

[This piece, written in 2007 continues I think to be relevant to current events. It was a finalist for the Bechtel Prize at *Teachers & Writers Magazine*.]

Reading Huckleberry Finn in Morocco

“American values are well known all over the world. It’s the most powerful and advanced country in the world. Their way of living is very strict and everything has a sense for them. They are superieur and more educated then any other nationality. Everybody respects them. When I go to America I will do my best to adapt to their culture. Life in America is simple and pure.”

- Amine Gelounne, a Moroccan high school student answering my question “When you think of America what comes to mind?”

It’s the first week of the New Year, and the start of the second year of Obama’s presidency. Since working early on for his campaign, I’ve taken the whole thing very personally. I keep thinking that Barack means blessing, and that the world is made of names and meanings, how one thing means different things in different places; or how the same story is read by different people. I think about these boys I used to know, and this one morning in early January.

I was teaching English literature at an ‘American style’ high school in the Middle Atlas Mountains of Morocco, where I had gone with my husband and ten year old son. We had left San Francisco out of a hunger for adventure, mostly. Moving to a ‘Muslim country’ we had never seen before seemed strange to some, but then San Francisco had become strange too, pretentious and self absorbed, cut off from common concerns and no longer the alternative place I had fled to from the Midwest so long ago.

In the university town where I worked the student’s mostly wealthy parents had sent them to the American style school to learn English, on the one hand as the international language of commerce, but there was an unspoken hope too, that they would learn “American”; learn to be however it is that Americans are, that make them forward, rather than backward, because they were worried about being seen as backward.

“You think we’re savages, don’t you,” one 15 year old boy asked me a few days after an incident in class when we read a Time Magazine cover with the headline, Generation Jihad, “and you know what, we are.”

“Of course you’re not,” I reassured him, and though I was tempted to say, ‘you’re just the same as us,’ both of us knew it wasn’t true.

In my classroom a few months later, in one of the self-fulfilling prophecies that seemed so common there, this boy viciously attacked the school’s lone American girl, kicking her in the chest. This came after an argument where she flipped him off. He claimed it was a matter of pride for the way she insulted him, though the racial motivations were clear to all of us.

Wanting to know Americans, wanting to study in America, and wanting to kick America in the chest were a few sides of an ongoing struggle, wherein our class reflected the world at large.

That day with the magazine comes to mind again lately, because I’m hoping my new president can change how other countries view us, and perhaps more importantly how we view others. It was another day in January. It was cold in the Atlas Mountains with snow piled up around the windows.

My junior class, good Muslims all, were huddling around the electric heater embracing each other for warmth. Mehdi the joker who loved Arabian horses was leaning against Ashraf the lady-killer, dressed in the latest Paris fashions, tight shirts, jeans pre-torn. One student’s family ran the ferryboats that go between Tangier and Spain, carrying it was rumored, hashish from the Riff. There was brilliant Leila, whose family owned a restaurant in the Fez Medina; Latifah, the daughter of a former treasury minister, with acres of skin showing between her fuzzy

little sweater and her low, low jeans, because the richer you are the more skin you can show. She had her arm around Miriam, the soft-spoken girl with the hijab, the only one in the school. According to the other dozen or so students, she was not to be taken that seriously, since as late as last summer she had been seen sunbathing in a bikini on the beach at Casablanca.

I was teaching research skills with news magazines I hadn't bothered to look at, with their usual headlines war, earthquakes, epidemics, when suddenly all eyes were drawn to the cover of a *TIME* Magazine with the bold headline of "**Generation Jihad.**" in two-inch letters across a figure in a white hooded sweatshirt with a hidden face. A hush fell over the room. Twenty faces stared up at me, waiting.

"Oh *TIME* I said trying to dismiss it casually, out of hand, "It's just sound bites, media conglomerates, its sensationalist, need to keep people afraid, no one takes this seriously...."

"Let me see, let me see" they shouted in unison, tearing the pages to try to find the start of the article about disaffection of young Muslims in Europe, mainly in London but also France where many students here had family and cousins. My students weren't yet emigrants, but they might be. We were they.

As the students argued among themselves, I felt for the first time what they feel everyday. I felt the howling wind that American media blows over the world, a wind that threatens to peel off the skin and drown out the local conversation; a rip-tide of noise and influence that flows along the edge of the world where only the strongest swimmers can make it back home.

"Is that really how they see us Miss?"

"When I was in Paris this woman yelled at me to go home."

"Do people say this in America?"

What people say in America matters to other countries, who we are matters, the stories we tell matter. And how we read each other's stories matters too. It was within this context, of the "American question" that we finally began to read *Huckleberry Finn*.

We had read other books in the American high school canon first, and there were always surprises. When we opened *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's world unfolded like a replica of Morocco circa 2006, fraught with class struggle and incipient feminism. Leila a brilliant young woman, with three brothers, who knew she would inherit nothing while her brothers would be wealthy, saw her life on every page. "We have the pride and we have the prejudice" she commented. While introducing Orwell's *1984* with a mention of the importance of free speech, I was quickly shushed up by some whispered voices, urging me to stop. "Miss I don't think we're supposed to be talking about this," Yassine said. "Of course we should talk about it," I insisted, but the room was silent. After class Yassine explained that the possibility of the King having a spy in the room was real to them, and so discussion of such things was not worth the risk.

But then I was sure Twain's masterpiece would be a favorite. Here was the America I wanted them to know, the -- to hell with your pompous conventions I'm doing my own thing—America, that's what they needed (I thought) what young people everywhere need to help them move the world along. Certainly, Huck's quintessential journey from oppression to freedom, the great adventure through the uncharted territories of self-discovery and inner joy was universal wasn't it? Not to mention the fact that some previous teacher had left on the back shelf, just enough copies to go around. Its easy to forget how, in so much of the world, the story you can get your hands on is the only story.

Huckleberry Finn would be easy, I thought, until the first chapter. It was Miriam in the back of the classroom who first waved her hand.

"Miss, Miss, what is this log cabin?"

"A log cabin," I began, "is a kind of house that is made of tree trunks we call logs."

"Like a house a peasant would live in? Is Huck Finn a peasant?" she asked.

I've already learned that Moroccans feel insulted if I tell them stories about peasants. This is an oral culture, printed words still represent spoken language so reading about a peasant is like talking with a peasant and they don't want to.

"No, he's not a peasant. So a log cabin is made of whole tree trunks fitted together." I sketch it on the board.

They shake their heads. No one has ever heard of such a thing. Trees are scarce here on the edge of the Sahara; the use of so many trees seems profligate and wasteful. Just the kind of thing they have come to expect of America. I sense their disapproval and try to compensate.

"You have to understand, there were so many trees in North America at this time, it was a huge forest..."

"It's never a forest in America is it, it's always a huuuge forest," said Mehdi, and there was laughter from the aisles. Our "bigness" was a source of endless jokes.

There were a raft of words like 'raft' that they had no image of, and I feared rustic vocabulary would strand us in the first chapter; but the worst problems it turned out, were conceptual. Like how can you light out for the frontier if there isn't one? For Moroccans there has been no such thing as a frontier for 800 years. In their minds the French word *frontiere*, means only 'the border to the next country.' There is always the next country belonging to

another king. Of course there is desert, but no Moroccans imagine disappearing there. It isn't practical, and Moroccans are in their own way profoundly practical.

A few weeks earlier the American PE coach had taken the high school boys on a camping trip to climb Jebal Tubkal the highest mountain in this mountainous country. They were a hundred meters from the top when the group decided to turn back. When I asked what had happened, expecting a dramatic twist, they said simply 'our feet were really cold.' No one had considered going ahead without the others, (except the American) and they felt no sense of failure. Why climb a mountain when your feet hurt?

In the same way they asked, why would Huckleberry Finn want to leave his own house and family, endanger the life of another man, and travel along a muddy river filled with danger and the unknown? Why? *Huckleberry Finn* seemed to lack common sense in a way that my students found suspicious, as if something were sinister about him.

And "poor Jim" they complained, what was Huck doing, leading this perfectly good servant (their word) out of his house and doing this to him, leading him into danger? What good was freedom going to do Jim if he couldn't find enough to eat?

Each of them had a servant, often underage, in their house whom they were quick to defend. "They are much better off with us than they were in the village with nothing to eat. We don't pay them that much but they are not starving. Plus we don't treat black people the way you do in America, shooting them all the time," Ashraf explained.

The chapters about the family feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepardsons captured their interest more than most. They immediately saw in it the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, (which was always their main complaint about America, not our presence in Iraq) and spent several days debating the topic. And still this week in 2009, the headlines tallying 400

Palestinians dead, the photo in the New York Times of a torn open wall with a gaping hole, that so represents this conflict.

“Palestinian kids don’t even know what they’re fighting about anymore, one young man explained. It’s just the same as in the *Huck Finn* feud the young ones die for what?”

Hoping to get them further into the action, I asked my students to imagine themselves as Huckleberry Finn, and write about a week they would spend on a raft on a river. In their papers ‘the river’ often became the Nile; and their rafts became very crowded. No solo adventurers here. Students listed their passengers, “My best friends and my sister and brother.” “Me and all my friends.” “Me and Amine and Mohammed and Hassan, and Ashraf.” While the rafts were crowded the landscapes were strangely empty. There were no towns or colorful characters; instead the riverbanks were filled with wild animals, tigers, elephants, and snakes— a sort of African safari cartoon. As if in leaving one’s home region, one has left the realm of people all together and entered a primeval wilderness. Yassine, imagining a trip on the Amazon wrote:

“We made a raft and went on our journey. We talked about our families and what we were going to do if we didn’t get to Brazil. We were scared for a time but then got up our courage and said we are going to do it. There were some hard times when the rain was harsh. We made weapons to fight animals back if they attacked. At the end we got to Brazil called our parents, they came to get us but no one believed our story and we got punished for sneaking off.”

Most students described something similar for the end of the journey. ‘My parents are there and take me back home.’ Or ‘I call my dad and he picks me up,’ or ‘My older brother is there and he takes me back to school, but what a great time we had.’ Their families are never out of the picture, and they are not sure they want them to be. While to an American reader Huck’s escape from his father’s abuse seems a pretext for a trip we know he wants to take anyway, to the

Moroccan reader the Father never disappears. The Father is the theme the students keep returning to. Trying to get away from him was for them, the most radical idea in the story. Whenever I pressed them on a question of motivation, or the symbolic meaning of Huck's journey, it was never the thrill of discovery, or finding one's destiny, or Jim's need for freedom, it was always just that 'Huck wanted to get away from his father.' The father's wrath was familiar too. 'He had to go far away because he was afraid his father would chase him.' Even when they guess that Huck's father is one of the bodies in a house floating down the Mississippi, they aren't at rest. There are always uncles, cousins, and brothers to come in his place.

This was the strange and fascinating idea for them, the idea of attempting to get away from your family. In their minds there is no getting away. There are no uncharted territories to light out for personal or otherwise. Even if you decide to take an epic journey through the great river of life, your family will be dressed and waiting for you at the other end. And you won't mind. Will you? Leila turned her raft assignment into a reflection on this question.

"It's my family that chooses the best road I should take. It's my friends that guide me on the dark road. It's the people I love that keep me breathing, Without them I feel lost on a dark road without oxygen. This fear influences me in many of my decisions about my future,...I want to stay very close to the people that take care of me and hold me tight when I need them to. God blessed me by giving me the chance to be surrounded by great people so why should I leave and live with my loneliness?"

My students never spoke of being alone; they were intensely involved in each other. When they saw me out in the hills around school walking or running, they always asked why I was alone. When my husband left town for a few weeks they asked daily if he had returned yet, they worried for me.

For my Moroccan students discovering the uncharted frontiers of the self always meant discovering their place among others; their place as friend, as sister, brother, wife, mother, father. It was the rivers drawn on the map of human connection that they explored relentlessly. The interpersonal exchange was everything, and everything was to be taken personally. It was always “Miss, I need to talk with you, or just between us,” or let’s discuss this grade; the abstract –I’m a teacher you’re a student model meant nothing to them. Each lesson, each exchange, was an intimate personal negotiation, and the deep and delicate humanity in that made me love them. The interpersonal exchange was everything, and everything was personal.

‘When there is no ‘getting away’ and nowhere to get away to, when the individual is never on the raft on their own, responsibility is always shared, and my students preferred that always. Cultural differences among people aren’t just in forms of faith, or in rights granted or rights taken, in material gain or loss, differences have fundamentally to do with *feelings*.

So even after the words are explained; after the raft is righted and the wilderness unrolled, we can never read the shore in quite the same way. We can even learn to see the same things, learn the same words, for the same things, but finally we don’t feel the same about what we see. We can go down the river with Huck Finn, but we don’t end up in the same place.

Huckleberry Finn is about the opposite of human intimacy, it’s about the frontier; that abstract new American land which promises everything that hasn’t been thought of, or seen, or experienced. That promises you can find it. You the individual. That sense of individual promise is what parent’s were hoping for at the American School, but their children hesitated. The children knew, that you couldn’t take one world into the other. They knew that the family ties

that keep Moroccan culture flowing are the same ones that have to be un-tied for American culture to flow forward. They knew that once you're on Huck's metaphorical raft there is no going back. Most Moroccans I knew described their 'old world,' based as it is on personal ties of loyalty, affection, hostility, or some combination thereof, as finally the real human world that we are all bound to. Americans in their minds are simply blinded by the light, too young, too ambitious to see that despite our running here or there, we will all come back to these same ongoing ancient struggles with one another. Or will we?

I left San Francisco because it had come to feel cold and materialistic, I found in Morocco lives of warmth and intense feeling. But I didn't stay there either, and that's part of my story. Just like leaving home at 17 to move to San Francisco, or hitchhiking across the country, or staying in a monastery in India. I can look with longing at the lives of my Moroccan friends, the communal tenderness and sympathy, the prescribed roles, narrow though deep, but I didn't stay. It's dangerous out on the open river of American life, unpredictable, harsh, lonely, but it's the devil's pact we pay for the promise of what might just be around the next bend. Because really it might be better.

We can replace despots, with men whose names mean blessing; we can change the color of what we believe. I want so much to go talk with my students again, I want to say look, our president's name is from your language, his skin is from your land. We are on the same raft.

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