From 'encapsulated marginality' to 'constructive marginality':

Embracing multiculturalism in Brighton

By

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When people ask me where I come from, I never know what to tell them. While I grew up in a Filipino household, I've spent my entire life in Hong Kong. I am not 'Filipino' enough that I could consider myself one, yet I would not consider myself a full 'Hong Kong' girl either. I cannot fully connect to my Filipino relatives, unable to understand their pop culture references or their discussions on current affairs. When I visit the Philippines I am not completely aware of the cultural scripts there, such as the process of commuting by taking a jeepney or tricycle.

But when I am around my Chinese friends, I never feel that I can fully connect to them either. I do not have enough knowledge to always understand what they are talking about – not just in terms of my understanding of Cantonese, but also any traditions or beliefs that they mention. I also have trouble understanding the cultural values that influence their decisions, something that other Chinese girls can understand without explanation.

My in-betweenness has never been intense enough to make me feel completely isolated or lost. But it gives me a small, yet constant, feeling that I do not fully belong. While I can interact well with my different groups of friends, I have never gotten the feeling that I am reaching the level of closeness with them that they have with each other. So although it is not an identity I hate, it has not been something I have really appreciated either – I have always envied those who could easily find their 'people'.

But my first few weeks on exchange at the University of Sussex have given me a new perspective on my in-betweenness. I am slowly beginning to realise how much easier it is for me to adapt to this new environment compared to my peers on similar sojourns. Firstly, my multicultural identity has given me an open mind, making it easier for me to accept the cultural differences in Brighton. For example, Brighton, unlike Hong Kong, has a strong LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) culture. Same-sex couples here hold hands casually in the street, pride flags are prominently displayed on houses and restaurants, and a variety of activities aimed at LGBT people are openly and publicly held. In both Hong Kong and the Philippines, such a prominent display of the LGBT lifestyle would not be accepted since both cultures are generally conservative about these issues. A few international students I talked to from Hong Kong seemed uncomfortable with the prominent display of LGBT relationships, noting that it was not something they personally support.

Being away from home is definitely a transformative experience

I thought about my own case. Coming from a Filipino household, LGBT issues were rarely brought up, and if they were, it was never in a positive light. In Hong Kong as well, most of my Chinese friends approach the issue quite conservatively. When I arrived here, LGBT culture seemed so strange and unfamiliar to me, yet I was able to accept it in the end – just like how I have accepted the cultural differences between Hong Kong and the Philippines throughout my life, such as the tendency to speak more bluntly in the Philippines compared to Hong Kong. It made me realise how the simple fact of having a hybrid identity made it easier for me to accept

the views of people from other cultures. Besides, as someone used to living in a culture not entirely my own, it was easier for me to adapt to the lifestyle and cultural changes here in Brighton. I noticed this during the first week when I started meeting new people.

When entering university in Hong Kong, most students meet their first university friends through orientation camps organised by their colleges and faculties. These camps are meant to maximise opportunities for friendships as freshmen stay in pre-assigned small groups, living together and doing a variety of ice-breaking tasks for several days. Because of this, freshmen in Hong Kong take a more passive role when it comes to meeting friends – friends are 'provided' through these activities.

In Sussex, however, I notice that freshmen take a more active role in meeting others. While there are events targeted at freshmen, like club nights or performances, I notice that unlike in Hong Kong, the events themselves are not designed specifically for students to make friends. I was never put into situations or tasks where I had to interact with people I had never met. Rather, I was in an event with a lot of other freshmen, and it was up to each of us to take the initiative to meet other people.

During one of these nights out, I noticed how difficult the adjustment was for some Hong Kongers. I met an exchange student from Hong Kong who had a discussion with me about how much easier meeting friends is for him in Hong Kong compared to Brighton. "I went to the freshers' events because I wanted to meet new people, but I just didn't know how to go up and start talking to them. Meeting people in Hong Kong is never as hard as that." Later on in the conversation, he asked me, "How are you able to talk to other people so easily?"
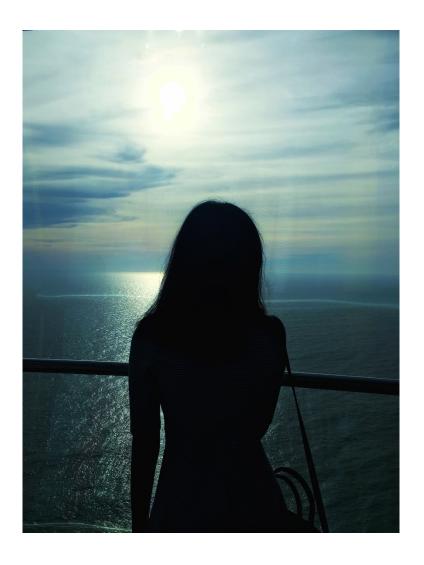
I had no idea how to answer him at that time, but in my room later on, I began to reflect on his question. I definitely have been affected by the drastically different style of meeting new people here at Sussex – the idea of putting myself out there and talking to people scared me in every freshers' event that I went to, and I always left these events feeling drained from the extra effort I had to use to do something so unfamiliar. Yet I am still able to do it, and I believe that is because I have had similar adjustment challenges back home. An example of this is while I am used to not initiating small talk in Hong Kong, back in the Philippines, being this curt is considered rude. In those situations, I have had to make an extra effort to observe the norms and cultural scripts among Filipinos and adjust appropriately. Doing such similar things in the UK is therefore easier for me as compared to Hong Kong people who have not lived in another country for an extended period of time.

The incidents that I have experienced since arriving in Brighton have made me reflect on my feelings towards my multicultural identity. I realised that in the initial stage of meeting new people, a multicultural identity has been beneficial for me. In the longer term, however, as I try to form closer bonds with others, I felt hindered by it as it has been difficult to fully understand and connect with others. Thinking deeper, I wondered to myself whether or not being unable to fully connect to a certain culture was necessarily bad. I will never be completely a part of any culture because I have been exposed to a mixture of cultures since I was young. But the trade-off, as I have realised time and time again during my sojourn, is that it is much easier for me to interact with new cultures and integrate into them. In the end, I still consider myself a part of both Filipino and Hong Kong cultures. I look at the world through Filipino perspectives and use Filipino values to make decisions. On the other hand, I care deeply about the state and future of Hong Kong and am actively invested in Hong Kong's current affairs. While I may not be 100% a

part of either culture, I am still a devoted member of both. Any extra adjustments I need to make in different contexts, or any awkward moments resulting from my limited understanding of these cultures, I can accept happily knowing what multiculturalism has given me.

Reflecting on how I feel about my identities

Interculturalist Jane Bennett suggests that those with multicultural identities may develop in one of two ways: the first, encapsulated marginality, describes a state of alienation from all cultures experienced, with individuals unable to construct a unified identity. The other, constructive marginality, refers to when individuals are able to actively build context for the purpose of constructing their own multicultural identity, integrating elements from diverse cultures (J.M. Bennett 1993:113). I have always had a greater sense of being an encapsulated marginal – unsure which culture I am really a part of, unsure of my own cultural identity. For the past month, I have slowly been shifting towards being a constructive marginal – the realisations I have had about my multicultural identity since arriving in Sussex have made me come to terms with and become more accepting of my hybrid identity.

Because this essay is about my sojourn, the writing experience has been a great opportunity to understand and articulate my own international experience better. Since my arrival here, I have felt bombarded with new sights, sounds, and smells that I haven't been able to fully process yet. I have also experienced a flood of emotions, both good and bad, from wonder and excitement to loneliness and homesickness. Reflecting on and writing about my experiences in words has given me the chance to clear my head and express my feelings. This has helped me to better understand my journey.

And because I can lay out my experiences in this essay, I have had the opportunity to genuinely reflect on how I can use my multicultural experiences to make the most out of the rest

of my sojourn. With more than a semester left in Brighton and a world of opportunities left for me to broaden my horizons, this reflective essay has been necessary for me to figure out the next steps I need to take to make the rest of my exchange fruitful.

References

Bennett, J.M. (1993) 'Cultural marginality: Identity issues in intercultural training', in R.M. Paige (ed.) *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, pp. 109–136.

About the author

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