



The shifting nature of home

*Where you come from
may be far less important than
where you're going*

by Pico Iyer

Many-homed people

Not being given a set nationality or single passport when you're born forces you to take conscious measures to define yourself and decide where you want to be – choices that earlier generations did not face so often.

I've always loved that moment in Graham Greene's classic novel of Vietnam, *The Quiet American*, in which the English protagonist, Thomas Fowler, tells a French friend in Saigon that he's been summoned back to his head office. "Home?" the Frenchman asks. "No," says Fowler. "England."

I couldn't have put it better. An Englishman may think of England as the opposite of home, and yet may feel entirely at home in exotic and seductive Vietnam, with which he has no official connection. A typical European today, especially if she's of student age and in a city like Paris or Berlin, may have so many places she thinks of as home that the word suggests an anthology of locations, a mix of her parents' homeland, the culture her partner speaks for, the city where she went to school – and the one she dreams of visiting. Some of us have grown up with such a fluid and portable sense of home that we're most at home now when mixing and matching partial homes – or in some major city that brings our homes together.

Last summer, to take one example, I returned to England, where I was born and spent most of my first 21 years. But I was seeing my hometown of Oxford in part through the eyes of my Japanese wife, and no one has ever thought of me (thanks to my Indian features) as a classic Englishman. Then I headed back to my home in California, where my mother (sari-clad and raised in British India) lives; we've been officially based in Santa Barbara for almost fifty years now, but never begin to sound or think like Americans. Then I set off for Japan, the country where I truly feel at home, though I've been there for 27 years on a tourist visa, and never wear Japanese clothes, barely eat Japanese food and speak Japanese only as a three-year-old girl might. My real home, I sometimes think, is an airport, or any of those modern cities – Melbourne, Singapore, Vancouver – where most of the people around me are permanently sorting through different selves, thinking of "home" as a sentence they never quite complete.

This is the way the world is going, lightning-fast. There are now more than 230 million people living in countries not their own – in other words, four times more many-homed people than live in Australia and Canada combined; the number is increasing so quickly that within a genera-

tion there'll be more of us than there are Americans. The average person you meet on the streets of Toronto is what used to be called a "foreigner," someone born in a very different country. Many, many of these travelers are, of course, exiles, who never wanted to leave their homes, and ache to go back home. But for the fortunate among us, it makes for possibilities our grandparents would not have recognized.

Go to the Cineplex, and you're watching a partly Chinese, partly Hawaiian, partly English (and deeply Canadian) actor born in Beirut and partly raised in Australia (Keanu Reeves), or an actress who's Danish and Mexican and French-Canadian and therefore all-American (Jessica Alba). Turn on the TV, and the world's most famous golfer is so mixed up – Thai and Chinese and African-American and perhaps many more – that he's devised words such as "Cablinasian" to try to describe his nationality; most of us find it easiest just to call him "Tiger." Look at the White House, and you see a half-Kenyan man, partly raised in Indonesia, with a Buddhist sister and a Chinese-Canadian brother-in-law, whose first book was as thoughtful and passionately honest a look at shifting identities as exists.

It's hard for those born to this mingled and crisscrossing world to appreciate just how quickly our world is changing in this way. As a boy in Oxford, I never set eyes on another child with dark skin, and when my parents and I moved to California, it was years before, as immigrants from India, we ceased to be a rare novelty. When I was in graduate school, Canada's biggest city was still known as "Toronto the Grey," because it seemed so uniform and far from diversity. No one then had heard of "World Music" or fusion cuisine; the norm was still the life known by my grandparents, in which people were all but assigned homes, selves and castes at birth, and had little chance of escaping them. Home was less a partner that you chose than an ancestry that you inherited.

This erosion of all the hard-and-fast distinctions of old makes for any number of fresh challenges: many a young woman – if half-Korean and half-Canadian, say, and studying Spanish while on her way to a study-abroad program in Hanoi – doesn't know what to say when people ask her where she comes from. She doesn't fully belong to any one category, as her grandparents did, and she can sometimes feel neither here nor there. Not being given a set nationality or single passport when you're born forces you to take conscious



▶ *A conversation with Pico Iyer –
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But my sense is that such a young woman is part of a fast-growing tribe that is itself a new, floating community of its own. A half-Thai, half-German young man will instantly feel aligned with her, if only because they share the same questions, and the same inclusive sense of home. And out of their union will come entirely new combinations: the leading young American writers today mostly have names (from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to Edwidge Danticat) that most young Americans can't pronounce. For all of them, home is a work-in-progress; a collage to which they're constantly adding new elements; a mosaic in perpetual motion.

Defining ourselves

More and more of us, I suspect, identify ourselves less by our passports than by our passions; and defining ourselves by our values and our interests, what we care about, can allow us to step a little outside the divisions that nation-states and tribes enforce. I often feel I have more in common with someone who loves Thai food, or relishes the Icelandic post-rock group Sigur Rós, or who feels at home in transit zones, than with anyone who happens to share my Indian name, my English place of birth or my American passport; if you ask me who I am, I will probably begin by talking about my wife, the monastery I've been regularly visiting since 1991, my favorite book or film, or what inspires me, more than I'll need to talk about

nationalities. For me, where I come from is much less important than where I'm going.

Many around us, of course, are still deeply rooted; they may be living in the same house in which they grew up, and close to their grandparents and generations of forebears. But even they, very likely, are having to think anew about traditional ideas of identity and home as all the world streams into their neighborhood. Certainly, if they're living in a typical modern city, from Hong Kong to Los Angeles to Zurich or Sydney, they're likely surrounded by Iranian businessmen and Mexican restaurants and Indian yoga teachers and Ethiopians. Nothing remains fixed in our fast-moving new world, and even if you're not moving, the world is constantly moving around you.

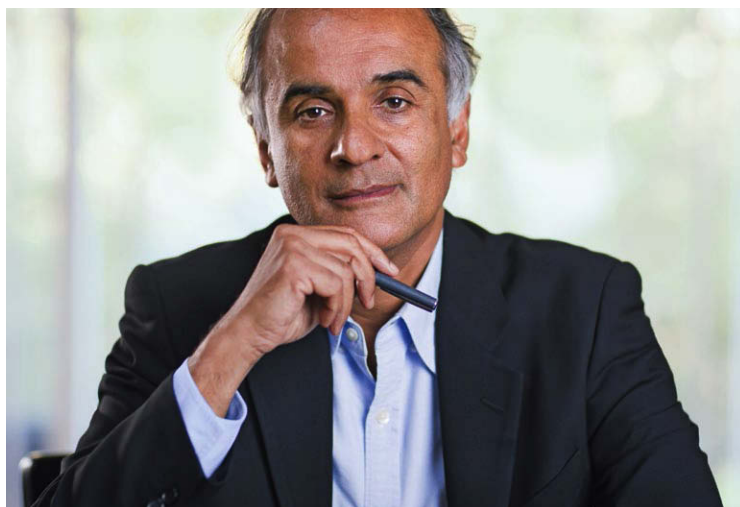
This raises questions that humans have never had to address so insistently before; it also brings problems. My sense, after 40 years spent crisscrossing the globe, is that our sense of distinctness is not going away, and the more old divisions fade, the more new ones appear. If we don't discriminate against people so often now on the basis of their race or religion, we still treat them differently if they're young or old, blond or brunette, from Brooklyn or Savannah or North Dakota or Beverly Hills. It's not as if tribalism itself has disappeared as clear distinctions have; it just takes different forms.

I'm one of those people, though, who chooses to see the glass as half-full, and wants to rejoice in the opportunities my grandparents could not have known – to live in a place that feels a secret home, to define myself outside of ancestry, and

to enjoy convergences between cultures that were unimaginable when I was born. When I was at school, there were 1,250 students at my school near London, and all of them were boys. Fully 1,230 of them were white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants from the same small section of society; even the handful of Jewish and Catholic boys stood out. Nowadays, when I revisit that school, most of the faces I see seem to be Chinese and Korean and Russian and an endlessly evolving combination of all of the above. Their sentences, their dreams, the school's classrooms all seem more invigorated, more full of shifting potential, than ever.

So I was delighted to “go home” this summer to England – and to Japan and to southern California. All those places are interesting to me in part because they're all a little foreign. It's wonderful to have a very fixed and certain sense of home, as most of us do when we're asked about our faith, our loved ones, even where we live; but the world sometimes forces us to be adaptable, as it did when my house in Santa Barbara burned down one evening in a forest fire and, suddenly, I lost everything I owned in the world.

The next morning, when I woke up – the only thing I owned was a toothbrush I'd just bought from an all-night supermarket – if someone asked me, “Where is home?” I couldn't point to any physical construction. Home would have to lie in the affections and connections and beliefs I carried round inside of me. Lacking a single, visible home, I – like so many of us now – would have to seek out new ways of making myself at home wherever I happened to be.



Pico Iyer

is the author of *The Global Soul*, *The Open Road* (about the global citizen known as the XIVth Dalai Lama) and many other books exploring the new meanings of home, and the new possibilities for identity, in our mobile world.