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UWP 001
10 December 2020

Silenced Tongue

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are preparing to land. Please tighten your seat belt and put your phones away.” We landed in SFO. My thin jacket was no match for the freezing cold night at the airport. I gripped onto my mother’s hand as we walked through crowds of unfamiliar faces. These faces were different, but I didn’t know what that difference was at the time. Like any typical kid, I happily arrived at this new place I would call home. Listening to the voices of a whole new language, I was not shocked or scared. Instead, I was curious, interested, and excited for what lay ahead of me.

Before I go on, let me introduce myself. Hello, my name is Haishan Huang. Haishan means ocean sea coral in English and symbolizes beauty. I was born in Guangdong, China. I came to America with my family at the age of four. Learning English was not a problem for me since I started young. I quickly picked up the new language and adapted to the new environment. When people see my name, they’ll usually ask me where I’m from and I would confidently say, “I came from China!” Sadly, this confidence lasted only till the end of elementary school. As I got older, I began to hide my native tongue, Cantonese, and the fact that I was born in China. Throughout this period of transition, I’ve incurred multiple incidents where I constantly questioned my old identity as an “American.” Most people believe language acquisition only rests upon the challenges of speaking and writing but from my experiences, there are microaggressions and racial issues that one has to endure as well.

It was a Sunday. My dad, little brother, older sister, and I went on our way to the Starbucks 3 blocks down from the apartment. As usual, I played the role of a translator for my dad at the cashier but instead of the usual “thank you and here’s your receipt,” I was asked a question.

“Are you guys tourists?” The cashier kindly asked with a smile.

“No. We live here,” I firmly replied. The cashier saw the change in my tone and expressions and quickly apologized.

“Oh, my bad. I didn't mean anything else,” said the cashier.

I forced a smile and said, “it’s okay,” took the receipt and walked away.

As I was drinking my Starbucks, the cashier’s question kept coming up in my mind. Even though he was sincerely sorry, it somehow bothered me. Maybe the cashier thought people speaking Cantonese must not be “true” Americans. The question can also hint that I do not belong here.

The thought that “I do not belong here” constantly reminded me of that incident and so every time I speak Chinese, I would experience similarly uncomfortable scenarios. Speaking my native language has become a dangerous task where I have to carefully plan out what to say and say it in a way where I don’t sound like a “tourist” or a FOB (Fresh off the boat).” When I say carefully planning out what to say, I mean speaking Chinese with an English accent. Funny right? Faking an English accent just so you can sound more American and trying to hide the fact that you can speak Chinese. This idea came to mind when I realized the ABCs (American-born Chinese) all had this accent whenever they spoke Chinese. The scary part of this was the more I

continue with this practice, I started to lose my native tongue. I was able to speak Chinese with an English accent without even trying which made me feel great at the time.

The satisfaction of being able to speak Chinese with a English accent eventually overcame the discouragement that lingered in my heart as time went by. However, I realize the discouragement never disappeared. During 7th grade, in my 6th-period science class, we were working on a group project. My group mates and I were having a discussion on the solar system and the Galaxy. It was my turn to share my opinion.

I said, “The black ho.....”

Before I was able to speak the next words, laughter exploded. One of the groupmates cracked up laughing. I was extremely confused. Were my facts incorrect?

“Say black hole again.” the groupmate said in a joking matter.

Without acknowledging the issue, I said “Black ho?”

“Haishan, you know you have an accent, right? It’s black hole, not black ho!” said the groupmate.

Right when I was asked that, the doubtful feeling from the Starbucks incident was awakened. Once again, my identity and my language were questioned. I wasn’t sure how to respond so I denied the correct pronunciation. After that incident, I repeatedly practiced the correct way of pronouncing the word hole until I had it!

Ensuring I was pronouncing each English word correctly wasn’t enough to comfort myself. I forced myself to listen to western music like hip hop or rap since that’s what Americans listened to. I would purposely go on Google and search up “Popular American Songs” and download them to my playlist even though I didn’t like all of them. The harder I pushed myself to do the opposite, the stronger my desire for Chinese music is. Every time a Chinese song comes up on TV or when my sister plays one, I can quickly identify the title of the song, the author and inadvertently start singing or humming along. Whenever I listen to Chinese music, I can closely relate my mood to the lyrics and the flow just calms me down. Since following the trend of American music didn’t work out, I sought a new plan which I still feel ashamed of today for once doing. On my Spotify playlist, I organized all the English songs at the top and placed all the Chinese songs at the bottom. The point of this is so I can confidently open my playlist in public and show people I listen to English music. Other than that, I would put my phone face down when listening to music so others cannot see the title of the song I am listening to. Whenever I checked the time or changed the song, I would do it secretly just so others don’t see the Chinese titled song on my lock screen. Even though this was a horrible mistake but no doubt it boosted my confidence at the time.

Having to go through such careful planning just to safely speak Chinese in America is a pain. On the other hand, speaking Chinese in China is a natural task where I didn’t have to fake an accent or purposely hide my song titles. People might question why I have to try so hard to learn another language? Maybe speaking Chinese would have been a much easier way but how will I become an American? How would I translate for my parents who didn’t go to school? And if I don’t, how will I communicate with others? Amanda Lee Koe wrote about her childhood lesbian love story that received constant objections, in “Not Gonna Get Us,” published in the Paris Review, “Mandarin was the only common tongue we had between us, but unlike for the Han Chinese, it was the first language for neither of us.” In this essay, Koe details how Mandarin wasn’t her or her friend’s first language, but it was the common language they both knew and were able to use as a channel of communication. My situation is similar to Koe; English is the language everyone speaks and uses to transmit messages. If I want to become a part of America,

I first need to learn their language, so I can at least communicate. Also, being able to speak the language wasn't enough, perfecting it was the goal; Therefore, getting rid of the accent was the second step.

As time went by, I accomplished my second step. My English had greatly improved to the point where you can barely tell there's an accent. With great confidence, I started to believe that I am a true "American!"

The belief that I was a true American didn't last long. During my senior year of High School, I went through another similar experience like the previous ones but worse. In my AP environmental class, I was working on a lab write up with two other classmates. Classmate one was sharing her plan, but I interrupted half-way through.

"Wait, I don't understand what you just said. You talked too fast. Can you repeat it?" I kindly asked.

"Haishan! I know you're not from here, but you need to keep up!" classmate one replied.

Those words hit me like boulders and left me speechless. It crushed the defensive barrier I had built for so many years. She literally wiped away the thought "I am a true American" that I spent years working towards with those words. "Keep up" didn't just mean to follow closely with what she was saying but also served as a warning that I will be despised by others if I don't catch up. Hoping for some sympathy from classmate two or hoping for her to speak up but she was working on something else. With nowhere to express my feelings and no words to combat, I bottled up everything inside and ignored classmate one. I tried so hard to hold back the puddle of tears, but I could not hold it back anymore. I rushed to the restroom, locked myself in one of the stalls, and started crying but silently so others couldn't hear me.

While tears flooded down my cheeks, flashbacks of past memories of the incidents I mentioned and the ones I did not were all coming back. These experiences and people made me feel ashamed of my native culture, pushing me onto the road of worshipping the western culture. Each time something like this happens, I would silence myself because I thought as long as I stay quiet, this would eventually pass by. But once again, I was proven wrong. There's no problem with accepting a culture but trying to erase your history or background is a big mistake. Classmate one's words served as a wake-up call.

I wiped off the tears, washed my face with cold water, and gradually walked back to class. Instead of silencing myself, I decided to speak up. I went up to classmate one and confronted her.

"I am not from here, but that doesn't mean I don't belong here. You have no right to judge me in any sense because you don't know my story, and what I've been through; So, watch what you're saying!" I declared.

Classmate one saw my attitude and was frozen in shocked for a good minute because she didn't expect that from me. She realized her words probably really hurt me and said, "my bad." I guess that "my bad" was an apology, but definitely not a sincere one. Even though it didn't sound sincere, it symbolized my first victory against my identity.

Classmate one's words didn't simply just offend one's feelings but also violated my First Amendment right. With similar experiences as the author, Gloria Anzaldua who struggles with conflicts as a native Spanish-speaking person living in America, forced to integrate and uphold American societal views agrees with me. After being attacked repeatedly on her form of expression, Anzaldua came up with the conclusion that it's a violation of our right as an American citizen. In her essay *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, Gloria Anzaldua argues that "Attacks on one's form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First

Amendment” (411). I agree with Anzaldua, but I would even add that cultural centrism is a way to put one’s culture at a lower status. Many immigrants who have been in America for almost their whole lives are still not considered “American” since they weren’t born in the US. I lived in America for more than fifteen years, but in the eyes of the native-born people here, I will never become one of them; therefore, they believe the First Amendment, or any US citizen rights does not apply to me.

Language acquisition isn’t all about speaking and writing but also about the experience one goes through as they are acquiring it. These experiences can include microaggressions and racial problems. Throughout my journey of acquiring a second language, the microaggressions and tension producing environment forced me to cut off my native tongue. No doubt the journey was painful, but the outcome was worth it. Instead of continuing the track that was set for me, I took a turn. I stopped hiding my phone when listening to music and even told people the fact that I like Chinese music. I stop hiding whenever I encounter a situation that wants to silence me. I stopped trying to change the fact that I’m not born in the US and trying to get rid of my Cantonese accent. In the end, having an accent can put a distinctive characteristic to my character and my speaking voice because that is what makes me unique.

My accent added uniqueness to my character but so does my name, Haishan. In the introduction, I mentioned that I often got questioned where I was from because “Haishan” doesn’t sound like an English name. In addition, I often got teased by people because of my name. A classmate once made a joke that goes “Hi-Shawn” and “Bye-Shawn.” At first, I would laugh it off but eventually, I got sick of the jokes which led to the birth of my English name, Valerie. To many people, my English name was just a part of blending into another culture but only I know it’s a protective armor and shield against the racist stereotypes and jokes. After announcing my English name, I felt the rise in status and moving closer to a “true” American. Another purpose of the name Valerie was to accommodate other people, making it easier for others to address me. One of the most common pronunciations of my name is “Hey-Shang” when people first say my name. Some people might confirm with me if they pronounced it correctly but must just address me like that’s how my name is pronounced. Making others' lives easier, I changed my name to accommodate them but why should I accommodate them by hiding my Chinese name. Instead of hiding my Chinese name, I tell people both my names. Valerie symbolizes strength, braveness, fierceness and a lesson learned. On the other hand, Haishan symbolizes the tolerance of the ocean, the beauty of sea corals, and a representation of my culture. Both these names reflect the qualities I possessed and acquired to overcome challenges during this difficult journey.

The fight doesn’t stop here. As I continue to struggle with identifying what it means to be American, it’s important to keep these lessons in mind and constantly remind myself: “I am who I am. Stand strong! Don’t forget your culture and where you came from because your culture is what defines you!”

“Hello, my name is Haishan Huang. I also go by Valerie. I came from China! Nice to meet you!”

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