested as the terrain of civil society stands, it is through the manifold expressions that people, rather than nation-states, exert claims of citizenship in learning for agency and deliberative engagements across borders, beliefs, cultures, belonging, regions, and causes for social change. Dower (2002) suggests that there are two components to the discussion of global citizenship – consciousness and/versus institutional making. It is the component of global citizenship as the making of global civil society, and a consciousness of wider loyalties and expanded belonging that is the focus of this study.

Spirituality and Adult Transformative Learning

The spirituality of adult education has been framed under various concepts such as “Spirited epistemology” (Vella, 2000); “learning from the heart” (Apps, 1996) and the “Learning Spirit” (Gobeldale, 1991), all of which offer ways of connecting to and drawing out the spiritual self into action and agency. The social context of spirituality in adult education is concerned with expressing one's set of core, inner belief systems into action and engaging in a lifelong ontological struggle of “becoming” and learning.

Methodology

Conceptually, this is a phenomenological study that privileges the lived experiences of the participants in making sense and meaning of their world and actions through a material and spiritual paradigm. Through purposive sampling, 10 women from the Chicago suburbs were interviewed multiple times to solicit thick descriptions of their experiences as Baha'i transnationals. Four major themes were identified from the transcripts: the search for an inclusive spiritual paradigm, the multi-faceted dimensions of transnational relocation, transcommunity, and relational learning. Accordingly, analytical narratives were constructed from the transcripts under these emerging themes which were then verified with the participants for accuracy.

Findings and Discussion

The participants are from diverse ethnic backgrounds: an African-American, a Korean-Italian-American, a Japanese, and seven Caucasians. Their ages range from 26 – 85 years. The places they relocated to include: South Korea, Japan, Canada, Thailand, Finland, Namibia, the Dominican Republic, Taiwan, and the Swaziland. The duration that they lived outside the U.S.A. varied between two to twenty-four years. All of them were self-supporting in a variety of jobs that were primarily in the educational sector.

Developing Wider Loyalties and Expansion of Vision through the Space of Religion

The pivotal message espoused in this new religious movement is the widening and expansion of parochial loyalties and aspirations. Baha'is believe that a global approach to the advancement and betterment of the world is necessary because “until this issue is acknowledged and addressed, none of the ills afflicting our planet will find solutions, because all the essential challenges of the age we have entered are global and universal, not particular or regional” (Baha'i International Community, 1999). Therefore, through teachings such as these: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” and “Let your vision be world-embracing rather than confined to your own self,” its adherents are challenged to live out these counsels in their everyday lives. Movement and living across international communities is much encouraged in

the Baha'i discourse for the purpose of teaching and sharing their faith with others, and to experience the praxis of living in diverse Baha'i communities. It is with such a transnational discourse and emphasis on cross border movement in the Baha'i worldview that sets the context and stage in examining the learning narratives of the participants in this study.

"Us and them became us." As these women tell of their process of becoming an adherent and their faith-inspired relocations, it is apparent that religion has been, and is an important part of their meaning-making in the world. Their narratives tell of the search for a belief system that could align and accommodate their inner spiritual needs with agency in the social world around them. Most of the women interviewed talked about how necessary it was to find a worldview that is also necessarily an inclusive spiritual space for "others". The following reflections allude to the participants' critical questioning of this issue.

Christine: "I went to a Catholic school, my mother permitted me to go to church, I believe was Episcopalian. And I went to their ceremony and I thought it is almost exactly like ours! They even had communion. I was just astounded because I had been programmed at this point in my life to believe that everyone who didn't believe as we do were going to hell. They were wrong and we were the only ones right. In my little mind I thought they seem so much like us. Why is it they would be sorted out differently from us?"

Kay: "I had met people of other religions in school and found that they were also good people of faith who wanted to help the world to be a better place. What attracted me to the Baha'i Faith was it gives us a way to do this together. The teaching is that all religion is one religion. I began reading the Holy Books of various religions and becoming happy to find the same thread of truth running through them all. Us and them became us."

Oneness of humanity. Underlying the narrative of most of the participants who became Baha'is in their adult life is teaching of the "oneness of humanity" and "oneness of religion" that offered an expanded and inclusive view of understanding religion. Their attraction to this religion weaved in both a personal need and social expression of their spirituality. For example,

Pat: "The Baha'i Faith gave me knowledge that led to an understanding that there was a living relationship possible, a day to day, really, moment by moment, living connection to God. But then those are personal things. On another level religion is not just about me. There is this great concern about the profound issues that relate to community life, life on this earth with all other people, and that was wonderful."

Virginia: "In the late 50's the 'sit-ins' began happening in Oklahoma City. At that time it was a strictly segregated community. Had never felt the prejudice that many people of the city and state felt, so, I thought I should become a Baha'i... my becoming a Baha'i was my declaration that I was on the side of the African Americans."

Sandy: "In this religion one of its central teachings is getting rid of prejudice. I was part of the civil rights era, so I knew what it was like - the black white prejudice in this country. I was definitely a believer in the oneness of humanity. Here was a religion whose very central teaching talks about that."

Transnational Belonging and Identity: "I Belong as Long as I am of Service to Humanity"

Vasquez and Marquardt (2003) point out religion as a transnational force cuts through layers of identities and boundaries; important among them are regions, time, and ethnicities. They also point out that religions are among the oldest form of transnationalism that exhibit the fluid, shifting identities and hybrid cultures of transnationalism and imagination. Moving out of the U.S.A. into the transnational space, these women would now be the Other such as being the "ulkomaalainen," "gaijin," "farang," "wei-guo-ren," "kyopo," "yellow tail," and "rubio" in other people's lands. While positioned as the Other outside of the USA, they were able to resolve such marginalized belonging through their Baha'i identity that offered them an empowering space to belong and be a part of the community where they were. Though they might not have a sense of place and belonging in the mainstream society, it is through their identification with both the global and local Baha'i communities that enabled them to "learn to make home any place." A younger participant who spent three years in Asia expressed this point succinctly when she talked about her experience of crossing borders:

"Every time you get a stamp in your passport you feel like you belong to the world instead of one country. And the neat thing about the Baha'i Faith is we are required, when we travel, to follow the laws of the land and the government and also the Baha'is of that land. So you are full Baha'i citizen of that country when you move to that country. Though you are not a full citizen with the government but with the Baha'is you are. So all of a sudden you are there and you belong as much as anyone else. You really have a quick idea of feeling a belonging to another place. I belong as long as I am of service to humanity."

Eriko, of Japanese ancestry, talked about how living in Russia for five years has impacted the way she felt about being Japanese in America. Because of her Oriental features and demeanor, it was not unusual for her to be identified as a Japanese, Korean, Chinese, or Russian during her stay there:

"People there thought I was from Uzbekistan. In the western part of Russia, they thought I was from the Soviet Union; when in Vladivostok, they thought I was a Chinese laborer or Korean. I will always say I am Japanese from America. At that time that was probably how I actually felt too. I was not an American citizen then. To say I am Japanese from America is probably more correct than saying I am a Japanese-American or whatever. I think that was probably my stronger identity. Culturally I am Japanese but also because I lived most of my life in America, I'm culturally pretty American. Of course, then I can say however, as a Baha'i, my identity is more broad, and a world citizen; and you could prove it -- here I am living in Russia. After living in Russia, it doesn't matter. I don't have to be so worried about that because I am a human being, and I belong to the world."

For Sandy, living and teaching school in Namibia for 5 years has taught her that she could make any place home:

"I learned that people who are very different in terms of education, language, their cultures are really my sisters and my friends. I was there because I am Baha'i, not

because I am an American. So I am a world citizen trying to reach other world citizens with this message.”

Pat, an African-American who lived 12 years in Finland, talked about her life and role in a predominantly white society as an informal and everyday educator of diversity:

“I was very noticeably different with my dark skin, dark eyes, and dark hair. I taught some aspects of socialization about diversity just by my presence in that country. I offered the Finnish people the chance to know, and to come to understand somebody from a different culture, so that’s what they learned from me. I provided an opportunity to learn how to understand someone different just by being present and living among them, and they taught me some very important values that lead to my own personal development. It was very valuable to learn from them. It was definitely an opportunity for sharing. Twelve years is a long time, and a lot of trust can be, and was, built up during that time.”

A participant who spent 10 years in Japan reflected on what she considered an invaluable component in learning to cross borders:

“Every relationship is with someone unfamiliar to you in terms of their assumptions, their expectations and to me that brought human relationship to a more pure level because you didn’t take as much for granted and it’s a much more of a human to human connection cause that’s your lowest common denominator. You weren’t all Baha’is, you weren’t all of a same culture, race, education, anything. Most of that is in fact different, diverse; so to me it reduced relationships in a very positive way to the lowest common denominator of a humanity so that you share and can relate on a much more essential way with people.”

Raised in the U.S.A, Kim reflected on how she felt about having been to her mother’s land as a Baha’i transnational for two years. As a Korean-Italian-American she was less attracted to go to Korea, but as a Baha’i she saw herself in broader terms:

“I think I won’t want to live in Korea because even though it is my heritage. I didn’t have a uphold, a heritage to live there, but as a Baha’i I thought OK I have the unique opportunity to offer service. I might have more opportunities as a Korean-American Baha’i than a non Korean-American. I remember .. I felt like I could go to Korea and I had immediate family all over the country, like I could go to all these cities, visit with both Korean Baha’is and Baha’is from different parts of the globe.”

Implications to Adult Education

Firstly, it is apparent from their cross border narratives that education for global consciousness must necessarily incorporate an inner, affective component and the cultivation of the “imaginative and compassionate narrative” (Nussbaum, 1977). To be world-embracing, learning cannot be achieved at the cognitive level alone. Though learning about others is important, to *enter* into a relation(al) learning with others is quite a different experience. To be world- embracing is to learn and empathize imaginatively, compassionately, and relationally in

order to validate and appreciate other ways of knowing and being. The learning dimension of such transnational experience is about transformation in social context. As evident from this participant, one cannot transform without a context:

“We don’t transform in isolation. Some of the things we do in the course of our life are solitary like reading, writing, meditation. But unless that is combined with interacting with people you’re really can’t transform, I think, just alone. It requires interaction because transformation means quality, and how you know these qualities are developing unless you exercise them. How do you exercise kindness and love alone in a room?”

Secondly, though transnational studies provide a vibrant framework of understanding how identities are being (re)constituted across borders and space in a globalizing context, less discernible in this field is an understanding of the impact of a spiritual paradigm on the making of “third space” identities. Religion is a powerful force for conceptualizing self and identity across space because it challenges our traditional and bounded ways of mapping and viewing the world, and therefore, is an important area that needs to be explored in adult education. This is especially pertinent to the way we conceive of belonging in terms of margin-center. Rather than conceptualizing belonging and identity in terms of centers and margins, the voices of these women reflect the development of their belonging more akin to the way rhizomes branch out and spread all over.

Finally, this study has implications on expanding the small space of spirituality in adult education. This is particularly important for diversity education in the U.S.A. as we have yet to capture the rich voices from other spiritual worldviews of meaning-making.

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