Transcending Borders
by Hayley Hathaway

“Did you see the letters?” asked the little 7-year-old at my side. I had just returned from a trip overseas and was recounting some of the highlights. Letters?

“You know, while you were on the plane and looked down, could you see the letters? Like the ones on the maps?”

I laughed. I’m sorry, I told him. There aren’t any letters, just trees and highways and fields; from a plane usually you can’t even tell which state or country you’re in.

Yet here on the ground, those separations are often very clear. Those borders and words on the map serve as our framework for understanding who we are and our place in the world.

I’ve had lots of moments in my life, like the exchange with my little friend, to reflect on borders: what it means to live within them, cross them, and ultimately transcend them. Many of the most powerful moments have come during my three years at Casa de los Amigos, a Quaker Center for Peace and International Understanding in Mexico City. Here I have witnessed the great diversity of meaning that comes from calling a nation your home. And also what it means to give that up.

Nigeria was Steven’s home. He lost it when religious extremists murdered everyone he loved. His journey to Mexico was not chosen, but forced upon him for his own survival. Steven came to Casa de los Amigos as part of its Solidarity Lodging Program so he could have a roof over his head, warm food, and most importantly, a safe, temporary home to begin the painful process of healing and starting over in his new country, with its confounding language, customs, and stereotypes.

Steven has already experienced some of the intercultural conflict that comes with the new territory at the Casa, surprised that his asking a young woman from Germany about her marriage status was interpreted as a sign of romantic interest. He has begun to get used to heavy staring on the streets, where Mexicans don’t hide their surprise at seeing a black man.

Yet he has made friends with the other guests and found good listeners in the Casa volunteers. He attends the Casa’s daily Spanish classes for migrants and refugees. Together they take their first steps toward learning the language and participating in cultural activities to understand Mexico’s traditions better. Even if he cannot or does not want to speak in detail about his past, his peers in the Spanish classes share in his struggle as newly arrived men and women from different countries looking for a way forward.

José now calls Mexico home. He’s not going anywhere, he says. He has moved enough times already in his five years. He misses the friends he left on Mexico’s southern border and the house back in Honduras and his family’s home in El Salvador. But now he’s got a new apartment and new friends and has a fun time in kindergarten, even though the kids make fun of his accent. José and his parents left El Salvador because of increasing gang violence. They made their way to Mexico City traveling on a cargo train through dangerous territory and extreme weather. José doesn’t talk about it. The things he saw on the train were not meant for children, let alone adults.

His time at Casa de los Amigos with his parents helped add laughter to José’s most recent memories, as he played all over the house with toys given by Casa supporters and went on frequent outings to the park. A Casa guest from Singapore helped José’s family find an apartment, while others donated furniture. Once settled in, José said goodbye to his dad, who continued north in search of work – frustrated by the lack of job opportunity in Mexico, the difficulty of getting work papers, and the subtle anti-Central-American sentiment here. Now José’s family extends across three countries and two borders. It’s unclear what country José will call home as he grows up.

I have come to call Mexico, “my country.” I am a U.S. citizen living abroad and working as the director of a Mexican non-profit organization. I have no plans to return stateside. I will always carry my nation’s story with me, as will Steven and José. For any U.S. citizen traveling abroad, our nation’s history and its current political and cultural domination beyond U.S. borders make any trip weighted with meaning even before the suitcase is
packed. Americans who would never consider themselves nationalistic and relate little to the country’s current politics still bring a distinct perspective. We also bring passports. Unlike many of the Casa’s guests and friends, I can go to my other home when I like. My loved ones can come visit.

You can see how the seemingly innocuous question, “So, what are you doing here?” easily leads to heartfelt conversations at Casa de los Amigos.

Sit at the Casa’s colorful dining room table for a few minutes and you will be among the other teachers, activists, students, migrants, adventurers, retirees, language-learners, and refugees chatting about each of our ways of seeing and engaging in the world. Sometimes the conversation remains light, like when everyone laughs over a common cultural faux pas. Other moments are challenging; they touch on deep questions of identity and belonging, all set against a backdrop of international politics and structural injustice. Together they serve as opportunities to connect and reflect. Maybe this all make borders matter a little less.

Imagine yourself in conference room packed with sixty Casa guests, friends, and volunteers. Aztec dancers with plumed headdresses shake their shell ankle bracelets to the beat of Haitian drumming while the master of ceremony greets you in French, Creole, and Spanish. You enjoy the tortillas and salsa and spicy chicken while chatting with a young Haitian woman. You marvel at that way that laughter can uplift a group, even as you realize this gathering commemorates a tragic event, the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti that brought these people here.

I’ve learned a lot about the power of these moments at Casa de los Amigos, whose unique style of peace work for decades has relied on the simple concept of inspiring diverse people to come together and create a community that offers hospitality and healing. For many, Casa de los Amigos is a home. Right now it’s home to guests from France, Ghana, Germany, the U.S., Mexico, Peru, Canada, and Nigeria. Like Steven and José, each of the 2000 guests who stay at the Casa each year has their own story to share. As partners in creating the unique home that is the Casa, we may never fully grasp each other’s stories or struggles, yet we can offer our willingness to listen, affirm each other’s dignity, and embrace moments of lightness and celebration.

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Casa de los Amigos is my home now too. I share in its hope to provide each person with a sense of peace and belonging. That’s how I feel here. It’s a space where joyful festivities can accompany deep reflection and where our stories, nationalities, and identities can both inspire and challenge us. And, most importantly, it’s a place that transcends a world defined by lines drawn on the ground.

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