

From the Red-Dot-Indian Woman to Jet-Set-Mangoes and all the Hyphens In-Between Studying Abroad and Discovering Myself

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Introduction

I AM A WOMAN born and raised in India. An Indian woman. An Indian woman now living in the United States. An Indian woman living in the U.S., and travelling to Honduras on a study abroad program. So, who am I? In this article, I use the context of study abroad to ask questions on how world travel affects my identity as an Indian woman born with a colonial past. As a woman who lived in India for decades and travelled extensively in the last twenty years, I speak from personal experience when I claim that mainstream stereotypes and caricatures go hand in hand with ignorance about a woman from India. Worse, I am guilty of playing the part. The constructed Indian woman in me was well preserved by religion, ethnicity, nationality, history, and philosophy until I crossed geopolitical borders to confront my own shifting, at times, ambivalent identity/ies.

The shift from India to the U.S. was easy. I exchanged my teaching position in India for another in the U.S., entered a Ph.D. program at a public university, and embraced my new life without much question. Enrolling in a study abroad program to Honduras was something else altogether. It allowed me the opportunity to occupy multiple spaces and speak from multiple locations, troubling the production of knowledge about the quintessential Indian woman—knowledge that I took for granted as a recognizable representation of myself. Call this space I dwell in the new transcultural imaginary (Krishnaswamy, 2002), border consciousness similar to the new *mestiza* (Anzaldúa, 1987), or hybrid identities (Bhabha, 1994). I now experience my life at the “border line... a constant state of transition” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3), marked by a vibrancy that is elusive and often difficult to define.

This article is an attempt to explore my hyphenated cultural schizophrenia, one that relocates meaning to my past and present experiences. I use autobiography and life-stories positioned

within feminist-cultural-discursive frameworks to explore the construction of my identity/ies and illuminate the continued situating and resituating of my identities within the spaces of in-between-ness. Inhabiting spaces of in-between-ness, the question of being Indian, Hindu, Asian, Asian-American, or American, when asked from the borderlands, has rendered my cultural, racial, and ethnic affiliations problematic, de-essentializing all categories that had worked for me in the past. In order to understand the spaces I occupy in the process of global movement, national identity, and personal choices, I draw upon the complexities and contradictions of my experiences, attitudes, and perceptions that surfaced while studying abroad in Honduras. My experiences are a live demonstration of the intersection of representations of Indian women, my own cognitive-affective experiences, and formation of subjectivities through the subject positions I occupy, ones that are unstable and contradictory.

In what follows, I begin with an overview of the study abroad program, the context for exploring who I am and who I am becoming. Next, using my experiences in Honduras as a springboard, I draw on memory and history to situate myself in India and abroad, exploring what it means to be an Indian born of colonialism and the impact it has on shaping my perceptions and attitudes. Then, I examine the complexities of the gendered discourses that constitute me as the universal Indian Hindu woman ‘other.’ Here, I struggle with and acknowledge my complicities in the discourses that constitute my identity/ies. Subsequently, I argue against the construction of third world women as a singular, monolithic entity by giving examples of women whose subjectivities, positionalities, and personal choices are marked by difference. I conclude by affirming that study abroad offers experiences and opportunities for examining the construction of the self, disrupting essentialized simple dichotomous identities such as third world/first world, and rearticulating identity as multiply situated, at times contradictory, and always in the process of becoming. In closing, I suggest study abroad for all educators as fertile ground for exploring how identity/ies are constructed within the complex and conflicted hyphens of local-national-global-ethnic-racial-historical-geographical-colonial-economic flows that complicate cultural politics as it is understood in teacher education.

Studying Abroad in Honduras

It is May 12, 2008, a bright Monday morning and the beginning of the summer semester of a Honduras study abroad program at Purdue University. A small group convenes at the Indianapolis airport, a sixty-mile drive from the university campus. Most of the nineteen or so travelers—twelve U.S. American White preservice teachers consisting of four men and eight women, three graduate students not in the teacher education program, two faculty members, and two graduate assistants, one a Honduran woman and the other an Indian—the common affiliation of this motley group is interest in study abroad.

As we corridor our way through baggage, immigration, and security, it dawns on my fellow students that as they smoothly whisk from checkpoint to checkpoint, I am in a separate queue. While my bags are snaking their way through screens and metal detectors, I am waiting at a desk ominously called U.S. Department of Homeland Security. I pause for a moment and respond to the concerned glances that the students direct at me. I am not a U.S. citizen. My passport tells a different story.

I am an Indian citizen, a part-time graduate student at a U.S. American university, now a research assistant for the short-term Honduras study abroad program for preservice teachers. I have

an agenda. My goal is to digitally record the perceptions and experiences of U.S. American preservice teachers through interviews, conversations, and class discussions and keep extensive field notes to fill in the gaps, and I did both. In the classrooms during their field placements, preservice teachers gave me plenty to record. They delved into their own lives, communities, and families to speak about their experiences, all the time acknowledging their thankfulness for the safety and security that come with being U.S. American citizens.

The preservice teachers are enrolled in a teacher education program which offers two courses, *Multicultural Education* and *Exploring Teaching as a Career*, through study abroad in Honduras. The intention of the study abroad program is to help preservice teachers become multicultural educators, understand their own attitudes toward diversity, toward themselves, reflect on their cultural biases, and be better prepared to engage with differences in their future classrooms. The intentions of the program—engage preservice teachers in multicultural awareness—matched the conversations and discussions I studiously recorded. What was not on my scripted research agenda was tracking down my own reactions and responses that were disturbing and completely outside what I knew of myself. I confronted a new agenda—self-discovery.

Therefore, in this article I offer a kind of road map to my experience, an overview that will enable educators to experience study abroad more fully, more thoughtfully, although I am certain that the experience strikes something deeper than multicultural education itself. My focus is on unpacking my experiences, exploring my changing identities, letting the issues of study abroad emerge in the process. I suggest that studying abroad is an ongoing initiation into self-knowledge that deepens my capacity for experiencing myself as well as others. Here I undertake what Pinar (2000) refers to as “a complicated conversation with myself and others, the point of which is movement: autobiographic, political, cultural...autobiography is not just about oneself but about the Other” (p. 30). I do not think I would underestimate the capacity for inclusion that study abroad opens within me via a deeper understanding of who I am constantly becoming in relation to others, rather than a frozen notion of who I am.

Revisiting the Past to Understand the Present

Traveling to Honduras

The shortest international flight I have taken; in two hours our study abroad group has made the cultural leap from Houston to Honduras. I look around and inhale deeply. In the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, we begin climbing into the bus waiting to transport us to the Kellogg Center on the agricultural university campus in Zamorano. Halfway across the world, curiously, the Honduran air breathes like India, my home country. I survey the landscape. Above, the clear clouds joining and breaking in the sky, beneath, the flamboyant Gul Mohurs, better known as Flame of the Forest, line the road, houses relaxed in their shadows with vegetable saplings protected behind chain-linked fences, and a group of boisterous children shaking mangoes from the trees.

Mangoes. I find myself traveling back in time—a burst of emotion transports me to my childhood. As far as I remember, the mangoes I picked came from the tree outside the family home; we (my brothers and sisters) raced and then fought each other for the ripest one of all. We had to learn to pick mangoes at the right time, they had to be just so, to be able to eat them off

the tree without getting acid blisters on the side of the mouth. Mango picking used to be an art. When the last fruit was gone, it would be a year before we tasted another mango.

Now my mangoes come from Kroger, or Meijer's, or Target, neatly packed in cardboard boxes with a little sticker on each beautiful luscious uniform fruit that tells me they have travelled from Mexico, Brazil, or Mumbai. Jet-set-mangoes. Mangoes with expiration dates. Since when did mangoes become so complicated, I wonder. Whatever happened to mangoes that were simply raw, ripe, or rotten? Honduras is teaching me some old fashioned lessons on the epic changes in our now globalized, or is it glocalized, food chain.

What a clever, sanitized word—glocalized—in ten alphabets the local is overshadowed by the global—along with the history and geography that sustained the local communities with only the lingering traces of what once was. In the process of looking for answers, I discovered something I had not expected to find—parts of myself. What especially compels me about study abroad is how it makes me someone else. It takes me into myself but also confronts me with how within new contexts I am seen differently, made to be a different woman. Study abroad for me initiates a restructuring of my own life. It reminds me that there is more to this globe than the selfish world I inhabit in my daily life, with its narrow circumference of home, school, friends, and family. It shocks me into “wide-awakeness” (Greene, 2001) making me realize that my ways of existing sorely need renewal.

At moments of wakefulness, I find the experience of studying abroad compelling and unsettling. I am unsettled because of the childhood memories it brings back of my parents' farm in rural India. I had forgotten about farm life, and I am surprised to recognize aspects of my childhood experiences and my family history in Honduras. I am even more surprised at being caught between two worlds, two worlds at war with each other, one that is my past, and the other that is right in front of me. Study abroad in Honduras takes me back to my past, my childhood, my memories, on one hand, and offers experiences that bring a sense of new awakening to who I might become, on the other.

Although I am no Odysseus, the two sides of my life's journey, the past and the present, give me a sense of place within a history and a geography that is indispensable to my hyphenated existence as a global traveler. Each side of my life infuses me with a different kind of knowledge. The first nourishes and feeds me to make me who I am. The second, that is the present, shields me from the tyranny of the first. It is necessary to keep both intact, the history I am born into and the one I create through my stories, experiences, and travels. Traveling to discover myself hardly means I return home to be a completely new person. In fact, it reinforces who I am becoming, with changes from study abroad that will continue working their way through me for life.

Glocalizing the World

As I sit in the bus on the way to Kellogg Center, a gust of wind interrupts my reverie to jolt me back into the present. The wind also carries a plastic shopping bag across the street, over the moving traffic, hesitating for a moment on our side view mirror, and floating away, another carbon time capsule my generation will leave behind for future generations. I realize with a start that the other students in the bus, like voyeurs, are absorbing the dirt, the disorder, the poverty, discussing their first encounter with the likes of “the third world” which they admit they have never faced beyond media images.

I listen but with a cataclysm of questions walling up in my head. Why are my U.S. American fellow students so obsessed with poverty? What did they expect? I want them to notice the glocalized new world on either side of the hillside, feel the sense of history in the juxtaposition of the local communities, the Spanish colonial past, the imported American plaza—Honduras is a poor country, yes, but one that is open to the risk of change that accompanies multiple cultural influences. I have an incredible urge to defend the dirt, the disorder, and the poverty—shield it from the simplistic American gaze that both fixes and sustains discourses that represent the self and other. Such lenses measure the world in terms of the haves and have-nots, a gaze described by McLaren (2000) as the search for “consumer utopias and global capital flows [that] rearticulate whiteness by means of relational differences” (p. 151). I have an even stronger urge to separate myself from all things American, Western, White. I do not know if I am grieving for the poor in Honduras or for the poor in India. I try rationalizing the dirt, the disorder, the poverty, every way I can.

As hard as I try, I cannot rationalize the poverty. How often have I immersed myself in a thrilling bestseller insulated inside my car driven by cheap Indian labor blithely ignoring miles of New Delhi slums, avoiding the faceless masses of humanity, the empty faces of despair? That was much of my younger life. Then, I did not know how to begin to address the misery of my people, caused neither through a random act of mindless terrorism, nor by the organized dropping of a lab created atom bomb, acts that are easily condemned. The hopelessness of third world poverty is something else altogether. Even as I write this page, the Oscar winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), a widely acclaimed movie set in the slums of Mumbai, evokes anger in me—could Danny Boyle, the director, not find any poverty for his film along the notorious Tower of London or the drunken docks of Cardiff? Regardless of the attention it brings to global concerns, it also reduces, displays, makes the complicated lives of people on the borders a simple storyline, one that can be consumed and then given awards, possibly out of guilt but much less rarely out of a recognition of complicity.

Ingenuously, Boyle has handed voice back to the colonized ‘other’ by letting the Indian cast of characters speak, as it were, for themselves. An Indian narrative for Western ears that almost makes race, ethnicity, empire, poverty, and exploitation look attractive under the camera’s tinselled glow. Edward Said’s (1978) orientalism right into the twenty-first century. According to Said,

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (p. 3)

I recognize that Boyle’s film is a contested space, as is India, Indianness, Bollywood, Indian culture, globalized India and that my own politics is problematic. Nevertheless, the charge I level is against a de-historicized public sphere and Boyle’s place in it, one that ignores “aesthetically reflective awareness of difference” (McLaren, 2000, p. 166) and the larger context of world politics and history in generating and sustaining inequity.

I am angry that Boyle brilliantly presents every complication that is India while leaving his own or any other form of Whiteness disengaged from the narrative, untouched by the camera. There is the American Dream but there is no complicity. I am angry that after the last red carpet rolls, the only name the world remembers from the Oscar winning film is that of Danny Boyle, a

British filmmaker of Hollywood fame. My heart is waging its own war, but I fear I am fighting the wrong war because I do not want to confront the war that implicates me. And my life-style. And my cultural caste-driven Brahmin induced amnesia. Sometimes the most revealing moments about myself come to light in the most unexpected places to connect what I feel with how I produce and validate knowledge. As Ellsworth (2005), speaking of knowledge always in the making, reminds us, the most provocative thoughts come from places of learning outside formal classrooms.

At other times, my “thinking-feeling...learning self in the making” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 3) makes me reflective of what is going on around me. This self on the move makes me acutely aware of my U.S. American fellow companions who cannot stop speaking about poverty in Honduras. As I listen to their conversations in the bus, Gina, one of my fellow companions says she thinks the children who live on the streets or along the bare hillside in Honduras are “happy.” She wonders if she is being “too judgmental” when she places a high premium on material comfort—“after all, these kids look happy.” Another student, Sarah, responds, “They don’t know any better.” Others, at the end of the bus comment, “They are too proud to look sad” and “Maybe they always smile at strangers.” With finality, Ashton, another U.S. American student, concludes the conversation, “We are so lucky to be born in America!”

I look at the children outside in their present state, the darkened skin, matted hair, turn to the shocked white faces of fellow students inside the bus, and look away confused and upset. Is it a “white” thing to dissect poverty, speak about happiness, and be grateful for one’s own lot in life all in the same breath? Why am I so quick to draw the line between my U.S. American companions and myself? Whiteness and my world. Western and non-Western world. What Spivak (1987) calls the “self-consolidating Other” which creates, resists, and sustains the discourse of the colonized and colonizer. Without the construction of one, the other fails or “subaltern, insurgent, nationalist, colonialist, historiographic,” become “a general field of failures” (pp. 199–200). Although such binary distinctions play out in social, material, political, and ideological contexts, the truth is that a refusal to acknowledge how I am implicated in certain relations of privilege and domination is to ignore my own “whiteness” in reproducing unequal relations of power.

Besides, while I am drawing political lines between what is Western and non-Western, Whiteness and non-Whiteness, essentializing imperialism and exploitation, my sensibilities show a desensitization to the real world of desperation that is poverty and my own role in sustaining this desensitization. Here in Honduras, I am face-to-face with children of the damned. Mumbai, Delhi, Tegucigalpa, Rio de Janeiro, Kabul, Karachi—third world metros straining to find a spot on the global map while their children never really show up at all on the academic map of modernity, progress, and development. Of course, Honduras is neither representative of world poverty, nor is it virtual reality mediated through the World Wide Web. Out here, there is only firsthand knowledge of the world outside my cushioned comfort zone that situates me from where there is no mistaking my place in the world. There is firsthand knowledge of who I am, who I have been, might I say, who I might become. I might see complicities where the students do not, but I am also bothered by my inability to come up with resolutions, fixes, changes.

Something about studying abroad in Honduras troubles my own identity. I think to myself that it is simpler just listening to the squawking parrots or following splashes of red, yellow, and blue on the gorgeous macaws in Zamorano. The parrots’ calls, outside the bedroom window at Kellogg Center where we are staying, are music to my ears. Another excuse to meander down memory lane. I grew up with the sound of screeching parakeets, racket tailed drongos, and songs

of the bulbul (Indian birds). So I am in my element in Honduras. I am nostalgic about my country, India. Distance had truly made the heart grow fonder, and displacement made home appear more romantic. I am distressed that not a single student is interested in the parrot alarm each morning. What the students hunger for are the conveniences of cars, the comfort of American fast-food, and freedom to wear what they please, go where they please—in short, their familiar ways of being. They do not have eyes to see what I see.

While my American fellow companions are searching for the familiarity of home in a different way, I am in Honduras, looking for places and things familiar to me. In our own way, we are both looking for reference points in time and place, defining home wherever we are going. So fixed, so set in what we want, and what we know. As students, teachers, and researchers then, how do we begin to shake the foundations of our knowing and begin to de-learn? How do we create spaces for new learning between modernist Western forms of knowledge, the legacy of the Enlightenment that organizes culture around mastery and control, and ‘other’ enlightened ways of thinking, living, feeling that are open to cultural indeterminacy and hybridity? Where do we begin to relearn, to reconfigure the structures of our knowledge? How do we probe our cultural relationship to the other often blinded by myths and presumptions?

Often my own presumptions confront me wherever I went in Honduras. When I first stepped on Honduran soil, I was quick to defend the poverty, dirt, and disorder. Within a few days I realized Honduras and its people did not need my neurotic shielding from the critique of Western eyes. A visit into the country’s ancient history brought this irony home to me. I saw the ancient city of Copan and realized that a thriving civilization that had once lived millenniums before had a cultural system all its own, and this civilization had throbbed with life. Honduras I realized, is hardly primitive—its complex culture, ancient architecture, art and crafts all speak of an advanced civilization, most notably the Mayans Indians. In Honduras, nevertheless, these influences are intricately intertwined with indigenous beliefs and practices; the sun gods and deities of fire, wind, and earth have been appropriated, as it were, by the Spanish colonizers of the west. The Mayan Indians, the Spanish conquerors, today’s Hondurans—new worlds upon old worlds. So many ways of seeing and feeling that break habitual ways of seeing and feeling. So much arranging and rearranging of knowledge, events, experiences. Fresh worlds that open up to challenge the labels placed on what is Spanish, what is Honduran, what is Western, and what is indigenous. The “distinctiveness of societies, nations, and cultures predicated on a seemingly unproblematic division of space” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 33) is ruptured by the cultural permeability of worlds, places, and spaces.

I realize that my knowledge of spaces, places, and cultures has been dominated by the metaphors of my own language—especially seeing and hearing. For me, to have encountered another culture was to wrestle with the Cartesian realities of self and other, us and them. In the past I related what I saw, heard, and imagined from the reference points that satisfied my own cultural images or experiences. Language defined the images in my mind and related them to how I viewed others. So trained was I in knowing others through my own language and metaphors that I could not perceive what was outside my experiences and could barely imagine any other way of relating to others except through ways already familiar. Yet, the language and metaphors I depended upon for understanding others left a wide gap, a lack of perceiving, between the self and other. Now as I revisit past experiences, I recognize that my attitudes and perceptions are changing. I also recognize a new language that has taken shape, a new set of metaphors, new ways of perceiving complex differentiations—a “new terminological kaleidoscope” (Appadurai,

1996, p. 31)—within the spaces I have previously known as self and other, us and them, non-Western and Western.

Schooled in the Western philosophical tradition and invested in modernist public schooling, I have spent many years blindly adhering to the banking model of education and high-test scores, never questioning the objectives of a national, homogenized, standardized curriculum. An example of the perceptual metaphors I depended upon, schooled in empirical ways of observing, reading, and learning, was the blind faith in that which I could see and a denial of that which was hidden to the naked eye. As a classroom teacher, I felt uneasiness at not knowing whether my students understood what was going on in class or not. Often I found myself reluctant to address students' needs unless I had identified them, named them. In the classroom I have been reluctant to acknowledge students' needs when they were invisible to my teacher-trained eyes.

However, with global exchanges, crossing cultural borders, negotiating multiple cultures, working with diverse cultural groups, and being challenged by cultural differences, I am more open to questioning my beliefs and practices, more willing to engage in self-reflection. Now I am willing to engage in students' learning difficulties and negotiate cultural or academic images that are unfamiliar to me. When I am unable to interpret students learning needs, I now believe that they do exist, and that they are beyond what I currently know. Rather than look for the certainty of resolution to every classroom challenge, I am more accepting of contradictions and ambivalences. This does not mean I am not troubled by uncertainty. Rather, following Lather (2000) I am convinced that in education "we all get lost: the women, the researchers, the readers...aimed at opening up present frames of knowing to the possibilities of thinking differently" (p. 303). Rather than certainty I find myself in "a sort of stammering relation" (p. 303) to knowledge of the self and the other.

Getting lost in study abroad reminds me that in Honduras layers and layers of cultural knowledge have formed a palimpsest, blurring what is local history and geography, singular identity and hybrid identities, and what is imported and foreign. Study abroad also offers me a new language of transformation, the new metaphors for seeing what I have never seen before, of reconstructing my images through a decolonizing of the mind. The in-between-ness of living multiple cultures, never fully knowing, always negotiating, teaches me metaphors to rethink how I interact with students whose cultures differ from my own. It also gives me the ability to recognize my own fears and desires, prejudices and privileges that shape my response to students' worlds. The power of this in-between-ness is that it renders all absolutes irreducible, all learning provisional, part of the changing fluidity of globalized cultures (Bhabha, 1993) and my place in it. This in-between-ness gives me the space to question myself, open up to others around me, try to imagine how they experience the classroom and the world outside. Now when I stand in the classroom as an instructor, I know the moment belongs to the students, and I let my role in the classroom unfold as I take part in it.

Being an Authentic Married Indian Hindu Woman

Wearing a Red Dot on my Forehead

As my American fellow companions commute from the Kellogg Center to the high school in Tegucigalpa for their field experiences, I quiz them on race, class, and gender issues they might have experienced in Honduras. I am interrupted by Rick, who is a White U.S. American preser-

vice teacher. Rick and I have barely spoken since we arrived, but at this point he surprises me with his remark,

I can't believe you are an Indian woman who works with prisoners. I would never have known you are Indian because you are not wearing the red dot on your forehead. Oh, and you are married but you live away from your husband? Indian women can actually do that?

In my mind Rick sees me as an impossibility—an Indian woman minus the red dot on the forehead, working in a prison school is beyond his reckoning. Should I ask for clarification? Should I clarify? Is this the proverbial teaching moment where I can set the history and geography of my people right? My people? Who are my people? Indians? The colonized? Women? Indian women? Third world women? Oppressed Indian women? Liberated *non-red-dot* women? Instead, I retaliate. I reward his well-intentioned inquiries about the plight of Indian women by reminding him that every single department at our common school of education has a male head, the women's detention school I work for has a male principal, and top it all by stating that the U.S. presidency is the epitome of patriarchy. Besides, since when did the red dot become the yardstick for my freedom, I wonder.

I tell Rick and the other students that although there are some traditions in Indian culture that justify the red dot or the sacred *bindi*, different women decide whether or not to wear the red *bindi* for different reasons. Before I can explain why I choose not to wear one every day in the U.S., Aubrey decides for me, “Why would you want to wear that mark of oppression when your husband is not announcing to the world that he too is married.” I stop in my tracks. Obviously, Aubrey knows who I am, and what choices I should make better than I will ever know. She has assumed that as an Indian woman, a married woman, the quintessential married, Indian Hindu woman, I am marginalized and dispossessed of voice. The subaltern multiply marginalized. Gendered. Racialized. As an academic, presumptuous in writing about subalternity (Spivak, 1988). Now, as part of the global, transnational third world women who work in first world positions I remain—“gendered outsiders inside” (Spivak, 2000, p. 9) among my U.S. American fellow students. Here I am, without the red *bindi*, in Western clothes, studying in an American university, traveling without my husband as chaperone; yet, for all my visibility, my experiences may as well be invisible.

Signifying Limits of the Red Dot

How did this red *bindi* come to signify oppression among my U.S. American companions, those who I had known for only one week? How did I become the oppressed Indian woman while my companions spoke to me as liberated western women or as men who champion feminism? How did I become the object of the epistemological and ontological limits of western knowledge yet continue to be discursively produced by those very same western forms of knowledge? Dare I intervene in what counts as knowledge and who decides what knowledge is of most value? Analyzing Hindu women's subaltern struggles, Mohanty (1988) states that Hindu feminists, committed to respecting women's choices inscribed within their religious traditions, are up against what is considered popular western feminism. The latter rejects the possibility of any form of women's rights within patriarchal Hindu or Islamic religion. Accordingly, when

Hindu women wear a *bindi* or Muslim women wear a *hijab*, their notion of liberation is rejected by western feminists who see such women as victims of male regulatory controls.

Such stereotypical images of Hindu or Muslim women are representations that ignore the actual struggles Hindu or Muslim women face, and reinscribe their subordination to tradition or religion or cultural institutions as a naturalized fact (Ray, 2000). Mohanty (1988) critiques Western feminist discourse that places western feminism as the reference point for all women, thus homogenizing third world women as well as first world women. Solidarity among women “cannot be assumed on the basis of gender, it must be forged in concrete historical and political praxis” (p. 67) as “beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism” (p. 77). Therefore, to use symbols such as the *bindi* or the *hijab* is to deny the multiple intersections of oppression that women face each day. It is true that women are repressed and exploited in different parts of the world but certainly not in the same way; each woman experiences and negotiates the circumstances of her life differently.

In my experience, while many Hindu women do object to wearing the red *bindi*, many others also object to not being allowed to wear it; therefore, the practice of wearing/not wearing a *bindi* is not a litmus test of Hindu women’s liberation from patriarchal domination. My struggle is not a litmus test of Hindu women’s liberation from patriarchal domination. My struggle is against the notion of choice as represented by the presence or absence of—the wearing or discarding of a red dot on the forehead—as a measure of my liberation and oppression. My struggle is against the canonization of dominant bodies of knowledge that form the foundations of academic knowledge to define critical issues such as women’s complex choices and differences. Interpretations of Indian Hindu women’s experiences are as much based on canonized structures of knowledge emerging from the west as they are founded on the gendered myths of Hindu cultural mores that contain and oppress.

For example, the notion that an authentic married Indian Hindu woman wears a *bindi*, and that those who do not wear the *bindi* are Westernized and their authenticity is suspect, recreates a specific, exclusive female Hindu image as authentically representative of all Hindu women. However, this is a discourse sustained in India and abroad, within mainstream Hindu culture as well as outside it. Such a homogenizing discourse not only sustains ontological categories of identity but also excludes the experiences of many Hindu women who fall outside the margins of *bindi* or no *bindi*. Such binaries that aim to draw the line between Western and non-Western, deny Hindu women all forms of resistance, negotiation, and freedom framed within categorical impositions that are oppressive. I have not worn a *bindi* these last six years in the U.S., and although six years ago I had been in the regular habit of wearing my red *bindi*, becoming part of the millions of women in India—just another married Hindu woman—today is different. The six years of my U.S. experience have ensured this difference among U.S. women, as well as underscored my differences from other married Hindu women.

Yet, when I look back into my past, or scrutinize the present, in a sense I become the other every time I leave home. With a red *bindi*, I am the universal married Hindu woman; without it, I am the Westernized inauthentic Indian, never fully Western abroad, or fully Indian at home. I have become the poststructural conundrum—known by the predetermined cultural script of India and the West, unknown through my changing subject positions. The *bindi* is just a red dot adorning my forehead. Absent, present, or erased, it is a mark that functions as a sign. It signifies I am the other wherever I go. To my American fellow companions in Honduras, it signifies my oppression as a married Indian Hindu woman. To me it is more than a symbol, a signifier, or a metaphor. It is, perhaps, a personal choice. It is what Spivak (2000) calls “An Unfinishable

Syllabus: Always to be Updated” (p. 19). It is an indelible part of my history, my erasure. It is also the unwritten part of my histories, my stories.

I evoke references to Spivak’s subalternity or Mohanty’s challenge to Western feminism as the context of study abroad brings alive discourses that pre-exist Aubrey and me—the liberated Western feminist and the third world oppressed Indian woman—making us both realize that any knowledge we produce arises from what we know. Accordingly, how we conceive of the self and other are effects of what we already know. The self and the other are preconditions and effects of western knowledge long before Aubrey or I came to be. They are also preconditions of subalternized knowledge long before Aubrey or I came to be. In a sense, study abroad threatens the authority of such knowing, because it occupies a space where knowledge can be disrupted. Caught in a space that is not home, study abroad becomes that ambiguous space where we, that is, the self and other, are both able to renegotiate knowledge and its effects.

The Making of Third World Women

Seen as a Third World Woman

Study abroad is a site for situating subjectivities attentive to histories, stories, autobiographies that transgress racialized and gendered categories. This is not to say I have never defined myself categorically. I have used categories of identity strategically, in order to speak in my voice, but they have not had stable meaning, instead changing according to contexts and relationships between contexts. Even Spivak (1993) recognizes that while strategic essentialism has its uses, it remains problematic. In an interview with Ellen Rooney, Spivak explains the problem with essentialism saying that knowledge is constructed and sustained by “irreducible differences, not identity” (p. 11) and that in the essentialism/nonessentialism debate she “turned out to be more...antiessentialism” (p. 14). At the same time, to conceive identities as multiply situated hyphenated hybridities such as Indian-Hindu-Asian-American does not necessarily mean that I have lost my Indianness. Rather, it is a challenge to binary oppositions such as American/non-American, ethnic/national, or local/global at the same time taking into account differences and contexts.

Negotiating my identity/ies I realize I will always be an Indian because of the years spent in India—the anglicized, colonized side of me is also the Indian version of what it means to be anglicized, inflected with my colonial past—I was anglicized long before I ever left India, and I was colonized long before I was born. This does not mean I do not feel the tensions of a displaced identity. Leaving India the tensions emerged from multiple sources such as my attempts to preserve my Indian-ness, my actual life in the U.S., expectations of my family and friends in India, perceptions of friends and colleagues in the United States. Each of these is negotiated at emotional, material, social, and imaginative levels. The links between them are varied, complicated, and negotiable.

An example of this negotiation is evident in the *Multicultural Education* course for graduate students that is part of the study abroad curriculum. During the class, I became aware that when the other students, all U.S. American, want their opinions about oppressed third world women confirmed, they look at me. This is because in the class we are reading Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ *Death Without Weeping The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (1992). Scheper-Hughes focuses on how the everyday violence of poverty, hunger, disease, and infant mortality are normalized bringing to the surface the lethal dynamics of medical knowledge, cultural practices and global

implication on the lives of women she writes about. The other graduate students do not ask me for my opinion about Scheper-Hughes' book or the women in Brazil that she writes about. They turn to me only so that I may confirm what they are thinking about third world women.

Rather than ask about the book, they question me about the extent of women's oppression in the third world. When I speak about oppression of women in India, I feel I am confirming their thoughts. At the same time, when I refute their categorical assumptions about third world women, the students look surprised. I do realize where their questions come from and why they must ask them. I also understand that women across the third world are often represented as singular, monolithic, synonymous with oppression—portrayals of patriarchal domination of women (Trinh, 1989), proof of their oppression in signifiers such as the red *bindi*. One only has to view media representations on any given channel, news broadcast, Hollywood film, documentary, or newspaper for proof not of the representation of third world women but of mythical singular monolithic third world women.

Now as I answer, clarify, defend, or deflect such misrepresentations what disturbs me is not that my companions know little about my world, my cultural choices, and my Hindu complexities. Rather, what is disturbing is that my companions already know and take for granted what they know about me—that Hindu women, Indian women, Asian women, third world women are oppressed, downtrodden, often treated like property under patriarchal ownership of men. What makes the other U.S. American students assume that while they may or may not be oppressed as first world women, third world women are all oppressed? How did third world identity become a naturalized condition or an established truth my first world fellow students assume without question?

Myths documented as truths about non-Western cultures have a long history within and outside academic scholarship and universal knowledge of third world women is one such example (Niranjana, 1992). Translation of texts, cultures, practices, and beliefs have been viewed as a site for perpetuating unequal power relations among peoples, races, genders, even languages. The traditional or Enlightenment view of translations along Western philosophical worldview helped colonialism to construct the marginalized third world "other" as unchanging and outside history (Said, 1978). Decades after Said's analysis, Pinar (2004) notes that such mistranslations of cultural differences continue to be sustained within unequal relations of power perpetuated through self and other, or through "racial and gender sediments which contribute to the stasis that is the present moment" (p. 31). Pinar calls for autobiographical stories, "not essentialistically, but historically, socially, racially, in terms of class and culture" (p. 30) that will enable educators to reformulate the relationships between self and other.

Made bold by multicultural issues raised during study abroad, and made even bolder by Pinar's call for life-stories, I do not hesitate to let the students know that Juanita, my co-researcher, and I are examples of how different two, non-Western women can be. While we are both third world women, our experiences are clearly quite different. The differences do not just result from differences in age, nationality, or religion. I am an older graduate student, a Hindu immigrant and feminist teacher, and now waiting in line for the green card and residing in the United States. Juanita has been a well-established educator at a university in Honduras, a Christian Honduran twenty years younger than I, educated in Honduras, and currently a graduate student working on her Ph.D. in the United States. The differences between us emerge from all of these things and, at the same time, among many other relational and contextual differences. Third world women, Honduran women, or Indian women are not singular monolithic ontological categories. Rather, every one of us is discursively constituted at multiple sites. Neither Juanita nor I fit into simple, clear categories but complicate rather than represent any perceived simple identity.

On occasions, both of us view ourselves as feminists. While Juanita's feminism is a Honduran feminism based on Honduran history, and emerging out of the discourses around her life, mine is born out of Indian history, Indian culture, and the intersections of my personal experiences. In our own way each is an expression of difference aimed at intervening in dominant representations of third world marginalization in American contexts as well as the cultural spaces where multiple cultures grapple with each other within asymmetrical power relations of domination and subordination.

In order to further my argument about third world women's specific locations, I remind the other graduate students of Teresa Salgado, a different kind of Third world woman, a cultural worker, and mayor of the town of Ojo de Agua in Honduras. She runs a free K–6 school for children and runs a *papusa* kiosk to fund the school. Our study abroad group visited her school. Full of excitement, Teresa introduced us to her students crammed into a single room without the clutter of school supplies, just children and a single teacher. A true activist Teresa has brought water and electricity to the town and spoke animatedly about her next project, literacy classes for adults in her beloved town of Ojo de Agua.

Teresa's world is not defined by third world or first world politics. She truly believes she has a stake in the future of her world—the local community. She is an example of the consciousness a local living economy creates so when she eats mangoes they are grown by local farmers, not transported by the false geographies of modern life. For her, education is about relationships. Books are simply tools. She moves between local, national, global, third world, first world, her world; her strength lies in her imagination, staying close to what sustains community. Teresa's activism signals how community-based women's leadership negotiate the terms of global change through local struggles. I point out to the other students that Teresa's life-work, so different from Juanita's or my life, gives us a unique understanding of the diversity of third world women's lives in a global context. Teresa is an example of the millions of unnamed women around the world who take on the challenge for social change with every act of theirs. In my mind, it would be an injustice to situate Teresa as anything but a world citizen.

As I stood amidst Teresa, Honduran children, and U.S. American preservice teachers, I understood that the intensity of my emotions—sadness, guilt, and confusion—have all sharpened my awareness, fine-tuned my ways of seeing, made me question my first and third world demarcations. Never have I felt such determination to change the way I think and do things. Teresa's message reaches home—real education is not the structures of knowledge, the extent of how much I know, or how to make the leap from the third to the first world. It is a reminder that it is through active participation that I, as a local, national, global citizen, create spaces for change. It has been easy to believe that as an educator I had no say in school policy or educational matters. I cannot continue to believe this. Teresa's activism and citizenship inform me that the self is the first and last space for change. It is where I must pose my questions. Who am I? Who am I becoming? Can I be just? Equitable? Participate? Become a cultural worker? Activist? Can I listen to those around me, my students, my American fellow companions, my teachers, fight for change, without giving up?

Reararticulating Who I am Becoming

We Will All be Forever Changed

I am learning from my fellow companions each day. I am also learning of them as much as I am learning about myself. What engages me is how preservice teachers actively participate in the

making of meaning through their struggles, in thinking through the connections between themselves and their unfamiliar cultural surroundings. The meaning emerges as part of a collaboration between us and them. Out of our cross-cultural and embodied interaction comes the recognition of what works, what causes the breakdowns, and to what extent we can see the changes within our own perceptions. This ability to be able to think outside one's known self and connect with the other is to engage in "action sensitive knowledge" (van Manen, 1990, p. 21) that is key to transforming perceptions.

Many a time, I witnessed preservice teachers as well as graduate students who were part of the study abroad program, reaching out to connect with students in Honduran classrooms. I learned as much from their experiences as they did. On a visit to a small community school where teachers and students manage with the bare necessities of schooling, one of the graduate students, Linda, is moved to tears as she serves children sandwiches that the preservice teachers have made. As she hands out the sandwiches and mango juice, the children hungrily wolf down the food. Their teacher informs us that the only food most of the children eat during the day is what the school provides.

The teacher's simple statement brings home a moment of truth for me—the material divide between the children I stand amongst in this classroom and my own life brings some unexpected reflection for me. I turn to Linda who is focused on the very moment itself. She is simultaneously laughing and crying. When she recovers, I ask her to speak about her feelings. Seconding my own thoughts, Linda says that watching the children she has had to do a double turn of her life. She finds the children's lives shocking. What shocks Linda even more is the recognition that this deprivation is commonplace. She sees herself implicated in the daily deprivation of the children she is serving. She soon realizes she has been moved to listen, to feel, and to change through a participatory relationship in spite of the disjunctiveness she feels.

The daily negotiation of meaning makes it impossible for me to ignore Linda's perceptions. The thresholds she crosses teaches both of us how to move outside our comfort zones, to rename our combined world and calls upon us to not just imagine but create a different cultural history. Listening to Linda I think, study abroad can do a thousand and one things to loosen, shake, disrupt, sadden, regret, enjoy, instruct—it can make us break through to a greater consciousness to let the other that exists inside us inhabit our very being. At that moment, I too felt the experience of study abroad so intrinsic to the deepest side of Linda that in spite of my extensive research I was unable to truly translate her experience.

Discovering and writing about another's feelings is harder than the ability to name what one feels. Speaking of the impossibility of articulating complex thoughts and experiences, Lather (2000) speaks of the "violence of clarity, its noninnocence" (p. 292) when academic scholarship attempts to essentialize, clarify, and totalize the lived experience of others. Witnessing Linda grapple with the experience, getting thoroughly immersed in her experience, ruptured my meticulously constructed academic image of researcher and put me in another relationship to Linda and my U.S. American fellow students. The experience challenged my constant need to draw the line between researcher/participant, American/Indian, Western/non-Western.

The limits of my categorical thinking is challenged by Sarah, an American student. Sarah's observation has implications for changing not only my myopic categorical thinking but also challenges our collective experience of what is Honduran or Indian or American. Sarah does not give into my weakness for intellectualizing experience. She throws herself right into the local, national, global flow of things and soaks it all in, intuitively remarking, "We will all be forever changed after this study abroad experience." Listening to Sarah's embodied articulation, I too

begin to understand that the significance of study abroad lies not in what we know about other cultures but in what we can imagine of our own and the interactive dynamism between ours and other cultures.

Sarah's use of the word 'forever' is very reassuring to me as it implies that the experience of study abroad will always shape who we are and her flourishing "we" has a warm inclusive feeling. This is an education apart from the efficiency of a well-constructed, predetermined curriculum and instruction program. Here education is teased out of all scripted sequence and measured learning to a different kind of rush, an energy, a phenomenological immediacy, to a world outside the material reality of standardized teaching, learning, and evaluation (van Manen, 1990). Study abroad, the formal way in which students and instructors struggle with their own existence, is knowledge that calls upon each one of us in a way we recognize and to which we respond.

Troubling, Hybridizing, Negotiating, and Always Becoming

My time studying abroad in Honduras draws to a close. I stand alone on the Kellogg Center porch in the late afternoon, looking out toward the university campus. A cool Honduran breeze is refreshing to my skin after the searing heat of the afternoon sun. My eyes are closed; the world around me has stopped its endless churning; I feel a moment of absolute stillness. Across the wide expanse drifting through the mango trees, I can hear the voices in Spanish, a foreign language to me, and music—Patsy Kline's *Crazy*, of all numbers, playing somewhere in the distance. Sounds, voices, textures, peoples, histories, stories, lives, Spanish, American, English, Hindi, *Spanglish*, *Hinglish*, the old, the new, the in-between, now, then, changing, blending, blurring.

In this moment of repose, I am acutely conscious of my privilege as a child. Within the privileges of childhood, I am aware of the restraints of growing up in a gendered society and of my subjective agency that surfaces at times when the world becomes too much for me. I have and continue to navigate through multiple structures of knowledge, and my changing contextual positions and locations mark the impermanence of my identities always eluding those definitions that will pin me down to singular, monolithic entities—woman, married woman, third world woman, educator, Indian, non-Western, foreigner, alien resident of the United States, temporary traveler studying abroad in Honduras. Who am I at this moment of repose? Where do I begin to negotiate my place that is slipping away from me?

I look back to the beginning of this study abroad experience and smile to myself. I think of the U.S. American students I have traveled with, who are keen to hear stories about my life, so different from theirs. They do not know what to make of who I really am, and I remain uneasy that they might still see me as an oppressed Indian woman or an exotic inexplicable other. I do not know what to make of their perceptions and attitudes as well as I would like to, and I feel the tension of never being sure of where our relationships with each other are going. Yet, in the awkward spaces between us has stumbled a kind of intimacy. I think of the people I met in Honduras, a Scottish high school principal, an American school principal, Australian and British teachers, fellow temporary residents in Honduras—what complex intersections have brought us here to a country that merits a line or two in U.S. American history books?

I think of the people of Honduras: Juanita, my fellow researcher; the Honduran school teachers so dedicated to preparing their students for the highest honor of all—future jobs as professionals working in the U.S.; and their students no different from students in India in their

ambitious pursuit of the West, and yet so very different. The empire lives on; the emperor wears a new nationality. Most of all, I think of the women in Honduras, and one very special woman, Teresa Selgado. What a remarkable woman—the depth of a single woman’s local knowledge and action—Teresa stands tall among all of us, ever so proud!

And then I think of the director Danny Boyle. His art and philosophy. I wonder, who is Danny Boyle, really? I am again reminded of Edward Said. India and Britain—our cultural boundaries are rendered porous by the common history of colonizer and colonized. We will both continue to participate in a common history we grew up in, however unequal. India, Britain, Honduras, Spain, U.S.A.—we are products of the colonial school that has imparted what we know about history, philosophy, arts, science, and culture. Yet, meaning in our separate, common, or hybrid existence continues to be made, and in rereading of the colonial past, we will continue to make the future in our own special way without any final end.

Who would have thought a place might change perceptions to this extent? I remember that my emotions shifted; I began to understand things that did not make sense before—uncertainties, contradictions, multiplicities, paradoxes, identities, subjectivities, hybridities, hyphens, cultures. I will never learn enough about the profound complexities of cultures different from my own to be completely sure that I know their beliefs and practices. But I am also aware of an inexplicable feeling that I have learned to connect with myself, the intimate, contradictory, complex otherness of myself.

Conclusion

Once again we are driving down the narrow, winding hillside road that takes us out of Zamorano, into the airport city of Tegucigalpa. Once again we study the dangerous slippery slopes where small hutments dot the landscape. Endless miles of poverty, children running up and down the jagged, steep hills, gun toting security guards with their semi-automatic weapons, women gathering firewood, residents, non-residents, travelers, tourists, consumers, students, teachers, us—the experiences that have given meaning to who I am becoming, just as my identity/ies have given meaning to my experiences. Yet, somewhere between identities and experiences and their complex interplay is the impossibility of articulation for in definition of experience is a loss of meaning (Lather, 1996). Experience remains indefinable. How else do I explain that the scene of poverty or the devastation on the hillsides that sounded shocking on first appearance, in three weeks had turned into something more complicated—a sense of sadness, a loss, contradiction, a feeling that in some inexplicable way I had made a connection with the people of Honduras that will haunt me forever.

My time studying abroad has been extraordinary. I have discovered myself multiple times over—I am the self and the other, multiple and fractured, sometimes all at the same time. The spaces I occupy are somewhere in between—the meaning never fixed. The site of multiple intersections within this small, unusual country, among people I have never known before, traveling with U.S. American fellow students I have known for four weeks in all, brings a constant repositioning of who I am becoming. Study abroad gives me the space to become someone else. I try to understand my experiences and wonder what meaning my experiences have for the people of Honduras or for my U.S. American fellow companions. I am aware of how much all of those I met during this study abroad experience have taught me. I am also aware of the discourses competing for authority—my U.S. American fellow students who compel me

to rethink my third world identity, those I met in Honduras who make me rethink my privilege and subjectivity, the questions that continue to trouble me about my life, my teaching, my shifting identities, and the discourse that is taking shape, changing, shaping me, changing me, even as I write. All these discourses are not separate entities. They are inextricably linked, the sum total of my embodied life-experiences.

The power of study abroad is tremendous as it stirs the foundations of my intellectual and cultural well-being. It seems to me that it creates a breakdown in the safety of experiences, taking me back to the memories of childhood, loosening the formative beliefs of my early years, beckoning me to experience the unknown, entering the unstable space of not knowing, exchanging the safety of rootedness in home and country for the peril of being in multiple places at the same time. What especially compels me about study abroad is how my own life replays itself through metaphors, such as the red *bindi*. Study abroad reminds me of who I have been and that I can become something else altogether. It takes me into myself so that I might understand outside myself. It differentiates me from others around me so that I might differentiate who I am with who I might become and, in so doing, reconnects me to others around me.

Engaging with the other gives me the powerful feeling that I am creating meaning out of what I am responding to. In a Pinarean sense, every teacher, every student, each act of learning, each act of teaching needs the other to complete it—reaching out across a chasm—the key to dynamic unfolding of all meaning both within and for us. The in-between-ness of seamlessly navigating different worlds—a world that is Indian, forever colonized by the British, at-home in the United States of America, and now brought together in a disquiet harmony in Honduras. This is both a process of coming together and of individuation. It is both displacement of who I have been and identification of who I am becoming. I participate in reflection and in the imaginary, both making me mindful of who I am and how I perceive the other.

In Honduras I learned the significance of place and began to comprehend what it means to stand by and watch exploitation, devastation, and do nothing about it. Sometimes you have to experience studying abroad to see what is changing under your nose, in your own life, or highlight what needs to change. In the past I have not been open to change, resisting reviewing or revisiting my life-experiences. Often, I have taken my privileges for granted, claiming my liberation from the imposition of identity, history, and culture. I know there is much in my life that remains to be explained, confronted, transformed. But I am not ready to give up on myself—at least not yet. I know multicultural education matters. I know study abroad matters just as much. I also know, knowing yourself matters the most. So educator, know thyself. Take the risk to study abroad, take the time to find yourself. You will. Honestly.

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