
From the Instructor

The final paper in WR 098 requires students to create an original argument analyzing themes in a set of works. In this section, the essay had to “synthesize” Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and two essays from the anthology *Globalization*, which contains a range of arguments about education and global citizenship. The synthesis element of the paper is often challenging for students, and some struggle to find ways to incorporate the essays without having them appear as mere tangents or barely related examples.

Calvin’s essay is remarkable because it not only completes the requirements of the assignment beautifully, using ideas from the two essays as necessary components of an argument that illuminates the memoir, but the essay also makes it clear how the analysis of these texts can help us to understand and perhaps answer difficult questions about cultural integration. Framed as it is with personal experience, Calvin’s essay demonstrates the relevance and even practicality of his claims, and we don’t doubt his sincerity or investment. Additionally, sophisticated use of counterargument and contemporary touchstones contribute to making this a meaningful and clarifying essay.

— Kevin Barents

WR 098: Introduction to College Reading and Writing in English

From the Writer

The idea of this essay stems from my personal experience growing up in Hong Kong and Toronto. I was often asked where I was from. While most people think it is a simple question, I always feel obligated to say Toronto instead of Hong Kong. I fear that people might label me as a newly immigrated alien, often referred to colloquially as a FOB (fresh off the boat). After reading the book *Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, I found the story very easy to relate to. The first-hand stories about how the author, Maxine Hong Kingston, faced cultural pressure really resonated with my thoughts and experiences. In this paper, I decided to discuss the ways America's dominant cultural and social expectations shape immigrants' self-identities, forcing them to behave a certain way. Also, by drawing on different readings from earlier in the semester, I explored the question of how immigrants can face the dilemma of cultural competency. All in all, I believe balance and flexibility are key solutions for immigrants in order to have positive experiences in foreign lands.

— Calvin Poon

CALVIN POON

THE MELTING POT VS. CULTURAL COMPETENCY: THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY FOR IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICA

When I first met my friend Steven, he asked me where I was from. When I told him I was from Toronto, Canada, he inquired again but added this time asking, “where I was really from.” My answer clearly was not satisfactory; he thought my accent was “funny.” Surprisingly, his question was much more difficult to answer. I did not know what to say—why could he not accept that some Canadians have a “funny” accent? Did he want me to say that I am from China? Why did my accent matter? When he first asked me where I was from, I felt obligated to answer Toronto even though I was mostly raised in Hong Kong. I was reluctant to answer his question with Hong Kong; I feared that he might label me as a newly immigrated alien, often referred to colloquially as FOB (fresh off the boat). This short anecdote is typical of many immigrants in America, and raises important questions for exploration. First, in what ways do America’s dominant cultural and social expectations implicitly shape immigrants’ self-identities and ultimately force them to behave a certain way? Second, and arguably more importantly, how can immigrants face the dilemma of cultural competency; how, if at all, can immigrants be true to their own heritage while still remaining open enough to adapt to new cultural milieus?

Maxine Hong Kingston offers one answer. Kingston herself grew up in a different culture and also recounts first-hand stories from her Chinese family. In her famous autobiography *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Kingston recalls the “talk-stories” that her mother once told her, ranging from ancient Chinese tales to real life experiences. Kingston illustrates an important theme about the importance of acting a

certain way as an Asian-American, especially in the last two chapters, “At a Western Place” and “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” “At a Western Place” is the chapter where Kingston shows the comparison between the extreme Chinese and Western cultures. Kingston tells the story of her aunt Moon Orchid’s transition from Hong Kong to America. Kingston describes the cultural conflict through Moon Orchid, a symbol for China, the children of Brave Orchid, the symbol for America, and Brave Orchid herself, the arbitrator. Brave Orchid balances the two poles harmoniously; when Moon Orchid arrives in America, she is so excited to give Brave Orchid’s children the gifts she brought from Hong Kong. However, the American children consider the Chinese gifts worthless as they do not follow the casual American model of gift giving. Nevertheless, Moon Orchid disregards their attitude and stays true to Chinese tradition. Eventually, Brave Orchid’s children grow tired of their aunt: the apparent “cultural gap” is unbearable. Even when Moon Orchid shows love when she affectionately smoothens their hair during the evening, they immediately order her to leave them alone (131). Moon Orchid’s numerous failed attempts to connect with Brave Orchid’s children drives her crazy (141). Her attempts to connect not only fail, but rather exacerbate the situation as the children become intent on keeping interactions with her as brief as possible. Thus, Moon Orchid’s inability to develop cultural competency and adapt to American culture resulted in failed relations with Brave Orchid’s children.

Julian Hill, an African American law student from Harvard University, faced similar challenges in developing cultural competency while trying to learn of his Ugandan heritage through interacting with local Ugandans. In “In Search of Black Identity in Uganda,” Hill calls Uganda his second home but has yet to travel there. He eventually goes to Uganda, discovering that calling a place “home” is not easy because there is more to home than merely having the same skin color. Hill felt it was impossible to “meld” both American and black identities: “it just seemed like I couldn’t have it both ways” (59). Hill recounts one phone conversation: “‘Yo, what’s good? I’m chillin.’ I’m mad on my way. I’ll see you like in like four-five. Fa sho. Word. Yuh.’ As I ended the call, I looked around. Great. Four sets of eyes were on me—each pair screaming ‘Muzungu’ (foreigner)” (57). Hill’s use of colloquial American language in his phone call likely confused others around him. More importantly, however, is that these people are

distinguishing themselves from him; their looks imply that “You’re not one of us, you’re one of them” (57). Hill, in an attempt to change these peoples’ views, learns local Lugandan phrases: “Throw in a few of my patented Lugandan phrases with a local, and I felt less like the alien that I really was among Ugandans” (59). But if Hill is to be “accepted” by the new society, he must change and adopt the new culture. Hill changes his behavior to behave more like the Ugandans. The Ugandans seem more accepting as he adopts their mannerisms and traditions: Hill admits that he “[does] not feel like a tourist” after learning the phrases (59). His Ugandan friend Frank even recognizes him as a “brother” (60). Hill, unlike Moon Orchid, was able to build positive and meaningful relationships with people from foreign cultures precisely because he possessed greater flexibility and open-mindedness in adapting to new socio-cultural expectations.

Kingston further reinforces this idea in another chapter called “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” where she describes her own experiences with generational and cultural clashes. Despite her American education, Kingston still feels shame from her traditional Chinese. “[The emigrants] turn the radio up full blast. . . . they yell over the singers that wail over the drums, everybody talking at once, big arm gestures, spit flying. You can see the disgust on American faces looking at women like that. It isn’t just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian” (171). Kingston decides to retract her voice to make herself more appealing to Americans: “We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine” (172). This adaptation is reinforced when Kingston bullies another Asian girl who refused to talk. On the one hand, this incident shows that as a Chinese American, Kingston judges the Chinese girl indifferent for not learning to speak English. Kingston calls her “sissy-girl,” squeezes her cheeks, and yanks her hair in frustration of her difficulty to interact with this “FOB” (175). But more importantly, Kingston despised the girl’s stereotypical fragility. Kingston’s self-racism goes further: she even generalizes FOBs as people who “wear high-riding grey slacks and white shirts with the sleeves rolled up. Their eyes do not focus correctly—shifty-eyed—and they hold their mouths slack, not tight jawed masculine” (194). FOBs, according to Kingston, do not adapt to other cultures, essentially isolating themselves.

This isolation is illustrated in the television series *Fresh Off the Boat* based on *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir* by Asian American author Eddie Huang. Eddie's mother, Jessica, resembles Kingston's mother. Not only is Jessica a stereotypical "Asian Tiger Mom" who requires excellence in everything her children do (like *Brave Orchid*), she also lacks cultural competency, fiercely guarding Chinese traditions considering all Americans foreigners.

Some might argue one should stay true to one's culture and heritage and that one should not change to adapt to others' expectations. However, people likely will need to change to adapt to new cultures when living in a foreign country for one's own flexibility and self-respect, not to impress. Examples include the way we talk, the way we dress and the way we behave. In fact, learning English is already the first step to adopting American culture. Leila Ahmed's "Reinventing the Veil" illustrates how dynamic culture is. Ahmed reflects on her childhood experiences to explore how the cultural implications and symbols associated with the veil have drastically changed. Egyptian women nowadays wear veils not as a way to obey patriarchal traditions, but as an alternative way of raising awareness and consciousness about the sexist messages in Egypt (307). According to Ahmed, embracing change can be "bracing" and "exciting" and can create a new identity (308). Ahmed's example illustrates how embracing change, though it may be difficult initially, can even catalyze positive social change.

Overall, balance and flexibility are key for immigrants to have positive experiences in foreign lands. Although different societies may maintain and promote different norms, values, and beliefs, I believe it is important to maintain balance and still stay true to one's own heritage, which would ideally be respected by those around them. The concept of cultural competency, as epitomized in the example of Hill, is one possible answer to the questions originally proposed. Although this concept is neither foolproof nor without exception, it provides for immigrants all over the world a unique conceptual framework with which to leave their lives in new lands, wherever their destinations.

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CALVIN POON is a rising sophomore from Toronto, ON majoring in psychology and economics. As a member of the College of Arts and Science, class of 2018, he is studying to become an occupational psychiatrist and a businessman. Calvin took his first semester off to embark on a marketing internship opportunity in Hong Kong. He believes his ambitious and adventurous personality contributes to the "thinking out of the box" approach of his essays. He would like to thank Professor Barents and his classmates for their tremendous patience and guidance; their support and feedback were immensely helpful throughout the writing process.