

Good challenges of a young woman of mixed parentage essay example

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What is ethnicity? A universally accepted definition is that of Fleras (2012), who believed that ethnicity is a shared awareness of common ancestry; a socially distinct group of people (or groups of people) that have a common culture, language, nationality and religion. People with all the aforementioned in common usually form an identity and entire communities. They can even motivate others with the same worldview as theirs towards taking action, in regards a socio-cultural or political matter. But, what happens to people that have mixed parentage? How do they find their identity, when divided into two worlds? This is something that rose my interest, when I met my best friend, Hai No, a Mainland Chinese that left her country to pursue her undergraduate studies at Concordia University, at Montreal, Canada, a few years ago. The challenges she had to deal with and the difficult times she lived through finally to get an identity of her own, an identity that she felt right with, made me want to write this paper and share this experience.

Hai No is not just a Mainland Chinese. Since there are millions of people in China, she always felt she had to say she was a Han Chinese. However, for a reason, even saying she was a Han Chinese did not allow her to feel she had specified her personal identity. At this point, it is right to note that she was raised by a Chinese mother and that her had father left them, when she was a few months old. Her step-father was Canadian, and at the age of 16, she decided to move to Canada to chase her dream for a better future and higher education. Closing that small parenthesis, Hai No always mentioned that Shanghai, her hometown, was a significant part of who she was, her identity. Her mother spoke the local dialect and so did she. In plainer words,

she was a Buddhist Mandarin Chinese.

Her challenges begun when she stepped foot in Montreal, Canada. Being a Chinese student equaled to troubles adapting to the new life and a cultural shock that she had to overcome. Although she did have a Canadian step-father- that became part of her life when she was already 14- she only had started learning to speak English the last 2 years, which were obviously, not enough to make her break the language barrier. In fact, the language hurdle, became an everyday hardship and the only way to overcome it was to improve her English. At university, teachers could not understand her background and had unrealistic expectations from her, which only made things worse for this Chinese-Canadian young woman. It seemed as if those in authority (see instructors and public services in general) had adopted a one-size-fits-all response to mixed-race children.

It did not come as a surprise that Hai No had another major issue to handle, that of homesickness. When she arrived in Montreal, she lived far from downtown, in a homestay family, as she had no relatives from her step-father's side in Canada. The hostess was working full-time and sometimes even double shifts, so she was not around much. Hai No felt alone and terribly homesick; she missed her teachers, her family, her friends back in China. The only beams of light in her otherwise gloomy routine was when she sat in front of her laptop and chatted with her friends and mother through Skype. Other than that, the Concordia campuses were an alien environment for her and blocked her way to adopting to the new life. Being a freshman included losing your way to the classrooms and having a hard time accessing to several facilities.

According to Deaux (2001), people choose “ both whether to have an ethnic identity at all, and, if so, what identity to claim” (p. 3). For example, second-generation immigrants find themselves, often, struggling to decide if they would keep the identity of their origin-country or develop a new identity of the country they live at a time. Interestingly, they do not have to pick sides, by all means. They can as well keep a double identification or even use the two different identities as a basis of another, new form of social identification (Deaux, 2001). In other words, it is not necessary to decide between two mutually exclusive identities. I believe this is exactly what Hai No was experiencing: she was trying very hard to decide her identity, although she was never told that she may not even have to choose. She may have been a child of mixed parentage, but in fact, she was a Chinese girl from Shanghai, and her identity was in her homeland. Her step father’s influence was not enough to make her feel more welcome in the host country, which would have otherwise been her second homeland, due to her step-father. Anyway, the sense of belonging is significant and like almost every human being living and breathing on Earth, Hai No wanted to fit in with a group of like-minders, based on commonalities with other people that had the same background as her. This was the result of her mother’s parenting style, who had promoted a sense of belonging through only one aspect of Hai No’s background. Consequently, Hai No could only define and identify herself as Chinese. If this paper were written a few years ago, Hai No’s stance would have been accepted by psychologists. However, much has changed now. According to a relatively new research, the concept that mixed-race kids should choose a single race as their own, in order to be better adjusted, is

only a myth belonging to the past (Cloud, 2009). On the contrary, it is evidenced that multiracial individuals that have managed to identify themselves as multiracial are as well as people that identify with a single group (Cloud, 2009). That being said; the Concordia Chinese Students Association was a pleasant surprise as they allowed Hai No feel part of a group in a host country, at the time when she was trying to find her identity in it. The senior students from the Association gave a valuable helping hand to Hai No, in order to rapidly get used to the new life in Canada, by sharing their own experiences and their own setbacks, complemented by advice as to how to adjust to the new educational environment. Through sharing their experiences, the students of the Association Hai No learnt how to develop her interpersonal skills and how to communicate better with her peers. With the help of the Association's students, Hai No managed to improve her English, adapt to her new life, become familiar with campuses, and overcome the feeling of homesickness. These steps took her closer to conquering her goal, which was to hinder independence on her mother and step-father. She joined activities that had some significance to her in any way, such as publishing a Chinese newspaper, among others.

Hai No identified a new home for her, Montreal Chinatown, where she spent her leisure time with friends. No wonder she felt that way, considering that the Montreal Chinese hospital and the biggest Chinese school are located there, and there are many major socio-cultural organizations there with multiple functions. If ethnicity was indeed defined as a "principle of possible community [or group] formation" (Fleras, 2012 p. 115), then Hai No had found her place among persons that shared identification. Montreal

Chinatown expressed community identity, allowing everybody within to feel a strong sense of belonging and community. Moreover, identity thesis is a way to demonstrate how a membership to an ethnic group can help people with societal stress cope with the demands of the urban context (Fleras, 2012). Montreal Chinatown also celebrated Canadian festivals, alongside the Chinese ones, as a means to promote urban development and make everyone involved feel integrated with the urban context.

An ethnic community also promotes intergroup relations, providing individuals with both material and emotional support (Fleras, 2012).

Likewise, Montreal Chinatown plays such a role and makes people feel the ethnicity as community. For example, when a friend of Ha No's, and senior student of the Association, was killed by man he did not even know (perfect example of being in the wrong place at the wrong time), the boy's family and friends, together with Hai No took part in a public memorial, where they all prayed for peace. This was an example of emotional support. However, it did not stop there. The university raised many thousands of dollars (material support) to offer financial support to the family and cover their temporary needs.

Finally, another issue that mixed-race children face, is the white privilege. Ha No's friend had died from the hand of a white male, and for a reason she could not comprehend, there were many people that the white man should be released and that he was not guilty. The white race defended a member of their race and seemed to be unable to see clearly and convict that man's actions, due to his race.

Being a member of a minority group, even a so-called high-status one as

Asians, in a society dominated by white people made Ha No internalize the dominant society's values. Nevertheless, showing the proper respect towards life is a rationale (besides a common ideology) that can eliminate inequality and marginalization. Once that has been noted, it is important to understand that children of mixed parentage face a number of difficulties when they have been raised to identify as a single race only. Difficulties that they can overcome with the help of other like-minders and by achieving a sense of belonging and community. Of course, they can also embrace both their identities or take the parts of the two identities that they feel most related to who they are inside and create a new identity. Ha No's example is the perfect reflection of a person's struggle to fit someplace and try to make their host country part of their own identity.

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