

Crossing Borders Writing Competition

Bentic Joseph Sebastian, bsebast3@uncc.edu

Multiculturalism. I find it everywhere. Approximately 9% of the United States population is multiracial, and it is estimated to climb to 21% by 2050⁽¹⁾. Thus, it is essential to understand the challenges posed by being multicultural. In this essay, I hope to show how my multicultural identity has molded my perspective of the world.

I was born and raised in Dubai, to parents of Indian origin. They had migrated to Dubai in 1992 during its incredible growth after the Gulf War. Along with my brother and sister, we became members of a growing immigrant community (referred to as expatriates). Living in Dubai is a very unique experience, as it is one of the few Middle Eastern cities which embraced diversity and welcomed people from different cultures for economic advancement. In my high school, I had friends from Lebanon, Greece, Philippines, India, and Pakistan. I took for granted this incredible multiculturalism within the confines of my school playground.

Due to rules of citizenship, when I was born, I took on the citizenship of my Indian parents. I became a citizen of a country I never even set foot on. In fact, there was no real path to citizenship for expatriates. Although life was comfortable there, I was often reminded that we were foreigners. If a person lost their job and could not find a new one in time, they were deported to their homeland. If this person was a head of a household, well, the children would get uprooted too. My parents' jobs dictated where we would live, and as a result we moved from one apartment to the other.

Nothing was permanent here.

This state of impermanence colored the lens through which I viewed the world. I learnt early on that very few things are ‘forever’, and that my future was not guaranteed. I had to make my own fate. These were great lessons, for better or for worse, to learn at a young age. Lessons that helped me work hard enough to be invited to study in the United States.

Upon moving to the America to pursue higher studies, I was struck by the difference in how people felt about their country. I met people who were brought up in homes which were passed down across many generations. I was surprised that they never even considered a backup plan in case they were deported. They were proud to be American and felt like they belonged there. I had found what this way of life felt like, and it changed me.

Permanence was possible.

Having been in the US for six years, I am starting to integrate the American culture into my sense of identity. But I have only got more confused. I identified with certain values of each of my Middle Eastern, Indian, and American culture, but could not completely identify with any one culture. I also felt that the American culture was not as straightforward to understand as I thought.

What does it mean to be American? As I’ve followed the events in the past year, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement, I’ve realized that there is not just one American identity. The experience of each cultural group in the United States is very different, almost as different as being in another country altogether. And this divergence of culture is becoming more common. More families in the United States are of multicultural origins, and the proportion of these families are growing. According to Pew Research Center, “...since 1980 the share of marriages between spouses of different races has increased almost fourfold (from 1.6% to 6.3% in 2013)”⁽²⁾

I have personally met many diverse people in the United States. I've met a woman in college who immigrated to the United States at the age of two, growing up and effectively living as an American. But after she turned 21, due to delays in Green Card processing, she was required to transfer from her parent's 'dependant' status, to an F-1 'international student' visa, just to continue to live and work in the United States.

I've met an American citizen who spent her entire life in Chicago, but immigrated to Canada after graduation to begin her business there. She felt Canada had better opportunities for her career, so she decided to settle there, despite having to pay American taxes in addition to her Canadian taxes.

The idea of being 'American' is now more diverse than ever. This diversity can arise due to cultural background, family, immigration status, wealth, or career. Diversity is a strength, and deserves to be celebrated. The United States was built through the hard work of several immigrants, building communities and providing people the chance to achieve success, the 'American Dream'. The word 'migrants' seems to have negative connotations, but it is an immense advantage that America has managed to create a community with so much complexity. Diversity has its own challenges, especially for those who are used to a singular view of what America is supposed to be. However, I'm really amazed by how accommodating America is, even though there is a long way to go to increase our awareness of these different multicultural views in the country.

The question of a cohesive American identity will be more important as multicultural families become more common. My multicultural experiences have helped me see the different facets to the American experience. It is worth studying this complex and rich set of cultural identities.

I still struggle with the question of where I belong, as do many of us. As I learn more about my cultural background, I can't help but wonder. Perhaps I simply belong to the whole world, and so do you.

So do you.

References:

- 1) Brown MR. A New Multicultural Population: Creating Effective Partnerships With Multiracial Families. *Intervention in School and Clinic*. 2009;45(2):124-131.
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