

Global Citizen

I am Texan by birth, New Mexican by virtue of my childhood, and New Yorker by choice. My diverse family is made up of multi-generational Americans and newer immigrants. I consider myself a patriot; not in the American-flag-on-the-front-porch way, but in the more quiet, enduring way that grows through the trials that any country and population must overcome. One relative served as governor of Alabama just before the Civil War. My Indigenous great-grandmother is buried in a grave at a state mental hospital in Montana. I have Italian-American family in the Bronx. My Mexican great-grandfather came to the U.S. with his family as a child; attended university in Mexico and then returned to the U.S. for the remainder of his life. Another great-grandfather came through Ellis Island from Hungary in 1929. Parts of my heart reside in the expanses of the American West, in the high deserts and mountains of the Southwest, and in the concrete canyons of New York City. The United States, and each home of mine within it, has shaped who I am, how I perceive the world, and how I choose to live my life. I am quick to deflect blanket criticisms of the United States, but I am analytical of the oft-hypocritical and devastating actions, and assumption of exceptionalism. With great love comes great accountability, and I feel the weight of my country's actions on my shoulders as I make my way through the world. I am proud to be of this country, and I want my children to feel as much a part of it as I do. And yet?

My first international trip was to Mexico at the age of nine. At the time we were living with my aunt, having just moved out of the trailer we lived in for three years. Throughout my childhood my family lived the increasingly financially precarious reality of the struggling American middle-class. Despite this, I grew up watching my parents budget our money in a manner that allowed us to travel frequently as a family. The more trips we went on, the more I adopted their complete openness of heart to the cultures and peoples whose countries we were

entering. From a young age I decided I wanted more, and as a high school junior, I went to Turkey on State Department-sponsored exchange program. Over the course of the year I came to identify with the Turkish people in a way that was utterly unfamiliar to me, never before having been so exposed to and immersed in another culture. This is not to say that I believed myself to be Turkish, but it added a new layer to my identity. Only after I returned to the United States did I fully realize how immensely Turkey had changed my outlook and my life.

For the ten months I was in Turkey I was, in essence, a junior ambassador of this country. Upon my return I found myself doing the same for a country most Americans I knew had never thought of, let alone been visited. This had a profound effect on both the tangible aspects of my life, as well as on my beliefs and perspective on the world. I was raised in a progressive family that put no boundaries on love, gender, ethnicity, national origin, or any other identity. But my family and the larger community I grew up in were progressive bohemians, steeped in ideals of not only tolerance and acceptance, but also democracy, “freedom,” and secularism. For lack of being challenged, as I began my life in Turkey, I assumed these to be universal truths that were simply not realized by everyone. Without realizing, or wanting to realize, I had adopted the belief that the United States, flawed as it is, was an ideological leader, and that it was our duty to represent our beliefs abroad. Throughout my year abroad, as I learned Turkish, ate the food, watched local TV shows, celebrated the holidays, became a member of my host family, made lifelong friends, learned the nuances of the country’s history and political climate, and adapted my behavior to the norms of the country, this belief, and others, were challenged at every turn. Although I was not aware of it in the moment, my conception of myself within the world and within the United States, as well as of the entire world order, was changing.

Readjusting to life in the United States following my year abroad I realized that to think of myself as an American first had become reductive and did not capture my relationship to the

world. My responses to people and situations were now influenced by the connection I had to Turkey and to its people. National and international events were no longer important for how they affected the United States alone, but also for how they impacted Turkey and my community there. Suddenly I was defending beliefs, policies and positions I would have denounced without a second thought before. Having always been a proud American, I had to navigate what it meant to feel this connection to two countries. It forced me to reevaluate my career goals; where previously I had my sights set on serving my country and its people for its own benefit, I now felt conflicted about working for the interests of a government if the possibility of harming the other country was present. It forced me to reevaluate my political stances, arguments, my generalizations and even my humor. As I have become more comfortable in my shared loyalties, I have begun to consider what it means to feel such membership in more than one country, or perhaps, to no country at all, and what it may mean for the future of human societies. I begin with this introduction to establish where I stand in my relationship to my country.

As a proud American who is also a global citizen I necessarily have an ongoing internal, self-reflexive conversation about my place in the world as a human, and as an American, as well as my country's place in it. As I imagine my career, whether that be international or domestic, several interrelated questions arise: What can my role be, realistically, in countries where I am not a citizen? What is my moral responsibility as someone originating from a country that has such a global, international impact; one that is sometimes welcome, sometimes heartbreaking? Should I take the freedom of movement I exercise as result of my citizenship as a ticket to affect change around the world, or should I acknowledge the disparities, and focus on the communities here in this country? The former accepts my commitment to the global community, the latter acknowledges the more realistic reach of my influence. The more time I spend abroad the more I face the realities of what it means to be American abroad; the implications it has on respect

given, access granted, clout in social settings, and aid available in times of need, especially relative to that of other citizenships. This is not to discount the dangers any given person faces while abroad, or the particular experiences of people of color, women, LGBTQ individuals, and others. It is true that there is another problem of how different identities within citizenship groups are treated as *citizens*, the rights and recognition they are granted that others from the same country are or are not. This is the subject of another essay entirely, and one that has garnered, and will continue to, significant attention. I am, however, focusing on groups defined by citizenship, and the implications that accompany membership to such groups. It is to this problem that I turn; the hierarchy of value within which citizenship groups are organized.

We live in a world where, currently, national identities hold great significance; in which governments wage war on behalf of entire populations, and assertions of cultural exceptionalism bleed into politics, science, art and literature. Amidst this, I wonder what can be accomplished if we question the morality of such divisive an organization of people and interests. International politics encourages the picking of sides, whether it be that of which culture is superior, of international wars, of natural resources, of scientific fact and of religion. In an age when we receive updates on global events directly to our personal devices every minute, when we can follow live updates on a young girl's life in rural Ethiopia as easily as that of Kim Kardashian, and not only read about, but also watch the bombing of communities and the environmental destruction following weather events, it feels reductive to consider repercussions within the confines of national borders only. When a citizen of the U.S. with family in a rural village thousands of miles away can Facetime with them; can electronically wire money to them, and can watch live videos of their lives, how are we to contend with "America first" rhetoric? Where is the line between ethical patriotism and unethical allegiance? My own experience is an uncomplicated example of the multiculturalism that so many identify with. There are many

individuals and families that are split between two, three, sometimes more, countries. A world order where each country enacts policy solely on the basis of itself and its population's interests, without considering the increasingly global populations with whom they work, or the global repercussions, seems not only unsustainable, but immoral on a human rights level.

This brings me to the radical question of whether nationalities, as they exist now, are ethical because of their innate threat to human rights. This is not to say they do not serve a purpose, for they have proven to be powerful agents of social change, cohesion and organization. Humans are social beings, and nation states may in fact be the most ethical way in which we mediate our more tribal, protectionist tendencies. I also acknowledge that nations and governments may be the most productive, streamlined, and consolidated method of communication between governments and populations for as grand a scale as exists now. Indeed, humans are both incredibly empathetic, as well as supremely self-absorbed. By nature of our instinct to survive we limit threats to ourselves, our families, and our direct community's safety. If this is "human nature," it is easy to see how nations reflect the same survival instinct. Additionally, to rid ourselves of nationalities and state presence would be to overturn centuries of civilizations and culture, to revolutionize the entire political order that is the result of millennia of wars, struggles and insistence on recognition.

Despite this, we have reached a point in which we are able to obtain information about almost any topic, anywhere, within a few seconds if we so wish; in which our understanding of each other supersedes anything we have seen before. As we move forward, we are not constrained by a lack of knowledge, but rather by our own inhibitions and lack of imagination. Our survivalist instincts may, in fact, begin to be overpowered by the immensity of our social organization. It is, therefore, not impossible to foresee a future in which we overcome our most instinctual tribal tendencies to form, if not a borderless, nationless world, at least one in which

nationalities can coexist without risking the safety, well-being and dignity of another. The risks of failure to adjust are evidenced by current events. Instead of addressing climate change as a global community, our various countries are attempting to look after their own interests, some by addressing it, others by ignoring it. Instead of joining together to address the refugee crisis, countries are arguing about how to disperse the people to minimize the cost to themselves. There is a growing population of “stateless” people around the world; those who have given up or been stripped of their citizenship, and now move through the world with no grounding identity. “Nation first” policies will not solve these problems but will only prolong them under the guise of political negotiations.

Recently a professor of mine asked which group identities we believed were important to advocate for in the coming years. This question struck me as intriguing, and odd, because it seemed to demand a hierarchy of worth, or at least need. In my attempt to think of one that encompassed the largest number of people, I answered by naming the rights of people as transnational beings, as individuals able to travel between nations, to exist, to receive the same care and rights in their own countries, as well as worldwide. Nationalities, the chance of birthplace, do not just manifest in different policies enacted upon people, but they also create a different state of being. This is not earned through merit; it cannot be bought with money made by working. It is true, nationalities can be gotten through residence or marriage, but an existing nationality cannot be “upgraded.” This is the result of a world order in which certain countries are granted more value and legitimacy. The resulting patriotism and loyalty is, therefore, directed at a reality that places people in an inevitable hierarchy of privileges and opportunities, locking people, and societies, into a reinforcing cycle of inequality. For those that have multiple nationalities, they will eventually face a situation in which they must choose to vote or otherwise contribute to the wellbeing of one country over that of another.

The existence of inequality of some level, is unavoidable. Indeed, many of the factors that determine privilege – birthplace, parents, our race, our sex at birth, gender identity – are completely beyond our control. What I am not certain of is that there need be inequality inherent to the country of birth or an inherited citizenship. I am not arguing that nations and national identity are inherently unethical, to do that would be to deny the entire system of social evolution humans have gone through. I am instead arguing that, as socially, politically, philosophically and technologically aware as we are, it is unethical to allow the disparities between nationalities to persist at the current levels. Additionally, it is unethical to allow nationalistic tendencies of populations and governments to blind us to the very real problems humanity faces now, and to the solutions needed to ensure the survival of all, rather than just one country. It is unethical on a personal, a societal, and a political level. Fierce nationalism is both a spectacularly powerful unifying force, as well as a deeply divisive “othering” tool that creates enemies and allies where they do not fundamentally exist. Policies are enacted for the supposed good of a single nationality and populace, which enforces a struggle of nation versus nation, people versus people, and ideology versus ideology. The consequences of such a world order are visible in the power dynamics between countries, the history of interference and manipulation, and the political maneuvering, with or without regard to the people affected. The consequences also extend to those within the borders; those deemed “traitors” of the national interest, even if their actions can be understood to be helping another group. The enemy within often mirrors the perceived enemy from without, further entrenching a narrow vision of nationality and citizenship, in line with the politics of the day.

Today issues of concern are framed not in how they affect people and families, *humans*, but in how they affect “nations.” To this I say, where does the nationality end and the humanity begin? At what point can we denounce the loyalty that is expected of us and choose to serve

humanity on the whole? There are people that try to do this, whether they come from a multicultural family, have spent time abroad, or simply feel connected to the world in a manner that supersedes national borders. Those that embody the term “global citizen.” They, and I, are not arguing for a culturally homogenous world, or one in which no nations or borders exist. There is beauty in the tribes we have built, in the languages we have mastered, the political systems we have built, and the achievements different groups have realized. I pose this, instead, as a challenge to the morality of the extractive manner in which they currently operate; in an attempt to envision a world in which multiculturalism and multi-nationalism do not pit person against person, or person against friends and family. My experience in Turkey, in learning to feel for another country what I assumed I would only ever feel for the United States put the country I knew into stark perspective. I am unable to fully accept the prioritization of “national interest,” or travel through the world without thinking about how my being American affected my ability to move.

I am currently transitioning between my undergraduate and graduate studies. Though I feel passionately about what I am studying, and look forward to putting my degrees to work, my hope for the future does not come without doubts about my place in the field. There is the constant question of where the line between my national identity and my humanity lies; between where my responsibility to my fellow countrymen conflicts with that to my fellow humans. The questions and challenges I’ve posed in this essay may never change, but I do hope that through my own work, and that of others, we can look toward a future in which issues can be handled on the behalf of all people, regardless of nationality. I hope for a world where an individual can move with freedom granted through their own humanity, not that of their country. Without radical change to the status quo, I fear a future in which humanity is increasingly divided into groups that are afforded the right of being fully *human*, and those that are not. Our world faces

intriguing and difficult challenges in the coming years, and fierce, retractive nationalism has proven a poor method of combating such obstacles. The ethics of conscious living and co-survival demand that we reevaluate our current conception of the hierarchy for the sake of us all.