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Culturelessness and Culture Shock: An American-Asian Experience

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Abstract: Even though I identify myself as an American Asian, I struggle with racial issues regarding my adoption. Throughout my childhood and into my adulthood I noticed how popular transnational adoption is, and how common the white American parents and Asian baby combination is today. I wholeheartedly love my adoptive parents but I live with the constant feeling of abandonment. It is a topic that I do not discuss with my friends and family; it is rather taboo and makes most people feel uncomfortable because they cannot relate to me, but then, who do I have to relate to? It seems that society and other people choose to define you by what serves them best, and not by your own merit or personal interests and gains. As I get older my ego identity is beginning to emerge, as I am establishing a “psychological connection between childhood and adulthood” (Muuss 43). Even after coming out of my adolescence and crescendoing into adulthood, however, I remain cultureless, being redefined daily for who and what I am. I am stuck in a constant state of redefinition of self. Who knows what I will be identified as tomorrow.

Growing up I never noticed that I was different from any of my peers. Naturally everyone has a birthplace and though my birthplace of Seoul, South Korea, was a bit farther away than most of my classmates, I figured Germany, Lithuania, and Russia were almost as far, so it made no difference. I was raised in the suburban town of Danvers, MA, adopted by my white parents when I was three months old. If you are unfamiliar with Danvers, like many suburbs it is predominantly white middle class. I graduated as 1 of 3 non-white students out of 300. I had one incident at age 11 with older teenagers from my town; they chased me through downtown Danvers calling me “chink, gook, no one wants you here go home, go back to China.” It shook me up; at 11 years old I couldn’t fully grasp what was

happening because until then I was never treated differently.

After the incident with the other teenagers downtown, I began to realize how much my slanted eyes, yellow skin, and jet-black hair defined me, regardless of how I defined myself. Beverly Tatum wrote about psychologist William Cross’ theory of the process of racial identity development in her book “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*.” This experience in downtown Danvers was the moment I entered what they both refer to as the **encounter stage**. This incident was what forced me “to acknowledge the personal impacts of racism. As the result of a new and heightened awareness of the significance of race, the individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted

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by racism” (Tatum 55). For the first time I could no longer pretend I was a middle-class white like all my friends; I had to face that reflection in the mirror.

I still struggle with my racial identity. I am always defined as an Asian American, which can be considered an **artificial construct** because it is “a weak and relatively insignificant basis of identity and community—a construct that was artificial and externally imposed” (Kibria 40). “Asian American” has many implications that may have nothing to do with who I am as an individual. White co-workers, acquaintances, and even those white people I just have met have this naïve inability to see the specific ethnic differences (between Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc...) because “all you Asians look the same.” This statement always surprises me because I know that most people telling me this are easily able to tell their white-ethnics apart from one another. Such people do not realize the parallel between the differences in white nationalities and the differences in Asian nationalities—with very different values, norms, and histories within their overarching racial group. This imposed identity that all Asian nationalities are the same can be stifling when others assume so many things about me without ever interacting with me.

I felt some connection with the Cambodian teens from Lowell, MA, in the documentary *Monkey Dance*. Much like Linda I feel a strong disconnection from my Asian heritage, even more so than her because my family here in America is all white. I felt jealous watching the film as she got to go back to her homeland and see relatives, something I can only partially do. I can go see the beauty of Seoul, but the likelihood of finding my birth parents—and therefore other blood relatives—is minimal. It is frustrating to never know.

Even though I identify myself as an American Asian, I struggle with racial issues regarding my adoption. Throughout my childhood and into my adulthood I noticed how popular transnational adoption is, and

how common the white American parents and Asian baby combination is today. I wholeheartedly love my adoptive parents but I live with the constant feeling of abandonment. It is a topic that I do not discuss with my friends and family; it is rather taboo and makes most people feel uncomfortable because they cannot relate to me, but then, who do I have to relate to? In reading books on transracial Korean adoption, I discovered the Korean word “han” (한) which is considered “an emotion, a state of consciousness, and a physiological state” (Kim 152) which contains,

...Grudges, lamenting, regret, resentment, grief, and angst. It is conceived of as an ailment of the mind and heart, and inconsolable state of mind. Yong Hoon Hwang...describes han in terms of meaninglessness, separation anxiety, and existential anxiety, all inflicted by an individual or a damaging structure.” (Kyong Lo 169)

Reading these words I was happy to finally find my feelings articulated. It alleviates some of my struggles with my identity when han has been found in other Korean adoptees as a shared experience, allowing me to concentrate on other aspects of my life.

I rarely had racial encounters until I left high school. In my early adolescent years, from 11-17, I was constantly trying to fit in, by fitting out, by recreating myself every few years in that period of time. Instead of creating my own unique identity, I found myself amidst much identity confusion. In Erik Erikson’s **epigenetic plan** every stage of identity formation must happen in a sequential fashion. It “basically identifies the developmental interaction between maturational advances and the social expectations made upon the child” (Muuss 43). Each stage is a necessary process to end up a psychologically healthy person. I did every-

thing to avoid being defined by race throughout high school. I saw myself as developing normally compared to my classmates, yet I was still constantly recreating how I identified myself. I depended on the acceptance of my alternative peers, what Erikson calls **psychosocial reciprocity** where “the adolescent often goes through a period of great need for (peer) group recognition and almost compulsive peer group involvement” (Muuss 52). I hit the music scene and social groups once I entered high school. I felt that they were safe and more accepting; as they did not care that I did not have bleach blonde hair and blue eyes. We would go to local shows and meet up with others like ourselves from all around the northshore area of Massachusetts.

In retrospect, I was constantly tweaking my tastes to fit what the peer group would like also—for us at the time it was whoever could find the most obscure music was the coolest. I experienced what Coté and Allahar would call **identity manipulation**. They remark that,

In advanced industrial societies people appear to have become more symbol-oriented in the sense that they defined themselves and other more by how they look and what they appear to believe than by what they do...[young persons]...often make these statements through their clothing, hairstyles, and cosmetics, all of which contain a code that can only be properly interpreted by those in the know. (Coté & Allahar 81)

This symbolic materialism runs rampant throughout the USA, as America is a culture of mass consumption of material goods to represent and define ourselves to others. You can manipulate who you are by buying into whatever identity you want to be a part of; luckily my high school days were fairly inexpensive to mold myself.

Being “indie punk” could only be recognized by others in this peer group. We began applying new meanings to old terms, what David Poveda calls **lexical innovation**. Being DIY was an important part of this subculture. While the acronym literally means “do-it-yourself,” DIY encompassed a much broader meaning than just doing arts and crafts or housework by yourself. DIY punk is part of punk ideology encompassing ideas of anti-consumerism and self-reliance, having live shows in basements and homes rather than corporate sponsored venues. It means buying used clothes from Salvation Army rather than going to shops and boutiques buying new clothes. When you DIY out of the punk context it carries a much different meaning. It was a lifestyle and an ideology I lived through during high school. It was hard fast music that was cathartic to its listeners.

DIY music shows were **sensational performances** that “involve specific ways of doing things, skills, customs and competence in respect of certain bodily practices. [These] body techniques also involve (and result in) massive stimulation of the senses and emotions” (Malbon 270). This stimulation of senses and emotions allowed us indie punk kids to let go of some of our daily frustrations. The basement shows—and utilization of other free places—served as **social spaces**. Being at a show and acting with certain mannerisms showed an understanding of the culture, as “spaces or contexts of social interactions become key factors in terms of our opportunities to refashion ourselves and identify with others” (Malbon 277).

I also see another reason for my attachment to the young indie punk community. Not only was I trying to establish and assert an identity, but being exceedingly alternative was better than the scorn I would receive by the “popular group” had I just tried to imitate their styles, norms, and values at the time. Before entering high school I became angry at my position as an outcast. “From a surprisingly young age,

girls begin an intense competition in the social world. They are quick to learn about power—who has it and how to get it—by watching, getting close to, and imitating those who have it ‘naturally’ conferred on them” (Brown & Chesney-Lind 78). This competition that made those popular girls in my high school who had the power “naturally conferred on them” catty and ruthless to those deemed inadequate. I experienced a lot of **relational aggression**, which is “characterized by such behaviors as gossiping or spreading rumors about someone or threatening to exclude or reject them for the purpose of controlling their behavior” (Brown & Chesney-Lind 79). At 12 or 13 I would hear rumors about my crushes on boys and humiliated because of it; I was invited to a popular girl’s bat mitzvah formally, yet when I arrived I was the only person missing a place card out of 150 guests; I stood there awkwardly, feeling belittled, thus my aggressive demeanor that would lead me to punk culture in high school.

Like many high schools across the nation Danvers High School upheld the achievement ideology, which is closely tied with credentialism. Both ideologies of youth are used as social control techniques to maintain discipline through mass education. As far back as I can remember I was fed the illusion of the American dream. My parents, grandparents, and teachers told me from kindergarten on that if I behaved properly (no detentions, suspensions), worked hard, earned good grades then I will get a good job and make a lot of money. Any deviation from those prescriptions would result in my own failure and it would solely be my own fault. “As the **achievement ideology** propagated in schools implies, education is viewed as the remedy for the problem of social inequality; schooling makes the race for prestigious jobs and wealth an even one” (MacLeod 405). This ideology ignores the many other factors that play into achievement such as luck, opportunity, and networking. Instead, I see that this **ideology**

of youth exercised **social control** through the public American school system which “was developed to suit the interests of dominant economic and social groups...” and “...currently contain, shape, and condition young people, preparing them to be passive and uncritical workers” (Coté & Allahar 120). We learn how to behave in schools to learn how to behave and be complacent in the workplace. Even working now, I would never think to break policies or rules; I go to work, perform my functions, go home, and get my paycheck. I saw that my hard work would not land me in the college I wanted, and my alternative punk identity led me to Hampshire College.

The later years of high school and my first year away at college are what I consider to be part of my identity moratorium. According to Erikson this identity moratorium “should function to lessen the trauma of the identity transformation experience[d] during the coming-of-age period” (Coté & Allahar 74). While that makes sense—that through this moratorium I was better equipped for my entering into adulthood—I prefer how Coté and Allahar reinterpreted and redefined it. They consider it to be a sort of “time-out from task from adulthood [where] **identity moratorium** can provide young people with opportunities to experiment with roles, ideas, beliefs, and lifestyles and can set them on a life course that is rich and rewarding” (Coté & Allahar 74). It wasn’t until I left Danvers that I got to really take my time out to experiment with different roles and beliefs. I chose Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, because of its alternative non-pedagogical academic structure and its reputation for have very alternative, intelligent students.

I arrived on campus in September of 2005. I was happy and shocked, and I do not think I was ready for what I would be experiencing over the next year. In high school I thought myself to be cultured and worldly; yet I was culture shocked as I began to meet other students. I began to realize how sheltered I seemed. While most students had

extravagant tales of social and political work around the world and with their parents, I had little to offer. I was no diplomat's son, nor was I the child of members of the music group the Talking Heads, nor was I on Nickelodeon's show *Pete and Pete*. I had never been out of the country except for a cruise to Bermuda, nor had I done peace work in Africa. My parents never discussed Haitian and Dominican historical politics with me like the other students I was meeting at Hampshire College. I realized I was coming from an inferior class; all this work I had done to create myself during high school did not matter. I was just average in a sea of student opulence. I thought I was really privileged in the upper-middle class sense until I met my friends at Hampshire. They came from palatial homes in Bangladesh and New Delhi, India and domestically from Greenwich, CT and the likes. It was a culture shock, but a pleasant one to finally have many friends that were nonwhite. I was elated to have a lot of African American, Haitian, Indian, Nicaraguan, and many other ethnicities and nationalities around me at all times. It finally felt comfortable.

Because of the college's reputation for having alternative and progressive students, most saw themselves as the trendsetters. They perceived themselves to be ahead of the trends wearing the oddest clothing and knowing about cultural topics and trends ahead of time, all the students being part of different up and coming subcultures; these **youth** saw themselves as **producers** of emerging cultures. I met anarcho-punks preaching anti-capitalism, yet they were attending a \$45,000/year college. I met graffiti artists, but the college allowed them to write on only one wall dedicated to graffiti art. I met many white hippies with blonde dreads, appropriating the hairstyle of the Rastafarian religion rite. I was cast as plain and behind the curve of the trends, as a typical American consumer, mindlessly taking in current commercial cultural styles, yet other students were doing the same

thing. They thought they were being innovative, but I saw these **youth** as the biggest **consumers** of all, hidden by the guise of ingenuity.

Nancy Lesko introduces the idea of panoptical time as a part of adolescent's development that is being monitored, watched, and controlled, and evaluated by others. This evaluation of development determines if the adolescent is moving along properly or not, and thus the individual will begin to internalize such standards and norms. Panoptical time also requires adolescents to begin regulating themselves and taking on "responsibility, yet expects them at the same time to act as if each moment of the present is consequential (Lesko 107). I began to live by these affluent standards of living—unconsciously—taking in their behaviors and mannerisms. During that first week at Hampshire College meeting other students I felt the effects of **panoptical time**. Talking about our lives prior to arriving at college I could feel how others were looking down upon my experiences, or lack thereof. Students were condescending as they asked me "what about you?!" and looked disdainfully as I replied I went to public high school, were part of a few school groups, and just hung out with friends. I began to edit what I told others about my life, trying to parallel their accumulation of life experiences by reading and learning materials about topics I knew would now be relevant in conversation. I learned what topics I was expected to be able to discuss, as many of these students touted themselves on being young intellectuals.

While I was happy to finally be around people of all colors, I did not quite experience the **immersion/emersion** that Beverly Tatum talks about experiencing, where one surrounds themselves with symbols of their own racial identity, as well as seek out opportunities to learn about "one's own history and culture with the support of same-race peers" (Tatum 76). For me this immersion/emersion never

occurred. I felt out of place at Hampshire's Asian group, the same way I'd feel later with other Asians at UMass Boston. Since I don't share any language or cultural background with other Asians I was seen as an outsider, not fitting in with the Asians and at the same time not fitting in with the white kids or any other race. I am left on the border where neither color really accepts me. Much like bi/multi-racial children, I am torn between two colors. I was raised in white culture but my face is inescapably Asian. Tatum also discusses how psychologist Thomas Parham argues that,

...the middle-adulthood period of life may be the most difficult time to struggle with racial identity because of one's increased responsibilities and increased potential for opportunities. Those whose work or lifestyle places them in frequent contact with Whites are aware that their abilities to 'make it' depends in large part on their abilities to conform to those values and behaviors that have been legitimized by White culture. (Tatum 84)

While Parham and Tatum are contextually talking about blacks being placed in white culture, I see this happening for all minorities, Latino, Asian, etc... I finally acknowledged myself being placed within white culture from the end of high school on. I am almost forced to choose white culture, not my Asian bloodline, especially because generally the Asian community seems to look down on me, or generally excludes me. At the same time being neither white nor Asian, I was experiencing the **multiple other self** that Nancy L. Deutsch talks about. While I would like to have complete control in creating my own identity, "youth who are a minority in one or more categories, grappling with dimensions of self which other recognize as different is part of identity development" (Deutsch 83).

Not only am I Asian, I am a woman, which unraveled a plethora of complex assumptions and stereotypes. The double minority lets other people assume they know who I am and what I do; that I am an exotic, subordinate, model minority.

I was placed under a harsher criterion of what Lesko calls "**expectant time**" because I am Asian. I could not act too old, too mature for my age, nor could I act immaturity. Being Asian I was expected to both master maturity earlier than most, yet socialize in a fashion that mirrored my peers and my age group. I could not "go backward to childhood nor forward to adulthood 'before their [my] time' without incurring derogatory labels, for example, 'immature,' 'loose,' or 'precocious'" (Lesko 123). In some ways I am automatically labeled precocious despite the stereotypical image of high academic image. My actual age usually did not matter, it was my **social age**, which "denaturalizes biological age and allows us to see the negotiated, thus, *produced* character of age" (Lesko 143). This meant that I adhered to strict attitudes about sex and dating, dressing provocatively, and expectations in school; any deviation concluded in scorn. Being Asian in looks has other consequences. Despite the fact that I identify more as just plain American, I am always placed into the category of Asian American. Since white America historically has had the need to defined the "Other" I have coined myself as American-Asian, because my life-course has been directed more by American culture than anything else about me. All throughout my schooling I have experienced the negative consequences being part of the "model minority." The stereotype is the "**Asian nerd**" which "embodies qualities that are fundamentally antithetical to individuality ... having machinelike quality to academic achievements" (Kibria 32). I do not receive full credit for my academic achievements, as they are often attributed to my supposed predisposition to academic success. Sometimes this stereotype produces an **anti-model minority** sentiment since this "image

is often invoked to make invidious comparisons with other students of color” (Wei 318). Other students of color often regard that my hard work is making them look bad, not because of individual differences in work ethic but simply because I’m Asian.

Asian women in America are considered exotic, and often related to eroticism and fetishism in our assumed subordinate disposition. In high school I found myself attracting male interest, but usually only because I was Asian—therefore different. In high school I would come to learn the terms yellow fever and Asiaphilla for those men/women who are not Asian, but who are infatuated with dating an Asian or being sexually involved with one. I found this happening only once or twice in high school, but it worsened once I went to college. I found a multitude of young men of all races and ethnicities who found me to be attractive. This was new to me; during high school I was awkward and considered tomboyish, rarely being asked out for a date. As soon as I arrived at Hampshire I found myself the apple of many eyes. I had lost 20 or so pounds (unintentionally) arriving there in 2005, so I was now slender and fit. Simultaneously I was realizing this highly exotic image, and decided to be proud of the sexual image if it was going to be imposed upon me. I knew I was strong and insubordinate, and at the time I thought I could redefine (Asian) female sexuality all by myself. I wore a lot of makeup and clothes that clung to my body to show off my shape.

A few months went by and I noticed that others were starting to call me a **slut**. I had a lot of male friends and many assumed that I slept with them all as well. It seemed that the actual act of sex was unimportant; it was that I had taken on a strongly sexualized sense of self and it seemed to intimidate others. I was “fiercely protective of [my] right to be treated with dignity and respect without surrendering to the sexual **double standard**” (Tanenbaum 78). I was outspoken about my enjoyment of having relations

with the few boyfriends I had during my time at Hampshire. The combination of the way I dressed and my blunt conversation about the topic of sex was unconventional (and uncomfortable) for many people. I learned in those few months that “men are not held responsible for their actions the way that women are...we’re supposed to be sexual being who satisfy the needs of others, but we’re not supposed to enjoy or want sex” (Tanenbaum 86). I ended up leaving Hampshire College after one year because I realized that I could not rationalize spending so much money when I planned on continuing on to graduate or law school.

I chose to enroll at the University of Massachusetts Boston because it was the closest to my hometown. Actually Salem State College is only a town over, but I wanted to build credentials and a resume so I chose a state university over a state college, thinking that the quality was superior. While I see myself as a young adult, I am still in the process of forming my identity. Like most others in my age group who are granted to opportunity to go to college, I adhere by the concept of **credentialism**. This phenomenon “is the assumption that the best way to prepare oneself for a job is through formal educational training” (Coté & Allahar 35). Despite statistics showing that most jobs college graduates will obtain have little to do with what is learned in colleges, I participate in this phenomenon. This idea was reinforced in high school, and is pervasive at UMass Boston today—I need to get degrees in order to get the job I want.

While I work full-time to pay for my car, insurance, bills, school, etc... I recognize that I may work to buy some products that I want, not need. I bought a brand new car last year, I just bought a smart phone, and I chose UMass Boston over a community college. Introspectively, I see how the principle of complementarity has affected me. Conceptually, **complementarity** asserts social control and legitimacy. American businesses distract adolescents and young adults by narrowing “their thinking to focus

on issues of personal materialism and consumerism, from which big business is the principal beneficiary. As a consequence, their pursuits have become self-centered and linked to immediate gratification" (Coté & Allahaar 134). I buy into the need for the latest technologies, working to buy accessories to represent my identity.

Adolescence and youth are considered **a site to worry over** because of the abundance of this current segment of the society. With such great numbers we, as adolescents/youth could change the structure and current social, political, cultural, and economic norms. Institutions and ideologies have been put in place to assure that we do not try to change the current hierarchy of power, keeping us distracted by the illusions of freedom, thinking we are shaping are our identities, yet many ideologies have been placed so that our identities resemble each other, controlling some factors and instilling certain concepts to get the desired result.

My identity is not just who I am; it is a compilation of several external factors; I do not have control over determining what my identity resembles. Many of my identities are imposed by others, and then perpetuated, therefore becoming truth to others. I am all at once Asian, American, female, a slut, and a model minority. It seems that society and other people choose to define you by what serves them best, and not by your own merit or personal interests and gains. As I get older my **ego identity** is beginning to emerge, as I am establishing a "psychological connection between childhood and adulthood" (Muuss 43).

Even after coming out of my adolescence and crescendoing into adulthood, however, I remain cultureless, being redefined daily for who and what I am. I am stuck in a constant state of redefinition of self. Who knows what I will be identified as tomorrow.

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