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spring 2009

WICK

SPRING 2009

The *Wick* provides a harbor for the creative expressions of the Harvard Divinity School community. As editors of the *Wick*, we feel that the community and its members benefit when we share our creative work.

In the past, the *Wick* has published artistic material including short fiction, poetry, creative criticism and essays, visual art and cartoons. The *Wick* continues to welcome submissions in these genres and in other forms, as well. We invite you to share your imagined cartographies, fabricated autobiographies, interviews, experiments, manifestos and other innovations and adventures, within its pages.

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*immigration as dislocation: the challenges
of reconstructing a self-identity*

... the lived is ... never entirely comprehensible, what I understand never quite tallies with my living experience, in short, I am never quiet at one with myself. Such is the lot of a being who is born, that is, who once and for all has been given himself as something to be understood.
(Merleau-Ponty 2002, 404).

In the vast multiplicity of human experience—of lives to be lived, of journeys to be taken, of encounters to be made, of struggles and challenges to be endured, of joys and sorrows to be witnessed and lived, of inspirations and disappointments, of losses and gains, of passions and apathy to undergo—we embark on a journey of self discovery, of self construction, deconstruction and re-construction; of attempts to ‘be’ in the world we inhabit as individual selves bound by the very individuality to the communal self and to the world around us. It is a passion, innate to our very nature, to understand our being yet which “never quite tallies with [our] living experience.” The formation of our identity is perpetually reconstructed because of the plurality of experiences we undergo within the span of our lives. Through the multiplicity of influences that govern us in each of our encounters in our daily lives, we re-create what and who we think we are.

I am embarking on a journey of self-discovery. It is my quest to understand what makes us who we are, and what happens when the reality in which we live and perceive ourselves as individual beings with specific identities is replaced by a radically different reality, in which we struggle to rediscover our selves, re-establish, and re-create, almost from the very core of our being, what it means to be us. Due to immigration, I have and will continue to experience many of the difficulties and the challenges of displacement, both on an individual and social level. But such challenges and difficulties have proved to be extremely liberating. One who does not attempt to step out of his/her own cultural reality is in danger of perceiving identity as a category that possesses a fixed set of characteristics and concepts. Being

displaced, as well as attempting to understand others in their lived realities and conditions, enables us to discover the multiplicity of identities that intertwine to make who we are: that we do not live only one life, but the lives of the people, animals, environment around us as well; that we are not only one self, but multiple. As Michael Jackson states:

A human life is never a seamless whole, as single story.... We live several lives in the course of one. There is a perpetual discrepancy between who we are and who we are to others. Sometimes we stand aloof, seeing the world from afar. Sometimes we forget ourselves and become lost in another. Sometimes we seem to be singular entities, at other times we experience ourselves as diffuse and various. Sometimes we are fully aware of our bodies. At other times we have little or no sense of our consciousness as embodied. And our experience covers both a sense of ourselves as individuals and as belonging to a collectivity (1995, 161).

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty stresses the idea of horizons. In order for an object to be perceived, there has to be a certain horizon or background upon which it can exist as a “perceptual ‘something’”(4). In order to perceive an object and to concentrate our vision upon it, we must see the general view of things around it, in order to distinguish the object as a separate perceptual ‘something’. Homogeneous space does not offer us any kind of perception. If we see a field of red on a TV screen, we will not perceive it as anything until the camera zooms out and reveals the background against which the red rests. Only then are we able to distinguish the patch of red as a separate object, let’s say, a red curtain.

In order to be a separate entity an individual thing (an object), defined by certain borders and characteristics, must be “placed” within or in relation to a background of other things; the latter also defining the object’s perceivable shape and structure. Each background upon which an object is placed determines the “shape” of the object. The background is not free to determine any shape, but rather is constrained by multiple happenings, such as the object’s actual shape and its simultaneous

Every day, Sally hoped ~~today~~
would be the day her hat
would make her beautiful



by Oumvée Chéti

placement in relation to other objects, and the placement of the perceiving agent in relation to the object and to other objects. To be an object is to be placed alongside other objects: the latter construct the former's existence and shape for the perceiving subject, where simultaneously the perceiving subject is an object for other subjects.

...[E]very object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; but back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it 'shows' to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the other round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantee of the permanence of those aspects. Any seeing of an object by me is instantaneously reiterated among all those objects in the world which are apprehended as co-existent, because each of them is all that the other 'see' of it. (Merleau-Ponty, 79).

The horizon, then, is not a background upon which we inscribe our being; rather, the horizon is the perceptual field in which perceptual objects, including ourselves, co-exist. The perceptual field as my surrounding world exists not only for me and my interactions as a perceiver, but also for every object in my surrounding that interrelates with me and with other objects simultaneously. My interactions are not the only ones in the field, but there are multiple and simultaneous interactions between the objects that inhabit my (and their) perceptual field. Also my interaction with an object is not one interaction, rather it is a multiplicity of simultaneous interactions. For example: let's take the positioning of family members around a dinner table, where the father, or my father, used to sit only at the head of the table, positioning himself as head of the family. My position at the table in relation to my father simultaneously defined my "space" or "positioning" in the family. At the same time my position is defined by my mother's position in relation to my father, to myself and to each of my sisters. In the same manner my position and my sense of my position is defined by my sisters' positions simultaneously in relation to my mother and to my father. All these positions are also tied to each of our positions outside of the family circle, such as whether one of us is a student, the other is a worker who contributes to the sustaining of the family, or another holds a position of responsibility. In other words, our sense of who we are, is "tangled" within a large web of ties (familial, communal, cultural, educational, phylogenetic, social, etc), without which we

would not possess distinct identities, nor would we be perceivable objects. At the same time, this web of ties would not be what it is were we not in the web ourselves. All relations are dependent to other relations, so that meaning making and meaning ascribing is an interdependent process.

Another aspect of the construction of identity is the reversibility of sensual experience. In his chapter “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” in the *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty discusses the reversibility of sensual experience, which he discusses within the context of vision and touch:

How does it happen that I give to my hands, in particular, that degree, that rate, and that direction of movement that are capable of making me feel the textures of the sleek and the rough? Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. (Merleau-Ponty, 133).

When I see an object, it is because I inhabit the world of the objects, as one of the objects, open to sense and perception. I am simultaneously a subject (the one who sees) and an object (the one that is seen), where one does not exist without the other. It is necessary when I see, that I be seen from the outside. There is need for a complementary vision. This crisscrossing, the intertwining, implies not two different objects simultaneously perceiving, or seeing each other; rather the act of seeing (and of touching) itself is the chiasmatic relationship of intertwining. When my right hand touches my left hand, the right is simultaneously the toucher and the touched, so that at any given moment one cannot separate which one is the toucher or the touched.

The coupling of object and subject and the reversibility of the experience is necessary for the very existence of our perception. We need objects that perceive us at the same time that we perceive them in order to have self-perception: i.e. we need to be seen and touched at the time of our touching and seeing in order to be able to perceive our own selves through the reflective relationships between objects, so that “through other eyes we are for ourselves

fully visible” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 143). Through the interplay of touching and being touched, seeing and being seen, we form self perception. We, as individuals, are created and recreated by our placement within certain perceptual worlds; at the same time creating such worlds. Thus our placement within a certain horizon that has certain interdependent, interrelated objects constitutes the very process of creation and recreation of our identity.

The reversibility of sensual experience that occurs upon and in a horizon implies that the placement of our body amongst other objects in our perceptual field is important in determining and constructing a specific self-perception. The environment in which one grows up, including, but not limited to, the placement of objects around him/her, the placement of him/herself in relation to other members of his/her family, community, culture and religious group, is essential in the creation of one’s identity. Through the reversibility of sensual experience, where we see and are seen, touch and are touched, etc, we see and perceive ourselves through the reflection of others seeing and perceiving us at the same time that we see

How was the pirate ever to know that it was a semi-formal event?



by Otunwée Chézi

and perceive them. If self-perception is reflective, then I am who I am because of the understanding I have of others’ perception of me. Therefore self-perception is a combination of complex processes that happens when we, through our body, are present in the world of perception. Each encounter—each being within a world—shapes and reshapes our identity.

My first two years in America were haunted by a recurrent dream of going back to my home in my native country. Yet the home I kept dreaming of was not the one I lived in and considered to be my home, in Yerevan. I kept dreaming of another town, Vanadzor, where some of my childhood years were spent. I could not understand why I was dreaming of a place I was not yearning for in my waking life. For months and months, images of myself on the balcony, or sitting in the kitchen, or entering this or that room, floated before my eyes. It seemed as if I was searching for something in that home I was unable to find. Each time I would be in different rooms of the house, seeing it from different

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perspectives. I was searching, with no avail, with no concrete aim, with no particular item or goal in mind. Several years later, after the dreams stopped, I came to realize that the search was directed toward finding my own sense of self, as it was, when I first had glimpses of it during the formative years of my childhood. I was looking for the very elemental that constituted me in a home which was “the place that had nourished and shaped” the very fundamental aspect of who I was (Jackson 2007, 121).

I left home, because the future held very little not only for me but for my family. The economic situation was so harsh and so unpromising that the otherwise creative lifestyle of my family was reduced to a bare struggle for economic survival. My parents, who spent most of their lives within the imaginative and magical world of dramatic theater, were forced to take on construction and food industry jobs. Hope of recovering the creativity so essential to the identity of my family increasingly diminished. I told my father I was leaving for United States because I wanted to be able to “realize myself.” And this was true, but the imperative that forced me out of my country was my growing realization that if I did not attempt an escape, life would be stripped of its meaning in the everyday struggle for economic survival. Thus, my first goal was to create economic stability for myself and the family, which would enable us to create and recreate the essentials of our identity. Ironically, this goal destroyed most of the sense of self that I had sought to preserve. For the first three and a half years I worked two jobs, six days a week, spent my scarce free time watching films: immersing myself in the realities of others in hopes of finding at least a glimpse of my own. I lived in a place (Boulder, Colorado) where there were hardly any other Armenians, far from any familiar cultural sites upon which I could stand in order to sustain some sense of identity. To be able to connect to one’s cultural patterns in a new country is imperative. The lack of such connections destroys one’s ability to sustain her individuality and identity. Without cultural patterns and community, a dislocated person cannot find a horizon, a background upon which he/she is an object amongst others.

~

I often feel as if parts of me remained with them: the ones back home; the ones that knew me as I was. It seems to me that parts of my energy abide within them. I feel scattered: I do not even hold knowledge of where all the pieces remained. It is as if the memory of me is with them; the parts of me that was me, isn’t with me anymore. I cannot be that which I was, because

what constituted me, stayed within them: within the world of my home. I often roamed the streets of Boulder, deserted of people. Occasionally I would see a bicyclist who would stare at me in confusion, not knowing why I would not be in a car or on a bicycle. In my mind I explained to them time and time again that I am searching for human contact; I am searching for those people in whom I reside; I am searching for the pieces of me.

This emptiness, this fragmentation that one feels amounts to a feeling of being insignificant, inadequate, incompetent. With much astonishment I remember now that when I moved to the States, the jobs that I applied to were either at hotels as housekeeping or in gas-stations, despite the fact that I was legally entitled to work and I spoke English fluently. In addition to that, I had almost three years of undergraduate work. Yet I felt that I was not adequate enough to apply to better jobs. The jobs at banks or as administrative assistants or at the University of Colorado seemed so out of reach for me.

Many immigrants attempt to find their cultural communities within the new country and build their lives in and around them. They usually open up restaurant, shops, churches, schools, cultural centers. All of these cultural “sites” function as patterning; these are attempts to create a similar perceptual field/world to that of their native country. Sutton notes that “[these] “cultural sites”... become points of identification for people displaced by immigration” (305). The existence of such sites enables many immigrants to salvage parts of their identity by identifying with “objects” (either people, or churches or schools, etc) very similar to the objects in the original perceptual world to which their identity was tied.

Sutton in his article argues that eating and food can also serve as sites of cultural identification. The synesthetic memories involved in eating cultural food or packaged food from home, serve to momentarily reconstruct the “wholeness” of identity, fragmented due to immigration (305). Sutton argues that food serves to reconstruct a memory of the self before dislocation, because eating involves all of the senses: taste, smell, touch, vision, even hearing. But, the opposite is also possible. Food can evoke the memory of the fullness of one’s previous identity, but it can also be a very sharp reminder of fragmentation.

Every time I saw an apricot in the large supermarkets of America, I rushed toward it as if I was bewitched by it and pulled toward it by some magical powers that it, the apricot, possessed. Everything around me and around it blurred. It was as if I only had one and only goal: to get to the apricot. Every time—time and again—I would buy a bag full of apricots. My

heart palpitating, I would rush toward my apartment. Visions of me and my grandmother occupied my mind until I reached my apartment:

Everyone was asleep but me and my grandmother. The kitchen was overwhelmingly filled with apricot aroma. Buckets of apricots surrounded us, waiting their turn to be boiled in sweet water to the point of crystallization. I opened the middle of each apricot, one by one, feeling the velvety and soft texture of its skin. The insides were juicy. My hands were sweet from the juices that would drip into my palms, then into my arm, changing the very texture of my skin by making them sticky. It was like I tasted each and every one of them through my hands and arms. I could tell the degree of sweetness of them by tasting them on my palms. Once in a while I would eat one of them, but then I stopped. My mouth was incapable of recognizing the intensity of the apricot's sweet taste. It was through my body, which was immersed in the aroma of the apricots, which was consumed by the color of the apricots, which was touched by the flesh of the apricots, that I could exist in the sweetness of its taste.

The moment I would enter my American apartment, with its white walls, white window blinds, white doors and beige carpet, I would sit on my couch and open the bag of apricots. My eyes filled with their color; I would devour an apricot after an apricot. With each one I would feel a growing sense of incompleteness: frustrated with the impossibility of ever filling the gap, the void, the “black hole” in my identity. The taste lacked my grandmother, her kitchen, the granddaughter that I was, the cultural event of jam making, the importance of that event.

So much also depends on how one is viewed from the outside in the new country.

“Are you from Uzbekistan?”—a girl asked me once. I paused for a moment to understand what exactly in me could have reminded her of an Uzbek? I do not look Uzbek, nor does my language resemble Uzbek in any way. So, filled with curiosity, I asked her why she thought I was from Uzbekistan? She said: “Oh, because I had a friend that was from Uzbekistan.”

When I arrived in Colorado in the summer of 2001, the mountains of Boulder filled me with reassurance that the transition from my home—a mountainous country—to my new home would be smoother, yet it later proved to be a place of isolation. The way people identify you, the way they perceive you necessarily affects the way you perceive yourself. There was a tremendous lack of knowledge about my ethnic identity in Boulder. “Romania? Albania? Oh, Armenia? ... Hmm, where is Armenia,” was the answer to my cultural identity. Not only was there a general lack of knowledge of the geographic location of Armenia, but also of who Armenians are and what they represent. Some people

lumped us together with the Russian, others with the Muslim world that surrounds us geographically, and some simply did not know where to position us. Their inability to perceive me as a part of a certain ethnicity, resulted in a confusing and ungrounded perception of me. They lacked a background, a horizon onto which they could have built a stereotypical image of me, of my ways in life, of my religion, of my identity. Their perceptions of me were ungrounded, ephemeral. Therefore my own perceptions of myself, when I was around them, were ungrounded and ephemeral. I had to consciously think about each “step I took” in my relations with them in order to meet their expectations, yet they also, in a way, perpetually tried to find the right ways to communicate with me. The ungroundedness of the perceptions of me and my “space” within them created confusing, disoriented, constantly shifting relations.

I am not native to the American land by birth, therefore I am an immigrant, yet I do not fit into popular categories of immigrants, such as Latino, Asian, Arab, etc, all of the latter having certain sets of stereotypical characteristics, making communications with them somewhat easier. Ngo in his article “Beyond Culture Clash” describes the notion of stereotyping certain categories of national identities which prescribe qualities to people (such as “all Asian are computer geniuses, good at math,” etc). Such categorization and stereotyping is problematic, of course, since it ignores the individual characteristics of the person or of a particular culture with which one is dealing (which Ngo points out by showing that all Asian looking students were lumped under the category

ANGELA NEVER LOST AT
HIDE N' GO SEEK.

by Oumvée Chéni

Chinese or Japanese) and prescribes them the characteristics of the whole, which can lead to prejudice. Yet it does have a somewhat positive aspect also. When I reply to an American asking where I am from, it is necessary for me that the American perceives me as part of a certain category. The essential characteristics of the category “Armenian”

were usually not recognized by Coloradoans and so I was viewed with characteristics that did not resemble my own ideas about what it means to be Armenian. This amounted to fragmentation of an already fragmented identity. Our perception of ourselves is

bound to the way people around us perceive us. "...through other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 143).

So I lived in a world in which I did not exist as a perceivable object. I saw, I touched, yet I did not feel myself seen and touched from the outside. The way I was perceived (an immigrant; someone from an area, somewhere, unidentified; someone that has no history connecting her to the outside world; someone of whose culture we have not even heard of) did not correlate to any knowledge I had of my self. People called me the dark haired girl with dark eyes. "Was that me they are referring to?" I often wondered. "But do they not see that I have light hair and light brown eyes?" You see, Armenians usually have dark brown or black eyes and hair, and in relation to that, in my country I was considered the "blonde," because my hair and eye color, relative to the darkness of the average Armenian, was light. This knowledge was not shared by the people around me. For them, I was viewed as the dark haired one, yet I could not see myself as dark haired. Without any recognition my identity as I constructed it, I became only a biological body with no inscriptions of identity.

I sometimes felt physically so separated from anything else around me that the separation led to an extreme isolation from the outside world and from my own self. It felt like I was a figure cut out of cardboard and put in the midst of things which disrupted the coherence of the interdependent existence of things. My body was disrupting order: preventing coherence of a life to which I did not belong.

I did not belong to the web of ties constituting the perceptual world in which I was placed through my physical body, but in which I did not exist as an object capable of perceiving. Although I was perceived from the outside, I was unable to reciprocate that perception—that look, that touch—since I did not share any ties with it.

The world I inhabited was a fusion of things without any distinctiveness. It was more like a ruined painting: a mixture of incoherent colors—the result of an attempt to wash them off, to clear them. All I saw were vague and foggy colors, patterns, identities—all ruined, destroyed—particles of which remained without any distinct identity, individuality. It was a chaos: a combination of undifferentiated and unrelated things.

In one's native country, before dislocation, one has a sense of belonging that is more concrete. In a new country that sense of belonging—the sense that what surrounds you is "yours"

and is part of you—is more abstract and ephemeral. When a person is immersed in the perceptual world of a new country, a lack of familiar patterns and objects creates an experience of loss, of fragmentation of self. What is left is emptiness—lack of self-knowledge, lack of concrete ground on which to stand. We learn to build a new identity by relating to the new objects and patterns around us. Yet the new identity never creates the sense of belonging, precisely because we enter into relations with the new objects as an immigrant: i.e. as a disoriented, displaced person, somebody who already does not belong.

Relations in one's native country are based on a sense of being at home, being where one belongs by birth, being in one's own domain. In a new country, relations are based on a sense of being a displaced entity trying to come to terms with the new land: relations based on seeking to find a place to stand, more particularly the place where the immigrants stand, i.e. where those, who do not belong there by nature and by birth, stand. This new identity, created based on the sense of nonbelongingness, consequently creates the sense that the immigrant's place is vulnerable, that it can be taken away any time, since by right of birth, by nature, it is not his/hers. The new identity is essentially an identity of not-belonging.

After three years, I made a trip back to my home. Yet I realized when I was there that the concept, the idea of 'my home' was no longer a tangible place. I realized that I ceased to tangibly and concretely belong to any one place. I became a stranger in my native land, as I was a stranger in my new home. No longer was I, as a subject/object, a part of the web of ties constituting the present life in my native home. I was viewed as an outsider. Ironically, this sense of being perceived as an American in Armenia helped me to become an American. I started to perceive myself as an American, and recognized my identifications with American life and culture. When I returned, I immersed myself in American life with the reassured sense of being an American and searched in it for reassurance of my Armenianness. By being perceived as an Armenian immigrant, and having a hold of my American identity, I was finally capable of identifying with both, so that I became and I still continuously define myself as the Armenian American.

My self redefinition somewhat situated me in the web of American life and helped me to dare to continue my education. With little confidence in my abilities or in my sense of adequacy I entered the admissions office of University of Colorado. That

day marked my journey of self discovery within the multiplicity of human life and condition, and the multiplicity of possibilities to interpret them.

Although I realize that I might never find a concrete ground under the feet of my identity and I realize that the sense and the challenges of non-belongingness might always accompany me and I realize that I might never recover a full sense of self-confidence, nonetheless I believe immigration has been one of the most liberating experiences of my life, deconstructing and reconstructing who I am: taking me out of a world that constructed who I was, immersing me into a world where I was not “existent,” thus revealing the many possibilities of lives we can live.

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