

The unanchored self

by [Tom Montgomery Fate](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

*The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*, by Pico Iyer

Pico Iyer's new travel memoir is an inventive take on the increasingly elusive nature of cultural identity in the modern world. With the help of Teilhard de Chardin and Emerson, Iyer first defines the idea of the global soul as a collective unconscious. But after the first 30 pages the collective "global soul" shifts to designate the individual--Iyer and people like him.

Iyer's parents are from India; he grew up in England and the U.S. and now lives in Japan. "The country where people look like me is the one where I can't speak the language," he writes. "The country where people sound like me is a place where I look highly alien, and the country where people live like me is the most foreign space of all."

While Iyer recognizes the "blessings of being unaffiliated," of being able to "fit in everywhere," he also seems to long for his parents' sense of tradition and morality, which he claims he did not inherit. This has left him "prone to floating dispassion." Rather than "their fierce sense of right and wrong," he has "a more unanchored, relativistic sense." In the world he inhabits, he "could get anywhere soon, and nothing was final."

In the broad scope of the book, however, Iyer himself is seldom the subject. He establishes his position as a representative "global soul" early on, but doesn't return to self-examination until the final chapters. In the mean time he offers an interesting analysis of Los Angeles International Airport as a symbol of the culture of movement and border crossing. He then draws a complex portrait of a wealthy business friend, Richard, who, with his briefcase full of phone cards and plane tickets, needs no office. Though Richard lives in Hong Kong, his sense of home is similar to Iyer's--nowhere and everywhere, necessarily foreign and finally only a state of mind.

Iyer focuses on large cities, where he has lived much of his life. One third of the book consists of a fascinating, though perhaps too anecdotal, contrast between Atlanta and Toronto. Atlanta, which he visits while covering the 1996 Olympics,

represents the hypocrisy of the new money multicultural--the "globalized" homogeneity and placelessness of endless malls and chain stores. Oddly, it seems similar to the "global soul's" concept of home as nowhere and everywhere.

Toronto, on the other hand, is a more authentic and workable experiment in ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. "The multicolored present actually redeemed an unaccommodating past here," Iyer writes. "Not by bureaucratically erasing it (as in Singapore), or by turning it into a food court, but by offering unorchestrated cacophony."

The book is fascinating but quirky. Iyer writes from a more privileged position than he takes in some of his other works such as *Video Nights in Katmandu*, in which he talks about people of all economic classes. His critique of the injustice of globalization is strong, however: "Multinationals have the greatest stake--quite literally an investment--in telling us that the world is one (and Everyman therefore a consumer). Globalism has become the convenient way of saying that all the world's a single market."

In the end we are left with Iyer's honest confusion, which is ironically a source of the book's unusual authority. "In short," he writes, "the very notion of what is here and there--what is familiar, what is strange--has to be reconfigured in the modern world." The book is a search for self and community in an accelerating, hi-tech world where cultures and borders are increasingly blurred.