

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In WR 098, students engage in important conversations about complex issues related to globalization through their reading of numerous essays and a novel. Throughout the semester, students encounter multiple perspectives on themes such as linguistic and cultural differences, assimilation, tribalism, and definitions of home. The final paper of the course then asks them to formulate a conceptual problem and enter into a debate about one or more of those crucial themes. As international students—some of whom are experiencing living in a foreign country for the first time—WR 098 students tend to become quite invested in the course material and impassioned in the debates, establishing their own well-reasoned positions and challenging assumptions. Yun Li's writing talent was clear from the beginning of the semester, and I could tell that she had a special affinity for words and for writing as a form of self-expression. As the semester progressed, Yun consistently challenged herself on writing assignments, demonstrated by the sophisticated evolution of her ideas and argumentation, along with her linguistic growth. She had been commenting on the realistic possibility of cultural homogenization all semester, so her decision to enter into this debate in a formal way was a natural final capstone assignment to close out the course. In the early stages of her writing process, Yun's position in this debate was quite undecided and, as a result of this lack of confidence in her point of view, her voice became rather muted in the discussion. As she continued critically engaging with the texts and her classmates, Yun came to some important realizations about assimilation and tribalism, and she was able to skillfully reorganize her argument and strengthen her voice. The result is the excellent prize-winning paper published here.

Lesley Yoder

WR 098: Academic Writing for ESL Students 2

FROM THE WRITER

I see the experience of writing this essay as a chance to explore something I am personally related to and passionate about. As an international student myself, I have been struggling with the ambivalent impulse to fit in this westernized society and, at the same time, to maintain my original identity. As a student minoring in psychology, I have always been interested in human nature and instinct and how they determine people's behaviors on a daily basis. Therefore, I was caught by Marcelo Gleiser's point of view that the evolved and ingrained tribal tendency of human nature makes globalization unattainable. However, the contradictory cases I read in Julie Traves's essay "The Church of Please and Thank You" and in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* resonated with me and inspired my decision to base my final paper on the debate about whether cultural homogenization can realistically occur and whether minority cultures will eventually die out without any intervention. Although I initially found the tribalism perspective plausible in every case, it occurred to me that our consciousness and rationality play a significant role in the possibility of cultural assimilation. During the writing process, I came to realize that to achieve globalization and cultural unification in a favorable way, it is important to remain aware and respectful of one's heritage, but also critical, to discern the most effective path for progress.

YUN LI is an international student born and raised in Shanghai, China. As a rising sophomore, she was just accepted to the Questrom School of Business but has not yet decided on her concentration. Despite her pursuit of business, which is mostly what her parents expect from her, her true passion lies in literature and psychology, which she has declared as her minor. Writing is a big part of Yun's life. Fascinated by what words can communicate and how they can heal and comfort, she takes up writing as a source of relief and as a way of expressing herself. Coming to the United States for college, away from her family and hometown, has been a giant leap for her and is a path full of unexpected challenges and hurdles. Yun is still adjusting to the foreign environment and struggling with the transition, but she is optimistic about the adventure ahead. Yun would like to offer great gratitude to her WR 098 professor, Lesley Yoder, for her patience and significant help on her papers. Only with her help could Yun achieve great improvement in her writing skills and get this opportunity to have her essay published. Thanks to Professor Yoder's warm and encouraging class environment, Yun has learned to get fully involved in class discussions and to express her thoughts with confidence.

YUN LI

Prize Essay Award

FIGHTING AGAINST TRIBALISM

Since globalization is an ongoing social tendency that exerts significant influence and shows no sign of stopping, it raises some concerns about the threats it may impose on minority cultures and about the likelihood that cultural homogenization will eventually occur. According to Marcelo Gleiser in his essay “Globalization: Two Visions of the Future of Humanity,” human tribal tendencies make a unified culture unattainable despite rapid technological developments and increasing scientific transparency. While Gleiser claims that cultural homogenization is unlikely, the lives of the main characters in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* prove otherwise. After Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli emigrate from India to start their new life in America, they maintain their Bengali traditions and expand their Bengali social circles; yet, in many ways, they still become Americanized unwittingly and merge into their new Western environment. Moreover, their American-born son, Gogol, attempts to escape his Bengali roots and disconnect himself from his parents, which predicts further deviation from the family’s Indian heritage in the long run. The contrast between Gleiser’s perspective on tribalism and the Gangulis’ gradual Americanization sets up the debate about whether a “global village” is possible. While I concede Gleiser’s point of view that human beings do have an ingrained tribal tendency to cling to our familiar social groups, I think he overlooks the fact that human beings are active agents who are able to consciously choose to merge or fight against another culture. Moreover, the power of social influence and relationships cannot be neglected. Hence, I argue that cultural homogenization is likely to happen, which therefore endangers minority languages and cultures.

Although I disagree with Gleiser’s overall claim that cultural homogenization is unrealistic, I concede that we as human beings do have an ingrained, evolved, inextricable tendency to be tribal, to remain in our own familiar social group, and to favor our in-group members and exclude outside factors. The statistical evidence mentioned in Gleiser’s essay suggests that cross-cultural relations present only a limited amount of communication patterns: “International mail constitutes 1% of the total; international phone calling, less than 2%; international Internet traffic, between 17 to 18%; exports as percentage of GDP, 26%; first-generation immigrants, 3%” (9). As Gleiser shows, in real life, we do tend to approach people who are like us, in value or appearance. However, even if we do have an ingrained tendency to remain tribal, our conscious awareness has the ability to outsmart our instinct. As highly intelligent creatures, we have the agency to choose our living environment and social circles with which we want to interact. In spite of our natural tribalism, we are very likely to intentionally merge ourselves into certain cultures or societies that are perceived to be more promising and powerful.

The very action of immigration can serve as an example of people’s conscious intention to merge into another culture in order to seek more opportunities. As is demonstrated in *The Namesake*, after surviving a horrible train accident in India, Ashoke feels like he gets a second chance to live and thus determines to go abroad for his engineering studies. His decision to leave the place where

he grew up and immigrate to America can be considered as an effort to pursue a higher educational degree, a better living condition and a future with more possibilities that cannot be offered in his home country: “Ashoke began to envision another sort of future. He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died” (Lahiri 20). His impulse undeniably shows that people also have a natural tendency to move upwards and to evolve, escaping from constraints and adopting something greater, which is the foundation for the human race to evolve and develop. Since immigration is the one particular decision that has far-reaching and long-lasting consequence, not only Ashoke’s family but also all the generations that follow are likely to be influenced, and therefore even the whole Indian culture will be affected in the long run.

Similar to immigration, learning a foreign language and, at the same time, adopting its cultural connotations can also be viewed as people’s conscious willingness to merge into a dominant society. Nowadays, the globe has witnessed a significant growth in the spread of English, which, in my point of view, can contribute to the inevitable unification of cultures considering the inalienable relationship between languages and cultures. In her article titled “The New Language Landscape,” Reshma Krishnamurthy Sharma suggests that an increasing number of Indian parents, especially professionals, are teaching their kids English as their first language instead of teaching their own local languages. According to Sharma’s research, one contributing factor for this trend is that the parents “believe that speaking in flawless English from a young age, children are better equipped to work in global environments” (165). Like the Indian parents in Sharma’s essay, students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Julia Traves’s essay “The Church of Please and Thank You” also echo the necessity to learn English as an effort to be prepared for the globalized economy. Through her interviews with EFL students and instructors, Traves reveals people’s awareness that English has westernized people from other countries both linguistically and culturally. However, while they hold a similar point of view to the Indian parents interviewed in Sharma’s essay, the EFL students express their discomfort of being subjected to potential “linguistic imperialism” during Traves’s interviews (174). While they are aware of the threats that English and western culture impose on their own local dialects, the EFL students acknowledge that “to survive in this kind of competitive environment I have to speak English and I have to know what English culture is” (Traves 177). Their struggles with this unpleasant ambivalence can serve as further support for Gleiser’s reasoning that our tribal tendency is entrenched and ingrained; however, Gleiser fails to take into account our ability to fight against our instinct and make rational decisions based on reality. The reality is that we are now facing a globalized business society. In order to be competitive, starting from a young age, kids are educated and socialized to speak a global language, to be individualistic and to be intentionally westernized. The concern is in the air that if we are disconnected with those powerful Western countries, we are going to be hurt economically both as individuals and as a society. However, because linguistic and cultural diversity are intertwined so deeply, the global trend of speaking English as a common language can nearly predict the extinction of other minority local customs and values.

From Ashoke’s immigration to the worldwide belief that learning English can lead to prosperity, we can see that when our two evolved tendencies—to be tribal and to be superior—are in collision, it is likely that our instinct to “strive for superiority” is stronger, thus driving us to consciously choose to merge into a more advanced culture, which accordingly breeds cultural assimilation. Usually those decisions we make, such as immigrating to another country (like Ashoke and Ashima in *The Namesake*) or exposing our kids to another linguistic system (like the Indian

parents in Sharma's essay), have rippling influences on the future generations, thus resulting in the vanishing of our regional languages and cultures.

What if some people's innate tribalism is too strong to be suppressed by their rational thinking? A real-life example would be what Gleiser calls "fundamentalism" (9), meaning defending one's own culture or religion in a radical way. Yet, as far as I am concerned, extremely strong tribalism can serve as a unifying force rather than as a dividing force. When people's tribal tendencies overpower their conscious efforts to be superior, they may become so rigid and conservative that they refuse to open up to new, potentially more advanced aspects of another flourishing society, which may instead lead to their own extinction. Adaptability and flexibility are the key to survival and evolution. If people from certain cultural backgrounds fail to adapt to the overall global trend or fail to assert their cultural autonomy, they are more likely to be absorbed by more powerful countries or die out because of underdevelopment or poverty.

Some people may also argue that since human beings are conscious agents, even if we choose to live in another environment that is favorable for our future development, we can still explore the resources and opportunities that an environment can offer and consciously resist the outside forces of cultural assimilation. However, I argue that the power of socialization cannot be underestimated; in other words, once we intentionally expose ourselves to another culture, some extent of assimilation is inevitable. Who we are is largely formed by our social environment and the people with whom we interact. When people choose to immigrate to another country or to speak another language, cultural influence can unwittingly penetrate into their daily life, changing the most minute detail of the way they relate to the outside world. Because human beings are adaptive and social creatures, we tend to involuntarily internalize the traits of people around us and the environment we are in. Thus, I think it is almost impossible for us to keep our old selves from being influenced by our new surroundings. For example, in *The Namesake*, Ashima follows her husband abroad in his pursuit of his studies without the intention to adopt the Western culture. At first, she brings her country with her by eating the same Indian food, wearing saris, following Bengali traditions, and approaching only other Bengalis. Just after she immigrates to America and gives birth to Gogol, Ashima is overwhelmed by a sense of disconnection and alienation as she thinks about raising a child in a completely foreign country. She compares the feeling of being a foreigner to "a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (Lahiri 49). Yet as the story progresses, we can clearly notice that her life is slowly Americanized in many ways: she has learned to do things on her own, she eats casually like Americans, and she manages to make some American friends through her job at the library. At the end of the book, after living in America for 33 years and deciding to sell the family house on Pemberton Road to spend the rest of her life traveling back and forth between her family in India and America, Ashima acknowledges herself that "though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta" (Lahiri 276). We can see a sense of independence and openness, which are typical Western traits, grow within her and become part of her personality. Due to her husband's death from a heart attack, she is left to do everything on her own. Interacting with her kids, who were born and socialized in America, and other people around her enables Ashima to pick up some aspects of the American lifestyle over time, unknowingly being assimilated. Hence, it is hard to counter that we are significantly influenced by our social environment and the people with whom we interact. Since we are innately social and adaptive, once we enter a given culture, assimilation is irresistible and inevitable, beyond our control and even beyond our awareness.

While some behaviors of the Indian couple in *The Namesake* support Gleiser's argument that tribalism is hard-wired and ingrained in our human nature, their overall life somehow predicts future assimilation and Americanization in the long run. The contradictory perspectives lead to the question: Is cultural homogenization possible in the future? From my perspective, future cultural unification is likely to happen because the power and limitation of human being's rational thinking may work together and facilitate cultural merging—the power to overcome our tribal instinct and the lack of power in the face of social influences. So, if cultural assimilation is possible, should we see globalization as a completely negative outcome and try all means to avoid it? Or should we be open to some of its positive aspects and find an optimal balance between diversity and assimilation? Since every culture may have its favorable parts that deserve to be learned and its undesired aspects that should be improved upon or even abandoned, it is too extreme to conclude that cultural assimilation is something that should be prevented from happening altogether. It is not necessarily a bad thing to let go of some of the outdated or conservative parts of our own culture and adopt some advanced aspects of other cultures. Extremely speaking, do we have to spare no effort to save and maintain a minority culture if it is undesirable for human development in the long run? In brief, I think that what we need is the awareness of our heritage and, more importantly, the discernment to tell whether it deserves to be held so tightly.

WORKS CITED

- Gleiser, Marcelo. "Globalization: Two Visions of the Future of Humanity." *Globalization: A Reader for Writers*, edited by Maria Jerskey, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp.7–9.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Mariner, 2014.
- Sharma, Reshma Krishnamurthy. "The New Language Landscape." *Globalization: a Reader for Writers*, edited by Maria Jerskey, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 164–167.
- Traves, Julie. "The Church of Please and Thank You." *Globalization: A Reader for Writers*, edited by Jerskey, Maria, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 172–180.