

Sociology 213

Ethnicity and Identity

Erica Lee

Yellow and More: Exploring Racial, Ethnic and National Identity as a 1.5 Generation Korean New Zealander.

"I am a Korean New Zealander. I have spent the first half of my life in Korea and the other half, including my adolescent years, in New Zealand. I speak both languages fluently, and English like any other Kiwi with no detectable Korean accent. I don't look typically Korean because of the way I do my make-up. My social circle consists mainly of caucasian friends. All of this translated to a state where I have felt for the longest time, that I did not fit into either of the cultures. I could see that a bicultural space existed, but that sphere was complex and diverse in its own right. I could not find a significant community of people who I shared my life experiences with. I visualised myself floating above cultural boundaries, in a grey, murky space where I could not see anyone else." (Lee, 2014, n.p)

The preceding quote is an excerpt from a blog post I wrote in 2014. This autoethnographic essay continues and explores my long standing curiosities about my own racial, ethnic and national identity. Throughout the essay, I narrate a story from the past then analyse the experiences using key concepts of identity discourse to gain a better understanding of the past. First, I examine my racial identity using social ascription and meaning to make sense of its construction. Second, my ethnic identity is analysed using Cornell and Hartmann's constructionist approach as well as an observation in my own discourse shift from essentialism to hybridity. Lastly, my national identity is analysed using ideas of ethnicity based nationhood and transnationalism, along with a critical interrogation of my asserted and assigned position within the power relations of ethnic and national identity in Aotearoa New Zealand. I conclude the essay by relating Stephen Maturin's quote on identity to my own sentiments about the dynamic nature of identity construction.

Racial Identity: A Rude Awakening

I came to realise my own 'racial identity' when I first moved to New Zealand at the age of eleven. I was walking home one day when a group of Maori girls began shouting at me 'ching chong ching chong, ni hao, konnichi wa'. They gestured the slanted-eye face and squinted at me as they laughed. I tried to say something back but it had only been 6 months since I had moved and I didn't have the words. I stuttered and mumbled with my face bright red from rage and they cackled even more saying 'what a fob, she doesn't even know what to say! Go back to your country, you Asian!' When I got home, I burst into tears. I wasn't sure why I was upset but I knew then that 'Asian' was a dirty word and looking the way I looked was something to be ashamed of in this new place.

The rude realisation of my own stereotyped racial identity highlights the power of social ascription and meaning. Social ascription denotes a process of identity construction where other people or external circumstances make claims about a subject in question (Cornell & Hartmann 2007, 83). The subject is passive in being 'made' or assigned a certain identity. In my experience, I was assigned the identity as a 'Fresh Off the Boat' Asian i.e. a 'fob' Asian. Lowe (2016, 244) explains that the Asian identity is often only brought into consciousness of the subject under an oppressive experience where the circumstances construct the subjects as outsiders to New Zealand. It is important to note here then, that the meaning attached to the assigned labels is also significant in identity construction. In my case, the inherent meaning behind what was said to my 11-year old self was that my identity, as defined by my race, was different, inferior, something that could be made fun of and most of all, unwelcomed.

Another interesting aspect to explore in this specific experience is that the assignment of my racial identity was by a group of Maori students. In retrospect, I find it rather unusual that another minority group, let alone an indigenous group, so cruelly bullied me, as they too have experiences of racialization. Lowe (2016, 244) uses the work of Hall and Ip to propose that during the 1990s, Maori and Pakeha formed a sense of solidarity against the "alien Orientals" (2016, 244) in response to the threat of diminishing local identities via influx of Asian immigrants. The Maori led this alliance as they had more to lose from the erosion of the recently established bicultural New Zealand identity, which acknowledged their indigenous status.

Ethnic Identity: Beyond a Binary

In my high school years, I thought I could either be Korean or 'white' but not both. In an attempt to stay 'authentic' within each culture, I led a dual identity life where in each identity I refused to acknowledge the presence of the other. I was what I would call an 'ethnic drag queen'; switching between what I thought were two mutually exclusive ethnic identities by putting on certain attires and personalities. At home, I was Hye-Ji (my Korean name); a barefaced Korean who spoke Korean, ate Korean food and dressed like a 'fob' in big baggy clothes that covered most of my body. Out in the world, I was Erica; full face of 'Western style' makeup, spoke English without a trace of Korean accent, ate salads and sandwiches and dressed in skimpy trendy clothes. My personality amplified hugely into a loud, opinionated girl who had no problem speaking out about taboo topics like sex and drugs. I actively participated in underage drinking just to prove to the world I wasn't 'Asian' i.e. a fob, but a 'Cool Asian'. I felt that I could only be one or the other at a time, in order to avoid being questioned about authenticity.

My perspective of identity binary was soon challenged, as the ethno-drag didn't quite pan out the way I had hoped. My goal was to have a complete sense of belonging in both cultures yet I ended up feeling like I didn't belong anywhere. When I was in drag, I felt like I belonged with the Western culture but I wasn't quite white enough to be white and certainly not Korean enough to be Korean. When I wasn't in drag, my cultural values were too 'white-washed' to be Korean and I was just another invisible Asian to the Caucasians. I began to realise that the experiences that shaped who I was were vast, built layer upon layer and continuously expanding whilst containing everything from the past. I wasn't made up of many little identities but of many experiences that could conjure up almost infinite different identities in response to various settings. I could be a full-blown 'fob' Korean with my family, a Kiwi amongst my friends, or a bit of both with other kids of immigrant backgrounds. It was a matter of choosing what I believed was my identity at specific moments.

The 'drag' and 'non-drag' ethnic identities I created capture the heart of Cornell and Hartmann's constructionist concept of identity variation along two axes: asserted to assigned and thick to thin (2007, 85). 'Asserted' entails that the identity is self-ascribed; people choose to define it in their own terms through interaction with socially 'assigned' labels i.e. social ascription, a concept earlier discussed in the analysis of my racial identity. 'Thick' or 'thin' entails the extent to which the identity influences and shapes social life (2007, 77). When I am not in drag, my identity is assigned as 'Asian' by New Zealand society. This identity is thin because the term Asian doesn't take into account the specific practices I carry out as a Korean as it blanket terms all Asians. When I am in drag, I assert my identity as 'Cool Asian'. The identity is thick because it is the identity I actively choose to practice out my daily life in. It is important to note here that this asserted identity is somewhat paradoxical as the term 'Cool Asian' was a relatively less derogative term assigned to me by my Caucasian friends. I nevertheless asserted this identity because it was a form of resistance and retaliation to stereotypes of Asians.

Another interesting aspect of my ethnic identity navigation is the shift in discourse from essentialism to hybridity. Essentialism sees identity as static, biologically determined 'being'. It denotes that outer appearance and particular set of cultural practices determine how a person is identified culturally. For instance, I believed that putting on a 'drag' was essential in order to claim a specific identity. Hybridity, on the other hand, sees identity as a dynamic, choice-based process in which multiple identities can exist at once with the capacity to hold contradictions in one place (Papastergiadis 2000, 14-5). This holds true to my experience when I realised that I could negotiate and assert the identity I believed in, in response to changing environments, relationships and circumstances I faced.

National Identity: Transnationalism

Having experienced an array of identity dilemmas, I struggled with the lack of conviction in claiming my nationality as New Zealand during my early adult years. Whenever I travelled abroad, returning to New Zealand was returning 'home' simply because this was my place of residence. I didn't feel a sense of belonging to what I understood as New Zealand national identity, a community of rugby-loving, outdoor-oriented Pakeha and Maori people.

The first time I felt a true sense of belonging was in 2014, when I came across an online publication called *Audrey*. The articles commented on Asian, American and Asian-American popular culture from Asian American women's perspectives. Asian women were portrayed in a medium I was familiar with, on their achievements and merits rather than for just being 'Asian'. They weren't the stereotypical depiction of overly submissive, mute women nor were they the hyper-fetishized sexual beings. Their About Us page read, "The stories in *Audrey* help our readers navigate their identity, relate to other Asians, and feel connected to a community. We emphasize real and multifaceted portrayals of the modern Asian woman, ones that reflect the ethnic, cultural and generational diversity of this demographic" (*Audrey Magazine*, n.p). This little paragraph ensured me I didn't have to be American to belong here but that I just feel connected. I felt so empowered. I felt like I had finally found my own people. I finally felt at home.

The lack of conviction I felt in claiming New Zealand as my national identity can be explained by the exclusive nature of New Zealand nationhood. As I have expressed in my own experience, New Zealand's national identity is bound up with the majority ethnicity of Pakeha (Murphy, 2003, 49). As of the 1980s, government policies to rectify the colonial destruction of Maori rights have re-shaped the nationhood as a Pakeha-Maori bicultural community (Spoonley, 2003, 41). Where then do I fit in this bicultural nation? Significant power in New Zealand national identity politics lies in the hands of the dominant majority, Pakeha, who do not widely accept Asians as New Zealanders (Murphy, 2003, 65). We, the Asian New Zealanders, are positioned outside of how nationhood is defined and often suffer second-class status (Murphy, 2003, 65). The Maori hold relatively more power than Asian New Zealanders to define who gets to claim the New Zealand nationality. With this knowledge, I see myself not below, but alongside the Maori through self-assertion of my incomplete but present New Zealand identity as an Asian New Zealander. As DeSouza proclaims (2011, 229), I, too, feel compelled to support Maori in their self-determination to ground New Zealand in the founding principals of the Treaty of Waitangi, in hope that this will open up a space for a multiethnic national identity.

Moving on to the deep sense of belonging I felt to the Asian American women voices online, Appadurai's work on modern subjectivities in the virtual, transnational era explains my experience (as cited in Epstein, 2006, 148). He argues that the increasing networks created through electronic media and modern travel challenges geographically bound ideas of ethnicity and nationhood. New identities and imagined communities are created in the virtual space where people feel a sense of primary belonging to the virtual transnational community. For instance, Asian women of various immigrant backgrounds in Western countries such as US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand probably share similar struggles in navigating their ethnic and national identity. By coming together on a platform like Audrey Magazine, they are united beyond their geographical borders through shared experiences such as the frustration I expressed towards stereotyped portrayal of Asian women in media. I think it is in these virtual spaces that the most authentic, unfiltered, multifaceted hybrid identity representations and navigations occur and give rise to new age transnational identities.

Conclusion

This essay has used concepts of social ascription, the constructionist approach to identity construction, essentialism, hybridity, ethnicity based nationhood and transnationalism to make sense of my racial, ethnic and national identity experiences. Stephen Maturin aptly summarises my sentiments about identity; "There is nothing absolute about this identity of mine" (as cited in Cornell & Hartmann, 2007, 76). As a person whose identity lives beyond assigned labels, the dynamism of identity construction is an empowering process. I no longer observe myself blurrily floating in a cultural no man's land but rather, confidently weaving my way through vast cultural experiences. What my own experiences gifted me was a multi-access pass through various cultural boundaries. Therefore I conclude the essay with this: Sure, I am yellow; but I am yellow and more.

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