

## LOSS OF A HOMELAND: Insights of 'Strangers' For Teaching and Helping

"I see you're from Urbana (University of Illinois), but where's your voice from?" This question asked in an elevator at a CSWE conference jolted my awareness. For a long time I have avoided taking a look at who I am, I can pass as a (white) American, work hard to fit in a foreign academic world...yet my voice keeps giving me away. I am different. I am a foreigner." (Diary fragment, Golie, 1990)

Time will never erase who I am. As a friend used to say to me "if you are not certain you are Black all you have to do is take a mirror and look at yourself and you will have had a 'Black Experience.'" All I have to do is listen to myself and look at myself in the mirror and I have a "Latina experience." It is an experience that is half Mexican and half American. It is the color of coffee with cream. Yes, *Cafe Aloud*. It is the experience of being both at home and a stranger at the same time. (Marian)

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*Displacement provides unique opportunities for new vision*  
Janet Wolff. in: *Resident Alien*  
(1995)

Being born outside the United States or having lived on the borderlands offer an enduring awareness of being a stranger. The idea for this special issue was born out of curiosity about how social work educators or practitioners have come to live with their felt or assigned outsider/foreigner status. Educators and practitioners in the helping professions are increasingly committed to a focus on diversity in working with clients of different ethnicity/color and national origin. What seems to be missing are the insights of faculty and practitioners themselves in terms of what it means to them to be different and to be an outsider.

This issue explores in a variety of voices and narrative forms the profound experiences of people who for different reasons leave their homelands and who temporarily or forever feel 'strangers' and 'foreigners' in the U.S. The importance of this

exploration is to challenge the generalized assumptions and ideas of what it is to be a foreigner/stranger. Like all narrative work, from the deeply personal and unique stories of persons of different national backgrounds and experiences of 'foreignness' universal themes emerge that invite a new understanding. The stories told by practitioners and educators may be understood as the 'lived' experience that may challenge or deepen understanding of theoretical concepts such as biculturalism, assimilation and acculturation created in the dominant cultural discourse. One may ask, is 'adjustment' i.e. assimilation/acculturation an external or internal phenomenon?

Being a foreigner or stranger means different things to different people. Coming from a different land, having a different cultural heritage and language implies a knowing of a place where the mind's eye can go, where landscape, customs and people make for 'roots,' where something is left behind. It forces those who leave all that



behind to ponder the meaning of re- or dislocation, and the loss of a homeland.

Being an outsider does not have to relate to being a foreigner. The experience happens to everyone in different contexts, and the feeling can be as profound and discomfiting as the experience of being a stranger in a different land. For instance, feminists—especially feminists of color—offer a critical discourse about being an outsider. (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hooks, 1990). The exploration of similar 'outsider' domains could be insightful (and perhaps the topic for another special issue). For this issue we choose to understand and limit contributions from those authors who were outsiders because of national or indigenous origin.

We, as editors, have our different experiences with being a stranger and in fact were strangers to each other. We recently met, at the Doctoral Reunion of the School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign where both of us received our doctorates: Marian in 1982 and Golie in 1992. After presenting at the reunion colloquium, we talked to each other informally and exchanged insecurities about doing public presentations. English for both of us is a second language. We discovered that we had something in common: presenting in public makes us nervous; words come to mind in our native language and we cannot "find" the right English words. We shared the experience of recognizing that when we are under stress, languages

compete in our heads! And a language that represents more than words! It's what Gloria Anzaldúa writes about 'voice:

"Foreigners/strangers must learn a foreign tongue—standard American English—, a language laden with alien ideologies which are often in direct opposition to those in our own cultures. To speak English is to think in that language, to adopt the ideology of the people whose language it is and to be 'inhabited' by their discourse" (*Making Face, Making Soul* (1990). p.xxii).

What does being a foreigner/stranger mean for us? We both fit labels of being bilingual and bicultural. Golie is still a Dutch citizen, a foreigner, labeled as "permanent alien" by immigration laws. She came to the United States in 1987 as a single woman, the only member of her family ever to immigrate. She was trained in Holland as a "cultural worker;" a degree from a School of Social Work (group work/ community organization), a popular degree in the early 70s. She worked with high school drop-out youth and later as an activist and organizer in Third World solidarity movements. She also worked in Papua, New Guinea training the first women to be village development and agricultural extension workers. Marian is not a foreigner in the strict sense, but has experienced being a 'stranger' as a first generation Mexican American on her mother's side with close ties to the borderlands. Her 'stranger'

status is deeply rooted in the stories of oppression and discrimination of being Mexican American. What follows is the result of an interchange we had about the question: what does it mean for us to live with the loss of a homeland?

#### Marian:

" I guess because I come from a distinct set of parents I begin there. For my father the oppression he suffered engendered in him a welcoming stance to any stranger, whether it was an American who was Black or someone from another country. This did not come easy. It was a life-long experience beginning with being stoned, receiving a concussion in first grade from White fellow students that did not accept Mexican Americans in their school. At twelve, he was shot in his leg for playing in the White kid's park. Instead of becoming bitter, he learned compassion.

I also embody the teachings of my mother, who was born in Mexico and who suffered the ravages of discrimination, being deprived of an education. She was brought up in a French Louisiana/Texas border town, where Mexicans were little more than cheap labor. In her first three years in grade school she was punished for acts she did not know she did because she did not understand the language. She left school after third grade. Years later, when I returned to the area to obtain her records for citizenship, all records of Mexican children attending the school at that time had been destroyed.



This childhood experience led my mother never to speak English to us; she never wanted us to forget where we came from. She wanted us to appreciate and be proud of our Mexican roots and culture. It became her avocation that her children integrate the best of both cultures: the Mexican and the American. I am a product of that and that is my orientation.

As Gloria Anzaldua (1987) relates, people who live in the borderlands straddle two cultures and learn to be at home in both without betraying one or the other. Sometimes it is comfortable being in one or the other, and sometimes it is not because it demands making difficult choices depending on the particular moment; there are many moments everyday that demand this. For instance, will I pronounce my last name so that someone can understand it, or will I pronounce it as it is supposed to be pronounced in Spanish? Am I courteous to a cashier who just followed me around the jewelry section of a large department store to make sure I would not steal the jewelry? How will I respond to the head of a program who refuses to allow me to teach a course he feels someone of my background is not capable of teaching?

Neither the passage of time nor the earning of a Ph.D. erases the experience of being a stranger in your own land. I guess that is the challenge to celebrate life with all that it brings. My teaching is a constant journey toward modeling respect for difference and celebra-

tion of difference.

Marian's voice as a 'stranger' and woman of color is different from Golie's, who experiences alienation and loss of a homeland by coming from a different country.

**Golie:** When I lived in Urbana, I naturally befriended many women from all over the world who had lost their homeland: women from France, South Africa, India, England, Turkey, and I am sure that not all, but a great deal of the affections and affinities had to do with being a foreigner. We would often talk about 'home' and discuss the loss of it as more than the loss of a place, or family or food. Of course, we discussed the liberating parts, such as in my case: "If I had stayed in Holland, I would have never dreamed of getting a Ph.D." or, our friend from India, "I would have been forced to marry a man chosen by my parents." Yet, despite the appreciation for the opportunities and freedoms, there was also always an inexplicable recognition of something that is hard to put in words. 'Loss' did not capture it, nor did 'nostalgia' or 'yearning.' I still cannot put my finger on what it means, after years, to speak of home and a homeland. I still tell my American family and friends that I am going home, meaning home to Holland. Then, when I go, home to my country and home place, after nearly 20 years, I sometimes feel more a visitor. I am confused; I am seen as 'stranger.' Once in the bank in my small home town, the

teller started to speak English to me when I spoke to her in Dutch. Yet, long before the awareness of the significance of place was introduced as "sociology of place," I always noticed a peculiar feeling... driving from Schiphol Airport until about 15 kilometers from my mother's house, I would start feeling different, like the opening of the heart. I feel lighter, I breathe easier seeing the familiar farmhouses, grassland, cows, pretty little towns, and winding river, bordering the town with the imposing cathedral. Schama (1993) claims that there is a genetic level recognition of landscapes. If families have lived long enough in a certain place, i.e. have 'known' the landscape, than it feels like home. Going home is more than going home to family and friends.

Being a foreigner for me carries ambivalence about what the United States represents to me and to the rest of the world. Unlike many refugees and immigrants who flee oppression or poverty, the United States—the land of freedom—does present problems for me. What about (social) justice? I am very aware as an instructor that this ambivalence informs my teaching. For instance, as I teach "Introduction to Social Welfare" to undergraduate students, I bring a perspective of questioning the U.S. social welfare system. I discuss the tension between the values of freedom and equality in the context of comparative social welfare policies and how that affects thinking about human rights. Often giving personal examples of how I grew



up in my family, we talk about what it would mean for families in the US to live in a country with family allowance, universal health care, subsidized child care, housing subsidies, and generous student loans, which, (before 'retrenchment' became a buzzword) was the reality in many European countries. In helping students to critically analyze the underlying values of social welfare policies, many come to see the American model as coming up short. I remember one very young student raising her hand during some of those discussions saying: "If they can do that in Europe why can't we do that here? Aren't we the richest country in the world?"

It would be hard to claim that the way I teach a "Community Context of Practice" class solely is informed by being a foreigner, but I give much attention to discussing with students the meaning of community for our personal lives. How does the nature of the communities we live in and the presence/absence of positive connections play a role in our lives and the shaping of our identities? What represents community to us? Having lost the 'familiar,' language, customs, and people that made up community in a homeland, may increase sensitivity to the importance of community in a new land.

Another piece of being a foreigner is the attraction to other foreigners, both in my personal life and professional choices I have made. For ten years I was involved in working and doing research with South

East Asian refugees, especially with refugee women. I learned that being a social worker with an MSW degree is less important than being seen as a good helper. I had to be willing to build relationships, be like a friend, and I would be treated likewise. It made me feel different in the presence of these women, who, like me, struggled with language, adjustment, and acceptance. With them, differences felt comfortable and brought up mutual curiosity and acceptance. Working with these women forever changed my views about what really matters in the helping profession, not the degree you have, but the kind of person you are.

How then do I resolve to live with the loss of a homeland? I take comfort in the wisdom of others who were strangers and teach us through their examples and words:

*When you accept the state of being a stranger, you are no longer a stranger. I have been an exile when everything around me seemed strange and everybody was a stranger. Once I accepted that I did not have to belong and I didn't have to be part of the world, then I was free to be part of it. There was a paradoxical release of the spirit. The world became mine when I was no longer holding on to it. (Satiat Kaman, 1995, p.8).*

What does it mean for others to be a foreigner? What is the experience of being a stranger? The contributors to this issue all offer different voices; they speak of pain and despair, of yearning and resolu-

tion. Not all came from foreign shores. An indigenous person invites us to live ourselves into the meaning of "foreignness" experienced from the perspective of sovereignty. Loss of a homeland, far or near, always invites reflections on the political, the personal and the professional. It is not just national origin that makes the difference: family life, class, gender, sexual orientation and skin color all inform the sense of self that is foregrounded by a 'foreign' name or status, even when one's passport may show U.S. citizenship.

Reactions to the meaning of losing a home land vary. In our conversation with Gisela Konopka about contributing to "Brief Reflections" in this issue, she responded: "I'm not sure about this, it is different for me, I am not yearning for my homeland. The Nazis took it away long before I could claim it." For others, the deepening of one's own understanding of self as a "stranger" in terms of national origin comes out in relationship with clients or choices about who to serve with grant monies. In the most moving case it reveals understandings of oppressor/oppressed dynamics that evoke the healing of the self and soul. For some, there is the yearning for "home" that does not go away. The familiarity with the foods, the customs, the taken-for-granted communication patterns and the questions raised when moving to a new land never seem to end. But also, the continuous reflection on the questions "who am I, and where do I belong?" leads to the expe-



rience of gradually living into the answers, finding accommodations and even 'heart' felt solutions. These narratives tell about the vicarious journey into the search for meaning of being a foreigner/stranger, into the shaping of an indivisible personal and professional self in a new land.

Ultimately the meaning of being a foreigner/stranger is the question of identities achieved in lived experience that, because of another national origin, remain different from native born U.S. citizens. This experience we believe, influences the work we do as helpers and educators. It may not necessarily represent a different practice or pedagogy from those who are not foreigners, yet for some their particular approach to practice and teaching may have developed because of being foreigners. However, we as outsiders may look with a different lens at the world we live in now and at the one we came from. It helps us to ask questions differently and perhaps to develop different visions about teaching and helping. Hopefully it helps us understand what others feel when they see themselves as outsiders. Being an outsider/stranger may challenge us to transform the dualisms that terms like outsider/insider, foreigner/national imply. We may respond more intently to efforts and movements that call for both the recognition of difference and inclusion/solidarity with the strangers in our midst.

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