

Identity over Experience

Katherine Leung

Growing up in the American Southwest, I frequently got asked, “what are you?” or “where are you from?” They weren’t asking for my hometown of Austin, Tucson, or San Jose. I didn’t like this question because it made me feel different from the dominant culture of white Americans, who I had assumed did not get asked that question. I’d always answer that question with a canned speech of my-parents-are-from-Hong-Kong-which-means-we-speak-Cantonese-at-home and Cantonese-sounds-different-and-is-written-differently-from-Chinese. At a young age, I made it my personal mission to educate outsiders on Cantonese culture.

Even with my Hong Kong pride, I never felt at home in Asian spaces. I have been to Hong Kong four times in my life. During each visit, I tripped over my words and felt ashamed for knowing so little of the language I spent so much time explaining to Americans.

When I was a student at The University of Texas, I signed up for an international student partnership program. At first, I asked to be paired with new students from Hong Kong in an attempt to practice Cantonese. Right away, the division was obvious. They didn’t like me. We had nothing in common. I internalized that I represented everything that they didn’t like about America - that I was somehow culture-less and not the authentically American “guide” they had hoped for from the program. I had also internalized these students as symbols of the “old country”, not open to cosmopolitan or liberal ideas and wearing the wrong clothes, the wrong hairstyles. I did a lot better when I was paired with students whose home countries were outside of Asia.

Asian-American activism is also difficult because there’s such a disconnect in how first, second, and third generation immigrants engage with issues. There isn’t much solidarity between those connected to their “home” countries and with Asian-presenting activists who are monolingual in English. Many of those activists speak out overwhelmingly about Asian American representation in media, an issue that I haven’t had the emotional capacity to engage.

I spend my days working at public schools serving latinx students, at nature camps serving black students, protesting alongside a diverse body of youth and community organizers. Police brutality and family separation weigh much more heavily in my daily life than Asian representation in Hollywood. I find the lack of discretion in the pan-AAPI movement has led to the latest Asian-American produced media to be a celebration of hyper-capitalistic values, a decadent “arrival” onto the globalist stage, going as far as to silencing countless Asian voices that shed doubt in China’s imperialist mission. People who share our identity often find the community divisive or a contest in who has best attained the American dream, or a competition about which so-called Eastern or Western values are stronger. Despite it all, I seek belonging, while feeling love for my Cantonese brothers and sisters.

My intention with Canto Cutie is not only to create a community of artists of the Cantonese Diaspora, but also to celebrate one that exists. Artists all across the diaspora are doing amazing things and using their art to be heard. Some make art to try to initiate incremental changes in their own communities. Some make art that expresses their identity and educates outsiders. I celebrate that legacy with this first volume of Canto Cutie. I hope you enjoy the selection of artists around the world, with diverse narratives through art works and interviews.