Hidden Immigrant

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Those of you who have been in the same position know this feeling; the feeling of expecting to fit in, but discovering that the reality is the complete opposite. We wonder why it is so hard to ‘fit in’ with our so-called ‘home country’, but the reasons are so deeply within us that it is hard to realise and describe. Being a foreigner in a foreign country is easy, you are seen as one so it’s normal to feel like one. But upon entering the country of your birth or your familial origins, you realise that the place you are meant to feel the most ‘at home’ is the most foreign to you. How could this be? The frustration digs at us so much that it drives us to initially reject the culture we are supposed to already ‘know’. Some time after repatriation we realise that this culture is not us at all, furthermore, we realise that we are forever destined to be foreign everywhere we go and we are unable, or maybe have no desire to be fully part of just one culture. Our story is that of someone who doesn’t belong in one place, but who belongs everywhere. Repatriation denies us this ability to express the different cultures within us. Being in the one country in which you are meant to fit right in puts a lot of pressure on the requirement to ‘conform’ and fulfil certain expectations that you have neither the potential to fulfil nor the want to. The result becomes a momentary rejection of acceptance; there is a desire and longing that comes up inside of us that makes us want to express our difference, our individuality and remind ourselves and others that this place is not who we are (yet).

Being new in a new place is normal, it’s actually the only thing that’s a constant for us, but the thing is, usually everyone else realises we’re different; we stand out in a foreign place because we don’t speak the language (sometimes), don’t fully know the culture and don’t know where anything is. What makes it more difficult about being in the ‘home country’ is that we don’t look different at first glance, we blend in instantly and we are assumed to be ‘local’. For us, becoming a ‘local’ is possible in any place we move to, but that status takes us some time to achieve, months and sometimes even years. In this particular situation, our ‘local’ status is not achieved by our time spent there, but given to us thus it is assumed that we talk like the locals, act like the locals and know what the locals know.

Let’s talk about language, as Third Culture Kids, most of us are bilingual some even multilingual; generally we know our ‘native’ language (the language of our parents and our ‘home’), English and bits and pieces of whatever the local language is of our current place of residence. So, because of the different languages that reside in our brains, we get confused sometimes. When entering our first culture, we are assumed to be entirely fluent in that language, to know how to form sentences perfectly and even more, to know modern slang. More often than not, it is wrong to assume this of us. Because we have spent a majority of our lives outside of our first culture, our main language is most likely English. Because of this, the way we speak the native language will never be entirely correct; we would use the wrong words in different times, form sentences weirdly and we certainly have no idea what the “slang of the moment” is. We spend the first few months talking in sentences others find weird and having to endure looks from people that says “why don’t you talk like us?” and “are you an idiot?” and even laughter with an element of pity. To add to that, our accent will forever remain unusual.

Now, what about social behaviour? Us TCKs have grown up in countries completely different to our “native land”, some on the opposite end of the cultural scale. Our identity isn’t one that comes from a single culture; it is not entirely static and will always slightly change. So, we kind of created our own culture, a third culture and this is where our social behaviour comes from. What entirely influences our social behaviour are our multicultural experiences, we integrate the different social rules of different countries and maintain a flexibility of change. We can adapt and integrate ourselves within a society, respecting and following the social norms, but there will always be moments in which we get things wrong or get confused with. We are at the edge of society, taking part but remaining as an outsider.

Finally, expecting that we know everything about our ‘native’ country and culture is a mistake. We know a lot about a lot of countries and cultures, but in truth, we actually know a limited amount about our first culture because we simply have never lived there long enough to absorb the knowledge fully. Just like any new country we move to, it takes us some time to develop this. We observe, we wander and we slowly integrate ourselves into the culture. However, because this IS supposed to be our first culture, the one we are supposed to be experts on, we feel ignorant and ashamed of the lack of familiarity. The reality is that, we may know a lot about many cultures, but we will not know everything about all of them. We are made up of parts of cultures put together, a melting pot of cultural experiences that become inseparable within us.

We are hidden immigrants, finding a home wherever we go. We are locals who are foreign.