

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2013, First-Place Personal Narrative Winner
By Leat Ahrony
Please don't categorize my multiculturalism

"Where are you from?" a passenger on the plane asked me. I was departing from Taiwan to Canada for secondary education. *Where should I begin?* Most people can sum up their nationalities in one sentence, but I am not quite the simple case. I do not fit in a specific category or box. We are often attracted to simplicity. We like to have a right and wrong, a black and white solution or answer, but culture can only go as far as shades of gray.

It is difficult for me to identify myself and for many Canadians alike, because their roots are often planted elsewhere. It may be in Europe, China, India, U.S.A, Brazil, and many other countries around the world. For the younger generations, they may automatically consider themselves Canadians, and their passports support this statement, but there will always be something to add. Their grandparents and parents often carry on certain traditions, rituals, customs and eating habits at home. I fell in love with Victoria when I came here, and I see myself permanently living in Canada. However, like an international student once told me, "there will never be any place like home". I am quite scattered. Unlike many, I have three homes now. But my family and childhood memories will always be in Taiwan. I can briefly demonstrate my multiculturalism through three stories. Where do I belong? Is there a true answer, or is culture, ethnicity, race, and identity a sticky and complicated topic?

In 1993, at 4.9 kg, I was the largest newborn in the entire room, and according to my mother and the nurse, when I was hungry; I woke *all* the babies with my high volume cry. My legal name was printed in English in my Israeli passport. My family never relocated to a new country, but I learned to make friends with people from around the world since the day I could walk. I grew up in a collective and conservative society.

It took great effort for me to convince one of my friends for a play date and sleep over while attending Taiwan public Elementary school. It was not the norm; uncommon. My father originally from Israel, with grandparents who escaped from Georgia in Russia, did not speak Mandarin, and likewise, my mother could not speak Hebrew. Therefore, the common language, and my first language is English.

My parents sent me to an English speaking international pre-school, but then I shifted to a different environment when I was enrolled in Taiwanese public elementary education. Students cleaned the classroom floors, toilets, and class blackboards every morning before school started and in the afternoon before the school bell rang.

I was the Wai Guo Ren (外國人) A.K.A foreigner in the class. Because I looked different than most individuals in Taiwan, I will always get questions from locals. "Where are you from?" I love to see their surprised expressions when the first word that comes out of my mouth is in Mandarin. It was difficult to make friend growing up, because I never belonged in one specific category.

Home will always be my home. I may have a westernized Taiwanese mother, and a Jewish father, but our family loves and are influenced by the Taiwanese culture. I miss the flexibility to bargain at night markets, the convenience of 24 hours supermarkets and corner street 7-

11s. The warm winters and hot summers, and the safe feeling of downtown at 4 am in the morning are qualities I miss. As I was Skyping with my father last week, he told me every time he goes to the farmer's market; they always ask him when his daughter would come back from Canada? I didn't live like a traditional local Taiwanese or Chinese, but I was influenced by the culture, food, societal values, and habits. Our dinner table was very unpredictable.

We could have steamed fish with soy sauce, ginger, and garlic, a salad, and white rice. Sometimes my father would have couscous as a side dish, and combine it with two stir-fry vegetable dishes, and cold soft tofu. Our meals were always mixed, often a combination of Middle Eastern, Chinese, and Italian Food. Our mouths were accustomed to different flavours, spices, and herbs. It is hard living in a country all your life with most of your close family living elsewhere.

Welcome to the Holy land of Israel! Because my family were greatly involved with keeping the Jewish Community Center alive and running in Taiwan, we built many close friendships when expats from Israel came to Taiwan for 3-5 contract years.

Israel has a very different lifestyle, and mentality. The media annoys me sometimes, because it incorrectly educates the public that Israel is all bombs and terrorists. It is true people always live with tension, anxiety, and the possibility of some terrorist attack or causality happening in the next few minutes in the back of their minds. However, people do live with it, and it becomes a part of their lives.

When I go back to Israel for family vacations, I am aware of the higher possibility of something blowing up in my face, but I don't obsess about it. It is generally safe. There are certain things that become the norm, and a way of everyday life. For example, it is common to walk into a grocery store and see female and male soldiers carrying a gun strapped across their shoulders. This is their national duty. People in Israel greet you with a hug, or two kisses on the cheek. There is warmth in the air, and national security needs to be taken extremely seriously. There is also sacredness to the place: the birth of three religions. Unfortunately it is also a hot spot for conflict around religion, property, and disagreements on whether Israel should be allowed to exist. Am I willing to live in Israel? I would say yes any day. My Canadian Jewish friend who came back from an internship in Israel last month cannot wait to go back in the summer. So do I consider Israel my home then?

So here I am, in Canada, trying to put the puzzle pieces together of who I am, and I still don't know. Switching from a British to an American school system was sometimes confusing. I was taught differently, and had to change my spelling from 'colour' to 'color', then back to 'colour' in Canada.

I met an international tourist from Brazil on the ferry over Christmas break, and he asked me, "So do we use Celsius or Fahrenheit in Canada?" We actually use both I replied. "Do they measure in Centimeters or inches?" Once again, both are used, I replied. I explicated Canada's English is influenced by American and British English. We spell colour with a 'u', but we say fries, and not crisps. We love afternoon tea, but we also love our morning coffee. We drive on the right side, but we often measure in miles and pounds. I find it

interesting that grocery store prices are advertised in pounds, but on your receipt, the item is scaled in kilograms. At the same time, I have cherished the diversity Canada has to offer.

I have friends from Germany, Persia, Iran, Nigeria, China, Australia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the USA. I learned more about Islam and Christianity, and the different holidays they celebrate. I celebrated my first Canadian Thanksgiving and Christmas, and experienced a taste of snow in Victoria. I had the opportunity to work with campus advocacy groups, to make friends who identify themselves as a coloured individual, a First Nation, a queer, a lesbian, gay or undecided individual. But in the end, are we not all humans I ask myself. Does it matter if we really fit into a box? Close your eyes now and ask yourself the question: Who am I? It isn't an easy one to answer is it? Are you confused enough yet? If you answered yes, you know how I feel now.

Diversity is something special. It is worth celebrating, exploring, and appreciating. When we decide to open our minds a little, we will discover the differences in a collective and individualistic society, the variety of food choices, the variety of educational systems and opportunities and the ability to work with different people, to reach out to a greater audience, and contribute to discussions around cultural diversity.

Just like making friendships, establishing trust, and building relationships, you cannot categorize where a person is from or who they are. Our passport(s) is only a legal document. I have dual citizenship, and some of my friends have three passports, so what do they identify themselves as? We are often told to think outside the box in North America, but we unconsciously close one eye to be in the safe side, and stay close to the borderline.

Reach out and explore, because you never know what you may find. As an international student, I encourage everyone to build long-term friendships from around the world. It is easy to stick with your comfort group, but you fail to realize how much you are missing out on. We must celebrate diversity and not hide from it. Please do not categorize me, because I feel like a flexible rainbow. Everyone shines in a spectrum of colors/colours.