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Where Is "Home"? Value Conflicts, Identity Crises and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Identity in Myanmar Students Studying in the United States

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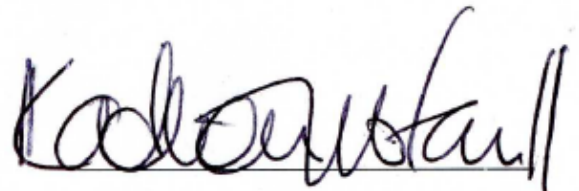By

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ABSTRACT

Fully engaging in a new culture means translating oneself into a different set of cultural values, and many of the values can be foreign to the individual. The individual may face conflicting tensions between the psychological need to be a part of the new society and feelings of guilt or betrayal towards the former society, culture or self. Many international students from Myanmar, most of whom have little international experience, undergo this value and cultural translation during their time in American colleges. It is commonly assumed that something will be lost in the process of translation and that the students become more Westernized or never fit into both Myanmar and US cultures. However, the study of the narratives of the Myanmar students studying in the US reveals a more complex reality. Because individuals have multifaceted identities and many cultures and subcultures are fluctuating and intertwined with one another, the students' cross-cultural interactions can also help them acquire new ways of seeing things. Through their struggle to engage in the US college culture, many students display the theory of "cosmopolitanism" in their transformative identity formation process and thus, define and identify themselves beyond one set of cultural norms.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Today, celebrating diversity and recognizing different cultures is generally praised and valued, but at the level of experience, the reality of pluralism is neither simple nor painless. It can be very alienating and ostracizing for an individual to move from one culture to a new one. This is because fully engaging in a new culture means translating yourself into a different set of values. Inevitably, something will be lost in the process of translation. The individual may face conflicting tensions between the psychological need to be a part of the new society and feelings of guilt or betrayal towards her former society, culture or self. Although there is much research on cross-cultural identity, little has been done on the hybrid identity formation of international students studying in the United States. Because I am an international student from Myanmar studying at Bucknell University, and Myanmar has been opened up for reform in the past eighteen months, I will specifically focus on the experiences of Myanmar students currently enrolled in post-secondary institutions in the United States, in order to shed light on some of the tensions involved in cross-cultural identity formation.

I have based my theoretical framework on selected works of writers and philosophers such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum, Rabindranath Tagore and Amartya Sen. In particular, their ideas have helped me to formulate my definitions of identity. Sen claims that we are in fact made up of multifaceted identities, and in today's world the focus on one narrow category of a particular identity (e.g., religious, or

cultural) is dividing our common humanity.[1] Although these identities need not be in conflict most of the time in our daily life, the internalization of radical and incompatible values during the experience of studying abroad can cause identity dissonance. The experience, on the other hand, can be the beginning of the formation of a "cosmopolitan" or global identity for an international student. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, *cosmopolitanism* can be understood as the notion that "we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance."[2]

In order to thoroughly understand the study abroad experience, I will employ narratives written by people who have been abroad as international students, and have gone through a similar process of assimilation from one culture to another. I begin with the assumption that assimilation is a gradual process that is never fully completed. Once one has experienced living, fully immersed, in two or more cultures, one can never truly be a product of only one of those cultures, but will inevitably be a combination. And so identity becomes *hybrid*, and therefore the international students may always face internal conflicting values with regards to certain cultural values. Nevertheless, the narratives of the students suggest many of them overcome the cultural conflicts, and are eventually able to identify themselves beyond one set of cultural norms—i.e., they become *cosmopolitan*.

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[1] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), xv.
[2] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xv.

Using the personal narratives of selected Myanmar students studying in the US, I will examine: a) the process of how an individual may become assimilated into a foreign culture; b) how the individual experiences the process of identity formation amidst the conflict of cultures; and c) how, after up to four years of studying abroad, they come to terms with the definition of "home." Despite their struggle with ambiguity, most students understand themselves in cosmopolitan terms. In short, although something is lost in the translation process, something can also be gained.

Therefore, I argue in my thesis that the struggle to adapt to a new culture while sustaining one's previous identity leads individuals to a new understanding of themselves and their identity, which in turn, enables them to rise above the two cultures and define themselves, as "cosmopolitans." However, becoming a cosmopolitan is not in itself a triumph—it involves accepting the constant challenge of engaging in dialogues of competing vocabularies and values. As a result, because of their comparative knowledge of both cultures, the students have an important role to play as agents bridging the Myanmar and American cultures.

Burma vs. Myanmar

In 1989, the country formerly known as Burma was renamed by the government as Myanmar, based on the modern literary Burmese pronunciation. Since then, the majority Burman group has been known as the Bamar, and all the citizens of the country including other minorities are called the Myanmar. Until recently, many countries in the West did not recognize the name change because of the military regime and continued to

designate the country as Burma. The two terminologies have been used interchangeably since the 2010 reforms.[3] The name change, however, does not affect the Myanmar citizens because the two pronunciations are similar in the country's main language, Burmese.

On the other hand, from my personal experience, it is very hard to say what a person means when she employs the word, "Burmese." Depending on the person being asked, it could mean the people of Myanmar or the specific Burman ethnic group. While foreigners would generally use Burmese to imply all the citizens of Myanmar, the people of Myanmar might employ the word to refer specifically to the Bamar people. To complicate the matter more, although there are many other languages and dialects spoken in the country, the sole legal language of education, government and national life is "Burmese." It is a Tibeto-Burman language, spoken as the first language of at least half the population of the country. Therefore, for the sake of consistency, the term "Myanmar" is used in this thesis, except when alternative terms are used in the source materials.

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[3] Jason Burke, "Burma v Myanmar – What's in a Name? Obama Plays it Safe during Historic Visit," *The Guardian*, November 19, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/nov/19/burma-myanmar-obama-name-visit.

Methodology and Limitations

There is an online webpage for a large network of Myanmar students studying in different parts of the United States. I posted a SurveyMonkey link to that page and asked the students to write a personal narrative for my humanities thesis project. The survey link was used so that the students could remain anonymous. Twelve students across the United States replied to my request and wrote narrative essays based on their college experiences. Although several of them are not ethnically Bamar, the students all share the same linguistic background of speaking Burmese as their first language. They all disclosed who they are to me, yet some students did not want their names to be mentioned in the thesis. Thus, throughout this thesis, random initials are employed to designate different students.

There is an obvious response bias since the entire pool of twelve respondents was included in the study. Because the narratives were self-selective and the students wrote their stories voluntarily, they had already displayed interest in recounting their personal transformations. Yet, even among the twelve narratives, we can see a wide range of student experiences. While there are possibilities here for generalization to international students, and particularly Asian students more generally, many remarks of this study are limited to the case of Myanmar, so the thesis will limit itself to an analysis of identity changes among Myanmar students studying in the United States.

Although the questionnaire was in English, the students were told beforehand that their narratives could be written either in English or in Burmese depending on their preference. If the narrative is written in English, the recommended page range was five to

ten pages, double-spaced, and if in Burmese, seven to fifteen pages, double-spaced. All twelve of the students chose to write their narratives in English. This shows that the students are comfortable communicating and expressing in English. It is also possible that they feel alienated or not used to expressing personal narratives in Burmese since all of the contributing students went to public post-secondary schools in Myanmar—and these schools do not usually emphasize teaching how to express oneself in Burmese. I, personally, have learned to express my thoughts during my time at Bucknell University, but only in English.

At the same time, writing in English poses some limitations on the study of the student narratives. Since the students *learn* to express themsleves in English usually by imitating other people in the United States, sometimes they might not actually mean the things they say in this language. The phrases can just be some common expressions that many Americans use, and the students just internalize and apply those words during their process of adaptation and assimilation in the United States. This issue is further discussed in the subsequent chapters, whenever it is relevant.

The following basic guidelines for what they could include in their narratives were provided in the survey:

1. What is the biggest value conflict you have experienced, as regards to the two cultures?
2. How many American friends do you have? Do you have more international friends than American? Why?

3. How much isolation have you felt when trying to fit into the American culture?

4. How hard have you tried to be part of the new culture? How do you find common ground with the new culture?

5. Have you ever felt incompetent or deficient among Americans because you are not accustomed to their lifestyle (e.g., sports, entertainment)?

6. What values have you lost, if any, during the process of trying to fit into the new culture?

7. Do you identify with Myanmar culture? If so, in what ways?

8. How has your relationship with both Americans and people back in Myanmar changed over the years of being abroad?

9. Where is 'home' for you now? Where do you think you belong?

In the initial call, respondents were asked to answer in a narrative form. While many students provided a personal narrative, there were some students who answered each question directly, one by one. Those narratives that did not meet the requested format were returned and the writers were asked to reformat. Instead of writing the narrative for a general audience, some students addressed me directly about their college experience.

After I received the requested narratives, I analyzed the data, establishing similarities and differences among the students' views on Myanmar culture, American culture, and their assimilation process. Using the works of the theorists mentioned above, I examined how the tensions and the process of fitting into a new environment have led

the students to blur the distinction between the Self and Others, and enabled them to identify with Others of different cultural backgrounds.

Significance

Myanmar is one of the most isolated countries in the world, due to the rule of the military *junta* in the past half-century. Since its independence from Great Britain in 1948, the country has had little exposure to the West. As Thant Myint-U has argued, the post-independent Myanmar inherited "a legacy of distrust" from colonial rule, and many Burmese elite were not willing to admit that the country was home not just to Burmese Buddhists but to a diverse group of people and cultures. The country has faced numerous armed and violent ethnic conflicts in many regions.[4] According to "The Human Security Report 2005," the country's civil war is the longest armed conflict in the world from the country's independence to current day.[5] Moreover, there were multiple foreign interventions, by the Americans, the Chinese, the Soviets and the Thais, that made it impossible for any local solution to the country's civil wars. Eventually, in 1962, the military government, led by General Ne Win, took advantage of the sudden British withdrawal and the insurgent chaos of the fledging nation, and took control of the nation with armed forces.

In addition to the junta's isolation of the country, the international community applied pressure on the nation by refusing aid and imposing trade sanctions, which led to

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[4] Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma with a New Afterword on Recent Events* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 288.
[5] Ibid., 258.

more isolation. By the late 1990s, US based corporations such as Wal-Mart, Kenneth Cole, Tommy Hilfiger and Pepsi Cola had ended their operations in Myanmar.[6] These international policies were not only counterproductive but also dangerous for a nation with so many diverse ethnic groups, cultures and languages. The ramifications of the isolation of the country and its citizens from the rest of the world are echoed in the struggles and value conflicts of the few Myanmar students who are fortunate enough to study in the United States.

On the other hand, in the past few years, the country has been undergoing a democratic reform, and the interaction between Myanmar and the rest of the world, particularly with the West, has increased substantially. However, any transition from dictatorship to democracy will open up new problems, including interethnic violence. We have seen the ongoing battle between the Kachins and the Myanmar army in the northern part of the country.[7] In the northern Rakhine State (formerly known as Arakan State), riots between the Buddhist Rakhine people and Muslim Rohingya people emerged in June 2012. Since the reform, questions such as, "Who exactly belongs to this country?" and "What does it mean to be a citizen of Myanmar?" are both explicitly and implicitly asked. Very recently, in late March 2013, another riot between Myanmar Muslims and Buddhists erupted in Meikhtila, a town in central Myanmar, and a state of emergency was

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[6] Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma with a New Afterword on Recent Events* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 343.

[7] Thomas Fuller and Edward Wong. "Myanmar Announces a Cease-Fire in Assault Against Kachin Rebels," The New York Times, January 18, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/19/world/asia/kachin-refugees-reported-to-flee-myanmar-to-china.html?_r=0.

announced by the President.[8] On April 5, 2013, eight people were killed at an immigration detention center in Indonesia during a brawl between Myanmar Buddhist and Muslim asylum seekers with regards to the riots happening in their home country.[9]

Many people in Myanmar hold to a sense of deep-rooted tradition with lasting association among "Burma, the Burmese and the Buddhist religion".[10] There is for many a feeling of one continuous history of the country, beginning with the legendary rulers of Tagaung and Bagan (Pagan) and interrupted only with the British occupation. On the contrary, in reality, there were civilizations in the southern Ayeyawady (Irrawaddy) Valley long before Buddhism arrived, and the current Buddhism practiced by many citizens of Myanmar is in fact relatively new. The history of Myanmar has always involved other people with their traditions, along with the profound influence of cultural "superpowers" India and China, coming from the west and the east respectively.[11]

At the same time, the country has now joined the consumer age, with many Western-influenced shopping malls being opened in major cities such as Yangon (Rangoon) and Mandalay in the past three years. On one hand, there is a glimpse of hope for economic development due to foreign investment and tourism. On the other hand, the identity and culture of Myanmar citizens, particular young adults who live in these cities, has been shaped by these drastic Western influences. When suddenly opened up to the

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[8] USA Today, "Emergency Declared in Myanmar Muslim-Buddhist clashes," *USA Today,* March 22, 2013, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/03/22/myanmar-meikhtila-emergency-muslims-buddhists/2008715/.
[9] Bangkok Post, "8 killed in Myanmar Buddhist-Muslim brawl in Indonesia," *Bangkok Post*, April 5, 2013, http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asia/344078/myanmar-buddhist-muslim-violence-spreads-to-indonesia.
[10] Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma with a New Afterword on Recent Events* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 62.
[11] Ibid.

world, many of the country's citizens have become attracted to the wealthy, materialistic aspects of the West.

This transition is pivotal in the history of "modern" Myanmar, and I believe Myanmar students studying abroad who have undergone the transformative experience themselves, have important roles to contribute to this reform and can serve as bridges to connect Myanmar to rest of the world, specifically in this case with the United States of America. These international students, who experience first-hand the effects of cross-cultural transformation and who supposedly possess global identities, have a critical role to play in guiding their fellow citizens to become truly cosmopolitan, rather than simply having Western values imposed on them. International students are also significant to the West as they provide the most intimate access for understanding the shift in Myanmar identity and culture before and after the 2010 reforms.

In short, despite the struggle to resolve the tensions among different cultural values and identity conflicts, the experience of studying abroad in the United States can establish "cosmopolitan" or global identities within international students. Through this thesis, I hope to raise awareness among peers, US college administrators and people back in Myanmar of the unique experiences of students studying abroad—and how these experiences can transform these individuals into indispensable resources for both cultures.

Myanmar Values from the Students' Perspectives

Myanmar is a culturally and ethnically diverse nation. Because there are so many different people living in Myanmar in their particular ways, it is very difficult to describe the country and its culture in a general sense. In fact, it is better to trace the individuals' specific slice of society and come to terms with what its immediate culture means to them and how it shapes the individuals' notion of Myanmar. Therefore, all the narratives are analyzed not in a historical sense, but in terms of storytelling. The Myanmar culture that the students describe in their narratives is not taken to comprehensively represent the entire nation. Instead, each story is regarded as a small piece of a multifarious culture, one that reflects the students' particular backgrounds and upbringings. Yet, the complexity of the students' lives can still be witnessed in this following extract from USM's narrative: "The whole family on my dad's side is Chinese, identify with Chinese culture and live as Chinese immigrants in Burma. … [B]ecause I went to public school[s] in Burma, … socialization in school helped me get in touch with Burmese culture better than in my family."

One of the main value conflicts that students studying in the United States face is the pressure to be "good." For many students, Myanmar culture emphasizes respect, humbleness and obedience, and the society praises and rewards the individuals who practice these virtues. One of the narrators, TM, states, "From the environment I was grown up in, I learned to value three things, work ethics, respect and humbleness." It is not that the values that TM describes are not praised and practiced in the United States.

However, these values are presented differently depending on the different cultural context. As a traditional high school student from Myanmar, for TM, focusing her "studies all the time" is a common way to show her strong work ethics, listening to teachers' words without arguing back to them is a sign of being respectful, and always lowering oneself compared to others means being humble.

Subsequently, when she first arrived at her university, she struggled with the idea of what it meant to a good person in the new cultural context. Because she had been defined being respectful in a specific way, TM was "scared of being judged as disrespectful if [she] question[ed] a teacher, talk[ed] back to a teacher or argue[d] with a teacher." TM was so habituated to characterizing respect in terms of her Myanmar cultural framework that "[t]eachers were almost like gods … [and] … [c]riticizing [them] seemed like a sin to [her]." As a result, TM never finds good reasons to speak up in her college classes, which presumably causes some problems for her.

Another cultural value many students ascribe to in their narratives is the family bond. Unlike in the United States, the notion of family in Myanmar usually encompasses both the nuclear and extended family. While American parents, in general, encourage their children to confidently make their own life choices, many Myanmar parents are more prone to show an instant red flag if they think their children are going in the wrong direction and will get into trouble because of their actions and choices. This contrast is attested in MY's narrative: "[A]lthough some of my friends see the devotion we have to

our parents extreme, I find that the devotion we have for our parents keep us from doing reckless, senseless things in the sake of self-indulgence."

Listening to one's parents and making sure you are not hurting their feelings is a recurrent theme in the student narratives. This return of gratitude and favor for their parents' dedications can be an influencing factor in their decision-making processes. In his narrative AH explains that although he was not religious, he participated in religious ceremonies before he came to the United States because of his mother and high school teachers. In addition, AH's social life in Myanmar, to an extent, was affected by his affinity to the family. Because his parents consider spending time at local tea centers with his friends as wasting time, AH is never accustomed to the idea of "hanging out."

With their own slices of Myanmar values, the twelve students came to the United States to study at their respective universities. As already seen above in TM's account of her struggles at college, many students face more or less intense value conflicts when trying to adapt and assimilate into the new culture. Before being able to analyze the students' process of integration into US culture and society, a theoretical background that can undertake their experiences needs to be established. Hence, I present the theory of cosmopolitanism as a framework with which to examine the cross-cultural transformative experience.

CHAPTER II: DISCOURSE ON COSMOPOLITAN VALUES

When anyone asked him where he came from, he said,
"I am a citizen of the world."
– Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Diogenes the Cynic*

In his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses the following issue: "How can people of different cultures speak with each other, how can they understand each other, and why should they start a conversation?"[12] These questions are central in understanding the self-transformation process the students have undergone during their time in the United States. Appiah's answer lies in his defense of cosmopolitanism.

There are two main strands that primarily govern the concept of cosmopolitanism. The first one is that we have universal concerns and obligations to others that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by kin, friendship or, civil and national ties. The second one is that cosmopolitans take seriously "the value not just of human life but of particular human lives."[13] This denotes that cosmopolitans take serious interest in the practices and beliefs that provide significance in those particular lives and identities. Since there are so many human possibilities worth discovering, cosmopolitans are curious and want to learn from each other's differences. Yet, cosmopolitans do not expect for everyone or every society to agree on everything and converge onto a single mode of life. Thus, Appiah admits the universal concern and respect for legitimate differences will

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[12] Patrick Loobuyck. "Book Reviews," *Ethical Perspectives* 16, no. 1 (2009): 129-147. doi:10.2143/EP.16.1.2036281.

[13] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xv.

clash from time to time, particularly in our era of globalization. He declares, "Cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge."[14]

Most advocates of cosmopolitanism would agree with the above definitions and challenges. However, one main subject area where they differ is the emphasis of national identity over other affiliated identities. In "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," Martha Nussbaum claims that "by looking at ourselves through the lens of the other, we come to see what in our practices is local and nonessential, what is more broadly or deeply shared."[15] For Nussbaum, the task of citizens of the world is to recognize the limitations of our own local circles and bring the largest circle of humanity towards locality.[16]

Therefore, according to Nussbaum, any emphasis on patriotic pride is morally dangerous and we should regard our first and foremost deliberations about "human problems of people in particular concrete situations, not problems growing out of a national identity."[17] Nussbaum questions why we should prioritize and perceive people differently from China just because they are from a certain geographic location other than the United States.[18] National boundaries should not overshadow the multiple identities we share as human beings and the moral responsibilities and mutual respect that we owe to one another. Otherwise, the patriotism would generate "a nation of moral hypocrites"

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[14] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xv.
[15] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitism," in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.
[16] Ibid., 9.
[17] Ibid., 7.
[18] Ibid., 14.

that speaks the language of equality, but instead dwells in "a self-serving, narrow scope" of the universe.[19]

Many critics of Nussbaum, however, criticize her cosmopolitanism for being a mere rootless illusion. Elaine Scarry contends that the way human beings act toward other people is shaped by the way we imagine them—and our capacity to imagine other people is feeble, particularly if they are strangers and foreigners.[20] Invoking Sartre's experiment of imagination, Scarry claims that even the imagined face of a singular friend lacks the "vitality and vivacity" of the perceived one in the sensory world. In addition, she points out our inability to hold multitudes of rich imaginary novel characters simultaneously in our mind.[21] Another scholar, Gertrude Himmelfarb, similarly argues that by pledging one's "fundamental allegiance" to imaginary, abstract strangers, we are denying the givens of life, from parents, ancestors, and family to tradition, community and nationality, and thus rejecting one's "natural" identity. Himmelfarb concludes that although it has lofty intelligent merit in it, cosmopolitanism, in fact, is a perilous illusion.[22]

In order to bolster the theory of cosmopolitanism, Appiah contests for a moderate position he calls "partial cosmopolitanism,"[23] which embraces both local partialities and

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[19] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitism," in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.

[20] Elaine Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People," in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 98.

[21] Ibid., 102-104.

[22] Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The Illusions of Cosmopolitanism," in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 77.

[23] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xvii.

universal duties of morality. Appiah argues that loyalty and local allegiances determine who we are, for "we confer the most kindness on those with whom we are most closely associated."[24] At the same time, he claims that because we are a part of a broader human community, no local loyalties can justifiably overlook that every human being has responsibilities to each other. This sense of a shared human nature paves a way to deal with strangers. Citing Wittgenstein's dictum—"If a lion could speak, we couldn't understand him"—Appiah underscores that it is our shared humanity that permits us to make sense of each other.[25] To make a stronger case for his rooted cosmopolitanism, Appiah further argues that the ability to connect with strangers does not just depend on the common humanity all human beings share. In fact, the engagement with a total stranger will always be an engagement with a *particular* stranger, and thus, we can take interest in one another as long as we find some shared identities between the two particular persons. In this sense, the stranger will no longer be imaginary but concrete, and even though we may or may not agree, we can eventually make sense of each other.

Similar to Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism, the work of twentieth-century Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore, whom Nussbaum routinely cites to support her anti-patriotic arguments, does not actually disregard the role the traditional cultures play. In an essay entitled "The Way to Unity," Tagore alludes to the importance of tradition in his writings:

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[24] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xviii.
[25] Ibid., 97.

I have come to feel that the mind, which has been matured in the atmosphere of a profound knowledge of its own country and of the perfect thoughts that have been produced in that land, is ready to accept and assimilate the cultures that come from other countries.[26]

In Tagore's view, using the available tools provided by one's own culture, the individual is able to accept and integrate readily into a new culture. In short, one's core tradition can expand to include cultural elements imported from other societies in the flow of cultural temporality.

Both Appiah and Tagore's rooted and partial cosmopolitanism can be placed between two competing ideologies: relativism and universalism. Contrary to relativists, cosmopolitans believe that there are some universal values to which every human being should and must adhere. However, unlike universalists, cosmopolitans acknowledge that while there are many norms that ought to be universalized, there are a lot of others that should be local. While cosmopolitanism establishes a banded range of universal values, it also supports and encourages people to live by their own ideas. The difficulty then is where to locate this balance.

Appiah approaches the discourse of cosmopolitanism by distinguishing values and morals. On one hand, values are contextual as they are learnt and informed by your close social group. Many of the things people take to be right or wrong are a result of local custom being solidified over time. These values guide and direct the actions of an

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[26] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Way to Unity," in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: A Miscellany* (New Delhi: Wellwish Printers, 1996), 352.

individual who shares her life with other immediate individuals. "They are things that [individuals] care about, because they are subject to [her] life."[27] Although she would care about the values that are significant to her life, a cosmopolitan, however, does not expect others to conform to her values. On the other hand, morality, which is defined by its subject matter, is objective and can be applied on universal level.[28] It is a set of universalized rules that articulates what obligations we have to other people—things that we ought or ought not to do to our fellow global citizens. While maintaining the idea of a universal truth, cosmopolitans are very skeptical and cautious about absolute truths. In other words, cosmopolitanism is, indeed, "universality plus differences."[29]

Cosmopolitans embrace pluralism. Since there are many values worth living by, cosmopolitans expect that different people and different societies embody different values.[30] However, in our globalized world, people often try to universalize their norms by claiming the values and views of others are mistaken. One of the challenges that cosmopolitanism faces is to "learn how to live in a world full of people who think [another individual] has made a serious moral mistake."[31]

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[27] Andrew Belonksy, "Kwame Anthony Appiah on Values, Sexuality and the Perfect Cosmopolitan," *Queerty*, February 9, 2008, http://www.queerty.com/kwame-anthony-appiah-on-values-sexuality-and-the-perfect-cosmopolitan-20080209/.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Kwame A. Appiah, "Chapter 6: Education for Global Citizenship," *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* 107, no. 1 (2008): 94. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-7984.2008.00133.x.

[30] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 144.

[31] Andrew Belonksy, "Kwame Anthony Appiah on Values, Sexuality and the Perfect Cosmopolitan," *Queerty*, February 9, 2008, http://www.queerty.com/kwame-anthony-appiah-on-values-sexuality-and-the-perfect-cosmopolitan-20080209/.

Appiah identifies that while communicating with strangers, misunderstandings and disputes between values can result on three levels. On the first and fundamental level, disagreements occur when one group invokes a value concept that the other is simply not accustomed to.[32] On the second level, two groups can have different interpretations and evaluations of the same values, particularly when these values are applied to unfamiliar new cases, which require discrete judgment.[33] On the third and final level, even when specific values are applied to a particular case, disagreements can arise from the relative weights individuals give to different values.[34] What these disagreements point out to us is that one cannot reach final consensus on values by ranking them in a specific order.

Appiah then contends that the role of reasoned argument in reaching an agreement about values is highly exaggerated. Instead of applying thorough principles to a set of facts and making deductions to reach a resolution, we justify our actions by rationalizing what we have intuitively decided. Appiah argues, "[W]hat you see depends on what you believe" and "a large part of what we do we do because it *is* just what we do." The act of reasoning only occurs when we begin to think about change. Even then, people shift their stance on certain values not because of principled arguments but because of "a gradually acquired new way of seeing things" [35].

If reasoned arguments are mostly futile, should we do nothing about the differences in values due to different local allegiances? Or should we fall back to the

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[32] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 47.
[33] Ibid., 59.
[34] Ibid., 63.
[35] Ibid., 72-75.

relativist approach and assume everyone is right from their own perspectives? Instead of leading to tolerance and acceptance, such relativism will create a multicultural world where "communities are neatly hived off from one another"[36] and effectively living in different worlds. Consequently, the results of being silent would inevitably produce a world filled with individuals who possess very skewed opinions about each other. Thus, the most practical approach to living in the globalized world of disagreements, according to Appiah, is the model of conversation or engaging in dialogue with fellow citizens.

The word "conversation" is applied not only for literal talk but also for "engagement with the experience and the ideas of others."[37] Engaging in conversation, nonetheless, does not guarantee the final agreement of values for all the participants. Yet, Appiah believes that with the potentiality of dialogue, we "can live in harmony without agreeing on underlying values (except, perhaps, the cosmopolitan value of living together)". Through conversations, we can reach agreement about *what* to do even though we do not agree about the rationale, *why* we do certain things. Citing historical examples, Appiah illustrates that "our political coexistence, as subjects or citizens, relies on being able to agree about practices while disagreeing about their justification.[38]

In fact, the purpose of conversation is "to get used to one another"[39] in the process of trying to understand and make sense of the strangers. This is because, on one hand, the

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[36] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xx.
[37] Ibid., 85.
[38] Ibid., 67-78.
[39] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 78.

dialogue, as implied in Tagore's writings, has a transformative power to create an "empathic link" between the conversers.[40] Thus any movement that strives to change the mind of the general populace entails a significant part of acquiring and getting used to new ways of doing things by engaging in dialogue.[41] On the other hand, cosmopolitanism adheres to fallibilism, which recognizes that our sense of human knowledge is "imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence."[42] Though cosmopolitans have their own strong views, they are open to the possibility that they are mistaken, even after thoroughly examining the evidence with the highest reasoning skills. Consequently, cosmopolitan conversation is about "learning as well as teaching … [and] about listening as well as talking."[43]

In order to create a world brimming with "citizens of the world," writers such as Tagore and Nussbaum highlight the significance of cosmopolitan education. With his Nobel Prize funds, Tagore founded a school called Vishvabharati (All the World) in a town called Santiniketan, India for the purpose of cosmopolitan education. Unless we undertake the cosmopolitan education project, Nussbaum warns us that we will live in our bubble and perceived the world solely based on our own closure: "[W]e risk

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[40] Saranindranath Tagore, "Tagore, Education, Cosmopolitanism," In *Asian Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. L. T. Alatas and K. Kuroda (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2006), 82.
[41] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 76.
[42] Ibid., 144.
[43] Ibid., 93.

assuming that the options familiar to us are the only ones there are, and they are somehow 'normal' and 'natural' for all humans."[44]

Myanmar students studying in the United States have this privilege of earning a cosmopolitan education. Regardless of the university they attend, the fact that they are abroad designates that they have opportunities to be exposed to new cultures and experiences. However, as noted above, cosmopolitanism is a challenge, not a triumph. Whether or not the students will accept this challenge will greatly be influenced by the ways they integrate into US culture.

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[44] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitism," in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 12.

CHAPTER III: INTEGRATION INTO THE NEW SOCIETY

Learning to speak the "American" Language(s)

"To change your language you must change your life."

—Derek Walcott, *Codicil*

All of the Myanmar students who contributed to this work speak English as their second or third language. Studying in the United States means the students, whose mother tongue is not English, are required to speak the host country's language. Although many students are fluent enough in English to be enrolled at American universities, their integration into a new culture demands more than proficiency in the English language. As one of the narrators, UMS, described in her narrative, both the language barrier and cultural miscommunication can push the students to the edge of the social circle.

Another student, PO, attests that in order to have an engaging conversation with American college students, he needs to understand various subtleties of the language and cultural references. "[A]s time passes, I started to realize that it is not the language barrier that is hindering me from being able to dive into their conversation, but my lack of knowledge of American television … [and] pop culture jokes." PO and many other students face this inconvenience because language not only conveys the shared meaning of its speakers but also carries secondary meanings, localized colloquialisms, common

sense understandings and private codes.[45] According to the example given in PO's narrative, many professors and other adults who are not interested in specific American television shows and popular culture would also not be able to speak this college culture language. In order to fit into a new society, one needs to understand both intricate specific societal knowledge of the particular region and that of a particular sub-cultural group which one wants to engage in. Therefore, depending on where they are and whom they interact with in the United States, Myanmar students studying in US universities will acquire different "American" languages.

An example of subconscious adaptation of an American language of expression is reflected in YS's narrative. Being "extremely shy and introverted," YS never knew how to express herself verbally before she arrived in the United States. Because of her quiet personality, she discovers making art is most suitable way for her to integrate into the new society: "I discover and recreate my own values in process of making art. … To me, art is about asserting your individuality and communicating what's personally to you without the use of verbal language." The concepts of asserting individuality and applying art to express oneself are very modern Western notions and in the semiotic field of emotions and feelings, YS (perhaps unconsciously) connects herself to the American language of individualism.

In another instance, NIT writes about her strategic efforts to learn to speak the foreign tongue in order to go beyond her comfort zone. Her technique was to observe,

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[45] Paul Kennedy, "The Middle Class Cosmopolitan Journey: The Life Trajectories and Transnational Affiliations of Skilled EU Migrants in Manchester," in *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*, ed. Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 26.

interpret and imitate. Describing herself as a sponge that quickly applies the absorbed information, NIT explains, "I … observe a lot about what people say or how people react to the kinds of situations, the kinds of phrases, jokes they use and apply them back when I socialize." Curiosity and engagement are important traits of cosmopolitanism and from her description NIT is exhibiting both. Subsequently, the student gradually came to recognize that the Americans she interacts with enjoy people who are confident and "witty and goofy"—people who tell jokes. By utilizing this gathered piece of information as part of the integration process, NIT learned to become "witty, goofy and relatively confident" among her university peers.

Simultaneously, because of her specific learning strategy and application of certain words and expressions in English, she has constructed a new layer of her existing identity. NIT's experiences and the sense of who she perceives herself to be are very different in the Anglo-American "language" than in Burmese. As Martin Heidegger famously wrote, "language is the house of being"[46] and therefore, our thoughts and beliefs are mirrored in the language we speak. NIT has a different set of referential codes, which generate a different perspective on her values and life when she looks at the world through multiple language lenses, especially when she put deliberate efforts to fit into the new culture.

Since NIT has written this narrative in English, her reflective self is primarily channeled through the values she has acquired in American English at her university. If

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[46] Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), 239.

she were to write the same narrative in Burmese, her thought process would be different and she would end up expressing herself in a whole new way. Hence, one of the limitations of analyzing and interpreting the students' narratives arises from the issue of bilingualism. Because NIT is learning the new language by imitation, the language can "make her" say things that she may not mean to imply. At one instance in her narrative, for example, NIT writes that, after three years at college, "I found out I love dancing and loud music." During the learning process, NIT must have internalized the phrase "found out," a common expression that many native English speakers use to denote that they have *discovered* their "true self." However, because the phrase is so overly used in English, it can also simply mean *a person has changed over time*. Judging by the context of what NIT described in her narrative, it is apparent that she has undergone a process of acculturation because of the duration of time she has spent in the United States. Instead of *discovering* her affection for dancing and loud music, in fact, it may be more accurate to say that she *has changed* to love dancing and loud music. But this runs against Anglo-American cultural norms of authenticity, which are deeply rooted in everyday English phrases.

The Myanmar students acquire different "American languages" because of who they are, who they are with, where they are, and the specific language they learn from different college sub-cultures. Inevitably, language shapes their identity and facilitates the way they engage the new American society. In addition to speaking the foreign language, part of the students' integration process is also enabled by experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

Bertrand Russell once said, "No one can understand the word 'cheese' unless he has a nonlinguistic acquaintance with cheese."[47] Russell holds that words cannot convey meanings unless a person has an immediate subjective experience of what is meant. This notion reflects the Lockean concept of experiential learning, which states that all of our ideas are not inborn but instead come from sensation and reflection. According to John Locke, experience paints all the materials of reason and knowledge on the canvas of the mind, which is initially void of characters and ideas.[48]

Most international students acquire American culture through experiential learning—and this appears to be the case in this particular sample as well. One of the classic examples of this learning is dealing with food. During his freshman year, HTS realized that "eating American food was more difficult than what [he had] thought." Prior to arriving in the United States, HTS had no "nonlinguistic acquaintance" with macaroni and cheese. When he tried it for the first time, he initially did not enjoy it. Confronted with unfamiliar food for the first time, he was also reluctant to sit with his American roommate at the dining table because he did not want to be "judged" for the food on his plate. This initial experiential learning further reinforced his self-consciousness about his dining habits: "Once I mixed soy sauce and chili powder in a plate and then my American friend told me that it was gross. I told him that was delicious."

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[47] Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 126.

[48] John Locke. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Kenneth Winkler (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 33.

Over time, however, his other experiences allowed him to adapt to a Western diet. After eating macaroni and cheese for a year, he grew to like it. Such change can happen within the individuals because human taste is not innate but flexible. Our senses change depending upon the external experiences we accumulate over time. In Locke's words, "external objects furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities, which are those different perceptions they produce in us."[49] Not only does HTS's adaptation to local food verify Locke's notion, it also confirms the mutability emphasized by cosmopolitanism, in that it is developed by acquiring habitual knowledge. In the end of his narrative, HTS concludes that, "It takes time to reach the level of likeness to a certain food," but now "food is not a problem for me anymore."

As well as the adaption to new cultural tastes, Locke's experiential learning can be applied to the students' shift in perspective and values. In his argument for cosmopolitanism, Appiah elaborates upon Lockean experiential learning and applies it to different values. He claims that if meanings are derived from a vast plenitude of experiences, so are morals. Local customs are linked to values since concepts such as kindness and cruelty cultivate some form of social consensus. People learn to be kind by "being treated kindly and noticing [it]." The values, then, "guide our acts, our thoughts and our feelings" and create responses. Although Appiah does not use these terms, this process is variously known as socialization or acculturation. The continuous adjustment

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[49] John Locke. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Kenneth Winkler (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 34.

and alignment of these responses, in turn, becomes necessary for humans to maintain "the social fabric, [and] the texture of our relationships."[50]

In many of the narratives of the students, it is evident that they went through a process of misalignment of their responses when trying to accommodate to the new external circumstances. When the students first arrived at their college, some of the very things that held together their understanding of societal constructs were being challenged. For example, TM, having grown up in a small town in Myanmar, came to the United States with "a firm belief in a considerate and sacrificing girl as [her] idol." However, during her time at the US college, TM realized that contrary to her "universal character of a lovely and kind lady" who behaves like a "good mom" and sacrifices "her desires for her husband, kids, friends and community," women in the United States "take pride in taking care of themselves as a sign of being independent and competent" and thus are not supposed to sacrifice "their careers, their ambitions and their dreams out of social pressure unless they do so by their own dreams." When her deep-rooted responses of values do not work in the new cultural context, TM began to feel lost. TM felt lost not because she was not in her old cultural reference anymore. Her frustrations were primarily for "not knowing what [she] wants for [herself] and not projecting [herself]."

Again, this specific phrasing of words here could be a result of the American language compelling her to say things in a certain way. It could very well be that she is inclined and prepared to learn the new vocabularies of value from her new society,

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[50] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 25-29.

instead of becoming a cosmopolitan. This view is further confirmed by TM's later years' college experiences:

> I grow drives and needs to stand up for my benefits. I learn to compromise my needs with the other people's, without making complete sacrifices. … I have been inspired to create my own identity, not complementing the identity of others. I have been inspired to find my own purposes in life, instead of just being someone's wife or someone's follower.

Indeed, TM has cultivated her own interest and experienced a paradigm shift in identity. Nevertheless, the above narrative also reveals that TM does not completely embrace the new values just to maintain the societal relationships at her college simply because she is not in Myanmar. There is a tendency to "compromise" the conflicting values regardless of the cultural context she is in and attempt to balance her old and new selves.

For this assimilation process an important question to answer is how TM's perspective shift in identity takes place, from feeling lost due to unsettling values to becoming relatively more comfortable with these differing values and establishing "a life made of [her] own choices." One of the explanations that Appiah would provide is that TM has witnessed the richness of vocabularies in the language of value through her experiential learning process. Throughout her four years at university, she has cultivated thoughts and sentiments that American students display and share with her. Despite hardship, eventually TM was able to rationalize and make sense why "women are admired for having [their] own stands instead of defining [their] own life with what

[their] parents, teachers or friends want." Once she was able to see these different vocabularies of value from different societal and cultural contexts and references, she could allow herself to nurture the vocabularies of her choice.

Invoking Humanity by Deliberate Effort

While most students integrate into their respective American university cultures by means of experiential learning, there are some who put deliberate and dedicated efforts into achieving this fitting in process. In what follows, I will analyze why the technique of deliberate effort can be fruitful by employing and extending Martha Nussbaum's defense of cosmopolitanism. In her response to critics of her essay, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," Nussbaum uses moral development for a child as a counter-example to illustrate that the love for humankind is not necessarily derived from a local group. Instead of humanity being developed as the outermost circle, Nussbaum argues that the child encounters the fundamental "human" experience while simultaneously being subjected to local specificities.

In early age, a child may be learning about her parents' particularity, but she is, at the same time, absorbing and identifying common features of human life.[51] As the child gets older and hears stories that are both local and global, she becomes inspired and uses her imagination to investigate the shared humanity beyond her physical locality. Imbued

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[51] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Reply," in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 142.

with local ideological interferences, these "living human thought(s)" of the child are then turned into those of a "shriveled" adult.[52] A similar argument that the love for humanity is innate in human beings can be found in the thoughts of Mencius, a Chinese philosopher of the late Zhou dynasty. Mencius provides an example that if a child is suddenly about to fall into a well, anyone's mind would immediately be filled with alarm and compassion, and thus try to save the child, without further considering the subsequent rewards or punishments.[53] Like Nussbaum, Mencius believes that human beings can and should further develop this humaneness in their adult life.

One of the students, ZH, actually invokes and develops the innate humanity we all share during her initial college years. ZH conjured this "living thought" of common humanity, which was once so vibrant in her childhood, by deliberately overlooking her Myanmar particularities. She recounted her technique as follows: "As much as I love my culture, what I automatically did was blocking it in my head." Critics of Nussbaum, especially those who support nationalism, would denounce ZH's approach for losing an important aspect of her (national) identity in favor of abstract humanity, or even the foreign identity. Based on the shared common humanity, her strategy, indeed, provides her a way to re-imagine the new local particularities from scratch. Igniting her curiosity, she was determined to learn the new culture and language: "I was not trying to restrain myself from eating cheese, pizza, burgers, lots of bread; going to church, celebrating Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and many other occasions."

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[52] Ibid., 143.
[53] Mencius, *Mencius*, ed. Philip Ivanhoe, trans. Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 35.

Contrary to the nationalists' criticisms, ZH began to re-identify herself with her Myanmar local customs after her deliberate efforts to fit into American culture. She claimed, "I started out with blocking my culture in my thinking process … but after … I have learned other cultures, I re-embraced my own..." Basing the love for humanity as the common ground, ZH effectively engages in both Myanmar and American culture. Moreover, she now writes cultural articles for her school's newspaper and shares her own Myanmar culture with others. Occasionally, she also cooks Burmese food for her American friends. This implies that ZH has developed a cosmopolitan identity. ZH recognizes the importance of different cultures and is willing to engage with them by applying and sharing values from her experiences of pre-college years in Myanmar. At the same time, ZH more closely resembles Nussbaum's cosmopolitan than Appiah's rooted and partial cosmopolitan. Becoming "a liberal, rationale and pro-equality, pro-human rights person" as well as "a social butterfly" who hops from one table to another to indiscriminately socialize during dinner sections, ZH seems to share the Myanmar customs and values because she happens to have been born and raised in that particular country, and there are intricate cultural traditions and values that she happens to know because of her upbringing. ZH shares the traditions from Myanmar culture not because of national pride but because she feels the responsibility as a global citizen to share the cultural values which she believes are worth discussing with the rest of the world.

One of the primary reasons that ZH can invoke a common humanity during her integration process is because humanity is not an identity and an individual, in contrast to popular misconceptions, does not have one definite singular identity. When interacting

with another person, ZH will have to identify what specific commonalities or identities the other person shares with her in order to be able to engage in a dialogue. The very first step in making sense of the strangers, therefore, becomes the recognition of multiple identities within an individual.

Identities over Identity

In *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Amartya Sen explains why and how the assumption of one identity per individual[54] is erroneous. Sen claims that individuals are not a singular identity but instead are complex and multifaceted. All at once, we affiliate with various categories of identity such as national, religious, and racial identities. He asserts that people are "diversely different"[55] and "our differences do not lie on one dimension only."[56] Consequently, "because of the "intricacies of plural groups and multiple loyalties"[57] to which each of us belongs, we can relate, understand and make sense of each other.

Nevertheless, the fallacy of having one singular identity is very pervasive and the concept can even be found in bestselling books. For example, Sen contends that Huntington's fundamental thesis in his *Clash of Civilizations* is problematic since different cultures cannot be divided into distinct entities operating in seclusion from each

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[54] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 19.
[55] Ibid., xvi.
[56] Ibid., 45.
[57] Ibid., 20.

other. Using the history of the world civilizations, Sen highlights that there is no one distinct civilization since the cultures of the world has always been intertwined and integrated. Therefore, individuals from a specific region cannot simply be divided into their civilization identity and designated as if they belong to one of the seven or eight different civilizations noted by Hungtington.[58] The act of underscoring a particular identity, in fact, is perilous. Histories, including the recent events in Myanmar, have shown that boxing into a particular identity (e.g. religious identity of being a Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu) and emphasizing on this identity while disregarding other important social affiliations has led to mutual destructions of all parties.[59]

Conversely, individuals can benefit from recognizing and connecting to the overlapping identities they possess when engaging in cross-cultural dialogue. For example, because of the fact of multiple identities, it is possible for a student from Myanmar to develop a closer relationship with her American friends than her native friends since she can share more similar facets of identity with the Americans than the Myanmar people, or vice versa. Many narratives of the students also acknowledge that they make friends based on similar interests and personalities.

An example of how multifaceted identities can be advantageous in assimilating into the American culture can be found in MY's narrative. Due to her growing up in a "slightly conservative Christian family," MY did not encounter many religious value conflicts when she attended the college that is located on "the bible belt of the United

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[58] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 40.
[59] Ibid., 42.

States." The common religious identity bridges her transition from her old Myanmar habitat to the new territory of the United States. In addition, because she has been exposed to the American sports and entertainment since she was a child, she is, compared to the other Myanmar students, more accustomed to the American lifestyle: "[H]aving familiarity with the American culture gives me an advantage in socializing with American students because I can pick up more on references and jokes."

Because the world's cultures have always been interwoven throughout history, it is conceivable that some aspects of Myanmar culture facilitate the students' engagement in the United States. For example, PO is praised by the college deans and faculty for his displays of respect: "I was raised to be polite to whomever I interact with. That helps me a lot [in the United States] because adult Americans, especially Professors and dean cherish… politeness." Even though the practice of politeness seems trivial to most US college students, politeness—often linked with professionalism—remains one of the ideals prized by most adult Americans. There might be different variations of defining what politeness means according to different localities, but it also seems like there is a widely shared understanding of politeness. Being brought up in the culture where politeness remains highly valued is a great advantage for PO, particularly in situations that extend beyond interactions with other college students.

On the other hand, the narrator MY is perceived as "being uptight and insincere" for presenting her understanding of respect by "using polite terms and behavior[s]." It seems like these perceptions towards MY come from her colleagues or peers. The

contrast between PO and MY reinforces the notion that each individual has a multiplicity of identities and the engagement or disengagement of a conversation depends only on the commonalities between the two specific conversing parties, regardless of their nationalities.

Establishing Friendships

Another important aspect of integrating into the new culture is establishing friendships, and all twelve narrators relate stories of how they acquire new friends. Making friends at college is a significant part of life for international students because it provides them with psychological stability and security.

This is particularly true during the first few months after the students arrive at the United States. The road of transition from the students' home country where they are used to their existence and their sense of who they are is relatively unchallenged, to a new world where their prior beliefs and way of living are repeatedly tested, can quite often be rugged and bumpy. In these moments, the friendships they build, perhaps unconsciously, can provide a temporary escape from homesickness and other harsh realities, and provide a joyful bliss. When an individual becomes too attached to her friends, she may even create an escapist bubble for security. It is, therefore, not surprising that many narratives of the Myanmar students who study in the United States claim that the international orientation, which is generally a separate and concentrated program for

first year incomers to meet each other under the facilitation of many international peers, helps the students' transition to college. Not knowing very much of the various local secret codes of language, the students thus tend to make friends with other international students when they first arrive at their university.

However, whether or not they become close friends with their fellow international students in the long run depends on many other factors. One of the conspicuous reasons is having common interests. Although some students are dedicated to find such common interests in "American" students, friendship for many other Myanmar students happens irrespective of their friends' national origin. For example AH explains, "If American means white-skinned people, I have grand total of two. If American means people with nationality of the United States, almost all my friends are American." Although most of his friends are minority, particularly "Hispanic, African [and] Asian," AH contends that he does not intentionally choose to be friends with people from minority groups. The main reason he has become friends with those specific individuals is because they all play soccer.

On the other hand, another student, SS, finds it easier to make friends with international than American students. Although SS has "a couple of" close American friends, she appreciates becoming friends with international students from "Kenya, Korea, China, Mongolia, Japan, Malawi, Haiti, Tibet, Nepal, Congo, Russia, Germany, India, and Turkey"—all of whom happen to love rice. She then explains how she shares similar personality traits with her international friends: "We don't mind sharing an

umbrella on a rainy day. Most of us will say 'Yes' even though we wanted say 'No' in our minds. Most of us are not as assertive as the American students." Despite SS's claim that she acquires friends based on common interest, the fact that she can make friends with people from so many different countries tells something about her university and the reason why she becomes friends mainly with international students. Her college seems to attract diversity to some degree, but the number of international students is small enough that most of the international students are compelled to affiliate together on the uneven plane of a so-called diverse community.

On the bright side, because most of her friends are from all over the world, SS gets to experience a wide range of different cultures. If it were not for her international friends, she acknowledges that "I [would] not have a chance to taste the delicious Mandarzi, [a] Kenyan snack. I [would] never learn to sing a song in Malawi." On the other hand, perhaps because her best friends are international students and perhaps because of the relatively small size of her college, SS's assumption of Americans being assertive shows that she has not experienced the diverse populace of American culture and its people.

For another student, PO, the increase in positive perception towards American students over time is accompanied by greater stereotyping of other international students. PO was initially more comfortable with international students, particularly with Asians because he thought they were "relatively [of] the same culture" and the people in the United States would be so "demanding, competitive and independent that sharing is a rare

case." Gradually he came to realize that "friendship [in the US] could mean as the same as … in Myanmar" and that "the degree of friendship depends on the type of person who you are interacting with." Ironically, as the relationship between PO and the American students progresses, his perception towards international students seem to move in the opposite direction. He acknowledges that: "the stereotypes Americans have about international students have sipped [seeped] through my brain and [I have] started to see international students more differently."

There can be two main reasons for PO's transformation process. First, coming from an isolated country which few Westerners visit, PO, "a citizen from a third world" may have unconsciously desired to get to know the "Americans" he rarely sees in his country. Because of his disposition to integrate, he can readily establish friendship with American students. The second reason is that when his school tries to diversify the student population, it seems to attract international students from certain Asian countries rather than others. As a result, the students from these particular countries form a clique. PO, as an "outsider" international student, views these cluster negatively, and eventually ends up stereotyping them.

Other students such as ZHH have difficulty saying whether they associate more with international or American friends. Regardless of the size of the student body or how diverse of his university is, ZHH can navigate his own way through the system and construct a social network with different people: "I can take off and meet with new people and make new friends and be in touch with old friends. I like the concept of social

enablement…" This mode of social interaction or social enablement is very cosmopolitan, and is particularly fitted with Nussbaum's type of cosmopolitan who does not take pride in patriotism. Criticizing nationality as a "superficial label" that a person gives to herself, ZHH only considers what personal experiences his friends can bring that can enrich everyone involved in the conversation. This transcendental cosmopolitan ideal is further reflected in his definition of diversity, which he describes as: "a set of different experiences converging to a set of different responses to the same scenario and creating something new in the process for everyone involved."

All the students analyzed above in this section maneuver themselves in their respective system of universities and seek friendship as part of their fitting in process to American culture. It is important to highlight that there is no single right or better way to establish friendship in this scenario. College is a perfect playground for students to make different choices and create a world out of themselves. Because the Myanmar students are already international students at their university, it matters less to whom—either the US students or the international students, or both—they choose to associate with. What really matters is that they find their companions, learn from each other and sustain a lasting relationship during their time at college.

Broken Mirror Way of Integration

"All Faith is false, all Faith is true:
Truth is the shattered mirror strown
In myriad bits; while each believes
His little bit the whole to own."
–Sir Richard Francis Burton, as quoted in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*

In his discourse of cosmopolitanism, Appiah provides the historical example of Victorian adventurer Sir Richard Francis Burton to question the notion that prejudice arises from ignorance and that intimacy engenders amity. It is ironic that Burton composed the above stanza, given that, despite having travelled many places, he conceived the world through the image of the shattered mirror, which reflects only one part of a multifarious truth from its own particular angle. Appiah attests that one can be "genuinely engaged with ways of other societies without approving, let alone adopting them."[60]

By the same token, although Myanmar students studying in the United States are being introduced to new cultures and concepts, they can still hold on to their broken piece of mirror from Myanmar, reflect upon the rest of the world and proclaim what truth entails. For instance, when ZH first arrived in the United States, she was self-righteously clinging to her piece of mirror. In her narrative, ZH regrettably and shamefully admitted that, because of the ill-formed influence of her Myanmar social circle, which regards

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[60] Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 8.

Islam as an extreme and dangerous religion, during a lunch conversation with a Pakistani friend she aggressively pointed out to him that his religion was violent, unlike Buddhism.

In another narrative, reacting to the "superficial world" of a sophisticated and capitalistic New York City where "making friends … is as easy as breaking up," FRT endures her "lonely and miserable years of [her] residence" by containing herself in "ethics and culture taught by [her] parents and [her] motherland." Accordingly, she writes, "I go to parties but I never touch liquor. I go out to eat but never break my vegetarian diet." It is not that FRT is not engaging with the new world she is in, and her individual choices are not respectable. Because FRT feels pressured amidst the ultra-cosmopolitan city, she persists towards her shard of the broken mirror of Myanmar and regurgitates the reflected images from it.

The writer of one of the narratives implies that her identity is limited by national boundary. The narrator, MY writes: "I … try to keep in mind that I am a guest in a host country and try to accommodate the American culture without losing my core values and beliefs." To MY's account, Nussbaum would likely respond by condemning her pride in nationalism and her national identity, noting that the locations of where human beings are born are mere accidents. Appiah, though, would contend that people *can* be "rooted cosmopolitans"—i.e., both citizens of one world, and at the same time, of one place. Both theorists, however, would agree that the origin of the "core values" that MY strives to maintain might not necessarily be located in the geographical boundary of Myanmar. "Local forms of human life," Appiah claims, are "the result of long term and persistent

processes of cultural hybridization."[61] Because of the process of cultural hybridization, both philosophers would contend that the core values and beliefs that MY adheres to are fairly new in the vast history of fluctuating culture, and that at some point in time, her values may have already incorporated some intricacies from the "American culture." In fact, it was MY who found it easy to fit into her religious college because of "slightly conservative Christian" upbringing—clearly disconnected from anything in traditional Myanmar culture. From this perspective, her religious beliefs have already played a major role in the history of Western civilization.

Furthermore, MY also discusses in her narrative why and how she would not impose her Myanmar cultural values on others: "If there was an issue that is acceptable in the American culture, but not in Myanmar culture, I would not impose my culture values on Americans and denounce them, rather I would just not participate or engage in the issue." Her rationale behind this resolution is that "it is just a matter of tolerance [and] it is unrealistic to be in agreement with everyone." The cosmopolitan theorist Appiah would agree with part of her statement; i.e., that one can be in disagreement with strangers—but he might dispute her notion of tolerance. Instead of withdrawing to her own ideas, Appiah would invite MY to engage in conversations with those with whom she disagrees. To initiate a dialogue with a stranger whom you know or suspect will disagree with you may sound like a futile act. But, for cosmopolitans, the essence of conversation does not lie in reaching an agreement, but in exchanging points of view and

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[61] Kwame A. Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, edited by Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 92.

getting used to each other's differences. Perhaps, MY will find ways to agree to disagree with her opponents.

Moreover, MY describes how her college promotes diversity and encourages international students "to keep their culture and heritage alive." According to her narrative, international students from MY's college are "not required to fit in" but in fact, are supposed "to bring diversity to the mostly black and white student population." This description is a perfect example of how current mainstream advocates of multiculturalism are narrowly guided—or misguided—in their views. Although with good intentions, they misread the purpose of diversity and often advocate "cultural conservation" in order to maintain monolithic traditions. Philosophers such as Appiah and Sen would agree that we must respect the choices an individual makes with respect to the integration into a specific culture, because human beings should have higher priority compared to traditions and cultures. Furthermore, individuals should not feel pressured to limit and burden themselves in the name of tradition to live a specific way of life. The notion of "maintaining" a culture, itself, is a misconception since, as discussed multiple times throughout this study, cultures are always already constantly changing phenomena. One might be able to keep cultural artifacts as part of a fragment of incessant culture, but it is impossible to maintain a culture in some immutable form. Consequently, cultural conservation as charted in colleges like MY's will unavoidably create what Sen calls "plural monoculturalism."[62] The model will then produce patches of disintegrated singular-identity-focused individuals who are uninformed about others because they are

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[62] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 156.

too busy keeping their culture alive and too sensitive to have a dialogue about other cultures.

After discussing various approaches by which the Myanmar students have integrated into American culture, as well as the substantial external circumstances that may influence this process, the question arises as to what sort of transformations occurs within the students during their cross-cultural experiences. Hence, the following chapter examines the value changes of our sample of Myanmar students studying in the United States.

CHAPTER IV: VALUE CHANGES IN MYANMAR STUDENTS

A Form of Cosmopolitan Response

Among the twelve students who submitted their narratives, there are some students who appear to be cultivating the cosmopolitan notion. One of these narratives is explored and analyzed below.

At one point in the process of exploring American culture, ZH realized, "I have learned about their culture enough and it's time for me to show mine." As a way of presenting her culture, ZH started wearing *longgyi* whenever she went to classes or work. By bringing in some flavors of Myanmar culture into her US college life, she is, in a way, "foreignizing" and de-localizing her college culture. *Longgyi* is typical day-to-day clothing for Myanmar citizens. It would be analogous to people wearing jeans in the United States. By wearing her Myanmar clothes in the United States, ZH is blurring the notions of domestic and foreign, and at the same time making a statement, inviting the rest of the college campus to get used to her particular culture.

In addition to sharing her culture, ZH develops the cosmopolitan perspectives of co-mingling and interacting with different cultures. In different cultures, she sees particular values of the local that are worth discovering and learning, providing that these cultural values do not interfere with the universal values that every human being should adhere to: "Culture is what society determines and as long as it does not restrain human rights and equality, it is a fascinating thing to keep and reserve in hopes of learning about the country and the people." ZH's words of commitment directly echo what Appiah

writes about the "heart of modern cosmopolitanism"[63] in "Education for Global Citizenship." According to Appiah, we respect culture "not because cultures matter in themselves, but because people matter, and culture matters to people." As long as the culture is good for humanity, we can enjoy the diversity and learn from each other. If the culture, on the other hand, is harmful to people, cosmopolitans do not have to be tolerant of it as part of a local palate that "some totalitarians just happen to have."[64]

Moreover, the way that ZH attempts to establish her international social circle reflects Diogenes' "citizen of the world" sentiment. When ZH has gathered close friends, she does not just cuddle in her own bubble of friends, but instead "reach[es] out to new Chinese, Korean, Argentinian, French people." Being a speech communication/rhetoric major and realizing that language plays an instrumental role in communicating with different people, "I am learning Chinese every Thursday; practice French with a French friend on Friday and Spanish on Wednesday." Such task of learning several languages in a systemic way reveals ZH's complex and ambitious way of thinking. Her curiosity and willingness to engage in other cultures by acquiring the communicative tools of language also meet the cosmopolitan requirements.

With regard to her personal values, ZH has established her own values and morality, employing strict reasoning and a strong sense of justice: "I've set my own values and rules and concepts of what I do and what I won't do." Though she was confused and adhered to the teaching of a particular religion, she claims to have become a

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[63] Kwame A. Appiah, "Chapter 6: Education for Global Citizenship," *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* 107, no. 1 (2008): 88. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-7984.2008.00133.x.
[64] Ibid.

free thinker. Although raised in a conservative country where many of the social norms are inseparable from religious beliefs, ZH actually broke through the local ties by becoming a critical thinker.

Another trait of cosmopolitanism that is noticeable in ZH's narratives is that she recognizes that we human beings share more similarities than differences. Like cosmopolitans who acknowledge their obligations toward strangers, ZH practices compassion "for the world and the human beings." The thought that the shared humanity is far greater than our differences is reflected in ZH's following activity: "One funny thing I do during college is trying to compare someone that I know from Burma with some friends…in the US. They are just westerners but they feel love; they expect loyalty, friendliness, kindness, caring, respect and happiness." As passionately argued by Nussbaum, this recognition of common humanity must have enabled ZH to transcend from the limit of nationality and social construction: "I feel more connected to all nations in the whole world and feel related to all human beings from the whole universe." Though she does not appeal to any origins or roots as defended by Appiah's partial cosmopolitanism, she has, indeed, developed a sophisticated cosmopolitanism form where she convincingly and comfortably undergoes a clear break from the established societal ties and distances herself from her national background.

Westernized and Americanized?

While students such as ZH nurture cosmopolitan identity, there are others who seem to embrace more of the new values they have encountered during the stay in the United States. For instance, with dedicated effort and systematic experiential learning, NIT learns to speak the "American language" of the college where she is enrolled as fluently as she can. As the linguistic ramifications of speaking "American language" have already been elaborated in Chapter III, this section will focus on other changes that NIT experiences during her cross-cultural integration process.

NIT explains her methodology as follows: "My first approach in socializing would be to talk about my own culture […] explaining things, and asking questions about the American culture." From a cosmopolitan perspective, the act of sharing and providing information about her culture, and listening to the others' stories is a very healthy habit for both parties. These exchanges can unearth values that are previously unrecognized by both parties and this can probably unsettle the commitments to their earlier values. Possibly this is how NIT learns and compares about different cultural practices regarding sex: "I was one of those people who decided that I would only have sex upon marriage, but now I'm not sure about it anymore. And, I talk more openly about sex than I used to." Because of her dedicated observations and adaptation, she can make sense of where this particular liberal culture comes from and, to an extent, be accepting of the choice that two adults are making. At the same time, however, she remains uncertain about her own vocabularies of values and is still applying her acquired new ways of perceiving the

world and reasoning the pros and cons. Other parts of NIT's narrative illustrate her cosmopolitan notions: "Once I realized that I can keep an open mind for everything, it helped me a lot in learning about how people interact in this culture, what the big topics are discussed in the society, and how they are open-minded about trying new things/ experiences/ meeting new people." Because of her dedicated effort to be a part of the new society, she has moved from having settled values about certain topics to opening up to new ideas.

When this process of acculturation is, however, over-applied, NIT becomes Americanized rather than being a cosmopolitan. She admits this shift in her narrative:

> I believe most of the drastic changes happened [to me] are as a result of me trying very hard to fit in and integrate into this society. I view that as upward mobility of my social life in the American culture. I am very happy about my progress, and will still be happy to fit in more.

Though she explicitly and proudly declares her accomplishment of being "Americanized," her acculturation tactic suggests us that she feels pressured and has struggled hard to fit into the new society. Thus, her "upward mobility" towards being more "American" is not a complete triumph. For this reason, she has not really transcended and authentically chosen her own values from different localities. One can argue that she hasn't truly become a cosmopolitan since the values she has fostered are a reaction to the social burden she has experienced.

Another major change for NIT is that her attitude towards her religious background has transformed: "A big value change would be that I no longer practice Buddhism. I identify myself as an agnostic although I still believe in some spiritual aspects of Buddhism." Because in Myanmar Buddhism is so intertwined with the local cultures, her identification as an agnostic person who believes in only certain aspects of Buddhism separates her from the majority of people back home.

Nevertheless, once one is exposed to two different worlds, particularly during the late teenage years, it is next to impossible to completely renounce the old values and experiences from the previous culture. Even if she spends the rest of her life in the US, the sense of who she is still will be shaped by the remains of cultural and value influence from her nearly two decades of experience in Myanmar. NIT is herself aware of these value fragments: "There are still some Burmese cultural things that I would like to retain to be part of my identity. … [T]hese include some ideology of Buddhism that if you do good things, you'll get good consequences; I believe in meditation and the peace of mind."

From this perspective, she has realized the limitations of the practices and so-called truths from Myanmar culture. And she modifies those ideologies, tailors them and makes them her values specifically for her own path of living. It appears that the two selves of NIT, which speak different values and expressions depending on the different influence of Anglo-American English or Burmese language, are competing and trying to reconcile within the individual. Although currently, she is more inclined towards the

American culture, the back-and-forth value conflicts within NIT illustrate that she is in the process of becoming a true cosmopolitan. Whether or not she will become a cosmopolitan depends on her future interactions with other people from both cultures, and other cultures as well.

Moderation, Sense, and Sensibility

Through their negotiation among different values during the process of integration, many Myanmar students seem to be on their way to developing a sense of moderation or balance in their personal value judgment system. One of the students, MY, for instance, critques the loss of balance in modern Western culture: "Moderation and acting sensibly … are the common sense that becomes lost in the names of individualism and 'self-actualization' in the modern Western culture." As recognized by MY in the above quote, moderation is, indeed, a universal common sense, understood both in Myanmar and US cultures. What the above statement does not admit is that it is not just Western culture that loses this "universal" value, but also many people in Myanmar.

This understanding of lack of moderation is recounted in USM's experience with people who take their values to an extreme. Although she believes and embraces that "both cultural orientations have their own merits," USM feels uncomfortable when she encounters people from both American and Burmese cultures who are "too individualistic or too collectivistic." She contends, on one hand, that the Burmese culture practices and

gravitates towards hierarchy since it values group harmony. She explains how, because of her seniority status, her aunt feels the need to look after and educate her about the right thing to do: "[P]eople try to stay in their roles consciously or unconsciously when they interact with others [and] [their] attempt of maintaining [the] role comes at the expense of exploring differences." On the other hand, USM senses that people in the US in general, feel very comfortable "prioritizing their desires … over the families." She continues, "Family comes 'after' what one wants. … I think people in the U.S. don't appreciate their birth family enough once they get married and have their own families. I think older people in the U.S. should be looked after more by their children."

Having experienced the two different cultures, USM begins to see which values she embraces and which values she does not. And through the interactions with others, she voices and stands for her established values. She is, in fact, applying Appiah's cosmopolitan approach of having a dialogue with others in order to make them "get used to" her values, which emerge from the cross-cultural experiences. There are beneficial consequences for both Myanmar and American culture because of USM's engagements in dialogue. To her aunt and other family members, she instills the concept of "autonomy and independence." For the people USM has talked to in the US, she has identified a paradigm of families which incorporates grandparents and other extended relatives within a household.

It is also possible that USM might learn some valuable cultural backgrounds with the people she converses with. Imagine USM is having a discussion on the topic of

moderation of the cultures with MY, who argues that the so-called extreme "devotion we have for our parents" actually prevents us from performing reckless acts in the name of "self-indulgence." Perhaps, USM would learn that her aunt is not using her seniority status, but instead she cares for her very much that when something bad is going to happen to USM for her perceivably irrational and reckless actions, she feels compelled to protect USM. Perhaps because she is not very good at expressing her concerns or perhaps she is too compelled to protect her niece, USM's aunt might have reacted in a resistant manner. Having dialogue with people like MY who has a different perspective with her can enrich USM with new insights.

On the other hand, USM could learn more about the concept of family in the United States if she happens to have a conversation with the right people. First, the way USM uses the word, family is different from what people in the United States would usually use. The word "family" generally means "the nuclear family" in the US whereas in Myanmar, "family" encompasses all the extended family members, including aunts, uncles and grandparents. Second, in an ideal American family, the individual's desires are synonymous with her family's desires, but not the other way around. Instead of fulfilling the family's desires, getting the individual desires satisfied or being involved in the process of self-actualization will actually make the US family members happy. When USM makes the point that US citizens should take care more of their older parents, she must have been considering the expectations from an individual based on the Myanmar context. With more cultural insights such as this one, USM will be able to understand and

make sense of more varied scenarios and thus eventually choose to act more sensibly and moderately.

In this chapter, so far, many major processes of value changes such as formation of cosmopolitan identity, becoming more Americanized or Westernized, and developing a sense of moderation through enriching oneself with various conversations have been explored. One important aspect is that Myanmar students studying in the United States still have options to choose their own values and make their own decisions regardless of the external cultural influences. This aspect is studied in the next section, in which the Myanmar students adapt differently to the party culture, a sub-culture that is more or less common throughout all American universities.

Engagements in Party Culture

Many of the narratives of Myanmar students studying in the United Sates describe their experiences with college party scenes. Depending on the type of university one attends, the domination of party subculture can vary from one college to another. Consequently, many of the narratives respond to their respective college parties differently, and this section analyzes and discusses the multitude of different responses from the Myanmar students.

One narrator, NIT changes her opinions about college parties and consuming alcohol and becomes more tolerant towards her college culture. She writes, "When I first

got here, I was disgusted a lot by the parties and the drinking which go on every weekend on every college campus. I couldn't stand the smell of alcohol; I couldn't stand the sight of people kissing and grinding with each other at the parties." However, after three years, NIT experienced a change in perspective: "[Now] I don't have a problem with other people grinding and kissing at parties. I don't have a problem with drunk people; I drink myself (occasionally to socialize)." Over the years, NIT's tolerance for and negative stigma about alcohol has changed and she starts to perceive alcohol as a tool that can be applied in social settings. With regard to "grinding and kissing," she becomes more tolerant and acceptant towards this culture, but her writings imply that she hasn't still actually practiced this act.

In another instance, USM, who, "by nature," does not enjoy going to parties and mingling either in Myanmar or in the United States, realizes that she can find like-minded friends in many other ways over time, without having to go to parties or drink with them. She explains, "I [gave] it a try to experience what the new culture is like. … I had fun, but it's definitely not something I would regularly do." USM also notices that there are quiet American girls who would rather stay in their room than go out partying. Thus, USM concludes, "I don't feel the need to go to parties just to get friends." During the four years at her college, she was able to establish very close relationships with some friends, "whose personalities [she] find admirable." Noticing the plurality of human identity as argued by Sen, USM proclaims, "[T]he more diverse I find people here, the more comfortable I am with myself." The more different people she encounters, the more USM comes to realize the diversity within herself, and thus develops her self-affirmation.

The third student, PO provides a different reason why he does not party. First, he acknowledges that partying, as a form of socializing, is something that he was never used to, even when he was in Myanmar. He rationalizes, "I personally believe … that when a person is intoxicated, he/she could not be true about whom he/she really is." Being brought up in a culture where many people abstain drinking and hooking up with people of the opposite sex until they are truly in love, PO could not understand why people in the United States uses drinking and partying as a means to have a one-night stand. In US college culture, students who hook-up do not actually want to marry the partner; indeed, the one-night stand culture is just to have fun and sex, and many US students would not look for their lifelong partners in hook-up places. This whole concept seems very novel for PO, who comes from a place where such culture is not practiced publicly and thus unheard of. Consequently, in order to establish more authentic relationships, PO chooses clubs and school events to socialize instead of making new friends via the party scene.

As discussed above, the choices that the three students made and the reasons they made such choices differed when they encountered the party culture. All three students came from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds when they were in Myanmar. Although it is true that the choices of students are influenced from both the American and the Myanmar culture, the three students have shown that one can always makes their own choices regardless of their external influences. As Sen claims, "influence is not the same thing as complete determination, and choices do remain despite the existence—and

importance—of cultural influences." [65] (35). We can, and as students do, apply our own reasoning and assert actions into the myriad influences. We can make choices of how to decipher and interpret the exterior world and act according to the way we conceptualize it. It is this very moment, when the external world is reflected, interpreted and internalized, that Myanmar students studying in the United States transform themselves into their better selves.

From Freedom to "Self-transformation"

> "Sometimes I recognize myself in others. I recognize myself in those who endure, friends who will shelter me, beautiful holy fools of justice and flying creatures of beauty and other bums and vagrants who will walk the earth and will continue walking, just as the story will continue in the night and the waves in the sea. Then, when I recognize myself in them, I am the air, coming to know myself as part of the wind. When I am no longer, the wind will be, will continue being."
>
> –Eduardo Galeano (1989), "The Air and the Wind"

One of the common themes that many of the students mention in their narrative is that they have become "less restricted" than before they arrived in the United States. This feeling of liberation is probably due to the context into which they are put. While they were in Myanmar, they were used to staying close to family and friends, and while this tie can be heartfelt at the same time it can be cumbersome because if one lives long

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[65] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 35.

enough in a specific location, she will inevitably be perceived in a particular way. And as soon as one leaves the country, all the familiar faces and attaches are, to some degrees, physically and emotionally, stripped away from her. The students are to a large degree on their own, and for many of them this is the first time they will have to make their own decisions regarding how they want to spend their college years. As a result of this sharp discontinuity in the students' lives, going to study in a different country can be both intimidating and liberating. This is also a perfect moment for adventurous students like ZH who take advantage of their freedom, temporarily cut all previous strings and attachments and make a fresh start. The university then becomes a microcosm of the real world, where students confront new existential criteria, make bold choices, learn from their interactions with others and become more mature in the process. One of the narrators, SS, for instance, discloses that she has become more confident after four years of college. Whereas she prayed in Myanmar in order to gain "confidence by saying prayers," she becomes more independent and practical in the United States—coming to believe, as per the "American Dream," that success can be derived if she is "willing to try hard."

When the students arrive at their university, the psychological need to find new attachments forces them to engage in the new social setting. Depending on their previous cultural experiences and personal motives for studying in the United States, some will have an easier time fitting into the new culture than others, who will experience more homesickness. Nevertheless, over time, many of the Myanmar students studying in the United States become more reflective about the experiences of otherness. In line with

Galeano's words in the above quote, the students begin to recognize themselves in others. This recognition allows the individual to blur the boundaries between self and others and enables them to draw closer to the rest of the world—a process that is often loaded with tensions and emotions. The result of this process is self-transformation, as evident in the following statement by USM: "I don't think that I 'lost' any values when trying to fit into the new culture." Instead, "the confusion, questioning and self-doubts that I had during culture shock and reverse culture shock eventually helped me become very certain about what 'my' values are."

Self-transformation can happen under Lockean experiential learning. Because of the external influences impinging on the mindset of the students, their identity becomes more flexible as they experience increasing levels and variations of otherness. PO notes: "As I was trying to adapt to the new environment, my identity changed … [and] … my personality has become broader and broader as I moved from conservative [small town] to the land that promotes freedom, the United States." Specifically, Galeano's poetic view of seeing oneself through the experience of others by recognizing a broader humanity can be found in ZHH's narrative. Although it can be exhausting to interact with multiple different people, ZHH claims that the people at the same time "infuse you with energy by their diversity… Diversification provides emotional security as well as freedom" Because of his commitment to "social enablement," ZHH subconsciously discovers the traditional Buddhist notion of *anatman* or "no-self"—i.e., the sense of who he is changes as he experiences various forms of otherness during his lifetime: "My

definition of myself and my identity is always evolving and will continue to evolve till I die."

The Myanmar students surveyed for this project underwent various cross-cultural experiences and acquired new perspectives after up to four years of studying in the United States. After their transformations, some students seem to possess the cosmopolitan identity while many others are in the process of becoming "global citizens." Regardless, they have begun to establish their own values and develop independent views on life. Now, the question to ask is what happens when these transformed students go back to Myanmar with all the new perspectives acquired from their experiences studying abroad?

CHAPTER V: GOING BACK TO MYANMAR

The Art of Choosing

> "I, too, have ropes around my neck … pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose."
>
> –Salman Rushdie, *East, West: Stories*

Contrary to what is stated in Rushdie's quote, an individual might not have to choose cultural values between distinctly "East" or distinctly "West," since it is often hard to distinguish the origins of a specific culture and practices merely from geographic designation. Nevertheless, amidst all the values, the individual will still have to pick and choose particular values for herself depending on the specific context. In *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny,* Amartya Sen emphasizes the importance of the reasoning that goes into the explicit and implicit choices involved in defining who we are. The prioritization of identities occurs depending on the person's social context. Sen argues that the identities need not always be competing, but in case there is a conflict, the individual will have to reason and decide to which identity she will give preference. Sen provides an example of how ruthless politicians intentionally and repeatedly hide this available choice from their citizens and make them think their identity is limited to where they were born and the culture (or subculture) to which they belong. Sen argues that

although cultural attitudes and behaviors may influence our reasoning, they cannot *fully* decide our identity. We still have choices despite the external cultural influences.[66]

However, one of the most apparent conflicts that most of the students face because of the ramifications of cross-cultural transformation is dealing with people back in Myanmar. Such people include the student's nuclear family, extended families and their Myanmar friends. The choices involved in determining one's identity and values become more explicit in these specific occasions. While interacting with people back "home," some students like ZHH take a firm standpoint: "I have demanded more respect of [myself] as an individual as well as giving [my parents] the respect that their experiences and values are worth listening to and not entirely, dismissed by me, but, I will find my own way of doing things." Instead of engaging in a dialogue with his parents as a true cosmopolitan would do, ZHH has taken the individualistic stance of tolerance towards his family.

On the other hand, there are others who make more efforts to adapt back to their "home" culture. These students are tempted to make decisions and justify their actions in accordance with the ways they have acquired in the new culture. At the same time, the Myanmar social setting tends to influence the students' choices. For example, when ZYA goes back to Myanmar, she discloses that, "I feel depressed and imprisoned. … My individuality is robbed away. Every choice I make is being criticized…." She believes the roots of these conflicts result from her stance that "I am right and I [feel] I have to fight for my own position." Another student, USM, also acknowledges that "During the entire

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[66] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 35.

time when I was back in Burma, I felt like my autonomy was being taken away from me, and that I had a hard time trying to have conversations with people in which both sides can question each other's opinion openly and agree to disagree."

In particular, some students face greater conflicts than others when they have to make choices or when they are making choices that are perceived to go against their parents' values. Although many experiences have transformed her in tremendous ways, NIT states: "I still believe in returning gratitude to my parents when I have secured my own financial establishment. This might be because I am highly family oriented, and that part of me still hasn't changed." Growing up in the culture where family ties are important and one is expected to pay respect to elders by listening and to an extent agreeing with their words, NIT, consequently, has a hard time revealing how she has changed. There is a desire in her to seek a middle way that will make both herself and her family happy about her transformation. With regard to her shift in religious belief, NIT is concerned that her conventional Burmese parents will recognize and disapprove of her transformation in becoming less religious: "[R]eligion is such a huge change that I am scared of the consequences if my parents knew about it upon my returning home." One of the plausible reasons she does not want to confront her parents with regards to her change is that during the four years at her college, she has adopted the Sartrean notion of authenticity and sincerity. Even if NIT does not believe in saying prayers, should she pretend she still believes in such act in front of her parents? Or should she contrast and challenge the lifelong belief of their parents, because of whom she enjoys the privilege of

studying in the United States and to whom she owes the debt of gratitude? Where lies authenticity?

Even if they cannot find common ground with their family "beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing," these interactions may still create constructive tensions in the ongoing process of the student's identity formation. Like Nussbaum and Appiah, Sen's solution of a better world in a globalized era lies in incorporating the local and national identities with a global sense of belonging. Sen and Appiah believe that can be done without eliminating our other loyalties. Sen might argue that since all the identities are equally and robustly important, the many facets of identity will always be fluctuating depending on the choices students make in particular contexts. In reality, one needs to ask how exactly an individual will choose her associated values and identities among the "diverse diversities" available to her.

Some argue that there will always be conflicting identities with regards to our choice. In his review of Sen's book, Michael Blake provides an example that if a person is both Catholic and homosexual, there will at least be an internal tension and pressure to holding both these identities simultaneously.[67] Also, we have to ask how significant the influence of the societal and cultural factors can be when it comes to choosing our identity. For example, how would a person who has grown up with strong family values in a conservative society behave or publicly show her stance when she doesn't believe in

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[67] Michael Blake, "Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny - by Amartya Sen and Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers - by Kwame Anthony Appiah," *Ethnics and International Affairs* 21, no.2 (June 2007): 260, doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7093.2007.00073.x.

the family's traditional religion anymore, or she turns out to be a lesbian in the culture where the concept of homosexuality is understood to be unnatural or sinful? In addition, to what extent would the use of reasoning in determining our contextual identity be helpful, given that our reasoning relies on the information available around us? How could a person know to choose Pepsi if she has never even heard of Pepsi?

Such tensions between different categories of identities can result in the blind-spot of identity politics. Through human interactions, some identity classifications become more important for certain people in particular cultures and societies than others and, thus, they end up defining themselves through this particular lens. Sen provides the example that although people wear different shoe sizes, we do not define ourselves in terms of these numbers since this specific classification is not important enough for us.[68] Similarly, one's nationality, ethnicity or race may not become an important part of a person's life or her primary identity until she is in situation in which she is part of a minority—or her nationality or race is somehow restricted in her current society. The individual then "forgets" that she shares many similar and overlapping identities with others, emphasizing instead this one singular aspect of identity. In the person's mind, that identity becomes her most important identity—or even sometimes her *sole* identity. The person may even make friends or enemies to share or protect this single identity.

Although the Myanmar students studying in the United States do not go to the extreme of alienating other people, some of them do grow strong ties towards their *Burmese-ness*. For example, one of the narrators, MY, claims that she has not lost

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[68] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 26.

Myanmar values but has rather become less 'restricted' in her lifestyle regarding clothing and socializing. Subsequently, when she went back to Myanmar, she was worried that her "looser" lifestyle might be perceived and interpreted by the Myanmar society as if she had lost her Myanmar values. Because of this concern, MY placed more emphasis on her Myanmar identity and consciously behaved in such a way so that she was not seen as "westernized." In another instance, although he attests his identity is "being re-sculpted with the American values," PO develops an urge to reveal his Burmese self to others whenever he is given a chance—because of the nature of his university which is predominantly white and in which "most international students are already Americanized." By singing Burmese songs and performing Burmese dances at his university, he finds it "very fulfilling … to show his difference in identity."

Although Sen claims that we can always make choices regardless of external cultural influences, in reality, choices are always made within constraints—and we will have to take responsibilities for all the explicit and implicit choices we make. This could be particularly difficult for the Myanmar students who have embraced new insights and values. In fact, their narratives suggest they have already made their choice of what they believe in for the current moment. The difficult part is to take responsibility for the choices they have made, without falling into the pitfall of identity politics. And it seems that this will always remain the most challenging aspect of this transformation.

Imagination, Reality and Fragments

> "[His] vision is fragmentary. … To reflect the [previous]
> world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of
> whose fragments have been irretrievably lost."

–Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*

There are two main factors that primarily contribute to the conflicts the students face when they go back and interact with people from Myanmar. The first one is that the students have changed after they have acquired a broader and more comparative sense of Myanmar and US values and other issues. Due to exposure to the outside world, the students may develop a critical view, a sympathetic view or both towards the values and cultures associated with Myanmar. The rate of individual development and change depends on the individual's personality and motivations for why they study in the United States. However, being international students in a foreign country, the Myanmar students will—whether consciously or unconsciously—have to undergo some personal transformation, since they are, at the minimum, required to speak the "American" languages. As discussed in Chapter three, the fact that one is speaking a different language means she is at least thinking in a set of different linguistic references, and thus a transformation is taking place within the individual. However, these experiences and changes in the Myanmar student's life may or may not have been recognized by the people "back home."

In addition, when people are distant from each other, their memories distort their actual encounters with others and they only tend to remember the extreme experiences of happiness or sadness from the past. Thus, when the student is abroad, the people back in Myanmar create fictional characters out of the multifaceted real student in order to sustain a connection during the student's physical absence. Moreover, in their imagined character, the people back home sometimes add the projection of what they wish the student to become by the virtue of studying in the United States. For instance, HTS's acquaintances from Myanmar assume he has made a lot of money but in reality HTS is always "broke" and he is "frustrated when people back home ask [him] how much money [he] make[s]." Because of the fragmented pieces of an individual's image that people back in Myanmar may hold, "[t]he shards of memory acquire[] greater status, greater resonance… [and] ma[k]e trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquire[] numinous qualities."[69] As such, this preserved and exaggerated image of the student can get further and further away from the "actuality" of the Myanmar student—who has changed so much while studying in the distant United States.

Conflicts, therefore, arise when the bubble of fiction bursts. Perhaps this is why ZYA's mother reacts so dramatically when she comes back to Myanmar: "At one point, my mother even said if she knew I'd become like this she would never have sent me abroad." Perhaps this is why PO's friends regard him as the outsider who does not embrace the same cultural values as they do: "Since I have become more open when

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[69] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 11.

discussing issues, my friends back home are sometimes unforgettable [unforgiveable] with my stands. … [They] start to regard my being liberal as the by-product of studying [in the United States], which they think transformed me into a person who wants to overturn the Burmese tradition even though I cherish Burmese culture."

The second main factor that spurs conflict is that the students who are in the United States are themselves not always aware of the incessant current of change happening—with a different rate—in Myanmar and in the perception of its people, particularly in this age where some traditional values are explicitly tested because of the recent government reform and opening up of the nation. This unawareness of the transformations in Myanmar culture is reflected in AH's narrative when he describes the culture he identifies with: "If I am to pick one, I will have to pick Myanmar culture because I have not been introduced too much to the American culture…" In short, AH assumes that the same unwavering Myanmar culture still exists, and that he is therefore obliged to choose and identity with one or the other. For some of the students, the internal value conflicts can be amplified if they happen to hold on their Myanmar culture or if they are confronted with those who steadfastly practice the traditional values without realizing the Myanmar culture has gradually evolved and moved on. In her narrative, FRT describes how her "liberal way of thinking … irritates [her] friends and families [in the United States]." This expatriate Burmese community to which FRT is exposed seems to be detached from the complex American lifestyle and culture, and clings to the historical values of Myanmar culture. Because of the experiences with this specific Burmese community in the United States, FRT expects that she will have to struggle

more when she goes back to her country. She does not recognize that immigrant communities often diverge greatly from those back "home"—particularly in times of social and cultural change.

Dealing with many fragments of the imagination, many Myanmar students studying in the US have to re-engage with the "home" society every time they return from the new society in which where they are supposedly settled and fully immersed. Although the students gain many new perspectives and develop comparative sensibilities, depending on the new values they establish, their re-entry to the former society can be quite difficult. A consequence of this could be that their sense of where they actually belong can change due to their transformative experience. Then, where do the students think their "home" is?

CHAPTER VI: WHERE IS HOME?

"We will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or
villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands…"

–Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*

Although Rushdie uses the above quote to describe the experiences of immigrants, the concept of constructing "imaginary homelands" is relevant to the experiences of international students who have lived in at least two culturally different locations and feel like they do not belong to any particular places. From the study of the narratives of Myanmar students, two main reasons can be identified as to why they might feel this lack of belonging. First is that the students have lived in multiple places for a significant portion of their lives and subsequently develop strong attachment to none of those particular local cultures. PO, who has lived in different parts of Myanmar and is now studying in the United States, attests to this: "As I have become more comfortable living [in] new places, my regards about where my true home truly exists has become blurred."

The second reason for the ambiguity about where the students belong is due to the various, and often conflicting, values they have cultivated over time. The previous chapter discusses why and how this is the case for many of the narrators. Since they cannot truly identify where they belong, these students are no longer citizens of a particular nation; instead, of being the product of various cultures and traditions, they have become citizens of the world, who nurture selected values as they see fit.

Nussbaum argues that becoming global citizens is a lonely business since they live in "a kind of exile" from the comfort of local truths and belongings.[70] The best companions for citizens of the world are "reason and the love for humanity"[71]—which rarely offer refuge for psychological attachment and intimacy. Alternatively, the global citizens can seek comfort and security in Appiah's rooted and partial cosmopolitanism. Yet, the stories of the Myanmar students studying in the United States suggest otherwise.

One narrator, USM, admits that she feels comfortable with American culture. However, she also claims that she is still learning many things about the United States as a "cultural outsider," and therefore she feels like she does not really belong here. In another narrative, MY first proclaims Myanmar as her home, and then, in the very next sentence discloses that she currently feels more comfortable with American culture. Her justification is: "I believe it is just a matter of adjustment. I had to put in some effort to adjust my behavior when I come to the United States and I will have to do the same when I go back to Myanmar." Home, by definition, should be a place where the individual feels most comfortable with herself. MY's deliberate adjustment efforts imply either one of the two: a) she is in fact more comfortable with American culture but tries to be politically correct by "choosing" the culture of her "home," or b) she actually feels she can be home anywhere with some effort of adjustment. Both of these tell us that MY does not have a specific place where she feels comfortable enough to call "home."

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[70] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitism," in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.
[71] Ibid.

On the other hand, instead of having roots in one particular country, some students express their home as an abstract and imaginary place. Creative ZYA finds her "home" in her art: "I don't think I belong anywhere. Home is to me not a physical place anymore. … 'Home' has become an abstract space that I will strive to recreate in my art." Another student, USM, expresses a similarly abstract point of view. Home for her would be a place where she is allowed to live in a specific lifestyle surrounded by people she loves: "The idea of 'home' for me is not a specific physical place, but more like a mental place where I can have autonomy, have a life of my own, and stay close with my family and loved ones." These inventions of "imaginary homelands" verify that some students cannot or have not found the place where they feel they belong. However, this lack of belonging is not as lonely or barren as Nussbaum implies. Although USM's image of home does have some feelings of yearning for a perfect little place where she can fit in, ZYA seems to be comfortably living in the art she has created: "When I am making art I feel most competent. My life feels more meaningful."

In conclusion, through various value adjustments and identity conflicts that they confront during their cross-cultural experiences, many Myanmar students in the United States undergo a process of self-transformation and eventually begin to form global or cosmopolitan identity, even though some claim to identify solely with either their previous culture or the new one. Due to the lack of data, it is unclear whether or not cosmopolitan identities developed in many students are of Appiah's rooted and partial sort—based in a specific locality or nationality. However, the narratives reveal that there are some students who are inclined to become Nussbaum's citizens of the world, for

whom the love for humanity transcends the local inessentials. Regardless of whether they have become cosmopolitans, the majority of the students create imaginary, ideal homelands since they can no longer identify the actual places where they can designate as home.

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APPENDIX: THE NARRATIVES

ZH

Since the first day I stepped onto this land, all I felt was that people are very similar with a little exception due to their environment and culture. Friends from the United States are as kind as, as mean as, as naughty as, as ridiculous as, friends from Burma, at least for me. I would contend that they all share the common values as human beings. The only differences are what and how they eat, what they do during their traditional holidays, and how they deal with their cultural restraints, basically.

I remember my first year, when I first moved in and went through the orientation; I became friends with the majority of the girls on my floor, except some girls from the sport teams since they are away most of the time. My coping mechanism, I noticed later, might have seemed a bit different or may be even the same for others. As much as I love my culture, what I automatically did was blocking it in my head; I was ready to learn their culture and language right away. I was not trying to restrain myself from eating cheese, pizza, burgers, lots of bread; going to church, celebrating Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and many other occasions. Therefore, my first year the whole time was an exploration and adventure.

I was always hanging out with all kinds of people. First years, sophomores, juniors, seniors are all my friends, to be truthful. I was merely called a social butterfly, especially at the dinner time, I hopped from one table to another to socialize; I just love new people and friends. To be fair, I think my close friends are all Americans, since we have very few Asians and I only hang out closely with my Burmese folks during the breaks and such. It was not because I selectively hangout with Americans; I just happened to be closer to them since we were in the same classes or same organizations or such. After the first semester in first year, I had a group of friends whom later became my best friends. In my sophomore year, we created a living group and since then, became so much closer until now.

I really enjoyed freedom that young people have in American culture. At the same time, I was not ready to embrace a complete freedom of expression when it came to clashing mine. I remember one time I was having a conversation with one of my friends from my floor. All of a sudden, she was pretending like she is pregnant with Buddha's baby. I was really offended and could not control my aggression. However, I realized that she did not mean to insult yet it was difficult to understand since I was still a girl with an embedded Buddhism teaching. It is funny now as I later found out that there have been a

lot of other expressions that talk against Jesus and Mohammad as well. Although I was considerably open to new culture, I was still a conservative, irrational being, back then. I was taught in my family, at school, and society in Burma that Muslims kill and carry out violence everywhere. So, when I was having lunch conservation with one of my friends from Pakistan, I was aggressively, now shamefully realizing that, pointing out his religion and telling him it should not be violent unlike Buddhism. What did I know! Until that time, I was a devout Buddhist, more likely a Buddhist daughter of a Buddhist family.

After I took several courses, went to several human rights, diversity, interfaith and secular conferences, I realized what a brainwashed person I was when I got here. Such a wonderful time I had, changing myself to become a liberal, rationale and pro-equality, pro-human rights person after all. Even with a lot of discussion I had with my friends at dinner table or coffee house or even at our common room while chilling, my thoughts have changed and also influenced their thoughts to a good change as well. All of us help each other grow up and be more accepting and tolerable in many ways.

I started out with blocking my culture in my thinking process at first but after all I have learned other culture, I re-embraced my own and started sharing. Now I am writing cultural articles on my campus newspaper to share about mine after learning about theirs; life is all about sharing, I believe. I think I have learned about their culture enough and it's time for me to show mine. I wear long gyi usually every day when I go to classes or work. I cook Burmese food and share it with my American friends. Since I have solid close friends, I am now reaching out to new Chinese, Korean, Argentinian, French people. I am learning Chinese every Thursday, practice French with a French friend on Friday and Spanish on Wednesday. Learning and sharing becomes the meaning of my life and if I am not busy, I feel very unproductive; therefore, I had to keep myself being busy with learning, teaching and working. Throughout my college life, fortunately, I had no time to get home sick or get lonely or depressed, except a few hours during some breaks. The thing is I was always busy with classes, speech team where we travel every weekend, newspaper production, amnesty international club and such. During the first year, I was busy trying to find my passion and also a way to get a significant position in each place to show my ability and work hard; in the following years, I was busy with all the positions I took. I had no time for any extra thing even like boyfriend.

Time proceeds to continue and surprisingly enough, in my senior year of college, depression hit me hard as I realized one of the rare feelings: feeling inferior and incompetent among my department fellow students. My major is speech communication/rhetoric major which is basically a major that is difficult even for native English speaking student. While I was comparing myself with a few great students from my department, I felt terrible, not being able to argue due to my language barrier. It was embarrassing and that was one of the moments that hit me. Thank Goodness I have such

good friends who are always there for me to hear me out and boost up my confidence again, I survived through that awfully crazy thought. Who am I kidding; I ran half marathon, I sing, dance Latin dances, organize events on campus, took several leadership positions as student senator, appointed committee representative, president of a club, assistant editor of the student newspaper, ethical leadership scholar, forensic-ator and many others. I was even doing a lot more than an ordinary American student would do. There is literally no one on campus who does not know me. That was one of my qualities; I try my best to uphold my reputation, not as an international student; just as equal as other students who are trying as hard as they can to reach their goals. I hated it whenever professors give me a subtle grade because they think English language might be hard for me. I chuckled and told them to be tough on me on grades. It's better to embrace a C-with pride than an A+ because of a pity, though they did not mean it. Therefore, no wonder I never felt incompetent. However, it was a temporary feeling and I find it very amusing feeling that after all, since I still could make solid arguments, speak eloquently, question the professors and discuss in the class.

People from Burma, including myself in the past, think that Americans are party crazy, drinkers, sex-addicts and audacious people. I disagree completely. Just like some people from Burma who are very outgoing and some being introverted, some Americans are also very introverted, traditional and shy as well. We cannot just stereotype people from the regions by the media influences or judge by looking at one person from that country.

When I was a sophomore year, in my class, I remember I was noticed as a person who breaks at least one social norm a day. I was freely behaving as I wish without any restraints like in my country. I was happy at the same time, I feel more confident and innovative. I was not harming society in any ways but I was not following any norms if I do not agree. Most of the time, I was soul searching, trying to figure out who I am as a person, what I want to do to make my life meaningful and what makes me feel about life as a meaningful thing and what I want and what I don't. So far, I haven't lost any values as an individual person. I have set my own values and rules and concepts of what I do and what I won't do. My own values and morality is set based on my own reasoning and I became stricter on how I based my morality on reasoning and justice. Before I left, I was confused about my religion; and now I am completely a free thinker. I practice compassion where I live for the world and the human beings. This might sound pretty but impractical. I do not set myself as what nationality and bound with any nations or social constructivism; rather, I feel more connected to all nations in the whole world and feel related to all human beings from the whole universe. Culture is what society determines and as long as it does not restrain human rights and equality, it is a fascinating thing to keep and reserve in hopes of learning about the country and the people. At the same time,

I think people are the same in many ways. One funny thing I do during college is trying to compare someone that I know from Burma with some friends that I newly made in the U.S. They are just westerners but they feel love; they expect loyalty, friendliness, kindness, caring, respect and happiness.

MY

I come from a slightly conservative Christian family. ████ is located on the bible belt of the United States so religion-wise, I did not encounter many value conflicts although the different Christian denominations in the mid-west have many rituals that are unfamiliar or even strange to me. The biggest value conflict I had and still have is the power-distance between people of different ages. In Myanmar, we address and treat people differently based on the seniority while the American culture allows and encourages candid and open socialization regardless of age, gender or status. I would try to show my respect by using polite terms and behavior, but most often this was interpreted as being uptight and insincere. I have allowed myself to be more "open" when I interact with people whom I regard as my seniors (in age or status) but I still sometimes feel that I am being disrespectful and I'm afraid that I will carry this behavior over when I go back home or interact with other Myanmars.

For my freshmen year in the United States, I hardly went out or spent time with anybody. That was mostly because I was overly-cautious about my study habits. I am also somewhat of a loner so this did not bother me much. Starting from my sophomore year, I was a lot less restricted with myself and allowed myself to interact more with friends and go out more. I did not find myself struggling to fit in. By that point, the friends I have chosen are friends I am comfortable hanging out with and while we would have some "culture shock" moments, we just openly explained how our different cultures react to these issues and move on. I have equal amount of American as well as international friends. In the beginning, I have a lot more international friends because the international students were given a separate week of orientation before the other students arrived. Therefore, we had more interaction and developed stronger relationships before we got to interact with domestic students. However, gradually I gained more American friends. In fact, the majority of the friends I spend time with are now Americans. It is not because I go out of my way to hang out with Americans, the majority of friends that I have common interests happen to be Americans.

I honestly don't think I was forced to undergo a drastic or significant behavior change (other than the one mentioned) in order to be a part of the new culture. ████ College itself is great at promoting diversity and encouraging international students to keep their culture and heritage alive. In fact, we are not required to fit in, rather we are

supposed to bring diversity to the mostly black and white student population. There are different clubs, organizations and events going on in the campus all year round that all students are aware of the diversity on campus and are sensitive to other culture. I also try to keep in mind that I am a guest in a host country and try to accommodate the American culture without losing my core values and beliefs. I do not find it very difficult to compromise. For example, if there was an issue that is acceptable in the American culture, but not in Myanmar culture, I would not impose my culture values on Americans and denounce them, rather I would just not participate or engage in the issue. I often find that it is just a matter of tolerance, because it would be unrealistic to be in agreement with everyone. . I know that this may not be the same for everybody especially if you are dealing with a racist bigot or some extremely patriotic or nationalistic person, but I find that generally being open about the culture indifferences makes it easier for both sides to understand where they're coming from.

I also don't necessarily find myself being unaccustomed to the American lifestyle because I was heavily exposed to the American culture (sports, entertainment etc…) since I was a child. I do find that my American friends are surprised at how acquainted I am with their culture because most internationals, especially from developing countries are not. This does show me that Americans don't necessarily expect people from other countries to have the same lifestyle or to have knowledge about it. I do find that having familiarity with the American culture gives me an advantage in socializing with American students because I can pick up more on references and jokes. However, I have instances where I wouldn't get a reference (eg. a movie quote, lyric…) and my friends would all scramble to familiarize me with the material. I think it is a nice gesture, but I know that some people would find that offensive and find that the Americans are culturally insensitive and are mocking their "inadequacy". It all depends on the person, but I have not had an instance where I feel completely left out.

The only things I did find difficult to adjust to were the different accents and slangs. It is especially difficult in the mid-west because of the different country accents and drawls. It is also more of a sensitive issue because people from the mid-west and the south are conscious about their accents. I find it very awkward to openly tell them that I do not understand their accents without coming off as rude. This is the main cause of communication breakdown for me. However, I do find that people are more accommodating and understanding when they realize that I am an international student. I guess they just assume that the fault was mine and not theirs, and it works for both sides.

I still do identify with Myanmar culture. I find that Myanmar culture is very beautiful and rich in that it is intrinsically "good" and "wholesome". For example, although some of my friends see the devotion we have to our parents extreme, I find that the devotion we have for our parents keep us from doing reckless, senseless things in the

sake of self-indulgence. I also find that Myanmar culture emphasizes on moderation and acting sensibly. I feel that these are the common sense that becomes lost in the names of individualism and "self-actualization" in the modern Western culture.

I have a lot narrower power-distance with regards to relationship with people from different culture. I am a lot more open, but I still try to observe my distance especially with older people from Myanmar. I understand that they will interpret my behavior as being disrespectful or "loose". I guess I am more conscious and conservative with how I interact with Myanmar people now.

I think I might have become less "restricted" in my lifestyle with regards to clothing, socializing etc… but I have not lost these values. When I went back to Myanmar for a break, I find that I was even more so conscious about my behavior in my country and I try not to be seen as "westernized".

Home is still Myanmar for me. Currently I would say I am more comfortable with the American culture because it is less restricted, but I believe it is just a matter of adjustment. I had to put in some effort to adjust my behavior when I come to the United States and I will have to do the same when I go back to Myanmar. I do not see myself as an American or see the United States as my home although it is a very nice country.

ZHH

Before I got to ████, I had already written like 14 letters to my roommate. We already had a good start. We talk about philosophy, politics and what we have been reading lately. I know that he and I are kindred spirit when it comes to discussing various issues. When I first got into international student orientation, I already knew at least three of them, one from Turkey and two from back home. The Turkish friend and I interacted the same way I did with my then roommate.. We shared a passion for international affairs.. Did I face any cultural shock? Not really! Not with them. What defines us were our differences and all three of us have read widely enough to know the differences and what to expect out of each other... I also chose to be on the Global Village freshman year floor which is meant to be a service floor for people looking out for diversity and people who are already diverse.. We have hippies, sports people, gay, bisexual...etc in as many ways as you can differentiate them.. It was a good start. And, unlike most international students, I hanged out with them because I found that I already have a family with whom I can traverse various topics. Diversity to me was not about skin color or the superficial labels such as nationality, religion etc... that we gave to ourselves. Those words matter less than the experiences behind those words or the people who carry those words. For me, I look in my friends what differences they have to offer and what it means to me eventually..

Diversity is thus, a set of different experiences converging to a set of different responses to the same scenario and creating something new in the process for everyone involved... With that said, there was still one thing I found it hard to handle though when it come to my American friends. It was their open discussion of sex and other intimate activities that I found myself too embarrassed to wade in. I made up for my lack of knowledge through wikipedia and "educational" stuffs online but, still I feigned being a social conservative for a long time for reasons that I have finally untangled.

That identity of social conservativeness on sexual issue remains consistent when it comes to interacting with fellow international students. My interaction with international students and fellow Myanmar students were based on issues that affect the international student body in general such as lack of internship opportunities, where should we be after college etc or studies.

It is really hard to tell whether I have more international student fris or American friends. I do not particularly need to live with one group of students. I can take off and meet with new people and make new friends and be in touch with old friends. I like the concept of social enablement and I try to follow it. Essentially, I am being dependent on the friendship one particular group or set of people. It takes energy to be around multiple people and at the same time, they infuse you with energy by their diversity. I develop this habit after a serious relationship that I had ended. Diversification provides emotional security as well as freedom.

Going along with the emotional security and freedom, I think I have for the most part tried to identified myself as multicultural, thus, not limiting to Myanmar but also incorporating anything that I find valuable and good to achieve my life goal of happiness, peace and meaningfulness in my everyday life. I have had clashes with my parents over social issues but, I have tried my best to establish a code of conduct where we can disagree and sometimes, ignore our disagreement as well. Like any social conflict, I think it will take time to establish understanding controversial issues such as atheism, homosexual rights etc. I have demanded more respect of me as an individual as well as giving them the respect that their experiences and values are worth listening to and not entirely, dismissed by me, but, I will find my own way of doing things.

In conclusion, my definition of myself and my identity is always evolving and will continue to evolve till I die. Passions, friendships, relationships, family and all the things that we value and the interactions with those entities converge to what makes us whole as well as our ability to achieve meaning in life, fleeting or fundamental being determined by our core values.

TM

I have two stories to tell. First …. If a person asks how I would identify a "good" student, my immediate mental image would be a student working hard, being respectful and being humble. To the obvious, how a person identifies a "good" student would vary from the others, depending on the values and beliefs that have gradually ingrained in him or her while growing up. I was grown up in a small town ████████, approximately ███ mile away from former capital city of Myanmar, Yangon. From the environment I was grown up in, I learned to value three things, work ethics, respect and humbleness, literally more than anything else. The praises I would often hear from my parents, teachers or adults to whom they think of as a "good" student would be "The kid never takes books off his face! He even reads books during lunch time!" "The kid is quiet and attentive in class. He is not playful!" "The kid lowers herself. She's humble." As I struggled for the identity of a "good" student, I focused on my studies all the time (strong work ethics), listened to teachers' words and never argued back to them (be respectful), and always lowered myself (be humble). I won praises from my teachers and peers as rewards. I am a naturally quiet person, but the values that I have ingrained also keep me as a quiet and obedient person.

Like many Myanmar students of around my age, I had a dream to study abroad at a place where education is highly valued and of high quality. I knew and expected that the education system abroad would be foreign to me, and that I would have to try hard to feel competent among peers. During my years at ██████ University, as I have expected, I come to grasp the differences in how I perceived of a good student growing up in Myanmar and how Americans perceive of good students. One of the most conflicting perspectives for me to adapt to was to "stand up for oneself". Back home, I learned to stay quiet and never talked back to teachers in class. Teachers love students who are quiet and obedient. A calm, quiet and good-natured girl has always been an idol for me. Speaking up in class to me seemed showing off in class, which is the opposite of humbleness which I value much. I was afraid that I would be judged as "showing off" if I tried to speak up something in class. I was scared of being judged as disrespectful if I question a teacher, talk back to a teacher or argue with a teacher. Criticizing a teacher seemed like a sin to me. Showing respect to a teacher was more important to me than being intellectually challenging or developing critical mindset. Teachers were almost like gods to me. I was never able to find a reasonable purpose for me to speak up in class. As part of culture, I felt "wrong" to speak up or question teachers in class. I would associate speaking up with negative judgments and would never feel "right" to speak up.

In the new culture at ██████, I feel pressured to speak up and question teachers in class. I like that I could freely question professors, and try to understand concepts and materials well. I agree that intellectual curiosity is necessary for deeper understanding of

subject materials. That was what I hoped to develop when I came to the United States. But the problem is that I would not feel comfortable and confident to speak up or ask questions in class. So, I would go to office hours to ask questions individually. However, I became aware that being "quiet" in class, even though it would be understood as being shy, is often judged as being "LAID BACK," a term that I have never associated to a quiet student before. I was shocked. A comment made casually by one of my professors whom I admired much for his intelligence and passion left me of thoughts. He complained, "….students are not very engaging. They just sit back and take notes! They never fully engage in class, and speak up…." That was an unexpected comment from my professor since I believed that he is a professor who understands and encourages quiet students. Gradually I grasped that while quiet students are understood and encouraged by professors and peers, assertive students are admired and valued as competent and confident students as long as they are not arrogant and dominating. At ███████, I feel a need to speak up in class to prove intellectual competency and to be truly admired and well-respected by professors and peers. I learn speaking up in class is valued as characteristics of a good student as it encourages students to become intellectually challenging.

As you would imagine, I feel deficient compared to my peers who can describe their opinions articulately in class. I had awkward and uncomfortable moments whenever I needed to speak up. I always find it hard to know when to jump in a conversation or discussion. I always worry that I will be aggressive. I always worry that I will sound arrogant and disrespectful. While I agree speaking up as a sign of being intellectually challenging, I still find speaking up to be conflicting with my value of humbleness. Even when I have seen students speaking up in class with full respect and humbleness, I cannot feel confident that I will sound like those students. Language fluency is also a barrier for me to feel confident to speak up. I feel that not being able to speak up in class with confidence is a huge barrier for me to earn true respect. In a society where speaking up for oneself is encouraged, I feel like an incompetent student who does not know how to speak up for myself. I wish I were brought up in a culture where standing up for oneself was nurtured. If so, I would have tried speaking up in class often times to become a competent and well-respected student. I would have gained confidence in myself by now just like my peer American students.

Looking back, I feel thankful that I was grown up in an environment where hard work, respect and humbleness are idolized. I believe from my experiences that a person would need to work hard, be respectful and be humble, to a more or less degree, to see opportunities to go to greater places, meet with greater people and create greater purposes in life. In my case, if not for hard work, I would have never had the opportunity to come to the United States and study at ██████. If not for respect, I would have never learned

to see well meanings in other people and learned to be a good person. If not for humbleness, I would have never allowed myself to learn from greater souls and grow up. I think what I am trying to say here is that I still try to maintain these three values even though I have now moved from my small town in Myanmar to the other side of the world, the United States. But, through my studying abroad, I have learned to adjust my values for greater intellectual pursuit. I am struggling for a new value "intellectual independency": to be able to think independently and speak up for myself. Instead of holding onto fear of negative judgments such as showing off and perceiving as conflicting to my values of respect and humbleness, I need to learn how to stand up for myself while still showing respect and modesty. I need to learn to develop intellectual independency without sacrificing my values. I know that for a person who is naturally quiet and introverted, it would always be challenging to speak up. But I think that the skill of being able to articulate myself in front of a crowd and feel independent is necessary if I were after greater causes in life. I could see a long way ahead of me to become confident speaking up for myself, but I will continue to struggle and fight with it.

Here is the second story. In my culture, girls are valued and praised when they are gentle and considerate. Even though being kind is a good characteristic for everyone to possess, I feel that females are more judged based on their kindness than males in the society. During my growing up years as a teenage girl back home, I developed a perspective rooted in my heart. It is that to become a good girl, I should pay priority to the needs of other people. The girls of my age in my country, we grow up idolizing Asian series heroines. They are often portrayed as gentle, considerate and sacrificing themselves for other people. They would often suppress their desires and would fulfill the needs of other people. They would cry behind and suffer secretly for the benefits of other people. They are often portrayed as angelic characters. I grew up my teenage years feeling a need to stay "angelic" to be adored and loved. I still remember I felt hurt and disgusted myself that one day in my childhood life, when my mom shouted at me, "You Evil Rotten Woman! Why don't you let your younger sister choose first? You are such a selfish witch!" I could not control my tears. I had never been judged that negatively before. My mom would always be patient and say gentle words to her daughters. Those words were harshly shocking. Since that day I always think of myself as an unlovely girl. Those words often flashback to me, repeatedly accusing me of a rotten evil witch! NO! Just like a typical young girl, I wanted to be loved. I wanted to be loved like everyone in my family loved my younger sister, a naturally considerate girl always sacrificing her desires to make other people happy. As a young girl starving for the identity of a lovely girl, I have learned so well to always consider for other people that I would feel guilty and disgust myself like an evil witch if I did not. I worry more whether I would hurt another person than I would hurt myself. I worry more whether I would ruin another

person's benefits than I would ruin my own. I worry more whether I consider for other people than whether I achieve my wants. I have learned to behave selfless to accept myself as a girl worthy of love and respect. I would define my worth with kindness and sacrifices.

With a firm belief in a considerate and sacrificing girl as my idol, I came to the United States. Because of my culture, I would be very cautious not to speak up my needs first and to listen to what other people have to say during my social interactions in and out of class. I did not feel right to put myself first. However, I gradually grasp a whole new perspective that totally contradicts with my value of paying priority to other people's needs. In the United States, I am encouraged to help myself, not sacrifice myself. I am encouraged to speak up my needs, not suppress my needs. I am encouraged to look for what I want, not to follow what others want. I realize Americans take pride in taking care of themselves as a sign of being independent and competent. It is typical for students who speak up their needs in class. Ironic to my old belief, I learn that an individual should respect another individual's rights to care and consider for themselves by themselves. I started to feel wrong not knowing what I want for myself and not projecting myself. Behaving like a good mom in my country, sacrificing her desires for her husband, kids, friends and community is, I believe, a universal character of a lovely and kind lady, but in the United States, women are not entitled to sacrifice their careers, their ambitions and their dreams out of social pressure unless they do so by their own will. I have met several women professionals and leaders standing on their own feet and being driven by their own dreams. I realize in the United States, as opposed to my own country where women are admired for their kindness and consideration for other people, women are admired for having her own stands instead of defining her life with what her parents, teachers or friends want.

As a woman who does not learn to be assertive and make independent choices on her own, I feel like a weak character always being indecisive and dependent. For most of my youth life, I always have let other people make decisions in every situation. I have rarely tried to demand something for myself from other people. Now, through my experiences at ▮▮▮▮▮▮, I grow drives and needs to stand up for my benefits. I learn to compromise my needs with the other people's, without making complete sacrifices. I have been inspired to discover myself, to know what I like and want. I have been inspired to create my own identity, not complementing the identity of others. I have been inspired to find my own purposes in life, instead of just being someone's wife or someone's follower. I know that, as a girl who has lived most of her life, always hiding behind other people and never asserting herself, it is a huge challenge academic-wise, career-wise , family-wise and emotion-wise to become a strong and independent woman. But I have experienced a paradigm shift. I would enjoy a life made of my own choices without

feeling pressure or burden to always make choices based on other people's desires. I tend to be a giving person, and I feel happier when I could give to someone than when I receive from someone. Yet, I still would like to discover the big picture of who I want to be for my own sake. I do not want to be caught up in always thinking for other people and not giving serious time to think for myself. I learned to embrace this new perspective a hard way.

In conclusion, I would say that as a Myanmar student who was grown up with contradicting values and beliefs from those in the United States, I find it tough to strive to truly win respect and admiration for both intellectual competency and personal character in my college life in the United States. I am a quiet and passive student in a society where speaking up is appreciated and admired. I am a considerate and laid back student in a society where standing up for oneself is a respected and rightful act. I was and have been odd. After coming to the United States, I am inspired to improve my intellectual curiosity and competency and to discover what I really want to do in my life for myself! However, I am still determined to stay true to my values of hard work, respect, humbleness and kindness. I believe that I can speak up and become intellectually competent while still having respect and humbleness. I believe that I can stand up for myself and create my own dreams while still being kind to other people. Despite tough times, I will never regret that I decided to come and study at the United States. This is one of the right decisions I have made in my life. If not for this studying abroad experience, I will have missed opportunities to fight through the odds and grow independency as a student and as a woman. I will have missed opportunities to grasp completely different perspectives, open my eyes and ears and improve myself. For future generations who like to study in the United States, I would recommend to come with a fighting spirit, a tough and determined spirit to learn and grow up through conflicts and odds. The student will have no regret.

ZYA

I chose to come to study in America because I like the liberty that they celebrate. All my life, I have tried to adapt to the Burmese culture, the Chinese culture and when I travelled to Thailand, the Thai culture. By adapting, I mean doing what everyone does in the given situation, not saying anything that would be considered different or strange. After leaving my family and coming to college in the US, I realized that I never knew how to verbally express myself nor to assert my individuality as much as I longed to. Discovering a channel to direct this individuality as art-making is a big breakthrough for me. I discover and recreate my own values in the process of making art.

I talk to Americans. I always have the feeling that my visible individuality is viewed by American with curiosity. I think they would be interested in making friends with me but I am extremely shy and introverted. At times I am also socially anxious. The cultural norm of starting a friendship is also different in American culture and Burmese/Chinese culture. To me, in American culture, you almost have to impress them into becoming interested in you where else in Asian culture, you automatically be nice to each other look out for each other because the common identity and the values you are brought up with. In a way, the way I form friendship with Asian people seem natural and not superficial. Modesty is something not a lot of Americans believe or practice.

I felt isolated in different ways when I am with American or Asians. When I am with American, I feel isolated because of their culture. When I am with Asians, I feel lonely because we don't value the same things or have the same interest.

I've tried hard to be involved in clubs and organization in my first three years of college. I was an RA my sophomore year and held a couple of positions in clubs and organizations. I seek to be educated in Feminism and Gender and Sexuality subjects by going to the clubs meetings. But because of the isolation I feel and the social pressure that I dislike, when I discover Tumblr, I stop going to the meetings and follow on the subjects independently via the internet. It saves time and energy to me but I also realize I am not meeting any new people. So eventually, I gave up in trying to maintain social contact with American, if you don't count the social networks as social contacts.

I major in Art. When I am making art I feel most competent. My life feels more meaningful. So when I am in an Art class, I don't feel incompetent or deficient at all since to me, art is about asserting your individuality and communicating what's personally important to you without the use of verbal language. But when I am in classes that talk more about US society, culture or religion, I feel very incompetent and disengaged. Mainly because I am not engaging in the same lifestyle as they are. I don't eat the same food, I don't watch the same media, I am not aware of the news or their other nerdy interest or sports.

I have lost fewer values than I would like to. I want to get rid of my shyness so that I can become more assertive and confident. I think confidence, assertiveness, boldness, humor are the qualities that appeals to American culture. My shyness and introversion have prevented me into changing myself as much as I want to. A pretty quiet shy dainty wall flower girl might appeals to Asian men but not necessarily to Americans. I do realize that when I am friendly and funny, I appeals to American more but I can't bring myself to do that all the time.

Cultural diet is something I take with me and it never changes. I still love Burmese food as much as I did before I come to college. I tried to get off board so that I can make my own food and eat rice everyday. I still love the food my family cooks and I

still yearn for spicy Thai food everyday. I think I will never lose the identity of my tongue.

When I went back home, I feel depressed and imprisoned. Being at home with my mother constantly reminding me of my role and responsibility is intimidating and diminishing. My individuality is robbed away. Every choice I make is being criticized upon. At one point, my mother even said if she knew I'd become like this she would never have sent me abroad. Part of the conflict with my family is that I was sure that I am right and I felt I have to fight for my position. If it were three years ago, I would just listen to everything I was told as part of being the obedient daughter. The rebellion that's building inside me is also very debilitating to me mentally. I know that I am hurting the people around me and myself but I can't change anything because I am changed.

I don't think I belong anywhere. Home is to me not a physical place anymore. I have mentally find escapism through finding a home within a person or a part of a person or an activity that I do. "Home" has become an abstract space that I will strive to recreate in my art.

FRT

Living in the city is not like living in the Hollywood every day until you get to reside in the Upper East side of course. Whatever, for most foreign commoners, it is a dream come true to live in New York, a city that never sleeps! Yet, in reality, it is like living in a superficial world, so capitalistic and so sophisticated. People in the city can be so generous and kind to you at one moment; then, they can turn their back at you at the other and act as if one never exists. I wonder if the act is being professional or just their nature of how things are done around them, such as making friends and building relationships. I lost thinking how people can talk and act differently. I lost myself being scared of their overconfidence! I used to be afraid I might end up being one of them, so ignorant and hyperconfidence for actually nothing special, but eventually who cares about what others think of his/her life! It is all about identifying oneself with the big city's culture.

Making friends here is as easy as breaking up as my experience tells. The only solution one needs is how to come out of the stress as the city is so big that there come a lot of terrific events waiting for one, either good or bad, according to my encountered. In the end, one needs to be a lot more matured in order to fit into the city life. Of course, it is so hard to succeed in living harmoniously in two different cultures but one has to find the best way to live with it when there is no other option. Fear and hesitation may not do any good for my life but earn more lonely and miserable years of my residence here in New York. Thus, to live happily in life, I endure.

While watching Disney Hollywood movies, what we see is the protagonists making friends and falling in love. Shopping and having an easy life is part of the dream given by these movies. In reality, the world is not all about a fairy tale, always ending with someone coming in rescue for one's sake. The community is not as helpful, generous and sweet as the movies describe. What happened when the dreams stay as the dreams? What happened when one realizes the world is not as perfect as he/ she thinks? What happened when one does not find a way to live independently? Well, one got lost. No one cares at all about one having lots of friends and money or meeting Hollywood standards. In the end, one works hard for what he/she desires. Nobody gives nor returns freebies in the capitalist system.

The first challenge to step into the big city is knowing how to deal with people turning their back at you. As a young Burmese girl who used to live in a very warm, helpful and close friendship, I used to earn deep friendship and expect my college friends to feel the same as me in expanding our horizon of understanding but a lot of disappointment touched me once I realized there never exists so-called truly close friendships, well at least not here in the New York. Friendship, in their cultural sense, is that helping out each other and physical intimacy. Hugs and handshakes, sweet talks and almost jaw-dropping flattery, and tweets and text messages are flying around. Yet, when times come to dissolve so-called friendship, people here will not hesitate to step on ones, whom they use to call "friends", for their own benefits. As NYC is big and diverse, competitions are big and on global scale which I could understand; as a result, one can truly earn his/ her own friendship or relationship which I believe is the consequence for whom lives in the big city. Hence, I learn to hold my emotions well, not letting people cross the line to step on me and being aggressive sometimes to defend of my own well-being but not in an extreme and selfish way but in a modest and respectable solution as I have been taught not to harm other, grow hatred and anger nor ignore of the disadvantaged but love and care of ones in need.

Yes, being alike to one of New Yorkers scares me. I do not want to end up as one of them having no true friendship. I do not want to be so selfish and so dare to sacrifice the ones I love for my own advantage. I do not want to be old lonely with no real loved ones around me as them. These fear kept me in a cave for several months without having fun, making friends and getting involved in social activities until I realized that I was lonelier than New Yorkers are because of my own ethics of making friends and what relationships are like. I actually was living in the past, holding to my Burmese collectivistic culture and tradition. In the end, I learnt that I need to be independent and more matured in order to make my harmonious living in the city. Living independently means not just having decisions on my own and taking responsibility of what I choose. Well, actually, it is more than that. One needs to know how to deal with different types of

people, from the aggressive to the reserved, from the old to the young, from the people with happy families to the ones with broken families, from the rich to the poor, from the party guys to the book geeks, etc. if wanted to make many friends, building the network.

The most important part is living at the moment, not thinking about the future too much nor the past deeply. What I need to do to have a happy life in the city is to live accordingly, taking one step at a time but not losing my own ground of culture and ethics as well as my future goals and ambitions. Successfully, I manage to live my own happy life without losing my ethics and culture taught by my parents and my mother land. I am not too selfish nor too generous. I make my own claims and live with the consequences. I make friends and commit to the ones I love at present, not thinking too much about what the others think of me; in the end, I understand, no one can satisfy everyone around. I go parties but I never touch liquor. I go out to eat but never break my vegetarian diet. People of my acquaintance accuse me of going against nature for not eating meat and drinking liquor; then, I argue how people can be different while coming from different culture and backgrounds, taking advantage of New York being a cosmopolitan city with people acting strangely sometimes and differently in their own way. I am helpful and easygoing but never let others insult or disrespect me. I might be offensive sometimes for being defensive of my own being but this is what I need to live in the world of capitalistic people. Consequently, I am loved and cared by my foreign friends, recognizing my good nature and strong personality, admiring my way of thinking and doing things and encouraging and supporting what I am doing to achieve in my life.

However, my openness and aggressive nature sometimes become thorns in my relationship with Burmese elderly here. With the tradition that the elderly are respected and the culture giving no chance of talking back to the older people regardless of rights or wrongs, I am frequently seen as a rude and cruel being in the eyes of my father and mother as well as my aunt and uncle who live here. My liberal way of thinking, accepting all ridiculous ideas and never holding onto a single way of solution to life, irritates my friends and families here. They claim if no single one is absolute, then I will wonder about without any direction. What my traditional Burmese community is claiming for is living an either life, one with parties and independence or a monastic living with them collectively solving all the problems I would have had. Simply saying, I have to choose either an individualistic culture or a collectivistic nature according to them as Burmese community cannot accept the ideas of going out late as a well-respectable lady, partying and dancing when time comes and making friends with some different people from my own from the west. In their sense, no foreign people can have a stable and well-function family with consistency. While a Burmese girl goes out with a white guy, pathetic thoughts and fallacious ideas come into their mind. Thus, Burmese community, especially traditional and conservative elders, will not accept ones fond of western

culture and ways of thinking as well-established matured beings of their culture, rather rude and naughty kids without any religious or parental control.

Actually, this is the just beginning and the real struggle I will face when I decide to go back home to my country. I am encountering the cultural conflict quite often here but still manage to deal with it without any serious problems. However, I am sure these cultural boundaries can be broken down if I can persist my own way of life in my own way of thinking and ethics. Once I let go of my present self of thinking, returning to be conservative and traditional as the Burmese cultural families want, I will be invisible and spend my lost decades for long between these two different communities. Thus, the actual self of me should be working hard to get recognition of the society, instead of going for the ought self that the community values; and this is what the fully functioning and self-actualization people, such as Thormas Jefferson and Martin Luther King, do to live harmoniously with the world but enacting an incorrect principle in a way of living.

USM

I think I ran into my biggest value conflict between the two cultures when I went back home during summer 2012 for the first time after having studied abroad for three years. I didn't realize until I got back to the U.S. for the fall 2012 semester that I was experiencing reverse culture shock when I was back home. My short answer to your question is I had a conflict with the extremity of both American and Burmese cultures' values: individuality versus collectivity/group harmony and hierarchy. Let me explain what I mean by this.

During the entire time when I was back in Burma, I felt like my autonomy was being taken away from me, and that I had a hard time trying to have conversations with people in which both sides can question each other's opinion openly and agree to disagree. Since I've been in the U.S. for college, I learned to use my critical thinking for both my beliefs and other people's beliefs and opinions. I enjoyed having stimulating conversations with my peers and professors about academic topics, social topics, and anything in general. When I had those conversations, the age or social position hierarchy rarely got in the way for us to engage in honest conversations. For example, I have an American friend who is in her 50s. She is like my host for the organization I receive a scholarship from. So, we are not peer-to-peer friends both in terms of age and her being in a caretaker role for me. But whenever we have conversations about anything, I can question her back, respectfully of course, and honestly state my opinions however similar or different from hers. So, in a lot of ways, when I'm in the U.S., I feel like my autonomy and independence is valued, encouraged, and I have a lot of opportunities to develop my individuality.

But when I was back home, I noticed one big thing I didn't notice before I studied abroad. I would talk with my parents, aunts, cousins and friends. And I noticed that there are often a lot of cues in those conversations that remind each side of their position in terms of age and social group. For example, when I was talking to my aunt about something I can't really recall right now. At one point, she said something I don't agree

with. So, I tried to bring up my own opinion about that and tried to show my disagreement politely. But she sort of shot that down quickly and kept emphasizing her opinion and felt like she needed to 'educate' me and give me advice for what is 'right.' Given that she is my aunt, I think she felt the need to look after me by giving me advice for what she believes in, without considering what my own opinion would be. So, I think, since Burmese culture is collectivistic-oriented and values group harmony and hierarchy, people try to stay in their roles consciously or unconsciously when they interact with others. Though there are a lot of things I respect about collectivistic culture, this is something I dislike—your attempt of maintaining your role comes at the expense of exploring differences. I'm not saying that my aunt's mentality is something every Burmese has. But I do see that it is a general orientation among Burmese people, in a lot of collectivistic cultures actually.

On the other hand, as you must have figured it out, I really like the value of individuality and independence in American culture. But I think American culture is extreme in its individualistic orientation, just like Burmese culture is extreme in its collectivistic orientation. People in the U.S., (again this is a general trend; I don't mean this for everybody), are very comfortable prioritizing their desires first over their families'. Family comes 'after' what one wants, I think. For example, I was talking to my professor about how I have conflicted feelings for choosing a career for which I would feel fulfilled and also with which I would earn enough money to support myself and my family. She told me that she appreciates that, and it's something Americans don't need to be worried about since the individualistic culture allows people to think about them first and then for other people. I think people in the U.S. don't appreciate their birth family enough once they get married and have their own families. I think older people in the U.S. should be looked after more by their children.

My value conflict is that I don't feel comfortable with how American and Burmese cultures can go too individualistic or too collectivistic. I believe that both cultural orientations have their own merits, and we should embrace them both.

I'm a moderate introvert. So, I'm used to having only a small group of close friends. As far as American friends, I have 5-6 close friends. In terms of having friends in general, I think I know more international students than Americans. But when I think about who I hang out with most of the time, those are my very close American friends. I think it's primarily because our personalities click together, and the second reason is that there's always something new between us to share and learn about since we come from very different cultures.

The first two years of college are probably the time I felt alienated or isolated the most trying to understand and fit into the American culture. Because of language barrier and cultural miscommunication, I think I felt very out of place or pushed to the edge of the social circle here. So, that feeling of loneliness was not to the point of being unbearable, but still pretty bad.

I never tried too hard to fit into the American culture here. During the first two years of college, I think I tried hard to get friends, but wasn't very successful because I didn't know what I was doing or what I wanted. Now that it's been over three years I've been in the U.S., I'm understanding the culture here better, getting more friends and

positioning myself better in the American culture. I think what helps is that I value autonomy and independence a lot. I found out over the summer that I can't really survive for long in an environment where I can't have autonomy. How I find common ground with the new culture is that I try to be non-judgmental and understand where the other person is coming from or why there is this cultural practice. But I still try to be myself at the best I can. I try not to compromise my values in a trade-off for fitting better into the culture here. For instance, when I first got to the U.S., I heard several times that I need to go to parties, or otherwise I won't get friends. I'm by nature not very extroverted. So, I don't really enjoy going to parties, dance and mingle with a lot of people, wherever I am—in my own country or abroad. But I told myself that I should at least give it a try to experience what the new culture is like. I went to parties a couple of times, tried dancing and drinking with my friends. I had fun, but it's definitely not something I would regularly do. So, I made up my mind that I don't feel the need to go to parties just to get friends. I'm pretty sure I can get like-minded friends slowly over time. I just might need more time. And it's true—over the time I got very close to some friends whose personalities I find admirable.

I'm not a sports person at all and not a party-girl either. But I also met Americans who don't like sports at all or are very quiet and would stay in their room instead of going to parties. So, I guess, the more diverse I find people here, the more comfortable I am with myself that I don't participate in sports or entertainment life here as much as what American media shows.

I actually feel that I really learned what my values are after going through culture shock in the U.S. and reverse culture shock in Burma. So, I don't think that I "lost" any values when trying to fit into the new culture. The confusion, questioning and self-doubts that I had during culture shock and reverse culture shock eventually helped me become very certain about what 'my' values are. So, despite the hard times I had before, I'm very glad that I have lived with two very different cultures by this point in my life. It's something that a lot of people don't have a chance for, and I feel very lucky to have this experience.

I do identify with Myanmar culture, but I can't say that I'm Burmese all the way inside and out. My situation is a bit different because I'm 75% Chinese and 25% Burmese by blood. The whole family on my dad's side is Chinese, identify with Chinese culture and live as Chinese immigrants in Burma. The family on my mom's side, on the other hand, is mostly Burmese, identify with Burmese culture and live as native Burmese people. But since I grew up with my dad most of my childhood and teenage, I didn't get to participate in Burmese customs and cultural activities like an average Burmese would do. But because I went to public schools in Burma, I think that socialization in schools helped me get in touch with Burmese culture better than in my family. In what ways do I identify with Myanmar culture? I really like the cultural value that one should always keep their family in mind and take care of their parents when they get old. I really respect this form of giving back to one's family and thanking all the sacrifices and things your family has done for you. And I like the friendly, hospitable nature of Burmese people. I think people in Burmese culture warm up to each other pretty easily and

welcome new people on a close, friendly level. Sometimes you don't find that with some American people here.

Before I went back home in the summer of 2012, I got out of touch with Burmese culture and people from my country and started to forget what home was like. So, I had to adjust myself back into getting to know my culture on a different level when I went back home. Now I feel like I have understood both cultures at least better than before. I'm glad I went back home and got to rekindle my relationships with my parents, sisters and friends in Burma. So, now I think I have good relationships with both Americans and my people in Burma.

Where is home for me now is a big question. Even before I studied abroad, I never really felt like I'm completely at 'home' and comfortable in my house and Yangon for a lot of reasons. And though I'm getting more comfortable with American culture, I'm still learning about the culture here and see myself as a cultural outsider in a lot of ways, not in a bad sense. So, the idea of 'home' for me is not a specific physical place, but more like a mental place where I can have autonomy, have a life of my own, and stay close with my family and loved ones. I guess not fitting anywhere is the place I belong!