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Multicultural Rhetorics

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American Enough

“Phuut Thai dai mai?” my mom’s friend exclaims as we meet for the first time in the bright Bangkok coffee shop. I shift in the cheap pink sandals I bought the night before from the market, and give a small apologetic smile. “Phuut mai dai,” I respond, feeling the weight of the words as they fall off my tongue. Her face shifts and she looks to my mom, “Thami mai phuut?” My mom laughs it off, and they fall into rapid Thai and I lose the conversation.

 Hearing my mom fall into the rhythm of her native language fills me with a feeling that is difficult to explain. It is a feeling of displacement, of not being able to meet her with her own words. Of not being able to communicate with the people I’m connected to. Of being unsure of what connects me to them. It is almost a fog, a wall that comes down between me and some part of myself. Until I was four I spoke Thai with my mom, and our little Texas house was filled with “neigh na kun,” and “chang” and “kanom.” My head was full of English and Thai, my dad’s gumbo and my mom’s kha man gai.

Eighteen years later, I asked my mom why I don’t speak Thai anymore. She looked down slightly and sighed, “I didn’t want you to be different.” She recounted the feelings she had as she decided to stop speaking Thai at home. Worries that speaking two languages would affect my English. A desire for me to have my best chance of fitting in. Fear that I would be perceived differently in this country.

 So we stopped. Today, shifting around in my speech are fragments of Thai, pieces left over from my childhood. It is “saw wat di ka,” (hello), “kap kun ka,” (thank you), and “phuut Thai dai mai,” (do you speak Thai?). Then of course my response: “Phuut mai dai,” (No I can’t). Other pieces of Thailand we’ve held onto, the food, the spices, the little Buddha figurines hidden around our house, but the language itself is a sea of words I can float atop, but never fully sink into.

 This fear my mom had, of her children being different for speaking another language, is a fear I’ve heard echoed so often by other Americans who speak multiple languages. It is a feeling that has weighed on my family, reinforced by phrases like “welcome to America,” and “go back to your country.” The fear of not being perceived as an American has been a sticking point in my identity, as teachers commented on my English, or classmates asked where I “was really from.” I felt a two fold homesickness, of not being accepted into the place I knew as my home, and not speaking the language of the place I was told was my home. Even as I mourned the inability to speak my mom’s own language, the culture around me emphasized the importance of speaking English and shifting myself closer to the idea of an American in my head.

Outside of the United States, I have still found my identity as an American questioned. Studying Arabic in Cairo, Egypt, my friends and I would often be asked where we were from. “Inti minein?” curious people in coffee shops and stores would ask, and after my white American friends would casually mention the United States, I would smile and respond “Ana amerikee.” I would often receive a confused look, a laugh, and a “La, inti min Korea,” telling me I was wrong about my own home, and usually guessing at my race. These incidents became a drumbeat in the back of my head, culminating in one night as we were out looking for late night ta’ameya to fuel a study session. Against the background of the bustling city traffic and the Cairo skyline, my friend and I started talking with the vendors of the stand next to our University. “Intom minein?” they asked, laughing as we fumbled through our broken Arabic. “Ana min America,” my friend responded, and they nodded then turned to me. I smiled back, “Ana Amerikee aydan,” I replied, stating that I was also American. One of the shopkeepers squinted at me and then responded “la, inti mish Amerikee,” or “No, you’re not an American.” I felt the catch in my breath and my world grew smaller, tunnel visioning into eight year old me in school being told I didn’t belong to the one place I knew. “No, I’m an American.” I responded, expressionless, unthinkingly switching into English. I felt my inadvertent shift, and tried to regain my footing in Arabic as he continued to list off the countries he thought I could be from. “La. Ana Amerikee.” As we walked away, I thought about my shift into English. I thought about the feeling of desperation as I tried to prove my identity as an American. What does it really mean to be an American, and is English a central component of that identity?

This question is central to our culture today. In the United States, over fifty million people speak Spanish (BBC). Over three million people speak Mandarin or Cantonese. Over one million people speak Arabic, another million French, another million Vietnamese (Statista). "At the annual Lower East Side Jewish Festival yesterday, a Chinese woman ate a pizza slice in front of Ty Thuan Due's Vietnamese grocery store. Beside her a Spanish-speaking family patronized a cart with two signs: 'Italian Ices' and 'Kosher by Rabbi Alper.' And after the pastrami ran out, everybody ate knishes" (New York Times). The United States has long passed this old ideal of a center of “Western culture.” Our American reality is one of intersections, innovation and individuality. At the same time, American rhetoric is divisive, touting assimilation and English dominance, and contradicting what we claim as our values of freedom and exploration. Ishmael Reed emphasizes this distinctly in his article, “What’s American about America?” with the statement “North America deserves a more exciting destiny than as a repository of ‘Western civilization.’ We can become a place where the cultures of the world crisscross” (Reed 2). Reed points out the contradictions in the American rhetoric, the feeling of both freedom and individuality, crossed with xenophobia and fear. The United States prides itself on individualism and exploration, yet at the same time reinforces stories marking non-english speakers and immigrants as others. Reed emphasizes leaving behind this notion of “Westernism,” as the core of Americanism, and pushes for an understanding of America as an intersectional “bouillabaisse.” Reed concludes his essay by stating simply, “The World is Here.” (Reed 2). The American reality sharply contradicts the, perhaps not dominant but often loudest, rhetoric about being an American. In reality, America is the mixing of cultures, languages, and people from across the world. It is more than the clinging to a single identity, it is the interconnection of many.

 These are the stories that make up America. In her essay “Crying in H mart,” Michelle Zauner explains her connection with her mom, her language, and her culture through H mart, an Asian grocery store that sells all the things you can’t find in the four foot wide Asian foods section at Safeway (the one where there’s only one kind of crushed pepper and never any mushroom soy sauce). She describes the feeling of walking through the aisles of packaged seaweed and furikake, spicy garlic sauces and fried onion chips. “It’s a beautiful, holy place. A cafeteria full of people from all over the world who have been displaced in a foreign country, each with a different history.” (Zauner 9) She describes the international students, trekking from their college town to find flavors from their homes. The Korean grandmother eating jjamppong in the food court. Herself, the daughter of a Korean immigrant, who within the aisles of H mart feels her connection to her mom. “I can hardly speak Korean, but in H Mart I feel like I’m fluent. I fondle the produce and say the words aloud—chamoe melon, danmuji” (Zauner 4). She explains finding pieces of herself through the soy sauce eggs and ppeong-twigi and banchan, and through the connection to all these people she doesn’t know, all also looking for little pieces of themselves. I cry almost every time I read Zauner’s essay, as she describes wondering which kind of seaweed her mom would buy or watching little kids run around with brightly colored snacks. Because she describes this feeling perfectly, of not only looking around and finding pieces of yourself, but knowing the strangers around you find pieces of themselves within you. “We don’t talk about it. There’s never so much as a knowing look. We sit here in silence, eating our lunch. But I know we are all here for the same reason. We’re all searching for a piece of home, or a piece of ourselves” (Zauner 10).

This is America. It is reaching for the same frozen packet of barbeque pork bao, and grinning at the other college student that might also miss the homemade version with their family. It is bonding over how long the flight is to see our grandparents, and comforting each other over the feeling of not being able to speak their language. It is the shared frustration when someone tells you that you don’t belong, and the understanding eye roll. It is the new language you make with your family, with fragments of Thai and a Texas accent, a nasal “eẽh” to ask a question and an “awh” when you disapprove of something. What is truly American is the interconnection between different people and places, and the combination of your different life experiences. I think back to a younger version of myself. Who was told she was different, that she didn’t fit in, that she didn’t belong. Who was constantly trying to bring herself closer to what felt like the unachievable dream of being seen as “American enough.” The idea of being “American enough” contradicts itself. What makes us American is not our similarities. What makes us American is the connection we find in our differences.

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