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Cultural Autobiography
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My Culture, Because I Have One

It is sometimes hard for me to identify my culture and to recognize how it affects the person I am today and how I respond to the people around me. I have fallen into the habit of thinking of myself as cultureless because I am part of the majority; I am an “average” American. I am a white, middle-class Christian girl from a happy family. This is the type of thinking, however, that I am currently trying to overcome. Yukari Amos claims that it is a “tendency of Whites to refer to themselves as cultureless and bestow on themselves a quality of personal detachment, objectivity, and omnipotence¹” (304), but that it is as impossible to abandon one’s whiteness as it is for a person of color to abandon their race. It is with these ideas in mind that I am trying to see more than just the “normal” in my life. Although it is true that my culture has not necessarily affected the way that other people see me because I “fit in,” it has affected the way that I see myself and the world around me. I have privilege that has blinded me to some important issues, and there are yet other aspects of my own culture that I might think pale in comparison to hardships that other people have faced, but that have still had an impact on who I am.

¹ Gay, Geneva. "Navigating Marginality." *Becoming Multicultural Educators: Personal Journey Toward Professional Agency*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003. Page 304. Print.

I grew up in a small town in midcoast Maine, which labels me a “New Englander.” My parents taught me to love the outdoors, to spend time in nature, and to appreciate simplicity. In my mind I connect my family with the outdoors, in large part because of a small community called Brightwater that my father’s family has been involved with since the 1920s. A group of ministers and doctors founded Brightwater on the coast of Maine, and their expanding families have been going there ever since. It is a slightly hippy community that loves to sing, play music, sail, build, and do woodwork. Again, this community, which is my extended family, emphasizes simplicity, peace and nature. I love being in Maine, far away from cities, because it is what my family loves and where I learned to be happy.

I also group in the “athlete culture,” but not necessarily the stereotypical type portrayed in the media. Just about every movie and book plays upon the idea of the privileged athletes who cannot see beyond their own bubbles, the jocks who are insensitive bullies, or the students whose are as competitive off the field as they are on. I was a three-sport athlete all through high school and now I play on the varsity lacrosse team at Haverford, where I have found this notion of athletes to be particularly strong. In high school my status as an athlete gave me a social power that at Haverford I do not feel because athletics are not very strongly valued. It is interesting to navigate how to show my pride in being an athlete while trying not to play into the predominant feeling on campus that athletes are self-important, still living in their high school glory days. I can see where many of the jock stereotypes come from. Many of my teammates were raised in the world of concerted cultivation, as was I. We participated in society-valued activities, activities that

drew attention to us as we competed to stand out the most. In addition, athletic teams are not always known for their diversity, ethnic or financial, a fact that cannot be generalized, but has been mostly true in my experience. Athletes also tend to be confident which comes off as egotistic. I have always seen my athletic culture differently however. A sports team has a lot of extremely hard workers, people who know how to balance their time, people who support each other and build up each others' confidence, and people who are willing to put over twenty hours a week into something they love. Much of a team's "cliquiness" is just the friendship that naturally happens when teammates spend so many hours a day, experiencing all the same challenges and joys together. My athletic culture has been one with a lot of different interests and personalities, of hard work, and of close friendship.

In Maine the lack of racial diversity is not limited to sports, but rather is a statewide phenomenon. It was a fact to which I paid no attention while growing up. In fact I paid very little attention to race at all. I had conversations about racial issues, read about them, watched the news and observed them, but I was never faced with them myself. I did not notice microaggressions or racism with the students of color in my schools and I assumed that they were not an issue. To reference Tim Wilson's theory of the difference between the conscious and the adaptive unconscious, my conscious views are liberal, global, accepting, and unbiased. My adaptive unconscious, however, is probably affected much more by where I grew up and might affect me in ways that I cannot see. Part of the reason I went to Haverford was because it was the school that offered the most difference—geographically, socially, racially—from what I had known than the other private

liberal arts schools I looked at. Here at Haverford, I talk about and see a racial hierarchy that I was blind to before. I am trying to change my adaptive unconscious little by little. Through the classes I take, as a member of the Customs Program, and in daily life, I am more aware of how difference is addressed around me.

One topic that I was very aware of growing up was sexual identity. My grandmother has had a female partner for my entire life, and five other uncles and cousins have identified as gay or bisexual. The normality of same sex couples was so ingrained in me that I did not even know it was a disputed topic until third grade. I remember the first time someone made a joke with the punch line “haha, you’re gay.” I had no idea what the meaning of the word was, and I repeated the joke to my dad who informed me of what I was saying. I did not understand how something as normal as being gay was being used to make fun of someone, and since then I have always been very sensitive when people are not accepting of different sexual or gender identities and am very quick to call someone out for using the word gay as an insult. I have always liked that story because it shows that some things really would not matter so much if we were never told they were “wrong.” Kromidas’s study demonstrated how children contribute to the complexity of racial formation, but they also contribute the formation of other social processes².

The cultural identity that I myself struggle the most with, especially in the way other people see me, is my religion. I was raised a Catholic, according to my mom’s side of the family. She is the oldest of ten children in a classic Irish-Catholic

² *Elementary Forms of Cosmopolitanism: Blood, Birth, and Bodies in Immigrant New York City*. Maria Kromidas. *Harvard Educational Review*; Fall 2011; 81, 3; Research Library

family from outside of Boston. I have never heard her mother go more than ten minutes without mentioning church, God's work, thanking a saint, or saying the rosary. My dad's family, on the other hand, is Quaker and holds pretty liberal beliefs. Many of the ideals of Quakerism were passed down to me and I have sporadically attended Meeting, but I was always a regular Sunday morning churchgoer. I always feel defensive about being Catholic. My dad's dad calls Catholics "papists" and makes passive aggressive comments about Catholicism and we all know his mom took it pretty hard when two of her sons converted. My friends, too, make comments about Catholics that sometimes make me feel uncomfortable. A lot of them have to do with social issues about which the church is known for being strict. When religion comes up, I want to defend Catholicism, but also want to distance myself from it. For the longest time I said "I'm a Catholic, but..." and I now identify as Quak-lic. For me, this acknowledges that I was raised Catholic and that there are important messages within the tradition that I believe in, but that I pick and choose what I like and can incorporate my Quaker background into my belief system. I am not necessarily tied to the conservative nature of the Church, which seems to be the only topic of which non-Catholics are aware. My parents' interest in peace and social justice is a product of their religion and is the most meaningful message that I have taken away from their combination of faiths.

At Haverford I have been better able to identify who I am and to see a multitude of cultures all around me, but it was not until I went to Argentina that I could relate to being an outsider. My parents had instilled in me a desire for travel and adventure through vacations that always took us to new countries or out in

nature. With this in mind, I spent five months studying in Mendoza, a city in Argentina located in the foothills of the Andes. People noticed me everywhere I went, because a blond female American sticks out. I still had the privilege of being white and no one discriminated against me—although there were people who would try to give me fake money or overcharge me because they thought I was a dumb tourist. For the most part, I just received a lot unwanted attention. As my friends and I walked through the streets, men would shout catcalls that were never aggressive, but just reminded us that we stuck out. To me it was obvious that it was because I was fair-skinned, blonde, and female, but some people there saw it differently. One of my professors claimed it was our fault that guys catcalled us because we dressed too provocatively. I found her view limited and simplified, and although I tried to argue with her, she was in a position of power as a professor and an Argentine. Another example of the attention that my friends and I received was how easy it was to make guy friends, but it felt weird because they knew nothing about my personality, and could only judge me on my looks.

I got a lot of comments about my language abilities as well. One that I remember is "*Hablás la mejor de tu grupo, pero tu acento es mierda!*" ("You speak the best out of your group, but your accent is shit!"). Another guy told me that I did not speak enough, which made me mad and I tried to speak nonstop after that. Did he not realize that we were in a loud area with a group and that it is hard to think of a response before someone? I overanalyzed everything I did and every word I had to say. I once sat for two hours thinking of a way to ask to shower that would not sound weird. I became a quiet, nervous person for a while, instead of the bubbly,

constantly talking person that I am, a person who says stupid things all the time. It took me months to get over that feeling of being out of place, and even then I only achieved that feeling with certain friends. I was self-centered because I could control the conversation if it were about me. This experience made me more aware of the challenges of being an outsider, where no one consciously paid any attention to my struggles or made offensive comments, but where I was always hyperaware of myself in relation to those around me.

My culture has changed depending on where I was, whom I was with, and what I was consciously aware of at the time. How I view myself, my privilege of being white, and how I view others is constantly changing. I need to acknowledge my own culture because I do have one. When I play into the misconception that my culture is the “average” culture, it not only discredits my own life experiences, it also labels others’ as not normal.