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Response to Kawash

Thea Gelbspan
Macalester College

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Dr. Kawash has contributed an important element to our discussion of the place of ethnicity within globalization. I will first discuss what I consider to be particularly important contributions to our theme. I will then highlight a few shortcomings of the work and conclude with some personal thoughts on the role of ethnic identity within the process of globalization.

I. Strengths

There are three elements of Dr. Kawash's paper that I consider worthy of special mention: attention to "ethnicity" as it refers to globalization; her use of media images; and the political implications of her remarks.

A. Use of "Ethnicity"

Dr. Kawash demonstrates mastery of the elusive concept of ethnicity. Her conception poses a formidable challenge to traditional anthropological uses of the word that imply an anachronistic essence of a pure and pristine people. Consequently, her perspective allows her to include the multitude of factors that compose culture. In representing a group's collective identity as a narrative of shared experiences, she facilitates discussion without contradicting the movement and change inherent in any global process. Her treatment of the term allows her to transcend static conceptions of the collective Self while rendering her description of ethnic identity appropriate, at times poignant, in the context of dominant images of globalization.

B. Use of Media

Dr. Kawash provides a convincing portrayal of ethnicity as presented by the mainstream media of the United States. The value of using such strategies in her discussion of an inherently dynamic theme is immeasurable; few better indices exist to

gauge the hopes of the U.S. business community in respect to the coming global future. In a world where history is being made faster than it can be written, the most recent popular images are a relevant and necessary indication of predominant global tendencies.

In the images she discusses, the achievement of international unity is envisioned within the context of the command of the United States, as shown in the examples of the Olympic Games and the film *Independence Day*. Within the paradigm of conventional media narratives, the overreaching domination of the market system is taken for granted to facilitate a global human family moving toward progress, universal gain, and the absorption of previously isolated or localized entities. The Hanes and UPS commercials used in Dr. Kawash's essay are only two of many illustrations of this popular discourse. Usually, this inevitable process is described as being resisted by small, conservative ethnic groups who, in the name of tradition, refuse to evolve and integrate into the global human network. An example of an expression of opposition, one that has been dismissed as an ethnic conflict, is the peasant uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, in response to the signing of NAFTA. Such an explanation is similar to the treatment given to the demonstrators for peace conveyed in *Independence Day*. Ethnicity is relegated to the role of an unreasonable and regressive obstacle to integration and transnationalism. Dr. Kawash's insights are quite instructive here.

C. Implications of Images

The principle political conclusion that Dr. Kawash draws from the common narrative of globalization is also instructive. She is correct in indicating that the image of a global, communal family implies contentment and consent on the part of the various participants, which does not leave room for the great divides of global inequalities. Her association of images of a menacing alien with depictions of those who wish to change the preexisting structures (social, economic, etc.) locates efforts to overlook critical analysis of current border politics, as well as the demonization of resistance to unjust policies.

In this media narrative, where ethnicity is construed as a lethal and binary phenomenon by those at the top of the global hierarchy, expressions of cultural identity are taken to charge the fortress of the clearly defined state. As a result, demands for larger pieces of the global pie, which are inherently divisive to the unity within the sacred borders, are often regarded as irrational and destructive. Dr. Kawash deftly exposes the media's manipulation of the public's fear of conflict by tying ethnicity to rebellion and, therefore, legitimizing the application of corporate and patriotic strength to subdue social unrest.

II. Disagreements

The task of critiquing Dr. Kawash's essay has proven extremely difficult, as I agree with many of the points she makes. However, there is one principal element of her argument that troubles me. This is her failure to explicitly state her position with respect to the messages she discusses. Consequently, I find a disjuncture between the strength of her analysis and the weakness of her conclusions.

In response to the question of the role of ethnic identity in globalization, Dr. Kawash defers to the depictions of a global community generated by the U.S. media and associated with corporate interests framed in American patriotism. She does not give us a clear sense of her own position within this discussion. In adopting a narrative strategy that relegates ethnic identity to a destructive role in an otherwise progressive integration of economies and nations, Dr. Kawash denies herself the opportunity to fully reveal the flaws of such pervasive discourse. The following example may illustrate the point.

Dr. Kawash writes that "real conflicts over land, food, human rights, or self-determination are transformed into 'ethnic conflicts.' "[1] In making such a statement, even sarcastically, one must make clear one's reasons for repeating such ideas. If she disagrees with the logic behind this position, she ought to affirm the existence of the many non-ethnically based expressions of discontent with the outcomes of globalization. If, in the end, ethnicity is understood to be, as Dr. Kawash states, "the always newly created expression of an experience in the present,"[2] then it is a product *of*, not an opposition *to*, globalization. This point

may be conceded, however, only if the definition of globalization is expanded beyond simply the phenomenon of the integration of economies and includes the movement of peoples and cultural norms. Because Dr. Kawash does not offer a more complex, encompassing definition of globalization than the one established by the media, she deprives herself of a discursive space in which to explore her initial conception of "ethnic identity."

III. Identity and Globalization

Globalization presents revolutionary challenges to the traditional human conception of identity and community. As human beings restructure the currents of history, as well as find themselves affected by such changes, radical consequences are bound to transpire. For instance, as Frederick Buell writes, "globalization theory has heightened our awareness . . . that culture and knowledge are a globally interactive construction that hinges on patterns of circulation. . . . Old notions about bounded, territorially rooted civilizations and national cultures are utterly broken down."[3]

The growing acceleration and intensification of human contact seems to render increasingly irrelevant the notion of a cohesive commonality that, at one time, distinguished one group as inherently different from another. The fundamental contradiction between the claim to a bounded identity based on those characteristics associated with ethnicity (such as race, language, religion, and geographical origin) and the reality of cultural development through interpenetration becomes accentuated within globalization. Indeed, more and more humans are posing the ancient question of "Who am I?" with seriousness and anxiety. In my conception of a nonconflictive basis of collective identification, I recall Dr. Kawash's statement that ethnicity is "the always newly created expression of an experience in the present."[4] With this as a starting point, I wish to present an alternative definition of Self that is consistent with the nature of globalization.

The premise that the foundation of one's identity is contingent on opposition to an Other, a not-ego, is acceptable to the extent that one assumes a vision of culturally bounded collectiv-

ities rooted in distinct geographical regions. Groups are thus defined in relation to the space that forms the context of their experiences. However, the Self that is more reflective of globalization does not define its so-called essence in respect to one place and people. This new creature is fundamentally different from those presumed to be the product of a relatively closed system of belonging.

I believe that the cosmopolitan described by social psychologist Ulf Hannerz in his book *Cultural Complexity* provides an excellent example of a type of person whose self-conception is not threatened but rather nourished by exposure to human differences.[5] Hannerz describes the cosmopolitan as one who welcomes the world's diversity. Fundamental to this personality's tendencies, then, is a willingness to engage with (as opposed to fortify one's borders against) members of various ethnic and national groups.

A conception of identity that is neither exclusive to certain innate characteristics nor posed in sharp contrast with other human groups has intriguing implications. For instance, it calls upon us to recognize that which is inclusive of human experience and therefore forms the common basis upon which people build solidarities. Perhaps the most universal to the human consciousness is the biosphere that envelopes us all. From the "one world" multicultural movement celebrating human diversity to ecological activism, the concept of mutual interests based on the singularity of our planet seems to be incontestable. Seen from this angle, cultural differences are not doomed to be solely a source of mobilization against others but could be a basis for tolerance, mutual enrichment, and the promotion of collective survival. This, I submit, is at the core of both local and transnationalist ecological, as well as broader social justice, movements.

I would like to conclude with an autobiographical note. My father is a U.S.-born Jew and my mother a Swedish immigrant. However, neither of these national or ethnic categories holds special significance for my sense of identity. In explaining myself to a stranger, perhaps the first thing I refer to is my multitude of encounters with the land, cultures, and political issues of Latin America. I share no blood relations with the people of that region of the world, yet, due to the experiences I have been

privileged to have, I feel a profound and undeniable solidarity with the peoples to our south. There have been occasions in my life when I felt a closer kinship with the women of the indigenous peasantry of the Andean region than with the majority of people who reside in New York City, where I was born.

I do not consider my self-understanding unique, nor do I believe that Dr. Kawash is unaware of such a possibility for all of us. I offer this self-reflection in order to illustrate the relative facility with which one may imagine alternative roles of the collective Self to that presented by the media's representations of the "global community."

Ethnicity is neither a scapegoat for social protest movements in general nor a clear example of local rejections of globalization. It is a product of the processes of cultural contact. Arjun Appadurai tells us that "[n]atives, people confined to and by the places to which they belong, groups unsullied by contact with a larger world have probably never existed."[6] Culture, then, is not a closed system; it is a system of meanings and understandings that create the context for behavior and comprehension. The acceleration of multiple patterns of intercourse and contact among peoples that we call globalization will not likely change that basic human fact.

Transnationalism is, by its logic, a transcendence of the limits of nation-states. Shifts of this magnitude and range are bound to usher in profound changes. In the context of globalization, this implies the end to the absolute assertion of racial purity; to singular, identifiable ethnic or geographic ancestral histories; and to recourse to isolation and renegade individualism. Those who understand this fact bear the obligation of challenging messages to the contrary. For, in the end, the force of theoretical and academic discussions of globalization rests on the effects of those discussions on real people. The cogency of the analyses and eloquent sentiments of scholars have one overreaching claim to legitimacy: their contribution to the much-needed change in harmful ideological and political structures. We engage in discussions about the human condition so that we may better understand the world we live in and upon. At stake in discussions of ethnicity in the age of globalization is nothing less than the Self in the world.

Notes

1. Samira Kawash, "Good Ethnics, Bad Aliens: Imagining the Global Village" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 195.

2. Ibid., 176.

3. Frederick Buell, *Postmodernism and Globalization: National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 336–37.

4. Kawash, "Good Ethnics, Bad Aliens," 176.

5. Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 252–55.

6. Arjun Appadurai, "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place" in *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1988): 1–24, as quoted in James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures" in *Cultural Studies*, edited and with an introduction by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 100.