

Unclaimed Identities

What is my France? This was the question our professor asked us to answer by the end of our time here. As I sat in my simple white chair in my host family's cozy loft room, I was surrounded by old walls painted like eggshells crackling, crumbling, falling apart. Joël Pommerat's *Cendrillon* lay beside me, untouched, pages ruffled from the lack of care I had given it. It's a Cinderella adaptation story, I think. That's all that the preface could tell me, anyway. Through my window, I could have glanced up to see the Eiffel Tower peeking out from the cityscape below. I could have also gone down the hill into town, and chosen from one of the three different *boulangeries* lined up in succession. What a Parisian experience.

Before asking what my France is, I had to ask who I was; I never acknowledged all of my identity. It just didn't feel comforting. Maybe it was because I felt alone — sure, even at Carleton, there are lots of Asian Americans, or even Asian Canadians like me. I just never felt the same inclination or understanding to be proud of my entire heritage. After all, it was so much easier on me to blend in when living in a predominantly white society. And so I trudged on, not thinking about it, until I lost those memories and it became awkward for me to act otherwise.

It was embarrassing. It was embarrassing to just *be* embarrassed, without always knowing why.

Having lived my entire life in sequences of change and travel, traveling to new places was always blinding yet exhilarating. It almost felt natural. And so, upon coming to France, I was excited for what was to come. I was ready to breathe in the cigarette smoke that I hated so, just in exchange for this once-in-a-lifetime experience. It would be easy; I would find *my* France — *my* Paris, and blend into the city with my *Passe Navigo* and baguette sandwiches. *Allons-y!*

On our second Wednesday, after class, we were given the gift of having an awkward amount of time to roam in the city before a *soirée* of contemporary dance. It was a cloudy, rainy day, like the rest of the week had been so far. It was also the first time I got to hang out with another Asian student on the trip — not that there are many of us at all. Let's just call her Charlotte.

In total, eight of us had gathered to find dinner. Many had expressed a desire to have Asian food, either Chinese or Thai. It was odd how easily they could say that. "Let's get Chinese," as if we were choosing a flavour of Lays chips in the local *Franprix*. It was detached from any cultural significance and made me feel uncomfortable. Google Maps lit the way forward.

As we boarded the train with our *Passe Navigos* in hand and masks on our faces, it felt comfortable. Only a few days ago, we couldn't even open the train's door latches ourselves. But we were now professionals. In the *métro*, I could hear accordion music being drowned out by the creaks and squeaks produced by the old, crooked tracks ramming against the wheels of the train. Through the rows of glass windows, I saw a blur of tunnels filled with bright graffiti and rusted pipes. *Just seven more stops until our destination.* We bounced back and forth, holding onto the metal poles that held imprints of millions who came before us. Some of them were probably just like us — a group of lost Americans trying to live their Parisian life. That didn't include everyone, but I guess Charlotte and I would blend in with the rest of them.

I felt like I was in Joël Pommerat's story, stuck in someone else's glass house, peering out to vicariously live in and follow the enjoyment others were feeling. It was difficult to follow along. Looking down at my swaying feet, I felt guilty about the distance and difference *I* had put between us. They were already so far ahead when I got off the train. My ears were humming loudly, a kind souvenir from the far-from-serene train ride. I missed my friends at Carleton more

than ever. I missed the ease of fitting into the group. I missed our messy, uncoordinated dinners of gazpacho, tiramisu, and mapo tofu that we'd clean up in the cramped dorm kitchens.

As I struggled to catch up with the others, I couldn't understand why these feelings were surging up right then, while in the company of my other friends. I couldn't afford to be too different. I knew that I *had* to learn how to blend in, or the next eight weeks were going to be terribly lonely.

Poke, poke. It was Charlotte, motioning for me to stand to the side of the street as busy Parisians exited the next door *boulangerie*... Yes, yet another one. Everyone else had gone ahead of us in search of something else, she explained, because the Asian restaurant we had chosen wouldn't be open for another half hour. We decided to wait, because either way, the others were too far gone.

Charlotte is trilingual like me: we both speak English, French, and Chinese. Because of this, we were able to speak in all three languages, weaving back and forth semi-expertly. At least, she could. I mostly nodded and repeated sentences in Chinese when I could follow along.

Charlotte's ability to communicate exactly what she wanted impressed me. There was nothing to hide when it came to identity, and not everything had to be positive. She loved parts of Chinese culture, yet hated others at the same time, as she explained so delicately over a bowl of spicy Szechuan noodles. I coughed and drank a lot of water. They were pretty spicy.

She whisked me on a trip to Hangzhou, where we were breathing in the equally cigarette-filled streets, and experiencing a whole other life of hustle and bustle. Charlotte condemned all the toxic customs that I hated, too, as we squeezed past the halls of rhetoric filled with misogyny and double standards, then sped through the stores featuring their newest skin bleaching solutions. I smelled the street food wafting down the aisles — or perhaps that was just the smell of the restaurant we were in. We talked for an hour about just that: Chinese cuisine.

And chewing on my deep fried egg roll — or *nem*, as it was called — in the central hub of Paris, I was completely hidden away from the Eiffel Tower, cigarette smoke, and *boulangeries*.

Speaking in English and French, I realized that I didn't have to reject everything "Chinese" for the sake of horrible, generalized customs. It was like the question our professor had asked us.

What is my France? I still had no answer to this, but a new, more imminent one overwhelmed me: *What is my China?*

It never had to be universal. I started thinking about my grandparents, forced into a mandatory lockdown in their small eleventh floor apartment in Shanghai. It was only a few years ago that my visa allowed me into the same space, blasting my loud indie pop music in the living room to match the crackling noises of oil that came from the kitchen. I could almost touch the bright pink blooming cactus that my grandma had spent months raising, and see the three rows of uneven magnifying glasses kept under the transparent table in the living room. I should have taught my board game to my grandpa. I could have shared my travel abroad experiences. I wished that I had spent longer basking in our family's traditions, and learned how to fold dumplings neatly. I regretted not asking more about my ancestors' histories.

Charlotte and I were quiet for a while as we continued slurping down our noodles and egg rolls. In that moment, I didn't feel pressured to impress or fit in with the six other students, wherever they had gone. I hope they found good comfort food, too.

"*Merci Madame!*" We called out as we left the restaurant. I felt refreshed — rejuvenated somehow. As we walked down the street, the sky had opened up, showering us with sprinkles of sunlight in the lingering drizzle. Over our trademark French *crêpes*, I felt the distance close. It was a relief — or *soulagement*, in French — to know that bit by bit, I could find a balance.

The contemporary dance show that night was liberating and magical. The metro ride back home was less so. And now, a week later, I am once again sitting on the white chair in my Parisian loft room, looking out the window into an unending drizzle. Joël Pommerat's *Cendrillon* has been cracked open, and in my desk hides my transformative supply of French *SushiShop* soy sauce (both sweet and salty), since my host family doesn't have any at home.

It's true, I'm still blasting my English indie music, cooking my egg fried rice, and saying my *mercis* and *s'il vous plaît*. How cosmopolitan, I might have joked to myself a few years ago. But then again, *true* cosmopolitans need to be accepting of all other people and identities, as I've learned in my favourite Political Science class. And I can't really do that until I can consciously *and* unconsciously accept all parts of myself.

I suppose this means I can't exactly blend in anymore — isn't that cheesy? Maybe that's why it's always been so embarrassing to think about it. *Que c'est gênant*, I might have translated into French, just to delay my other thoughts. But... a little difference shouldn't amount to distance between each other, right? I do want to continue exploring and sharing the city with everyone else, and start discovering more within myself. Ultimately, I think that those are two parts of a whole, although from an outside perspective, one may be easier to understand than the other.

Maybe I'll find my own France along the way. Hopefully, I'll find even more.

I guess it's time to reclaim what I once willingly let go.

There are seven weeks left; *bon courage*.