CREATIVE NONFICTION

The Return to Face-to-Face Classes as Culture Shock: A Letter to Students Returning to Campus

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SUMMARY *Unable to travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, I returned to past fieldnotes to stay ethnographically connected. There I found insights into culture shock that gave shape to varied feelings about returning to the classroom after more than a year of remote learning. These insights turned into a letter to returning students about culture shock and how to manage it. The advice offered stems from repeated experiences of returning home after prolonged fieldwork and managing the array of emotions that entails.* [culture shock, fieldnotes, fieldwork, teaching]

The COVID-19 pandemic has all but shut down my ethnographic research, leaving only the option of revisiting past fieldnotes and reconfiguring their lessons for new writings. In the in-between spaces of the fieldnotes—the parts that don't make it into ethnographic writing or the research conclusions—are notes to self, tracking unfolding understandings and reflections on the fieldwork process and its aftermath. Among these thoughts left by a past iteration of self to a future one, I found insights that proved useful to welcome a cohort of students back to campus. What follows is the spoken letter I prepared for students on their first day back from remote learning to sharing space in a classroom.

I've been thinking about my return to working on campus as a version of return culture shock.

Among those cultural anthropologists who do fieldwork far away and in a cultural setting that is initially unfamiliar, there is an understanding that when we do immersive cross-cultural research for a long time, we are likely to experience culture shock. We are taught to expect it as we go into the field. We know there will be an adjustment period to a different set of norms and that we will have to be flexible and adapt.

But the same sense of disorientation, or sometimes even overwhelming emotion, can also happen when we return. During immersive fieldwork in rural Costa Rica, I grew accustomed to what was initially unexpected, like a general store stocked only with basic needs rather than the varied selection I had

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at home. But the first time I returned to the United States after fieldwork, I felt overwhelmed by the options in a standard US grocery store. Equally jarring was the pace with which customers maneuvered carts through its aisles. I quickly missed walking as a form of transportation, newly dependent again on car culture in my hometown's streets, crowded with cars. This was not a one-time experience. Every time I return from immersive fieldwork, I face culture shock again. My own experiences with culture shock are much more severe upon return than going in the first place. In part, that's because it is easy to foresee being thrown off your usual routine if you go somewhere with a distinct set of daily norms, another language, different foods, and other standard ways of interacting with people. But when you go back to your previous way of life, you might not expect it to feel unfamiliar. Even though the place might not have changed so much in your absence, you did, and so did your relationship with that place, the people in it, and its ways of being. Upon return, I notice that my first language, English, lacks the niceties built into Spanish as spoken in the communities where I do research. This makes interactions in English seem abrupt, if not rude. The average volume of speech around me in my Southern California neighborhood compels me to overhear strangers' conversations. This is not how private discussions in public spaces work in my field site. Even the pronunciation of my name and its use in every greeting, as opposed to a nameless "hi," is different.

Return culture shock is real and can be intense. Maybe you'll just feel a little out of sorts, or maybe it will feel like drowning. It's likely something in-between. It might involve feeling newly overwhelmed at sights, sounds, and a pace that used to be so everyday in occurrence that they went unnoticed. Once aligned in ways of thinking, talking, and using humor, one's closest friends might seem temporarily annoying. Even before the pandemic, I had taken to the idea of quarantine upon return, while I re-adjusted to norms in Southern California. I staved off seeing friends until I had adapted again to the ways of being characteristic of each social circle so as not to strain those friendships. I am not alone in the feeling of disjuncture that prompted me to take that precaution. Ruth Behar (2013, 104) describes how it felt when she lived in one country and wrote about her prolonged ethnographic research in another. She calls it "a strange sensation—my head in one place and my body in another." This is how I feel when I return to the US from long-term, immersive fieldwork in Costa Rica.

Many cultural anthropologists experience this somewhat regularly as a sort of occupational hazard, revealed in informal conversations when we gather for conferences and post-sabbatical conversations. As a result, we have some insights that might help.

First, it isn't just you, and you probably are not really losing your entire grip on reality; there are likely many people feeling strangely and intensely about being back on campus or back in their workplace. If you can connect with people sharing this experience, you can be a good support system for one another. People going through this sort of adjustment at the same time will be more abundant in the going-back-to-work-after-quarantine scenario than in the just-back-from-long-term-anthropological-fieldwork one. They should be relatively easy to find. They might be seated about six feet from you in your classroom. Seek them out and offer mutual support.

Mid-career, when I returned from the field, friend and colleague Jim Weil foresaw the difficulty of that transition and preemptively sent a note in solidarity. He wished me well as I "settle[d] back into self." His phrasing offered the exact wording for what I was feeling. Naming it made it more manageable. Thoughtfully, I could consider the parts of self I wanted to reclaim and those that I wanted to change. A decade later, knowing a friend was going through a similarly difficult adaptation upon return to the US from a year-long sabbatical abroad, I sent her a letter to acknowledge the potential difficulty of returning to her old life, which had come to feel uncomfortably unfamiliar. I offered her strategies similar to those I offer you:

Think about some favorite habits you developed in your quarantine mode of being. Of those habits that were healthful, which can you incorporate into your new (but also old, pre-pandemic) routine or adapt to fit it? The same way these practices lent you comfort in getting used to a different set of norms when you left the classroom or workplace, they might help ease your transition now.

For me, during quarantine, this meant something so simple as taking the time to prepare my morning coffee, step by step, in the way that it is done in my longstanding field site in Costa Rica. It came to be a calming ritual to ease the "commute" from my kitchen to what became the home office, where I taught through Zoom. With the return to campus, I kept this practice instead of hurriedly preparing my coffee to go, as I did before the pandemic. This helped to slow the pace of the start of the day and let me ease into the faster tempo characteristic of my campus office. I had learned this lesson through cross-cultural exchange before the pandemic, but I was not always good at enacting it.

The year before COVID, I engaged in an international house exchange with a Spanish researcher. On the one day that we overlapped in Spain to exchange house keys, my host pointed to the line of tumblers taking up space on his too-small kitchen table and said, "I don't know what to do with these. Americans keep gifting them to me." I recognized the one emblazoned with my university's logo as a likely token from the mutual friend and colleague who had facilitated our house swap. In various combinations of black and chrome, the others stood there as a testament to my people's collective hurry. In Spain, he reasoned, a coffee break serves as a time to sit with a colleague outdoors, to feel the breeze, and hear the bustle of students, but exempt oneself from it momentarily. One should enjoy the coffee's rich brown color, its aroma, and its perfect bitterness—to be sipped, not gulped. That is the purpose of a coffee. But that's in Spain. In my country, the purpose of coffee—not *a* coffee, indicating the mindful moment of enjoyment, but *coffee* without the article, to highlight just the commodity—is often more functional. It is a socially acceptable delivery method to infuse the system with as much caffeine as efficiently possible to keep up with the required quickness of work and life. At my job, I used to drink it primarily for its drug-like effects.

Upon return from Spain, I resolved to quit to-go coffee. But within three weeks, the goal gave way to the pressures of my routine. In my post-quarantine return to campus, I've renewed the goal. So far, so good. It's a small thing, but the custom serves both as a manageable self-care practice and a daily reminder to watch my pace of life and work. Coffee-related rituals might not be what is most effective for you. I encourage you to find your

own reminders, drawn from quarantine life, that might help keep the effects of culture shock in check.

Another insight we can draw from anthropological understandings of return culture shock is just how long the sense of disorientation or disjuncture can last. In an analysis of tourism as ritual, Nelson Graburn (2018, 22) examined returning home as a "reverse culture shock." He refers to an unpublished paper that estimated the duration of this state to last approximately half the time the traveler was away from home. Applying the notion to his own university, Graburn reported student experiences in keeping with this framework. I assign Graburn's work to students who participate in the study abroad trips I lead, and they confirm the relative accuracy of this expectation. Given that this estimate is an average, of course, some people may feel the effects of culture shock longer, and some may experience little to none. Simply the understanding that there is an explanation for what Graburn compares to an altered state of consciousness, and the reassurance that it's temporary, has been comforting to many of my students upon return, just as it has been for me.

If it is true that one might expect this form of culture shock to last approximately half of the duration of their time away, and if we apply this idea to returning to campus after learning remotely, that means that if you were out of your workplace or off-campus for roughly a year and a half, as was the case at my university, this feeling might last up to nine months. That could mean feeling off for one whole semester and part of another. I know that doesn't sound very uplifting. I mention it so that if it happens, you won't come to think that you just aren't cut out to be a student—or a professor—anymore. If you feel that way, it might be the culture shock talking. This state is not permanent; there is an endpoint to it. It's just that it can be hard to see this when you are in the thick of it. You will eventually return to yourself, or at least some version of yourself. Who you are may well have changed along the way, which leads me to my next point.

Your time away might let you critically examine parts of your routine that used to seem normal and make thoughtful, deliberate changes. Maybe the quarantine model offered better ways of doing some things. It is possible that some of the previous norms can be replaced.

For example, even with a return to the classroom, I will keep Zoom office hours, which allow students to check-in or ask a question without a commute that can be quite long for some of my students. As for students, I hope that some who speak less in class but were skillful users of the chat on Zoom will carry their awareness of their contribution to class discussion online to the classroom and push themselves to participate.

In short, should you feel out of sorts when you return to campus, please know you are not alone in that feeling. Even if that sense seems prolonged, I urge you to ask yourself if it is the culture shock talking or if a change is in order. If it is the former, bear in mind that the effects of return culture shock will lessen as you adjust. If it is the latter, make conscientious changes as needed.

I wish you well in this transition.

References

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