At long last, I was going to have the opportunity of meeting with Dr. Ted Aoki. Until now, he was simply some big educational theorist whose name I had come across in the pages of books or journals. Such a great scholar! At last, the chance was given to me— I was so excited that I could be with him in the same classroom. On the first day of class, an old man walked into the classroom. To me, he looked just like some generous grandfather. Frankly speaking, he was older than what I had expected him to be. However, there was a definite charisma emanating from him. Furthermore, throughout the whole of his course, I was able to reconsider myself, ‘I.’ who is living in cross cultures. Through his sense of culture and identification of identity, I could look back upon myself.
The bird losing her nest

This is the story of a lonely bird. There is one lonely bird. She flew from her own nest to the forest at its deepest, darkest point. Now she is looking for a new nest for her next life. However, it is not as easy as what she expected before. Now she is losing her own voice.

At the beginning, I did not know what I would find in my new, strange city, remote and disinterested. All I knew about this city and its culture was different from what I felt. What I said was out of reach of what I really meant. Even now, I am not sure of what I express. I have no idea of how I can speak. As the self who lives within a different culture, I am losing my words and my voice. Left with my mother tongue, I am living within a new language. Learning a language is not a simple issue; that is, it is not only about learning a language but also about learning a culture and immersing into the mainstream of a dominant language culture.

Expressing myself is another way of showing myself. The first year, I started my studies and my new life with anticipation but also with fear of being with native speakers. Though the seminar format would be comfortable and easy for native speakers, in my case, it was a totally different and unnerving experience. Until then, I was just used to listening to lectures. Discussion time was so hard for me; I understood what the reading material said and what my instructor and classmates said, but I did not have enough courage to raise my hand and to share my opinions. In the first term, my first course was about ‘learning community,’ and I managed to feel comfortable in the small group discussions. But then, I had to give a presentation in front of those perfect native speakers! That was too severe for me. However, worth 40% of the final grade, the presentation was an important wrapping up of the course. Now, as I reflect upon that experience, I still feel nervous, as if I were going through it again. During my presentation, I worried about my pronunciation, word choice, sentence structure, and so on. Also, I prayed that nobody would ask any complicated questions!

Am I ‘Westernizing?’ With time, I have become accustomed to the atmosphere of the ‘Western’ classroom style. However, I still have difficulty speaking in front of others and also in the middle of class because of the fear of mistakes, mispronunciation, and misunderstanding conversation. I would like to participate in the mainstream. Then, what meaning does participating involve for me? On the one hand, I am participating in the classroom. But on the other hand, I am still in the margin of the class. Surely, my body is in the class, but where is my original body?

The way of knowing the culture
Dipti Desai[1] suggested two key questions about the meaning of being in a multicultural setting. How can we accurately or authentically represent another culture? What can we know about another culture?

Since I moved to Vancouver, I have not met enough Canadians to talk about Canadian culture. If I am allowed to call all immigrants Canadian, then yes, I have met many Canadians. If this is a part of Canadian culture, then, yes, I do know about Canadian culture. How can I define Canadian culture? Is it the craziness about Hockey? Isn’t it?

I am still puzzled about Canadian culture. It is really difficult to express in a word. Personally, I had various anticipations for the new world before coming here, but, after I arrived, I was surprised at the ease of adapting to this culture. Unexpectedly, it is easy to live here as a stranger. Actually, there are many people who experience the situation exactly like me. Though I read numerous articles about Canadian culture, it is still vague for me to define Canadian culture; moreover, it is a struggle for me to know the culture.

Now I want to answer Dipti Desai’s questions in the following way: To the first question, I would respond that I had no idea that representing other culture is based on the history, the location of culture, my position. There would be as many interpretations depending on the people. However, the answer to the second question is that we can learn "something" (definitely I can say something either concrete or abstract). Absolutely, the thing that I have learned is that I can compare it from my culture and the perspective of objectivity. As Homi Bhabha mentioned, I am allowing myself to extend my life in the third place where possibilities open up between two cultures.

Defining myself in-between

Constructing, re-constructing, de-constructing identity is another step of living in the hybridization. Looking back on my current cultural stage, I want to revisit my writing and between lines from other perspectives.

It started from the awareness of the culture and sensitivity, furthermore, from my appreciation and interpretation about the language(s) and culture(s). It is so true that culture not only helps us to understand one another but also entails its identification. There is a positive movement within a negative one and vice versa; the uncertain and difficult situation generates hope and possibilities. As time goes on, I am changing. From time to time, I can find myself as the transformative ‘I.’

I am living in a doubling between deep me and written me[2] in a discomforting
place of self and other. As a new borne child, although now I have two language(s) and two culture(s), my original ones are disappearing little by little. However, I can never quite be a ‘real’ English speaker. The same but not the same, is this the hybrid space—the space of exile metonymy? Although I am in the shaping of ‘self,’ I can find ‘other (another self)’ at the same time. Now I can see myself as a ‘shifting me.’

I am not I, am within and without i. I/i can be I or i, you and me both involved.
We sometimes include, other times exclude me.

–Trinh T. Minh-ha

The difference between ‘I’ and ‘i’ makes entities be captured as absolute presences. Both between and within entities, ‘I’ can be understood as multiple presences. Not one, not either. ‘I’ is therefore not a united subject, a fixed identity or that solid mass covered with layers. ‘I’ itself overlaps infinite layers. Now I am in the cultivating ‘I,’ in a different and new domain from the cultivated ‘I.’ I have become a certain kind of ‘I.’ I am still dancing between the matter of self and another self/I: one that interweaves the self as subject and the other as object. Although my cultural roots are still maintained, my cultural branches and my self are already changed in some parts and are changing in other parts. I am digging out my presence without acknowledging my absence. As Aoki (1999) says, in a different culture, I should have room for openness, and I should acknowledge the cultivating ‘I’ living in the diversity.

Encouragement and accommodation are seen as signs of the cultured or the civilized attitude that can appreciate cultures by locating them in a universal time frame that gives birth to the metaphor of community as diversity produce, in its seeming liberal openness and tolerance of other, a silent form that contains and constrains differences on the underside of diversity (p. 32).

Identity is not so much something that is already present, but rather it is a process of the self in the throes of being created in places of difference. Where the multiplicity grows in the middle, between- spaces that are pregnant with potential and possibilities are created, that is where I am.

Lingering remark…

Silence rather than outspoken voice is vital to read my world. Although I am still
suffering from ‘oral void’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 165), ‘newness’ or ‘foreignness of cultural translation,’ temporality of the in-between, these are engaged in creating me. As being a container of cultural difference, I am contaminated by other cultures and also am contaminating other cultures. Through ambiguities, I am digging into a new world, opening the door by acknowledging difference and diversities. I try to place myself in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness. From my inner voice, unleashed and entangled with variety, I am immersing into the open world with possibilities—a hybridity or ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge.

Dr. Aoki, has taught me how I could see myself and further, who I am.

**References**


About the Author

Jiryung Ahn is from Korea and currently a doctoral student in the Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry at the University of British Columbia. Her main focus is on early childhood education based on narrative inquiry, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. For her thesis, she is planning to conduct a narrative inquiry of children’s stories to understand how they construct the sense of their identity.