

As somebody who came to Pittsburgh from Vienna, Austria when they were five, who was born to a French German father and a second generation CA immigrant from Taiwan and northern China, I've experienced a lot of different cultures and perspectives. I've seen the six lane California streets, the rickety red street trolleys in Vienna, the brick houses typical in Squirrel Hill and Shadyside, the ornately carved facades of Paris. I came to Pittsburgh from a different world, from densely packed streets, and huge street markets to townhouses with front and back yards, with cars instead of trolleys, KitKat instead of Duplo. And as a person with those experiences, I've gone through a lot of other things too: finding a place, an identity in several cultures, trying to find somewhere between countries, languages, and cultures that I neither fully belonged in nor didn't know.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> grade I went to speech therapy, and I realized I had an accent. I couldn't say my r's, and this disturbed me. Once, at one of the sessions in that small, stuffy room, I said the German r, which is a bit harsher and rolls slightly. The therapist frowned, tilted her head, and asked me to repeat myself. I gave up and tried the American version again.

I wonder if people tend to overhear, oversee, skip the things they don't know. And I knew that I wanted to be somebody that explored the unknown. I spent 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade exploring the worlds I could be part of, perhaps because I felt the pressure to belong, and I wanted to somehow prove my independence of it, that I could be different. Maybe this is what made me so shy sometimes, but I am proud of myself because it took courage. I don't know who I was for my classmates, but I know I was not who I was in Vienna, and I know I was not who I am now. Something was lost when we moved and now I think it was the power of language; the inability to say what you mean, something that most take for granted; when you can think something and the words can come out with hesitation, sounding like everybody else's. Later, I read that an accent is beautiful, one of a kind, the sign of something you have achieved; worked for. But back then, for me, an accent was a sign of not belonging.

There were so many things that my classmates didn't understand about me that I was always interested in other cultures and traditions. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, in the last few weeks of the school year, an Indian girl joined my grade. At recess, I walked up to her, introduced myself and asked her about her home in India. She answered them willingly, a little surprised, but happy to share. There is an unreplaceable joy in sharing things about the familiarities that don't make sense in other places; like when the people in our history class documentaries speak in French. I remember an occurrence in second grade where I went to my Japanese friend Mao's Birthday party, and a boy there said something about me in Japanese, laughing. Being one of the only not Japanese people there, I felt embarrassed, and I repeated what he had said, substituting my name with his, figuring that if it was an insult, he would be part of the joke too. Everybody laughed. I never found out what he said.

Because we came from Vienna, not Beijing, because we visited my European grandparents much more than my Chinese ones, there was a certain uncertainty, a kind of distance that was created between me and the part of me that was Chinese. I didn't know all the Chinese holidays and traditions like I knew the German ones, and I felt there was little opportunity in finding them. It was an old recipe book with some narratives in that I discovered what paper cuttings to make for New Year's, my Chinese friend was the one who told me that our double happiness sign was hung the wrong way. I looked in the sections of the library with

myths of Chang'e and the Celestial Emperor. I realized, however, that being part of a culture does not mean you have to do *this*, or know *that*, it means that you share a way of life that can be your values, your language, or even food.

I hope Pittsburgh can be a place where you can find both new traditions and old traditions; where there are so many different communities and diverse opportunities that everybody can find an identity, a place where no one is excluded for their culture. Because what would one culture be without another? Cultural diversity enriches our lives in ways we haven't experienced before, helping you gain insight into other perspectives and values. If everybody was identical, nothing would be surprising, interesting or unique anymore; our future lies in collective learning, in the sharing of our ideas and opinions because ultimately, this leads to new ways of thinking and seeing things, and therefore new ideas and innovations. If there is anything I have learned in my journey so far it is to embrace the different and enter life with an open mind and open heart.