

In-Between Asian

This exchange occurred a few weeks into my first semester at Boston College: my professor insisted on everyone coming to office hours in order to get to know us better. Thus began my inquisition into my racial identity—I realized that the professor, who had earlier informed me that I was doing extremely well, was so muddled about my origin because I was acing his English class. He probably did not think that this was because I attended an international high school back home. There, race was invisible to me until I began my university studies: race was taken for granted, and everyone accepted everyone else regardless of where they were from, how they spoke, or which peers they associated with. It is here and now in a primarily white setting that I am confronted daily with how my classification as an Asian and a minority shapes my place in society: I view this as an opportunity.

According to Mary Waters in “Optional Ethnicities,” the fact that I “come in close contact with many people who are different from oneself . . . should influence my personality,” as ethnicity is a “social phenomenon, and not a biological one.” Since I have arrived, I have not experienced racism or discrimination, nor do I ever feel oppressed or inferior due to my race; I was not offended when my English professor could not grasp my speaking “without an accent.” I merely passed it off as BC’s lack of diversity. But at the same time, I began to note that being a different race is a big issue on campus: there are numerous clubs dedicated to this cause, the International Club of BC is the main one that I am involved with. All of our social interactions within this group have to do with the fact that we are a “rare specie” and have something unique to share with the rest of the college: to some extent this does make me feel different and a little special. Even at the smallest level that I may be unaware of, the new society that I am in has definitely affected the way I interact and my “personality.”

In Waters’ piece, associating with a certain ethnicity can have benefits, and indeed the culture clubs reinforce this: we in ICBC are viewed as exclusive to foreign students (although we are not). I personally am bonded to the group in the sense that we are all global nomads, and the interactions that take place here are based on learning about the differences of our cultures, and learning to transcend them. The rest of the student population stereotypes that international students only hang out with other international kids. This is sometimes explained as “banding together defensively because of perceived rejection and tension from whites.” I personally do not agree with this statement and feel that there is a different social implication at work. Peggy McIntosh states in her piece “White Privilege” that she can “arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time”, she explains that for those of other races it becomes a judgment on their deviance from the norm or the “Not-A” but for whites, it is acceptable. I feel that this view is partially due to their being a majority that it is easier to find peers of your own race, but as international students in a school that lacks diversity, we, too, need a shared background and comfort zone, which for me is the real meaning behind forming such groups: there is a need to conform to feel comfortable. Here, we can conciliate feelings of isolation or disassociation.

Generally, people in society aim to conform to the “normative values that govern behavior”: it is part of how humans as meaning making beings navigate all the information in our environment, which is me on a college campus. We try not to breach these norms, and different sets of people have different norms; however, in a new society I must find out what these new norms are on a daily basis in order to be able to project what George Mead calls the “I,” and thus by interacting I create the socialized “me.” At times this can cause conflict, such as how Anthony Walton needed to “learn how to be a black man” and created a “double-consciousness.” I can relate similarly: there was an instance when I frequented meetings with one of the Asian Caucus groups, and soon I found that I had to act

more Asian than I actually am in order to fit into the group's preexisting norms, and I was expected to associate mainly with members from that group. Later on as I attended less often, some group members were offended and rejected me from their group: there was conflict created as they felt I was "devaluing and denying core identities" by branching out of the group's solidarity. Here, it became ever more evident to me that identities are extremely powerful in societies with so many different divisions, especially those as pronounced as race. These expectations can influence the way I act: this again resounds Mead's idea of the "generalized other" and how others in the community affect the "I" and how we become socialized to act a certain way: Walters' idea of an influenced personality.

Still again, I at times find myself at the most basic question of who the "I" is, my identity in the United States is much different from my identity in the Philippines. Here, I am an Asian and an international student; back home I am Filipino-Chinese. And yet in both countries, people assume I am Asian American or part white (or something else) because my features fit none of the stereotypical looks of each ethnicity. I often look at myself in a mirror and at my sisters and try to place them as well, and observe as inter-ethnic children which sister got which features. Thus I begin to see how different the definitions of a race or ethnicity is on a continental basis, and how the members of a society truly socially construct what defines race, and how I must navigate these stereotypes. It seems that I have developed this "double consciousness" that Walton narrates. I question myself, too, as to how I can consolidate these beings. Perhaps I thus possess many different "me's" depending on who I am socializing with to see this "me" or this certain side of my identity. Perhaps, too, the "I" changes over time due to my experiences or becoming socialized.

Viewing my everyday activities walking around college can seem nonchalant and commonplace, but really, there is a framework that dictates the way I and we all act for a smooth running of society. Expectations that are constantly formed, projected, and broken down must be met as humans try to make sense of the world, and go about their daily activities. With the matter of racial identities added to the already complex interactions, much learning and responding is transmitted from individual to individual. However, there is a common need for people to keep to the norm; it becomes a question of what exactly the norm is, and how individuals act to maintain and appease this norm. Despite all of these, we are still able to compromise our place in the world today, and form identities that make us us. This is what, I feel, makes humans as social beings incredibly resilient and extraordinary beings.

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