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BACHELOR THESIS

Liberal Arts and Humanities

**Identity and self-representation processes of  
contemporary transnational and diasporic youth**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that I have written this thesis myself and on my own. I have duly referenced and quoted all the sources and literature that I used in it. I have not yet submitted this work to obtain another degree. I will sign this declaration and consent by handwritten signature.

In Mulhouse, 7 January 2022

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kattia A. Moura". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the dynamic processes of identity construction as related to fluid and multiple identities of contemporary multicultural and diasporic youth individuals growing up in transnational contexts. I present biographical case studies of two individuals of respective Thai and South Korean descents and with shared backgrounds in an international school education in Thailand, who are pursuing their undergraduate degrees in the US and Germany. I evaluate the situated identities they develop across social spaces such as on the street, at home, on social media and in academia. In particular, I look at the strategic elements underlying how both individuals negotiate their nested, overlapping and intersecting identities to represent themselves in accordance with the particular social contexts. Finally, I consider the subjective importance of the individuals' cosmopolitan values in how they construct a sense of self and embody these during their shifts between identities.

## KEYWORDS

Transnational youth migration, transnational social spaces, diasporic youth identities, nested identities, identity construction strategies

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## Introduction

As a biracial individual of Thai and German descent, I was surprised to realize how moving to study in Central Europe had made me more conscious of the fact that I was perceived within Western societies as Asian and, thus, “foreign”. This experience generated a personal interest in me to explore how people in similar situations as I, navigate their sense of self and identification in a transnational context where constant shifts between cultural settings predominate our lived experiences.

During the time I was constructing the premise to my thesis, the circumstances of the lockdown, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic between October 2020 and April 2021, greatly influenced my approach in adopting qualitative research methods that could be employed devoid of physical contact. Due to my inclination to provide a thick, rich and comprehensive analysis on how young individuals with Asian backgrounds navigate identity processes across transnational social spaces, I purposively sampled my informants so that an in-depth exploration on such a personal subject matter could be realizable. Accordingly, I proposed the roles of research participants to two of my close friends, Ploy and Eric, of Thai and Korean descent, whom I met in Thailand, and who at the time of this study were pursuing their undergraduate degrees in the US and Germany respectively.

What Ploy, Eric, and I share is a common secondary education at a school in Chiang Mai called Lanna International School Thailand. Our attendance at a school where we were immersed in a diverse cultural cohort of students and teachers defined a particular experience that both my friends, in separate interviews, compared to as a “bubble”. This meant that for the most part of our lives, and crucially between the age of 10 and 18, we grew up under an educational backdrop of a community where cultural differences were marked as the norm. In the general Thai society, however, we were each marked differently as either fully Thai in Ploy’s case, Asian yet foreign in Eric’s case, and half-Thai and Western in my case. Transitioning from such settings to studying abroad in the West where we, in turn, were perceived and recognized as foreign students from Southeast Asia, has resulted in a lesser or greater degree for each of us to reshape our sense of identity as informed by these transnational spaces and shifts.

My overarching aim for this study is therefore to investigate the ways in which contemporary multicultural and diasporic youth individuals living and growing up in

transnational social fields make sense of their experiences and identifications they form in the process. In this regard, I explore how Ploy and Eric alternate their multiple identities temporarily and situationally in relation to particular transnational spaces and their personal responses to these varied and shifting social contexts. Thus, my focus in this work lies in examining how processes of belonging and self-representation are fostered, maintained, changed, and contested in the context of transnational youth migration. The key area I ground my thesis in is therefore the field of transnational youth migration studies. While my interest in identity processes and self-representations are crucial components of my research question, I believe that framing Ploy's and Eric's stories as part of the transnational youth experience can provide valuable insight into how such young individuals navigate their multiple and shifting identities in the highly multi-faceted and fast-paced spaces underlying the transnational social field in which they live in.

In the main chapters that follow, I discuss the types of identifications Ploy and Eric define as meaningful to their sense of self and how they negotiate, shift, nest, and mediate these various identities temporarily, situationally and strategically. In each of the case studies that my friends present to discuss their experiences, I vigorously examine the social context in order to allow for a descriptive and comparative analysis revealing the contradicting and highly fluid elements of identity construction that are not only strategic but highly individual in nature. While my study takes the individual at the centre of evaluation, social processes as informed by society and my friends' social upbringings are further taken into account. Before transitioning into the empirical part of my study, however, I clarify some of the theoretical and methodological considerations I used to inform my research.

### *Theoretical considerations and methodology*

In the past, researchers have defined transnational migration as the process in which immigrants establish and sustain bonds with their host and home countries (Basch et al. 1994, 6). Recent scholarship, however, has come to define these processes as being practised and lived by contemporary migrants "within fluid social spaces that are constantly reworked through migrants' simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society" (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, 131). Therefore, evaluating the experiences of young individuals in the transnational context means perceiving the environment in which they enact processes of belonging as occurring across multi-layered and multi-sited social spaces that can extend beyond their society of settlement and origin. Identities as enacted and adopted by individuals in such

spaces must therefore be considered as more fluid and in a constant state of flux. The shifting nature of these identity processes contributes to the nesting of identities. Using the idea of nestedness and that particular identities are nested within broader group identifications, allows us to explore the relationship between multiple identities in context-specific situations. In relation to Ploy's and Eric's identity formation processes, the transnational context is of particular relevance to the social spaces these two young people navigate on account of their capacity to partake in complex transnational mobilities.

Despite the continuous and increasing flow of migration in today's world, there has been minimal research dedicated to studying identification processes among contemporary transnational migrant youths as the primary focus of study (Reynolds & Zontini 2016, 381). Instead, most of the research conducted in the sociological field of transnational migration have approached the subject from the perspective of the receiving societies with an interest in promoting integration and creating community cohesion strategies (382). Similar approaches have also failed to examine the transnational lives of young individuals as "the sole or primary subjects of investigation" while little academic interest of the existing research has given importance to individuals growing up in transnational families (383). Reynolds and Zontini's criticisms were published as an introductory article for a journal on identities and global studies in culture and power. The issue included various articles in which researchers concerned with transnational and diasporic youth identities presented their studies and conceptual themes on future research agendas of transnational youth migrations. In the course of my thesis, I refer to several sources stemming from this issue and more.

One of the important concepts related to the study of identities I discuss in my paper is the nested identity model as discussed by Elena Genova (2016). The conceptual framework of nested identities allows me to explore how Ploy and Eric combine different group identity characteristics in a process that is dynamic and context specific. Thus, I take into consideration the social context in which both individuals recount particular experiences and the relation to their multiple and nested identifications. Looking at how each person responds to their circumstances situationally and temporally; I link their self-representation processes with strategies related to essentialist and anti-essentialist notions. I employ these notions coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and George Lipsitz to exhibit the approach with which my friends manoeuvre their identities for the sake of achieving political goals (such as gaining the regard of authenticity) or social inclusion (when, for example, meeting other



group member's expectations). During the course of my analysis, I will further elaborate on the definitions of the concepts and strategies concerned.

### *Research question and study related considerations*

Having established the background, my overarching aim for this study, and some of the theoretical frameworks I employ in my analysis, I now discuss the essential points of my research question and its implications on the qualitative nature of my work.

To encapsulate what I outlined above, I am interested in examining the dynamic processes of identity construction as related to fluid and multiple identities of contemporary transnational and diasporic youth individuals who are growing up in transnational contexts. More specifically, I intend to study how two individuals, Ploy and Eric, of, respectively, Thai and Korean descent with an international school education background in Thailand and current pursuit in undergraduate degrees in the United States and Germany, personally navigate complex affective relationships between various identities of nationhood, cosmopolitanism, being a student as well as their understanding of identity and belonging as concepts. I approach Ploy and Eric's identity construction processes as occurring intersectionally and contextually by acknowledging the ways in which gender, age, ethnicity, and class shape their everyday experiences of identification. To demonstrate the complexity and fluidity with which my friends display how they understand and form their sense of identity, I analyse the social relationships with their homeland, the host country's university environment and their immediate circle of friends and family amongst whom they forge deep bonds of attachment. Of equal importance, I consider the significance of transnational technological mediums in their capacity to provide virtual social spaces for individuals to create and strengthen their links to sources of identification.

Studying identity processes as Ploy and Eric recall and reflect upon local lived and everyday experiences with people they encounter on the street, at home, in social media, in academia and the work-place environment, will allow for a thick and empirically rich analysis of how each person navigates various overlapping and contradicting elements of identity in ways that are not only fluid and strategic but highly individual and context specific in nature. My focus here on the individual's lived experiences calls for a biographical case study format to accommodate each person's particular circumstances separately. Such an approach will simultaneously allow me to acknowledge the impact of globalization forces on the lives of transnational young individuals. Through my paper and other social processes

informed by societies of Ploy's and Eric's upbringing, I put forward the incentive to impart more attention to particular aspects of study, for example, on individuals, and on multi-dimensional and dynamic processes of transnational identity formation, that have been neglected in the past under the broader scholarly research on transnational migrant youth identities.

### *Methodology*

As I stated earlier concerning the circumstances during which I was constructing my research question, I appropriated my approach and qualitative data collection methodologies according to whether or not I could conduct my research in the absence of physical contact. This enabled me to consult Ploy and Eric with whom I was privileged to acquire personal and intricate information in the face of living in countries apart from each other. Due to the limitations of an ethnographic method, the central data collection technique that I applied during my research was predominately grounded in a qualitative interview method approach. I conducted the interviews with my friends over a course of two to three months with one-week intervals between each call. Depending on the quality of the Wi-Fi signal and each person's convenience, we varied the mode of communication between either audio and video calls which generally lasted up to one and two hours. As a repercussion of the Covid-19 pandemic, both of my friends had returned to where their families lived, Thailand and Korea, at the beginning of spring in 2020.

At the time that I conducted my interviews with my friends, Eric had returned to his university in Germany whereas Ploy remained in Thailand and continued her college studies online. The situational aspect of their living circumstances at the time of our calls added to the unforeseen accounts of experiences and understandings of identities they constructed and, crucially, were constructing in their everyday lives. For the most part of the calls, I prepared a loose set of questions concerning their relationships to their family, friends, and notions of belonging which served me either as a continuation from the themes we discussed in preceding calls or as initiators for new topics we had not breached prior. In total, I conducted ten calls with each person, most lasting for an hour and others, at times, extending to two to three hours. The interval between each succeeding call with an individual generally amounted to a week during which I then transcribed our conversations and sent these to my friends in invitation to edit any topics discussed. Using and coding these transcriptions aided me to construct questions that built on their own recounts and served as a continuation for themes

(i.e., as related to authenticity, meeting expectations, etc.) we explored. Thus, the course of the interviews yielded a semi-structured approach that was underlined by organically emerging topics and discussions.

As the calls provided me with the main body of qualitative data in which my thesis is grounded in, I strived to incorporate methods that could cross-examine (and triangulate) certain findings that were of interest to me. I did this, for example, by paying close attention to topics of identity which were relevant and of personal importance to each individual. In addition, I also analysed their writing as an additional method of research that helped me to further triangulate some of the topics I studied in interviews. By their mentioning or through my own questioning, I would request a work they produced, for example, a university application, a class assignment, or a post on social media, that reflected their sentiments during a certain time and place. This method allowed me to access materials that revealed a perspective, a notion or an action that constituted a mundane part of their lives as young persons and students which I could further compare to their responses in our calls and in our Facebook's messenger chat exchanges.

#### *Limitations, positionality and ethical concerns*

I recognize that there are several setbacks that in the field of anthropology can be perceived in my subjective relation to Ploy and Eric as my research participants. While working with two of my closest friends on a topic of personal interest and relevance to me has the advantages of obtaining thought-provoking answers that motivated me to explore the theme on identity constructions at a deeper level, I often faced the doubt of presenting a sufficiently academic and, in particular, anthropological work due to the lack of diverse methodological data collection approaches I was able to implement. As a result of the long-distance study that I conducted, I was restricted to rely on the information I obtained in my previous years of friendship with Ploy and Eric, the calls I held with them during the period of data collection, and finally my online communication and observances of their posts on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Beyond the limitations for triangular research approaches of these sources, the process of selecting information to construct an inductive and coherent argument can be viewed as highly subjective in the light of my own positionality.

Without a doubt, my positionality in this work as the researcher and friend with shared and similar experiences to Ploy's and Eric's, framed the dynamic with which we

discussed certain topics. Our proximity in sharing the significant portion of our late adolescent years growing up together as close friends, led to stories that were personal, honest, and vulnerable. Straying away more often than not from the interviewer-interviewee (ask-respond) structure the academic method expected, my main concern during my work was my friends' well-being and comfort. Therefore, it is without a doubt that the research I present in this paper, while striving to maintain a critical and analytical approach, is highly subjective and personal for Ploy, Eric and myself.

For Ploy and Eric, who were aware since the very beginnings of the area of my research topic, the prospect of discussing intimate issues in the public sphere relied heavily on their trust upon me as their friend. Thus, to maintain a safe space in which I could inquire into their personal experiences, I invited Ploy and Eric to provide input and criticism during the course of my research; whether at stages of calling and transcribing texts or writing my analyses. During the course of my research, I also sought counsel and guidance Carolyn Ellis' method of conducting "compassionate research" through collaborative interviewing (Ellis, 2018). In its essence, compassionate research envelops a wide range of considerations involving the researcher and participant's positioning, relationship and dynamic of research. Though the goals of accumulating knowledge and understanding is a key concern, it is protecting the participant's well-being, being present for them and their stories, and making this accessible to others, that lies at the heart of the enterprise. It is therefore with some pride and immense gratefulness with which I receive my friends' consent to share their stories and excerpts from our calls under their actual names in this paper.

## Chapter One: Identifying with being Thai yet feeling different

*“When people ask you where you are from, what is your response?”*

*I had planned to pose the question much later, fantasizing this to be climax to the complex unravelling of conflicting emotions of belongings I anticipated my friend to dive into.*

*However, not even eight minutes into our first call together and I had already caved into my temptation. Ploy, thankfully, did not miss a beat.*

*“Oh, absolutely Thailand” she replied. Then she added, “That’s what I identify with the most.” Oh, I nearly voiced. But to form my remark into a question or an expression of acknowledgement? I hesitated. It wasn’t her words that made me pause; it was the immediacy and utter conviction interlacing her words. What made her so unequivocally certain? Was it really that simple?*

*“Do you identify yourself with those who are Thai around you?” I asked instead.*

*“Well. I guess yes and no. I identify with them in that we have the same blood, I suppose. I feel like I would blend in really well if I was just walking down the street or something. Like I would totally be considered a Thai person. I’d fit in just because I look Thai and speak Thai fluently. But I realise that I probably have a very different experience to most Thai people.” For a moment, I envy Ploy’s position. How comfortable would it be to simply fit in with the Thai crowd? But then I think about Ploy’s upbringing and how closely it resembled mine. Do I identify with being Thai as much as she does? Or is it only half the amount?*

*“Since you talk about different experiences between, you know, yourself and most Thais... how would you define Thainess? I’m thinking of the political unrest that’s going on right now, and the controversy surrounding kwampenthai [Thainess] and its implications.”*

*“Hmm. Well, talking about the political stuff first. I feel like I stand at a very privileged position in my experiences because a lot of the injustices going on, and a lot of what the protests are about, don’t really affect me as much as they affect, you know, the common Thai person. I feel weird saying that.” The line goes quiet for a few moments. “I mean just thinking about the protests and protesters, there was probably no international student who went out to protest, you know? It’s like, as an international school kid, you don’t really relate yourself with, I don’t know, the Thai circle. It’s as if because of our privilege and experiences, we’re in a different bubble entirely. But not relating to the Thai common person doesn’t mean I can’t agree or disagree with the policies that are, in my opinion, fair to like... humans?”*

*“Mmm.” I nod vigorously though my friend cannot see me.*

*“As for Thainess... I feel like when people say, ‘What it’s like to be an American’ or ‘What it’s like to be Thai’, you can’t help but be very nationalistic. You know, like ‘Oh you love your country, your people. You fight for your country.’” She laughs. “But I think... Thainess to me is having experiences that are unique to growing up in Thailand. So, I think that anyone really can identify themselves as Thai.”*

Based on personal communication with Ploy, 28 February 2021

The above vignette describes the time that I talked to Ploy in our first call for this study. My purpose of this recollection was to briefly introduce the positions Ploy and I occupied during our conversations and how the nature of her answers prompted the questions

I asked in response. While this semi-structured approach persisted in the duration of our so-called “interviews”, the topics we discussed largely revolved around Ploy’s relationship with her Thai identity and her “different experiences” marked by her education and other factors that I will describe below.

Some of the important themes which emerged during our calls when we were exploring Ploy’s feelings of belonging and self-representation was the flexible nature with which she was explaining how she navigates and negotiates processes of identity construction within various social settings. For example, in the context of our conversation described in the vignette, Ploy’s identification to Thailand as an entity she identifies with “the most” and her specific definition of Thainess encapsulating the “experiences that are unique to growing up in Thailand” reveals a strategic arrangement that allows her to identify with being Thai in spite of her “very different experience to most Thai people”. In fact, strategizing how to construct and represent her identification towards others constitutes one of the key attributes in Ploy’s mobility between identities. Hence, my main concern in analysing Ploy’s identity formations in this chapter lies in examining how she negotiates her multiple identity positions according to the social spaces she is situated in and in relation to the different people she interacts with in those spaces.

In this chapter, I therefore present how Ploy, a person of ethnic Thai heritage, utilizes and embodies strategic identity positions in ways that reveal the highly dynamic and fluid nature underlying her shifting identity formations as well as her multiple intersecting and nesting identities. To analyse Ploy’s identity-construction and identity-negotiation processes as occurring contextually and transnationally, I structure my analysis in relation to the different social spaces in which my friend shapes and shifts her identity positions. Hence, I first look at her sense of identity as a young Thai woman during the period of her childhood and her adolescence when growing up in Thailand. In this first part, I discuss how Ploy’s personal experiences influence her understanding of Thai social discourse and the implications of her particular intersectional attributes (I will shortly address) towards other Thai people. In the second part of the chapter, I look at how her identification with being Thai increases and changes after her move to the US, and during her studies in a Liberal Arts college in Massachusetts. Finally, I discuss Ploy’s construction of personal and cultural values she developed and fostered online in various social mediums during her adolescent years in Thailand and later in her US college studies. I examine these influences in relation to

her sense of self when expressing her personal beliefs in the intimate social space of friends and family at the time of our calls.

In all of these sections, I interpret Ploy's identity constructions through the following theoretical perspectives: nested identities model (Genova, 2016), strategic essentialism (Spivak 2012), strategic anti-essentialism (Lipsitz, 1997), and strategic hybridity (Poynting et al. 2004). While I use these concepts in my analysis of the fluid and shifting processes underlying Ploy's identity constructions, the concepts of "situational relevance" and the "subjective importance" of one's values (Ashforth 2001), to discuss the elements of space and Ploy's core values as closely related to one another. By assessing how Ploy navigates her identifications in relation to different social environments she is situated in, and in relation to her personal inclinations in these situations to identify and represent herself in accordance with her personal and cultural values, I aim to provide an in-depth analysis of the particular and individual ways she situationally and contextually negotiates her multiple identities.

#### *A brief introduction of Ploy's upbringing*

While Ploy's mom and biological father come from the north-eastern and southern ends of Thailand, they met in a Christian community in the Thai capital Bangkok, located in the centre of the country, where Ploy was born soon later. Because her biological father was adopted by a British missionary couple, Ploy spent the majority of her early childhood growing up in a Christian community where. As she confided with me, the memory of going to church and Sunday school remains among her earliest recollections of the time. Between the age of one and four, Ploy lived with her family in Chiang Rai, the northernmost district of Thailand, where her parents co-managed a guesthouse. Their English language fluency aided to their business, which many foreign and Western travellers did frequent. Thus, Ploy reflects on how "from a very early age", "the influence of a community that was other than the Thai community" was prevalent in her life (personal communication, 28 February 2021).

At the age of five, her parents divorced, and Ploy relocated with her mom to a neighbouring northern district and city of Chiang Mai. Moving to a new city with little means to support themselves, their "Christian friends from the same community" helped her mom find a job as a librarian at an English-speaking church. Thenceforth, Ploy spent the following three years "going to church a lot and going to the Christian library, reading bible illustrations." It was later in the library, that her mom met her dad who, visiting Thailand as an American tourist, "came into the library by chance, saw her, and the rest is history, I

guess?” At the time of her parents’ encounter, Ploy attended a Thai elementary school which she described as “a very bad environment for me because I was severely bullied for being dark skinned.” Upon her dad’s suggestion to attend an international school where such problems may not be as pervasive and harmful, Ploy transferred schools at the age of eight, and as she loved it in the international school environment, she “never wanted to go back to a Thai school” (personal communication, 28 February 2021).

At around the same time of Ploy’s transferral, her mom started her own business, an American restaurant, to work on as a part-time job. However, as it “became really big and she loved it so much” Ploy’s mom decided to devote herself fully to her enterprise. As her parents married in the following year, and her mom’s American restaurant grew in popularity amongst predominantly Western and “white people” tourists, Ploy grew up “having even more of a Western influence” as she describes her household then becoming “permanently bilingual,” and having friends at the international school who came from similar bilingual, mixed and English-speaking and foreign backgrounds (personal communication, 28 February 2021).

Thus, growing up between the age of 8 to 18 in an environment that merged Thai and Western cultural aspects and influences, Ploy’s upbringing denotes a multicultural experience that was underlined by her parental cultural backgrounds and by English-speaking communities from different sectors of society such as religious, educational, and business circles where expats and tourists were especially prevalent. When she graduated from high school, Ploy decided to pursue her undergraduate degree at a Liberal Arts college in the US from 2018 to 2022. In the period that I conducted my study with Ploy, she had returned to live with her parents on account of the Covid-19 pandemic. Continuing her studies at the same American Liberal Arts college online from Chiang Mai, Ploy responded to many of my questions concerning her self-identification and self-representation, in the context of her recent experiences in Thailand. Hence, I start my analysis with discussing Ploy’s situatedness and how she manages her Thai identities within various Thai social spaces.



## 1. Appearing “Thai to a Thai person”

### 1.1 Telling tales of being Thai during Uber rides

In this section, I look at how Ploy negotiates her association to her Western influences in the particular context of interacting with Thai Uber drivers. Of significance, is her strategy to “blend in” with the drivers in order to make them see her “as on the same level or the same as them” (personal communication, 28 February 2021). This scenario reveals the complexity of Ploy’s understanding concerning her Western associations perceived by Thai strangers and the fluidity of her identity processes to construct her self-representation.

I don’t know why I do this but whenever I meet new [Thai] people [in Thailand] or whenever I am like in a ride like an Uber or something and they ask me— and we’re having a conversation and the conversation diverts to “Where do you go to school?” And *a lot* of the times I’m *so...* what’s the word... I’m *so...* I really want to say that I’m at a Thai university as opposed to telling the truth that I’m in an international [university]. Like, that I go to college in America. I don’t know why. But I feel like, if I tell people that I go to college in America, they would have a totally different idea of me and I feel like, that the idea that they would have of me would not be me. It’s almost like... I see myself differently from someone who goes to college—who is Thai and goes to college in America. I feel like I want to separate myself from them. Even though I am that person, you know?

(personal communication, 28 February 2021; see also Appendix 1)

Ploy’s recounting of how meeting Thai strangers in the context of Uber rides in a Thai setting triggers her to feel a strong inclination towards presenting herself as a student at a Thai university “as opposed to telling the truth”. Describing how the disclosure of the fact that she attended a “college in America” would prompt the perception of her in others as someone she did not identify with, she evades her Western educational ties to avoid the “totally different” person she believes others would see in her. The dissonance Ploy notes between her actual position as someone studying in the US and her idea of herself as someone who is “Thai” but might be perceived as “not be[ing] me”, presents both a paradoxical and important example concerning her Thai-Western associations that is worth exploring in more depth (personal communication, 28 February 2021).

In order to provide a thorough analysis of the Uber interaction Ploy describes as set in a Thai setting, I examine the social cues that might contribute to how she responded by strategically constructing her identity, in that particular instance, as more purely “Thai”. Henceforth, I particularly evaluate the situational relevance of the occurrence she describes. To present an inductive analysis as a basis of my interpretations, I continually refer to Ploy’s account above in which she tries to make sense of her actions and judgements in this and

other similar situations. Though I make my references to Ploy's account clear and easy to follow, I personally advise the reader to refer to the Appendix 1 for the extended version of the insightful and reflective account that Ploy provides regarding her experiences.

As Ploy recollects, reflects, and reassesses why “a lot of the times” she decides to “lie and say that [she] go[es] to university in Chiang Mai”, she guides me (and the reader) through a range of past experiences that account for her discomfort in portraying herself as someone who goes to “an international school” or “college in America”. Referring to her socio-economic status, for example, she describes how she does not want the other person “to feel bad” or to see her “as more privileged than them [the driver]”. In the context of occupying the social roles of a client and a driver, in a semi-public Thai space, however, Ploy's concern of coming across as “privileged” can be specifically linked to the kind of position that she associates with her international and American educational background as well as to her class and ethnically mixed family background. She notes how revealing her enrolment at a college in America would generate “really invasive questions” among which “all the time, the first question would be ‘Oh wow, you must be rich.’” Additional presumptions, she describes, would follow in line of whether she was “adopted” and thus her “dad's white”, leading her to further “judgemental” notions she imagines others would have of herself such as that her mom is privileged on account of her relationship to her dad as a white, Western man (personal communication, 28 February 2021). Thus, the cultural tropes and prejudices prevalent in Thai society, according to Ploy's understanding, and her relations to her Western ties, provide a source of active resistance to being stereotyped and, in this way, to sidestep the aspects of her life that reveal her association to an international education and American dad. Consequently, she conceals her Western-Thai identity by temporarily and situationally adopting what she views as a more “common” Thai identity. This active subversion of her Western ties and a strategic appropriation of a homogeneous Thai identity displays her ability to strategically essentialize her self-representation to assimilate to Thai people's expectations and henceforth evade unwanted judgement.<sup>1</sup>

Ploy's means to subvert the negative connotations linked to the Thai-Western stereotype of a young woman in her circumstances lies in her ability to make up “completely different stories” that prevents those she is engaging “from asking more questions”. This intentional act of modifying relevant information of her life during brief encounters with

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<sup>1</sup> I expand on the prejudicial discourse surrounding Thai women and their relationship to Western men in the next segment.

strangers in order to “blend in”, displays a combination of a strategic essentialised and strategic anti-essentialised tactics that aid Ploy in her construction of her self-representation. Strategic essentialism is a concept that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined originally in the context of intercultural communication to challenge Western feminism’s historical complicity with imperialism (Abraham 2009). As an anthropological category, strategic essentialism denotes a strategy in which “differences (within a group) are temporarily downplayed, and unity assumed for the sake of achieving political goals” (Eide 2016). In Ploy’s representation of herself to an ordinary Thai person, she chooses to embrace the homogeneous Thai identity she imagines a “common Thai person” in similar circumstances to be. Henceforth, she conceals the differences her international Thai-Western identity would reveal. Yet Ploy’s response simultaneously also poses an instance of a strategic anti-essentialist tactic in which she uses a form of Thai identity outside of her own to define herself. Coined by a renowned Black studies scholar George Lipsitz, strategic anti-essentialism describes the “strategic, meditated, or calculated use of a cultural form outside of one’s own, to define oneself, one’s group, or community.” Therefore, in her act of situationally and temporarily adopting the “common Thai” identity as her own, Ploy, to her own conscience, essentializes what it means to be Thai while anti-essentializing her actual Western-Thai identity in order not to be suspect to a stranger’s judgement. To understand more fully the social context in which this occurs, I examine a different case scenario where Ploy’s gendered and subnational identities intersect the discourse surrounding the Thai-Western stereotype.

### *1.2: Feeling subject to “outright stares” on the streets of Thailand*

Whereas in the previous section, I discussed how Ploy was able to strategically subvert the “judging gazes”<sup>2</sup> of the drivers, I demonstrate through her following account how in Thai’s social public spaces her agency to fluidly negotiate her identities is greatly restricted. The main theme I evaluate is Ploy’s intersectional identities of being a woman, darker skinned and Thai and how this shapes her understanding of other Thai people’s judgements of her, the stereotypes surrounding Thai women and Western men.

Kathrin: Did you ever feel like you were looked down upon because of your skin colour?

Ploy: You know, funnily enough, good question too, but I only ever feel looked down upon whenever I am with my boyfriend. Because I feel like people think I’m a prostitute. Or that, you know, it’s always... When you see a Thai woman and like a white man on the street or whatever, it’s always... usually a white man and the woman has very tan skin. And you know,

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<sup>2</sup> Ploy, from personal communication, 20 March 2021; See Appendix 2 for the extended passage.

people associate them [the woman] with coming from Isaan [province in northeastern Thailand] or coming from poorer parts of the country and like got together with a white man through prostitution or through, you know, other means like that.

(personal communication, 20 March 2021; see Appendix 2)

Ploy's darker skin complexion had, already in her early years while she attended a Thai elementary school, led to her first-hand experience of the social stigma surrounding darker skinned individuals, in particular women, in Thailand. However, the kind of prejudice she describes as feeling "looked down upon" within Thai public spaces when seen there with her Western boyfriend, is further linked to her age, gender, national, and subnational ethnic (or regional) identity. As a young darker skinned Thai woman seen in public with a white Western man, Ploy notes how on behalf of her "tan skin" and association to being from the north-eastern Thai region of Isaan, she feels to be perceived by some Thai people as a prostitute. This reveals that her subnational identity of "coming from Isaan" and "poorer parts of the country" can be linked to the derogative stereotype of being a "gold digger".

That regional origins such as being from Isaan connote a lower socio-economic status within the wider Thai discourse is reflected in another source Ploy produced in writing. Outside of our conversations, Ploy further reflected on this sentiment in a creative writing assignment she submitted for a college class in the US in which she described visiting the place of her mother's upbringing in a town in Isaan.

It's [Isaan region] well known for being very rural and in my urban society, infamously outdated. Being from that region can sometimes make you the subject of mockery. I know a few of my mom's friends who hide that part of their identity, who try to blend in by wearing a cloak of expensive clothing, [eating] Western food and [acquiring] a Bangkok accent (Ploy, 2019).

In her essay, Ploy describes how her mom's hometown is perceived by those in her Chiang Mai "urban society" as "very rural" and "infamously outdated". She highlights the discrepancy by noting how "coming from that region" can expose the Isaan people to "the subject of mockery". By describing how, through strategic adoption of material, linguistic, and behavioural elements a person is able to acquire necessary symbolic capital, and by hiding "that part of their identity", Ploy shows how the relevance of regional and subnational Isaan background plays a significant role in the interaction with Thai people in Thai public space.

The pervasiveness of this social stereotype can be examined further in Catherine Hesse-Swain's ethnographic study on the identities of Lao's Isaan youth living in Isaan. In her research on representation of Issan people in popular Thai media, she notes how in Thai

television production, “the Isaan identity is commonly portrayed as a poor farmer, prostitute, taxi driver, servant or labourer” (2011, 62). Hesse-Swain’s findings likewise reflect Ploy’s awareness of how wealth, elements of Western identity, and the central Thai “Bangkok accent” are associated in Thai discourse both with higher class standing, and with hegemonic Thai identity, as the author observes: “Isaanness is defined *against* the dominant backdrop of what is presumed to constitute central Thainess—a modern, progressive, media and technological savvy-, middle- and upper-class elite” (ibid., 63).

Comparing the pressure that Ploy experiences when interacting with one individual Thai person, such as an Uber driver in a semi-private space, as opposed to a larger entity of people on the Bangkok streets, reveals the significance of not only space but also social context. While in the former scenario, she describes the need to conceal the international parts of her identity, the situation of being coupled with her boyfriend on the Bangkok streets heightens the pressure of the “judging gazes” she perceives in relation to her Isaan and gender identities. Ploy’s outward representation, such as her gendered, darker skinned, and subnational Isaan identity, leave her feeling judged and stereotyped in a negative manner that she wishes to avoid. As a result, Ploy responds by strategically negotiating her situational identifications among different nested identities such as her Thai-Western (international), Isaan subnational, and gendered identity. Thus, identities are temporarily shaped not only in regard to particular contexts and spaces, but further as response to certain stereotypes and nationalist notions surrounding what it means for Ploy to be Thai.

However, Ploy’s strategic capacity to subvert the “outright stares” and judgements in both situations are disproportionate. While she described being able to “blend in” with the driver’s expectations by means of her appearance and language fluency, her agency in strategically negotiating various elements of her identity to bypass the prejudice on account of being a darker skinned, young Thai woman of Isaan descent is greatly reduced when being with her boyfriend in Thai public spaces such as the streets. Being outwardly fixed with her association to a Western man and her intersectional identifications, Ploy consciously becomes subject to an ethnic, class, and gender stereotype. The discomfort she feels under the stares in a Thai public space, and the thought of being perceived as a prostitute, leads her, as she told me, “to watch” the way she dresses in a not “so openly” way. Hence, her attempt to modify aspects of her external appearance to divert the stigmatizing stares away from her identity reveals Ploy’s apprehension in being seen and judged as a darker skinned Thai woman coming from Isaan. The scenario further reveals that Ploy’s strategies of visually representing

herself in a “more muted” way, help her to deflect people’s stereotyping stares. In our brief message exchanges at a later time, Ploy elaborated how she consciously manipulates her clothing “style” when in Thailand (personal communication, 20 March 2021).

When I’m in Thailand, I feel like my style gets more muted to avoid unwanted attention—whether that be from my own family thinking it’s too revealing/wacky or older men/aunties on the streets glaring at me.

(Facebook message, 25 July 2021)

Thus, while being at home and in Thailand where Ploy feels constricted by derogative stereotypes, she actively changes her manner of dress in order to avoid the judgemental glares of “older men/aunties” as well as of her “own family”. That Ploy singled out the older generation as a source of judgement was reiterated in our calls when she described how it was “usually old people” who would stare at her and her boyfriend.

At the time of our call in which we further discussed this topic, Ploy stayed with her boyfriend’s family on a southern island of Koh Chang. She described that while they would “rarely get stared at [with her boyfriend] in Chiang Mai,” except in cases of “the taxi drivers or *songthaew* [public transport] drivers, usually old people”. However, her experience in Koh Chang differed in that she and her boyfriend received “a lot of stares from old men and women who don’t care to conceal it”. She mentioned during our call how “it was even on the bike today” where “people would be driving past and just stare.” The geography of Koh Chang as a regional place where the current approximate population size is 4.5 thousand<sup>3</sup> in contrast to Chiang Mai’s 2.1 million metro area population<sup>4</sup>, partly leads Ploy to infer further that “there’s less diversity with couples” in Koh Chang which is “probably why we stand out”. Therefore, in addition to the nested identities already analysed earlier, Ploy’s positionalities reveal that age identity serves as another key factor in terms of self-representation and social interaction in various regional and urban spaces in Thailand (personal communication, 20 March 2021).

In conclusion, the two situations presented so far demonstrate the limits in Ploy’s agency to strategically negotiate her self-representation with people in Thailand. She manoeuvres around her national Thai, subnational Isaan, international (Western), youth, and gendered identities, in response to the particular contexts, spaces and stereotypes that are relevant to her intersectional identity. While, for example, subverting or even completely

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.city-facts.com/koh-chang>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/22618/chiang-mai/population>

foregoing the Western part of her identity by adopting an essentialist self-representation as a Thai commoner, Ploy situationally and temporarily shifts her nested identities towards assimilation, as well as evades being stereotyped. In certain cases where her agency is limited, she strives towards a “more muted” expression of herself that will exempt her from the “judging gazes” of the older generation with their seemingly more conservative views. Consequently, Ploy displays a social expertise in responding to the social cues, expectations, judgements, and stigmas embedded within Thai discourse by adopting tactics of strategic essentialism and anti-essentialism.

## **2. Appearing “Thai to a non-Thai person”**

Having looked at how Ploy adjusts expressions of her identity in relation to the social expectations surrounding a Western-Thai and hegemonic Thai identity within predominantly Thai social spaces, I intend to expand my inquiry further by discussing how she negotiates her nested identities inside a Liberal Arts college in the US as an international, Thai, and Asian student among a predominantly American population of students and teachers. Evaluating how she understands and employs her Thai identity in two different social spaces on campus with non-Thai people, I first look at her experience inside a college classroom and compare it later against the backdrop of her casual interactions with her American student friends. In doing so, I show how Ploy’s fluidity to express her Thai identity as “authentically Thai” for herself in the presence of her American peers and professors is governed by the political and social context she is embedded in.

### *2.1: The “role of being Thai” in a college class in the US*

By referring to Ploy’s recounting of being “singled out” as Thai by her professor in a US college classroom, I explore how she experienced the pressure of representing herself as “an authentic Thai person” in relation to the social structures, roles, and expectations underlying the particular context (personal communication, 8 March 2021).

Kathrin: Was there anything [in her cultural interactions in the US] that caught you off guard?

Ploy: Mm... let me think about it. Oh, (laughs) I guess, teachers being very impressed that I’m an international student, specifically a Thai student. I’ve been singled out by teachers being like, “Oh, so Ploy. Since you’re, you know, from Thailand, why don’t you tell us something about Thai politics.” In a way that like my identity, my being Thai, would be almost singled out in the classroom setting that it would almost be impossible to escape from

that role of being Thai, you know what I mean? That whatever comment I say or whatever input I give to the class would always be prompted by the fact that I am Thai.

(personal communication, 8 March 2021; see Appendix 3)

Ploy's recollection of one college class experience in the US where the students were learning about Japanese culture and in which she was "singled out" as Asian and Thai, reveals how, in this particular space and circumstance, she found it nearly "impossible to escape that role of being Thai". That Ploy labels her Thai identity as a "role" that in consequence "prompted" any "input" she would give in the class, alludes to the pressure that she then associates to being "the only [Thai] representative" in a Western college classroom setting (personal communication, 8 March 2021).

The pressure to "authentically represent or give a Thai perspective" is a prevalent theme that Ploy displays in her identity negotiations. For example, she describes how the pressure of representing herself as "an authentic Thai person" to "a non-Thai person" is "the same" as being "expected to show myself as Thai to a Thai person." Ploy's reference here to the Uber situation (describe above) in which she assumed an imaginative Thai commoner identity suggests that in her self-representation towards her professor and her peers as a Thai national in the US, she similarly experiences her Thai-Western attributes obstructing her abilities to appear authentically self. In consequence, she makes a conscious effort in having to "to think really hard" in order to hide aspects related to her international upbringing that will meet the standard of what she imagines someone "able to represent a Thai perspective" would give. Thus, the situational space of a non-Thai setting, where expectations of Ploy's national and cultural representation are perhaps underlined by a subtle sentiment of exoticism, Ploy responds to the pressure of being "more" Thai by shifting her identity representation towards being a pure Thai national, and thereby strategically concealing her Western-Thai associations (personal communication, 8 March 2021).

However, unlike the Uber situation, in which Ploy strategically replaces and bends aspects of her international identity into a "half true" version of an imagined Thai identity, she employs a different response when situated in the American college class setting. She conceded to me that oftentimes, she preferred "not to even answer" the question and rather confess her lack of knowledge concerning, for example, politically controversial issues. The strain on her faculty to make use of strategic means in essentializing and anti-essentializing her Thai and international identifications can be traced to the power imbalance between the professor-student relationship (in her own words "more teacher based than interactive") that



enhances the pressure she feels in being singled out as “specifically a Thai student”. Thus, this hierarchical social dynamic within an American educational social space restricts Ploy’s agency and leads her to modify information that will represent her identity as more essentially “Thai”. However, it is possible to further infer her unnerved reaction as generated by the topics that she associated with Thai cultural taboos. For example, Ploy recalls how a recurring subject she was asked to contribute to was concerning “the [Thai] monarchy and politics”. Noting how “talking about it in such an open setting” was a “really weird” experience for her and that she felt as though she “was breaking the law”, shows that the American class setting presented a starkly different environment to those in which the Thai *lèse-majesté* laws are in effect. Punishment for breaking these laws through defaming, insulting or threatening members of the royal household include prison sentences and even exile. That the social context of the professor’s authority and a prompt to share her opinion from the viewpoint of a Thai representative on matters that are taboo in Thai society, heightens Ploy’s awareness of her exceptional circumstances and stifles the flexibility with which she is able to apply strategic means in constructing her outward identity (personal communication, 8 March 2021).

A further interesting element to consider are Ploy’s conflicting sentiments regarding the event of being “singled out” by her teacher. Though she admits that she does not like being “pointed out as being different from the rest”, she also sees the occasion as “the chance to represent my culture and be interesting [to others]”. In negotiating her option to assimilate with the larger group of the student body and her desire to “be interesting and have things to say”, Ploy strategically turns the “disadvantage” of feeling pressured and separated from the others into the “advantage” of sharing a perspective that only she can supply. In other words, Ploy uses her Thai cultural background as governed by her strategic aim to appear authentic and “present my culture” to others. However, because of the context in which Ploy is situated amongst her peers and professors in the US where being “interesting” is considered as a part of the social norm, she simultaneously displays a strategic avoidance of appearing completely exotic by adapting to the social setting and fulfilling other’s expectations by assuming an essentialist Thai identity (personal communication, 8 March 2021).

Ploy’s shifting between strategic essentialism (authenticity) and the strategic anti-essentialism (rejection of authenticity) during the moments in which she is able to “represent [her] culture and be interesting” demonstrates the prevalence of the influence that the social space and the cultural expectations within it have on the degree of expression on her nested

identities. To further discuss the significance of situationality and social spaces in an US context and the underlying cultural expectations, I continue evaluating the way Ploy governs her self-representation among her non-Thai college friends and how this leads her to redefine what she perceives as “authentically Thai” (personal communication, 8 March 2021).

## 2.2: *The “role of being Thai” amongst “white-friends”*

Kathrin: You know how we talked about self-consciousness and this feeling of like people silently judging you and [you] feeling self-conscious about how to present yourself in society? Did that self-consciousness shift onto other aspects of your life when you were in America?

Ploy: Mmm! Yeah. I guess like, not being cool enough and not being outspoken enough...

Because all my friends are so outspoken and funny and individualistic; they have things that stand out about them. So being there, you know, I wanted to fit in in the way that I want to be outspoken, and I want to be funny, and I want to have something that’s associated with me and just me because with each of my friends would be like, “Oh yeah, Jo’s an artist; she loves art. And Macey loves reading she’s always talking about books. And Rose loves music.” You know? Like, everybody has something about them that’s cool and interesting and I think my self-consciousness shifted onto being worried whether or not I am interesting enough or if I have something that’s worthwhile to say and to be listened to which is why, I guess coming back to it, I use the fact that I am Thai and the fact that I am from a different culture to be something that’s like interesting and worth sharing about me.

(personal communication, 8 March 2021)

In this excerpt, Ploy confides that being situated amongst her close friends in a college setting makes her “want to fit in” in ways that resemble the “outspoken”, “funny”, and “individualistic” nature of her American friends’ interests and personalities. Her observations reveal that the social area towards which she directs her self-consciousness to are certain social traits that she regards as commonly shared among her American friends. By similarly wanting to be “individualistic” in ways that she has something “interesting and worth sharing” about herself, Ploy decides to use her Thai identity as something that is unique and “interesting” about her. Hence, she strategically uses her Thai identity to differentiate, or individuate, herself from her friends “in a way” that is similar to how she perceived her friends approached the issues of self-representation (personal communication, 8 March 2021).

When I asked Ploy whether she felt comfortable using her cultural identity to express herself in a way that she felt was “Thai” while also true to herself, she affirmed by stating,

“I’m sharing stories that are authentic to me. Whether or not they’re authentic to everyone in Thailand or whether or not that represents Thai culture is another story.” Henceforth, Ploy displayed an increased sense of fluidity between her Thai and international identities in her self-identification and lessened the need to differentiate between these different sides of her identity from one another when she was situated within a more casual environment among her American friends. Consequently, her understanding of something “authentically Thai” as rigid and fixed to a certain essentialist experience becomes more versatile when the change in a situational context exerts less pressure on her self-representation. For example, she notes how being asked “how it’s like living there [in Thailand] everyday” by her American friends is less pressuring when asked “facts about Thai politics” by a professor. The social context, thus, plays a key role in lessening Ploy’s sense of self-censoring when sharing her views from a supposedly “Thai perspective” and thereby, separating her Thai and international identifications and experiences. Instead, the ease she feels in the context of hanging out with her friends supplies the space for her to engage her multiple sources of identifications and belonging, such as her international and Western-Thai background, in a way that is fluid and less rigid (personal communication, 8 March 2021).

However, despite the increased fluidity her self-identification and at the same time her understanding of her identity as Thai and “authentic” to her, Ploy also confided to me how she actively chooses not to explain to her American friends the “different experience” she had in Thailand in order to avoid being seen as “fake” or letting her background “disqualify me. As silly as that sounds.” The importance that Ploy places on self-identifying as Thai and wanting “to be seen as that [Thai]” reveals how despite her increased comfort to express her experiences and stories with her friends, she desires to be seen in the image of being Thai. Hence, the “role” of being Thai amongst her American friends becomes a tool for her to strategically authenticate her stories which, thus, act as a means for her to strategically avoid the authenticity of someone who does not belong. As a result, Ploy is able to shift her personal identification towards the Western-Thai identity and experiences that are true and thus authentic to her while still strategically concealing this behind the veil of a pure Thai national (Personal communication, 8 March 2021).

### 3. Ploy's personal values

And I guess why it's so personal because like your values are personal to you and, you know, they are an important part of who you are as a person. And when those values are attacked or criticised it's like... it's hard to come to— I don't know, it might not be hard depending on your personalities, but for me it's hard to come to an agreement when they're being attacked  
(personal communication, 14 March 2021)

Delineating her values as being “personal” and “an important part of who you are as a person”, Ploy conveys the significance of her personal values and their role in establishing a sense of identity. In a final assessment in which I consider the influences on Ploy's negotiations of identity, I discuss how she resisted, adopted and changed particular values in particular social spaces such as in her home and family circle, on social media spaces, and in the US college. I then argue that her values, which are marked by a liberal sensitivity, in terms of self-realization in doing “what [she] wants” and what she “feels like doing”, reveal the self that she feels “comfortable” identifying herself with the most. Thus, I explore which social spaces she views as providing the most optimal environment for her to feel at ease and the people occupying these spaces that allow her to express who she is and what she believes in. In my examination thereof, I demonstrate how Ploy's safe spaces are distinctly marked by an accumulation of her transnational social experiences shared with her friends from high school and college.

#### *3.1: Navigating media and online virtual spaces for values identification*

Referring to Ploy's account of growing up with certain values and how they changed over time, I evaluate the importance of social media in providing a virtual space for her to “seek out answers” to her questions that were prompted by her experiences and intersecting identities. More importantly, however, I examine what Ploy herself described as a “shift in value” when she navigated between “Western and Thai” media sources on the internet.

So, I think growing up, fundamental values like “Be a nice person” like “Be nice to your elders.” That would come from family; primarily my mom because she raised me on her own for a while. And then after that it would be school, you know, teaching you to (laughs) do your homework, be a hardworking person, don't lie, don't steal. Don't hit people. I don't know if that's a value. (both laugh.) “A value of mine is not to hit people.” But you know, school? And then, once you're older to form your own opinions and thoughts on things, I

think your values come from you in the sense that, “Oh I don’t like it when someone does this to me, so I’m not going to do this or I’m going to do things differently.” And older from that, I think, would be the media. Like what you see on TV. What you see portrayed to you, which [regard] I think, my values had changed a lot. Well, not a lot but my values have definitely changed; shifting from consuming only Thai media to consuming, you know, Western and Thai media... So, I’d say from that, from that, from watching TV, your values would then come from your own curiosity and looking things up and you know, looking for similar opinions or different opinions online. And then I would say now, a lot of my values can be accredited to what I learned in university [in the US] in classes like women and gender studies and learning about cultures and differences and stuff like that (personal communication, 14 March 2021).

In this excerpt, Ploy’s recounts how she developed her personal values over time, starting from what she perceived as her “fundamental values” introduced by her mom, her family and school, to forming her “own opinions and thoughts” on matters she experienced personally and from what she saw were being “portrayed” on the media. She reveals how the media such as TV and online sources played a key role in influencing her values and prompted her to look for further “opinions online”. The “similar” and “different opinions” she describes “looking up” online denote her agency in actively searching for information that will satisfy her “own curiosity”. Significant, here, is how she sees her values to “have definitely changed” through her online activity during high school and through the “shifting” of her use of social media spaces that featured “only Thai media” to other virtual spaces that allowed her to explore both “Western and Thai” media. Finally, she acknowledges how her current positionality as a liberal arts student in the US has influenced her to adopt new values that she developed by participating in the “women and gender studies” classes. Thus, the college environment provided for her another space in which Western media and ideals collided. Ploy, hereby, illustrates how the construction of her personal values and identities is a process that is ever-changing and responsive to the environment surrounding her, whether that be her local home in Thailand or transnational educational and virtual spaces (personal communication, 14 March 2021).

To evaluate how Ploy’s “shift in value” shaped her identity and, vice versa, was shaped by her active exploration of online media, it is worth briefly examining what she identifies as the time “before the internet” when she was mainly exposed to *lakhorn* (Thai drama/entertainment) and Thai “commercials on TV”. Growing up in her family home, Ploy

notes how her mom “wouldn’t really talk about stuff” like “sex education” or “colourism”. Hence, the lack of information available to her in her immediate surroundings spurred her to “seek out” different opinions and different people “in similar shoes as me on social media”. However, what marks her particular online activity is the multi-sited nature of her reference points in drawing from social media that she associated with both Thai and non-Thai sources. Ploy recalls how on Thai social media sites such as *dek d* (เด็กดี = good child)<sup>5</sup> which is according to her “like the Thai version of Reddit”, she could find answers to questions concerning sex education, women’s rights and even colourism such as, “When is it ok to have sex?” or “Is it ok for women to have multiple partners?” and “Is it true that foreigners like tan skin?” From these questions she would then pick out the “most agreed with comment” with “the most likes” and “read through that”. Ploy also drew attention to the fact that on Thai sites such as this one, people would reply under pseudonyms or express their opinions through “private blogs where their names are not included.” Hence, she described the “Thai influencers” as “not as open as [the ones on] the US side” where she would observe English-speaking vloggers “film themselves talking.” The different modes of “openness” through which Ploy sought out various opinions, may have heightened the gap she perceived when evaluating the content and viewpoints these varying sources presented. For example, on social media platforms like Facebook where Thai and English-speaking sources merged on her news feed, Ploy describes how the “Thai posts” would “put a lot of value on being pure and preserving your virginity” which, she considered “to be old values”. In contrast, she found the “Western media” or English posts claiming virginity to be “a construct that was created by men” and the “more liberal” call for “sexual autonomy” to be views she was “more satisfied with” (All quotes in this paragraph are from personal communication, 14 March 2021).

Ploy’s account of how she navigated the internet in her search for answers that reflected her intersecting identities, demonstrates how the values she adopted as her own was influenced by her use of both the “Thai and Western media” sources. While her Thai values were largely grounded in her mother’s teachings and in more traditional forms of media such as Thai TV, Ploy’s further identification with the English-speaking community at her international school and inside her bilingual home supplied her with the means to find answers to her questions and to “listen to what they [non-Thais] would have to say”. Thus, elements of her early membership in both international and Thai communities fostered her

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dek-d.com/home/writer>

participation in multiple social media spaces and international social circles and thus enabled her to selectively choose, compare, and forge her personal values when constructing a sense of self-identification that was informed by Thai as well as Western media sources.

Ploy displayed how in her continuous process of constructing and selecting specific values and aspects of identity, she steered away from some of her “fundamental values” she considered to be “old values” and, thereby, transcended the traditional and ethnically infused identifications. Her refusal to adhere to traditionalism and instead to adopt views she considered “more liberal” and felt “more satisfied with” reflects her shift in adopting “cosmopolitan values”. While she sought out opinions on social issues such as colourism and sex education on account of her personal experiences and intersecting identities, her active decision to adopt views such as the goal for “sexual autonomy” and recognizing the “social constructs” underlying her traditional beliefs reveals the conscious choice Ploy enacts in valuing a person’s rights and equality (personal communication, 14 March 2021).

### *3.2: Expressing “the person that I am” through “my friends”*

In this final section, I examine how Ploy navigates online social spaces she shares with her friends from the US college and her former international school in Thailand to represent herself in ways that reflect her personal values and beliefs constructed in the transnational social spaces discussed above. By first looking at how she describes her interactions with her friends and how she is able to “express” herself in both in persona and virtual settings, I discuss how my own positionality impacted my conversations with Ploy. Then, I examine her ways of self-representation from a different angle by discussing her Instagram posts that I observed on her Instagram profile in the past four years. In discussing my own positionality and providing a comparative reading in parallel to her online “expressions” and the discussions I shared with her during our calls, I aim towards presenting a more thick and empirically rich analysis of Ploy’s identification processes.

Ploy: I think what shaped me to be the person that I am would be a combination of everything. Like my friends. What I consume online. What I read about. You know, my family and being Thai and also being American, well I don’t really consider myself American  
Kathrin: And you find ways to represent yourself in ways that you just described?  
Ploy: Hmm. I guess I represent myself through talking with my friends. Like I don’t have a big social media following or anything like that, you know. And I also don’t feel the need to

voice my opinions to lots of people. So, talking to my friends and sharing similar beliefs, and I guess also differences, is how I express myself (personal communication, 14 March 2021).

Re-reading her words many months after Ploy uttered them, I realized how I was part of the story she was telling and presenting. While the context of the “interviews” served as a cue for Ploy to impart specific aspects of her personal life and sense of identification, I believe that our friendship served as a vital channel through which my friend felt comfortable enough to express herself and, vice versa, for me to resonate with her heartfelt stories. Despite the differences between our cultural and ethnical heritages, it was unwittingly easy for me to relate to Ploy’s experiences and the beliefs she developed over time. Our shared past and situatedness in Thailand as young women growing up under the care of Thai mothers and an international school education, served as an important springboard for us to empathise with one another.

## **Conclusion**

Ploy’s particular experiences and perspectives serve as a valuable contribution to evaluating the complex state of flux inside transnational social spaces across which nested identities operate. In this chapter, I thus explored how Ploy strategically navigated her various nested identities of being a Thai national, subnational, commoner and an international young female student in spaces predominated by Thai society, an educational Western setting, and the collision of both communities such as at home, among friends and on social media. My inquiry and discussion on Ploy’s situational and temporal strategies in response to the varying social environment around her showed that her awareness of derogative stereotypes and exoticized expectations increased the likelihood by which she would conceal her international and Western-Thai identifications and adopt a more essentialized form of representation. However, particular to her circumstances, Ploy further displayed a simultaneous switching of identities that denoted strategic essentialism as well as strategic anti-essentialism. Her aptitude at shifting between these two forms of strategies illustrates how her relationship to her multiple identifications are fluid and relational to the social context she is situated within.

To evaluate the extent by which Ploy employs strategic means to represent and express herself, I further explored the significance with which personal values penetrate her decisions to contest or conform to the surrounding social and cultural cues. I discussed how



many of the most important values Ploy displayed reflected cosmopolitan values. These values, which make up ideals such as individualism, mobility, social justice and equality, were adopted by Ploy within spaces such as social media and her educational upbringing. However, evaluating her adoption of these values in a larger scheme of things, however, Elliot's claim that people navigating through shifting social terrains of globalisations led to the rise of "reinvention" becomes highly relevant. Thus, in conclusion, Ploy's case reveals that the construction of her values and shifting in identities is a process that is ever-changing and flexible to the transnational social environments surrounding her.

## Chapter Two: Tracing the path of Eric's routes

For sure, Koreans have the patriotism. That's a very big thing in the country and they're very proud. But then there are also some people who would pride themselves for being abroad. Like that "I have escaped Korea" kinda mindset. That also exists. Um, not everyone. But I think that's also a stereotype built into the expat Koreans and maybe that's why the traditional Koreans have their [judgemental] views [about expat Koreans] as well. But most people I know here who are studying abroad, they still fully consider themselves Korean. They think it stupid not to. Like, "We're Korean." And you know, I don't think I've seen anyone in person that has thought that they... maybe that's just the adults. With the younger kids who grew up since young outside of Korea, I think that there definitely could be that anti-Korean mind. And I admit that I had it too. Like until high-school. Actually, until my second year here. I wasn't that fond of Korean culture— not the traditions and everything, but there are definitely bad sides of, you know, the culture that I really hated and I didn't want to go to Korea at all. And now I don't mind.

personal communication, 27 February 2021

Excerpted from the first call I conducted with Eric for the study, this account reveals an important theme that I did not anticipate when I asked my friend to be a part of my project. For as long as I had known Eric as a constant friend in high school, his critical stance on Korean<sup>6</sup> culture had been closely familiar to me. Therefore, to find out that he had become more open-minded during the past year, moreover accepting, of the Korean culture and his identification to it, has been a source of great surprise for me. In our calls together, we referred to the period in which Eric altered his attitude from feeling not "that fond of Korean culture" to later "not mind[ing] it" as "the shift" (personal communication, 11 March 2021). In sharing the story of Eric's shift, it is necessary to understand that his (re)identification with the Korean identity exemplifies less "a return to roots" than "a coming-to-terms with 'routes'" (Hall 1996, 4). The significance here, as Stuart Hall points out, lies in the process of "becoming" as opposed to "being". Thus, Eric undergoes the "process of becoming" which redefines the meaning of attachment to his Korean identity and that is subject to particular situations that trigger changes in his relationship thereof. I argue that in his case, the transnational context he is embedded in has greatly governed the dynamic nature of his identity construction. In other words, growing up in an environment defined by its fast-paced, complex and fluid social spaces, Eric's propensity to shift, switch and negotiate his sense of identification is especially high. Moreover, it is in this transnational social field and through the complex routes of transnational mobilities and multi-sited social spaces, that Eric was able to shift his understanding of belonging and identification to his Korean identity that he had previously, in Thailand, neglected.

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<sup>6</sup> That I use "Korean culture" as opposed to "South Korean culture" will be addressed shortly below.

Therefore, to apprehend more fully the magnitude of Eric's change in "becoming" Korean and my initial surprise thereof, I present a series of backstories that feature his family's migratory background and the transnational context of his upbringing within his home as well as in the diasporic Korean community in Thailand. In this first part of the chapter, I take into account Eric's immediate surroundings that comprises his family and friends as well as the media outlets he engaged with. I discuss how these contributed to his attitude towards the Korean culture in general and to the "non-Korean mind" he identified with up to the age of 20. In the second part of this chapter, I then examine, with a focus on identity shifts, what Eric described as a change in perspective during his second year at an international university in Germany where he assimilated into a group of first-year Korean students. His exposure to this group of people, who spent much time with him introducing him to Korean youth social media sources, and his later six-month visit of Korea, provided a sense of identification with a Korean identity he had previously resisted to embrace. Thus, my aim in this section is to demonstrate how transnational mobilities, the presence of media and social media outlets as a source of knowledge about a particular culture, and global forces of international education greatly influence the propensity for individuals operating within the transnational social field to flexibly adopt and develop various senses of identity.

In the third part, I discuss Eric's management of what he terms as "two completely different mindsets". My goal here is to examine the situational and temporal shifts he enacts by switching between his two main nested identities; his international and Korean identities. Relevant to this discussion is Eric's personal social inclination to be a part of the group dynamic he is generally a part of. Henceforth, I examine the specific use of his strategic manoeuvring to aid his cultural assimilations. In the fourth and final part of the chapter, I look at the extent to which Eric's personal values are significant to his in-group identifications. Discussing again the general concept of "cosmopolitan" and liberal values (Genova 2014), I argue how these values constitute a core part of one's identity when growing up in a transnational social space where the demand for reinvention and ability to respond to the fast-paced, dynamic social spaces remains prevalent. Therefore, by examining Eric's upbringing and evaluating his recent experiences as factors triggering the "process of becoming" in his Korean identification, I explore the fluidity of identity constructions amongst young individuals such as Eric whose Korean diasporic and international education background shape the complex affective relationships he builds via his "routes" towards notions of nationhood and cosmopolitanism. A final but important remark I must make

considering certain phrasing in this chapter, is that I employ “Korea” and “Korean culture” to refer to South Korea and South Korean culture. I base my decision to do so on Eric’s emic use of the former terms in reference to the latter as to avoid confusion between my writing and his accounts.

## **1. Growing up inside the Korean diaspora and the transnational social field**

Eric’s story begins in a metropolitan town at the outskirts of South Korea’s capital of Seoul where he grew up living what he called the “very typical Korean [...] average life there” (personal communication, 27 February 2021). This changed when he was eight years old, and his parents decided to move the family abroad. More specifically, they made the decision to move to Thailand where Eric’s father received a job offer to work at his company’s new base in Bangkok. The prospect of working abroad had been particularly appealing for his family due to the company’s incentive to cover his and his brother’s education expenses at a private school. In addition to this, Eric mentioned that studying abroad was considered “a really big advantage” amongst Koreans due to the opportunity to learn English and work in foreign companies (personal communication, 27 February 2021). Therefore, in his parent’s decision to make the transition from Korea to Thailand, the socio-cultural discourse surrounding the benefits of studying abroad played a key part in inducing the transnational move that marked a pivotal course in the route that Eric’s life began to head towards.

After living in Bangkok for a year, Eric and his family moved to Chiang Mai where his father was relocated for his company’s new branch. There, he transferred to a private international school which he attended from year 5 until graduation. Beyond the British curricular of study and his intensified exposure to an exclusive English-speaking environment, Eric noted during our call how his initial surprise at the unfamiliarity with his new educational environment stemmed from how there were “that many non-Koreans” inside the class (personal communication, 27 February 2021). With such a diverse cohort of students from different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, cultural differences can be seen in this international educational context, as supplying a source of a shared commonality as opposed to imposing a barrier. For being situated in an environment of high diversity requires teachers and students alike to “adjust to cultural differences” in order to take part in the “process of acculturation” (Alban & Reeves 2013, 7). These authors and others (see Mohan,

2009; Hayden & Thompson, 2000) discuss the necessity, particular amongst teachers in American international schools, to “make adaptations to cultural differences in order to be successful” (Alban & Reeves 2013, 8). The educational environment Eric thus became accustomed to growing up in was one in which students and teachers contributed to a “mixture of all the cultures that were foreign” to him (personal communication, 27 February 2021). Hence, his development for a sense of belonging inside a multicultural environment provided by an international school community provided a standpoint from which his outlook on being Korean changed and became shaped.

In a comparative description to the Korean Diaspora that began in 1860, In-Jin Yoon refers to the new wave of Korean immigrants leaving Korea from 1960 onwards as the “new immigrants” (2012, 413). Under this term, he differentiates between the “old” Korean diasporic communities who he portrays as having originated largely from the lower-class backgrounds and were pushed out of Korea in the 1950s as a result of the Korean war. In contrast, the new immigrants post-1960s comprised mostly of “educated middle-class urbanites” seeking permanent residence in host countries in search of upward social mobility and “opportunities for better education for the next generation” (ibid., 430). With the South Korean government liberalizing overseas travel in 1989 and the financial crisis that occurred in 1997, Yoon reports on the increased number of Korean immigrants in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, who were particularly spurn by employment opportunities abroad (ibid., 423, 415). This observation thus reflects the circumstances surrounding Eric’s migratory move to Thailand. In the context of obtaining a better education and better employment opportunities abroad, Eric’s family embodies Yoon’s “new immigrants” post-1990s of the Korean diaspora.

Eric’s particular circumstances growing up as part of this post-1990 Korean diaspora in Thailand reveals a crucial aspect of how his “routes” formed the nature of his relationship to his Korean identity. Continuing, in this first part, in discussing Eric’s situationality within the diasporic community and family home in Thailand, I explore the negative viewpoint towards the “bad thing[s]” in Korean culture inside Korea he developed abroad. In addition, I also explore media sources and family ties through which he “built [his] prejudice”. To do this, I look at the prevalence of technological media and transnational mobilities shaping his “negative view of Korea” (personal communication 11 March 2021). More importantly, I introduce Eric’s specified identification during this period as a “Korean with a Western

mind” (personal communication 27 February 2021), as responding to the wider Korean discourse surrounding him.

Eric: The thing is if, when you live abroad, you never hear the good stuff. Like you never hear the fun, you never hear what they’re enjoying. You only hear the bad news.

Kathrin: From who?

Eric: Just from... I mean, for sure, the news let’s say. You know, they aren’t going to say like, “Oh, these guys are partying and having fun.” All you hear is, “These students kill themselves.” And “This bad thing happened.” Also, just the people [Koreans] that came abroad [to Thailand] [...] Like for me, my dad came because of the company so that wasn’t really a big choice but there are people who made the active choice, like who had enough money and decided that “I’m not going to raise my child in Korea. I’m going to raise them abroad.” And that already— because for a lot of our friends and family it was that. That said something, right? If they made the active choice to leave, escape Korea, and we know of the like the bad culture, the stressful culture in Korea. Those things you keep hearing and seeing. Also seeing the comparison of the life satisfaction... like comparing me and my brother with our cousins and friends in Korea. My cousins would always be stressing, always studying, always going to study academies [tutor centres] to like 10 pm, 11 pm, 12. And us, we were just playing football and playing games every day. And that was since we were in year three and growing older, thinking more into it, I always knew that I was lucky to be away.

personal communication, 27 February 2021

Eric’s recollection of how he viewed the “negative” and “stressful culture in Korea” when he lived abroad in Thailand, illustrates how his conviction that he was “lucky to be away” was fostered inside the transnational space in which he viewed Korea from abroad. Living outside of Korea, the information he gathered about his home country consisted of “only [...] the bad news” which he could find through media sources such as online news articles.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, his correspondence with family members still living in Korea indicates that the contrast he saw between his cousins’ “stressful” lives and his own lifestyle confirmed the advantages he saw in living abroad. Most telling, however, is the group of Koreans he depicts as those whose “active choice” was to “escape Korea”. Referring to other Koreans in his close “friends and family” circle who had the means to raise their children abroad, he reveals both his proximity to the Korean diasporic environment and a deeper identification with the thought that he was among those who “escaped” Korea for the better. Eric’s account, thus, discloses that the aversion he developed towards the traditional Korean social norms was partially filtered through the news media, other expat Koreans, and through the correspondence with his friends and family members living in Korea. The convergence of his family’s and his transnational migration, transnational technological media, and the relationship amongst expat Koreans and other foreign nationals inside the international

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<sup>7</sup> Eric referred the site where he found these articles as “the Google of Korea”. (From personal communication, 27 February 2021)

school community as well as Koreans in Korea such as his family members, exemplify the extent to which Eric's experiences were shaped by the multitude of social forces in the transnational social field that he grew up in.

The relevant identity I use to interpret Eric's situationality and identification in this context is "expat Koreans" or "Koreans with the Western mind"<sup>8</sup>.

In our calls together, Eric repeatedly referred to a sub community of diasporic Koreans which he identified himself and his family to "definitely [be] a part of". In Korean, this sub community is termed *gyopo*. Min Song explains that the word *gyopo* connotes negative undertones of a Korean national who has lost touch with their roots (2005). In the duration of our calls together, Eric continually used "expat Koreans" and "Koreans with the Western mind" to refer to *gyopo*. After transcribing our calls and researching more into the topic, I consulted him with the question whether he used the different labels to refer to the same community. Eric affirmed this in our personal communications together and mentioned how he unconsciously decided to translate the term as he understood it. To thus avoid confusion, I will, henceforth, use Eric's emic terminology of "expat Korean" instead of *gyopo*. In addition, I will employ his labelling of the "Koreans living in Korea" as "traditional Koreans" to distinguish the separation he makes between the "two subcommunities" and explain the particular relationship thereof.

The significance of the expat Korean sub community is the thick description it is embedded in amongst both the diasporic Korean community and those who are permanent Korean residents inside Korea. Eric himself noted how the use of the word can signify either a positive or a negative value judgement, depending on the context and the perspective of the person using the term. For example, diasporic Koreans identifying themselves as those living abroad and having "the Western mind" would use the label positively and as a source of self-identification for being "more openminded" and, thus, less conservative in their values and beliefs than the Koreans living in Korea. On the other side, however, the latter would use the same label negatively to delineate a diasporic Korean person for being "radical" and "nonconforming" to the traditional values upheld within society (personal communication 27 February 2021).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is important here to note that I implement these labels according to how Eric recounted and simplified the position he held and how he understood the discourse surrounding the "Korean expat" identity label he himself identified with. Discussing this identity particularly in opposition to what the "traditional Korean" to him represents, my portrayal of the latter identity will tend towards an oversimplifying, homogenizing and reductive nature. I hope that the reader takes this detail into their critical consideration.

The transnational social space in which Eric grew up in from the age of 8 until 18, thus constituted an environment in which his family's migratory circumstances, the Korean diaspora and their discourses of identification and belonging, and Eric's access to Western and Korean media sources around him, influenced his "expat Korean" identity that he adopted and identified with. This demonstrates the extent by which transnational mobilities and various sources of media influenced Eric's identity formations. Thus, locating Eric's identity processes inside the transnational context provides a nuanced appreciation of the multi-layered and multi-sited social spaces he moved and continues to move between and which extend beyond the society of his origins and his diasporic settlement. Such a transnational consideration is especially necessary when examining how Eric's multiple identities are subject to a constant state of flux and his propensity in this context to develop strong hybrid identities. To discuss how Eric was able to develop such a hybrid identity of a "Korean with a Western mind" and following his integration with an Korean diasporic youth group as simply "Korean", I present the story about Eric's move to an international university in Germany in August of 2018, which marked an important chapter in his life in which he (re)turns to his Korean roots.

## **2. Eric's "becoming"<sup>10</sup> of a Korean**

In September 2019, at the beginning of Eric's second year in his undergraduate studies, a collective group of first-year Korean students came to study at his international university in Germany. The distinctive feature of these Korean students was that they all attended the same Korean high school in Korea prior to moving to Germany together. The arrival of this close-knit group of Koreans marked the start of a shift in Eric's interaction with students from predominantly foreign cultural backgrounds or other Korean expats to young Koreans who grew up solely in Korea. In this section, I argue that the arrival of these first-year Korean students fostered a specific Korean diasporic youth social space at the international university in Germany which shaped the "route" by which Eric began to identify himself with the "Korean-Koreans". Below, I present Eric's account of his increasing integration with the young Koreans with whom he initially did not anticipate to "feel comfortable with" (personal communication, 27 February 2021).

When they [first-year Koreans] came, they introduced that clumping [grouping] together. And then I thought, "Huh, it's not that bad. There's actually..." Which is actually really surprising

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<sup>10</sup> Reference to Stuart Hall's distinction between the process of "being" and "becoming" in relation to "roots" and "routes" (1996, 4).



because I hadn't been [immersed] in the [Korean] culture for 14 years, right? Like inside the actual Korean culture. So, I was very very... I was still living in the past. In terms of the Korean ideas. Like all the— all this up-to-date [Korean cultural trends] and everything, right. Like the culture and the new words with the abbreviations, whatever. So, I was like 10 years back so all of these guys were like, “Oh my god. What! You're not! What the heck. You sound and you look like Korean but then you're like 20 years late” or something. So, actually, they were the ones that put all the Koreanness in me last year. They actually actively did that. They actively tried to like inject Koreanness into me. Like they would make a YouTube list of the recent Korean famous songs I had to listen to, all these words that they used that I got used to anyways but, you know, it's like me not recognising what lol is, “What did you say? Lol?” And them, “Oh my god. You're like 50 years old.” (Both laugh.) That kind of stuff.

personal communication, 27 February 2021

An important element to note about Eric's account of his friends' reaction to his knowledge about new “Korean ideas” is the incongruence they perceived between how his age and cultural reference points denoted him in their eyes as being “20 years late”. Later in the same call, Eric elaborated how his supposed outdatedness led his Korean friends to nickname him “uncivilized idiot”<sup>11</sup> which is a “jokey insult” and a Korean slang for “someone who doesn't know what's going on up to date”. Henceforth, their scheme to “inject” and “put all the Koreanness into [him]” was spurred by their initiative to “rescue Eric from his uncivilized idiotness” which, as he revealed with a laugh, was also the title of the YouTube playlist they assembled for him. Eric's easy-going relationship dynamic with his diasporic Korean friends, and the ways in which they began to incorporate him into their world of Korean youth pop culture through online social mediums, such as YouTube and Instagram<sup>12</sup>, characterized an important aspect of his familiarization with the contemporary Korean culture. Eric himself emphasized in our conversations that “the key thing they [his Korean friends] did” was “not just be with me but introduce the media to me.” Explaining how the “common topic [among the Korean members] is the media”, Eric's consummation of the social media sources his friends engaged in supplied him with the knowledge to perceive and interpret the cultural cues and terms they versed in. Thus, while his relationship to the Korean students proves significant in Eric's Korean identity development, the media sources at his disposal enhanced his integration and level of ease to transmit his fluency within the group's dynamic. (All quotes in this paragraph are from personal communication, 27 February 2021).

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<sup>11</sup> The Korean term for this, Eric explained to me, is *mun-jjin*. As he described it as being “short for *munhwa jjin-tta*, which would translate to something like ‘culture loser.’” (iMessage, 4 January 2022).

<sup>12</sup> “I think it was just as I was getting more into Korean... basically YouTube and Instagram. That media. Like when I started getting more into Korean YouTube and Instagram. The new generation media...” (personal communication 5 April 2021)

Academic studies on online identity expressions and constructions of diasporic youth identities can offer some interpretive cues regarding Eric's processes of identification and shifts. In a study of the Uyghur diaspora on Facebook, Rizwangul NurMuhammad, Heather A. Horst, Evangelia Papoutsaki, and Gilles Dodson note how some Uyghur diasporic youth often feel "anxiety and responsibility for the loss of their ethnic identity" when growing up in non-Uyghur societies (2014, 6). The authors explain how Uyghur diasporic youth in these kinds of situations "take action to maintain and develop their ethnic identity" through online social media platforms (ibid., 6). While the authors' case differs slightly from Eric's particular situation, I propose that their interpretations offer another perspective on how his Korean friends rely heavily on the use of social media sources to integrate Eric and occupy themselves with updated Korean pop cultures.

The international university context as a setting where people from multiple cultural backgrounds interact supplies a transnational social field in which migrants from other sites of the world sometimes also encounter their co-nationals (Levitt & Jaworsky 2009). Eric's mention of how his Korean friends "introduced that clumping [grouping] together" of his new Korean diasporic circle indicates that their situatedness in a foreign setting foregrounds a desire to maintain a sense of belonging to their Korean culture. Eric, in a later account, elaborated on how his friends "want to live in Korea" but that they recognize their prospects of employment as being more feasible abroad than in the competitive environment of Korea. Therefore, in their isolation from their homeland, the circumstance of meeting abroad a person of ethnic Korean descent who is disconnected from the culture they strongly identify with, and their decision to "rescue" Eric from his "uncivilized idiotness" can, thus, be further understood as a way for his friends to strengthen their ethnic identity in their diasporic social space abroad. This would further explain the "intensity" with which Eric describes his "naturalisation period or adaptation period" he spent with his Korean friends during the six months from September to March, to reconnect with the Korean culture (personal communication, 27 February 2021).

As a further consideration of how the diasporic and transnational social context in which Eric is situated in impacts his processes of identifications and belongings, Eric's six-month visit to Korea following the time period he spent much of his time with his diasporic Korean friends in Germany marked another step in his closeness and identification with his Korean identity. When in March of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Germany began to worsen, Eric decided to visit his family in Korea. After his brother had graduated from the

international school in Thailand, his parents had decided to permanently return to their family home in Korea, which they had left behind in 2007. Thus, from March to September, Eric spent the longest time in Korea since he was eight years old. During this period, he worked as a full-time tutor at an academy centre for extracurricular learning and studying. The remainder of his time he spent with his extended family members and friends who were “mostly [Korean] people from [his] uni and only a couple [Korean] people from Chiang Mai” (personal communication, 4 January 2022). Noting how prior to his visit after his intense “adaptation period” amongst his Korean friends in Germany, he felt “70-80% comfortable already” with discussing Korean related topics with other Koreans, Eric attributed the experience in Korea as an “even bigger” source of identification with and acceptance of the “actual Korean culture”. “Living there properly” further allowed him to experience the “fun things” of Korean culture and not only learning about it “by words and reading”. Eric’s emphasis on living inside the “proper” Korean culture and being “fully immersed” within the “actual Korean culture” displays the relevance of the cultural social space, which supplied the type of experiences that the media and being amongst the Korean youth diaspora in a foreign country could not provide. Hence, Eric’s time in Korea reinforced his understanding and “mindset” of the Korean people and culture. (All quotes in this paragraph are from personal communication, 11 March 2021).

The transnational context surrounding his friends’, his family’s and finally his own circumstances and mobility to move across borders and between social and cultural spaces, greatly contributed to the different diasporic communities, people and cultures he experienced and developed ties with. The dynamic of his development towards a closer and more meaningful relationship with his Korean identity thus reveals the complex journey of his routes towards his ethnic routes supplied by his interaction with his diasporic Korean friends and the “new generation [Korean] media”. By looking at the situational context of the Korean youth diaspora inside the university space, I proposed how their shared interactions reinforced the Korean identities of both his friends and his own. In his shared friendship and identification with his friends that was fostered through means of social media within the university in Germany and first-hand experience during his visit in Korea, Eric was able to shift his former aversion towards Korean culture a sense of identification and belonging.

### 3. Shifting and switching between “completely different mindsets”

As discussed in the preceding sections, the transnational mobilities constitute a major part of Eric’s routes to forge a sense of belonging with his Korean identity through his Korean diasporic friends and the Korean youth culture supplied by social media and transnational experiences. To further comprehend the extent to which Eric came to identify with being and representing himself as Korean and how the multiple identities he developed are mobile, strategic and context specific, I explore how his acquirement of two “completely different mindsets”, a Korean and non-Korean one, serve as two different “personalities” he feels he can alternate between. My main goal is to demonstrate the fluidity and flexibility with which Eric manages both identities or “mindsets”. In this section, I thus examine a particular scenario Eric recounts of a Korean job interview and how his reflections exhibit the self-representing processes as influenced by specific social cues (i.e., the role of a candidate and interviewee) and cultural circumstances (i.e., Korean age hierarchy, formality, etc.).

A further aspect of my analysis entails examining the strategic elements of Eric’s situational and temporal shifts in identity and how his personal responses and tendencies towards particular social situations play an important role in evaluating the cultural and social context he is situated in. For example, Eric’s disposition to generally being liked by the person or people he is with, leads towards an automatic response he described in one of our calls as making himself “fit to that person”. In other words, by trying to “match their [other person’s] expectations”, Eric is able to leave a “good first impression” on his interlocutor(s). Thus examining his strategic processes in relation to his assimilation goals, the excerpt illustrates some of Eric’s key abilities to modify his own representation situationally.

Eric: Ok, so, normally I don’t go in reading people consciously thinking “Ok, I’m gonna, you know, please this guy” or something. But then that would happen in cases of like interviews or something like that, right? Like when I was applying for the teaching job in Korea, at the academy. I guess then for sure I went in thinking, consciously trying, even more than usual to leave a good first impression. And I know for a fact that it worked because when I was leaving, she said, “Oh, you’re the nicest interviewee I’ve seen ever.” Or something like... not nicest but “Oh, we connect so well!” She was very... like I left a very good first impression. And I got the job, so I guess it was successful. [...]

Kathrin: Do you find that there’s a difference of perception— of reception actually when you interact with people from different cultural backgrounds? So, when you mentioned the interview at the Korean academy, whether that is different to the interviews you’ve had with people, like Westerners?

Eric: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Cuz I know what they think is right. Or I know what they think is polite. And it’s all different, right. Like here [international university in Germany] they might actually want me to say more of my opinion. Like to... maybe not polite but that would be more expected than in a Korean. Like for sure when I was in Korea it was all like reception [passivity] and responding. Question and respond. Question and respond. But then here I

might actually go a bit more into saying my personal things. I would add more of my voice. And in Korea, like the hierarchy is set, right. So, there's a place I can fit myself exactly. Like there's a specific relationship between each interaction. Here it's not specifically up and down, right. But then, you know—it's different for sure. But then like in the end, depending on what they would want most and depending on the culture too, it'd be different.

personal communication, 31 March 2021; See Appendix

In this excerpt, Eric demonstrates how he is able to consciously modify his representation and give a “good first impression” “depending on the culture” as well as on the person he is interacting with. In the case of the Korean job interview, his success in being given the job and impressing the interviewer into believing they “connect[ed] so well” shows how he is adept in reading the social situation and determining “what they think is right” and “polite”. In the case of the Korean context, Eric displays a nuanced understanding of how the “hierarchy [which] is set” requires a “specific relationship between [the] interaction” in order to match what is “expected”. This entails “fit[ting]” himself in a “place” that is lower, or more “down”, as he knows that expressing more receptiveness will be received as a good impression. In the contrasting scenario of impressing a Western or international person at the university, Eric describes how he would “add more of [his] voice” by saying “personal things” as that is something that is “more expected” by the person. Thus, he perceives the situation as demanding “a bit more” of himself to be received well. He further notes that though he is able to anticipate cultural expectations in certain interactions, he relies equally on what the other party “would want most” as a reference point to match his representation.

Eric's ability to strategically assume personas that he deems most suitable for the purpose of leaving a “very good impression” when situated in a Korean or an international (or more Western) context reveals the importance of situational context underlying his fluid identity processes. As he was describing the flexible state of his own strategic shifting, he joked in the call at having “two personalities: a Korean personality and a non-Korean personality.” He explained how these personalities were “not vastly different” from one another but rather that he would generally be “more extroverted” and “direct” in the international community when compared to the Korean community. Feeling “different” while also “comfortable in both communities”, he notes that “the reason and the feeling of comfort is different in both communities”. This is an important aspect to stress, I believe, as it denotes the degree by which Eric identifies with his “non-Korean personality” and “Korean personality” as sources of identifications in their own right.

In an attempt to conceptualize how Eric mediates between both identities, I recall Victoria Mason's study on the Palestinian diaspora in Australia, in which she describes the

dissonance she observed among her research participants in reconciling concepts of diasporic identity and home. While the concepts of home and identity appear to belong to the same register, Mason demonstrates how second and third generation members of the Palestinian diaspora experience a discrepancy between their understanding of their diasporic Palestinian identity and their physical home in Australia. Mason renders this discordance with the particular word, “contrapuntal”. Borrowed from the language of music, Edward Said had used the term to propose that the hybrid nature of the Palestinian diasporic identity is like “a series of notes flowing over, around and through one another, where two or more voices or notes [of belonging to their actual and imaginary homes] can be heard simultaneously” (Mason 2007, 274). I thought that this depiction was a beautiful and fitting one to describe multiple identities and ways of belonging co-existing and interacting with one another.

I had initially intended to use “contrapuntality” to describe Eric’s state prior to his deeper identification with his Korean identity to highlight the dissonance between his sense of home and belong existing amongst those in the international community in Thailand and his superficial identification with being Korean only ethnically. However, when I asked Eric for his input, with the foreknowledge of his expertness in music, I was impressed by his understanding of the musical term and his reflection process in applying this upon his identity relationship between the two communities prior and post his sincere Korean identification.

With his consent, I attach an excerpt of his replies:

Thinking to how I understand the music terms and the situation it would more be like:  
Contrapuntal and polytonal. Contrapuntal (aka polyPHONY) is when there is more than two \*melodies\* playing at the same time, and there is IS harmony. (If there wasn’t, it wouldnt be music) but there is still only one “key”, meaning there is only one tonal note (root/home note). PolyTONALITY (or I guess you can say polytonal too), is when there are multiple distinct KEYS at the same point of music. [...]  
Buuuuuuut if you would have asked me without knowing how it was called in your literature before, I would describe it the other way around [pre-shift: polytonality; post-shift: contrapuntal/polyphonicism.] Because in polytonality, the harmony is strange (just for my musical taste) as it overlaps over two keys, whereas in polyphonicism, the harmony is perfectly diatonic even over multiple melodies. [So,] the way I [would] put it is that now, I am polytonic such that I have multiple keys existing simultaneously (but somewhat in order). And whenever a melodic line comes in a certain key (nationality group) because I possess multiple keys (mindsets) – I am able to harmonise with it.

Facebook messages, 27 July 2021

The process in which Eric assesses how contrapuntality or rather “polyphonicism” and “polytonality”, in their technical configurations, can be rendered into his experiences imparts a thicker description of his situated identities than what, I believe, the musical terms themselves can provide. Of significance here is his concession that without a foreknowledge of the context, he would have attributed “polyphonicism” as illustrative of his present

congruent relationship due to the “perfectly diatonic” harmony, which, to simplify, sounds nice. Thus, Eric prefers to use “polyphonicism” as opposed to “polytonality” to refer to his current state of “possess[ing] multiple keys (mindsets)” which reflect his ability to tune in and “harmonise” with a “certain key (nationality group)” he comes in contact with. (Facebook messages, 27 July 2021).

In this third part of the chapter, I discussed how Eric is able to “switch” between what he perceives as a more “Korean” and “non-Korean personality”. I demonstrated how his situated identities are highly relevant to the context around him, and dependent both on the expectations and the cultural background of the interviewers who determine the nature of that which is “more expected” in terms of leaving a “very good first impression”. The ease with which he is able to alter his self-representation depending on which community he attributes particular expectations to, displays his fluency to switch to certain “keys” of a certain group’s “mindset” and to “harmonise with”. Thus, instead of using Said’s term of “contrapuntality” as a metaphor to depict a discordance in identity, Eric’s own understanding and musical knowledge of the term serve him to identify his sense of equal belonging within both the Korean and international communities.

#### **4. Feelings of discomfort within the comforts of two communities**

*I shake my head in disbelief as I fill in the blanks with my personal information. As I near the end of setting up my account, I double check the details before confirming. Well, I mutter to myself, Instagram, here I come. Copying the username Eric sent me via Messenger, I insert it into the search bar. And there he was. (What was he doing in that picture?) I click on the link to his profile; the page opens shortly after. Immediately, I notice the sparsity of his photos. I wasn’t surprised. When was the last time he posted something on his Facebook wall? Our class photo from year ten? I take a closer look at the four images displayed on his Instagram profile. They were collages; posts that entailed five to six photos. The most recent post showed him in his graduation gown, holding his Bachelor of Sciences diploma and surrounded by other smiling and gowned people. I search the faces a little more before turning my attention to other posts. The oldest photo displayed the familiar old town gates of Chiang Mai. Reading the caption and the time stamp, I realize that this marked his last visit to Thailand. This catches my attention. If this was the first post... I continue onto his following set of pictures. Though it takes me many moments before connecting the familiar faces with those from Eric’s earlier graduation pictures, I feel a sense of accomplishment in recognizing his group of international university friends. Posted in March last year, this must have been shortly before leaving Germany for South Korea. I quickly click onto the following post. Ah, yes, there he w— woah! I zoom into the picture. Eric’s hair did look Korean. I analyse the curls and the modish clothes I’m not used to see him wearing. Once I get over the subtle unfamiliarity of his outer appearance, I focus on the people featured in his photos. I*

*assume they are students. I even recognize a former Korean classmate from our international high school in Thailand. And perhaps the others are part of the first-year Korean group he has been talking about in the calls. I swipe between the posts and note Eric's facial expression in each of them. He appears perfectly content and at ease no matter the cultural context. Did I ever feel such a sense of belonging within Thai and German contexts? I can't recall of any without feeling half misplaced. Gazing absentmindedly at Eric's smile, I wonder. Did he ever feel caught between two worlds?*

In this short vignette, I aim to describe the first time I visited Eric's Instagram profile and the general nature of his postings which featured photos of specific moments in the past two years of his life. I found that his profile reflected the consensus among researchers (see Ellison and Boyd 2013; McKay 2010; Miller 2011) that social network media can provide an important platform for people to create a "sense of belonging and community across a range of local and global scales" (NurMuhammad et al. 2014, 5). Eric's postings, in this respect, not only performs the function of updating his followers where he has been but more purposefully foregrounds the communities within which he fostered meaningful ties and with whom he, thus, identifies with. Made up of the different international communities he was a part of in high school in Thailand, and at the university in Germany, and his Korean friends in Korea, Eric displays through these photos and posts the centrality of the transnational social space for his sense of belonging. Evaluating deeper the nature and dynamic of Eric's self-representation online and the limits to his different group assimilations, I refer to an excerpt of our calls in which the significance of personal values becomes the determining factor for his own placement and notion of self among of his Korean friends.<sup>13</sup>

Kathrin: When you're in-between the Korean and international group and – because you say they're very opposing from one another – are you sometimes in situations where you see those differences and you have like conflicting emotions? Or you understand where they're coming from but then you don't know how to make them reconcile?

Eric: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I actually... exactly what you... So, for example, I would be talking to the Korean guys, you know just talking, and some topic comes up and... Unfortunately, they're very against LGBTQ [rights]. Yeah. Koreans are typically very... I would even say against. That much. And I'm completely fine. Like I don't care. It's just, you know, it's whatever. And if they would be talking like that... I feel very uncomfortable. And like, yeah. I do make my stand. But I don't try to convince them or make an argument. For example, that very topic [LGBTQ rights]. Most... no, I'm sure all of them are against and when they do bring forth that topic I would say, "Oh, but I'm completely fine. I have friends who are fine with it. I have friends who I know they are [gay]. So, I don't mind." And they would be like, "What!" But then I don't... I don't try to convince them. But that actually makes me uncomfortable when stuff like that happens. Like sometimes the very conservative ideas that

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<sup>13</sup> For a further comparison in which Eric discusses the rare instances of discomfort he feels among his international group of friends, I urge the reader to consult the extended excerpt in the appendix.



they would have would make me feel like... (He shudders.) And same for— not so much the other way around. Because they would be— I wouldn't feel like, "Oh my god, these guys are so liberal." That wouldn't happen. It would be like, "Wow, these guys are so conservative" with the Koreans.

From personal communication, 11 March 2021; see Appendix

Despite Eric's self-identification and the recognition of him by his peers as a full-fledged member of the Korean community, he illustrates in the above quote how the breaching of subjects concerning social rights in group conversations with his Korean friends can trigger in him a sense of unease and heightened sense of awareness that he is occupying an in-between position amongst to very different communities. Reflecting on situations where his Korean friends would express their "very conservative ideas" on topics concerning LGBTQ+ rights, gender gaps, and the age hierarchy within Korean society, Eric describes feeling "very uncomfortable" and compelled to "make [his] stand" by stating his personal view on the subject matters.

That Eric identifies more with liberal values shared amongst his international cohort of friends shows that the misalignment of his values with the conservative beliefs of his Korean friends serves as a source of temporal and partial "disidentification" (Muñoz, 1999) towards his peers. José Esteban Muñoz's conceptualizes "disidentification" as a process that "rethink[s] encoded meaning [...] of the majority" to "empower minority identities and identifications" (1999, 31). Eric's awareness of the different cultural backgrounds separating his values from his Korean friends allows him to disidentify with them and their beliefs. This sense of understanding also translates in his response to provide a different standpoint without "mak[ing] an argument" for hopes of getting "them to think otherwise" without "forc[ing] it or put[ting] any pressure". While believing that "if you want to convince someone, you should never put pressure", Eric consented in our calls that he "know[s] how they [Korean friends] think already and the general personalities they have" (personal communication, 25 March 2020). Thus, the combination of the dissonance he experiences in his values clash with his friends and an understanding for their viewpoint, leads him to a particular sense of belonging that aligns his identity as a member of the Korean diasporic youth group and the identity linked to his liberal views. This flexibility to accommodate situational identifications in times where Eric's sense of differentiation and in-betweenness between two groups is heightened shows that identity processes as maintained temporally and situationally are in a constant state of negotiation towards "harmonising" the "mindset" of the group and his own.

The significance of examining personal values in the context of identity construction is the focal point of identification they provide in the context of the high propensity towards reinvention and flexibility when living in social spaces that are governed by globalizing forces and a constant state of flux. Eric's case demonstrates, similarly to Ploy's, that the accumulation of his core ideals correspond with the liberal character of cosmopolitan values. Moreover, it is these core values that ultimately govern the extent to which Eric is willing to assimilate to the group of friends he is with. The transnational contexts that individuals are involved in thus govern the flexibility of these individuals and their abilities to nest and situationally shift their multiple identifications.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored how Eric's identity processes inside the transnational context provide insight into the multi-layered and multi-sited social spaces that extend beyond the society of his origins and diasporic settlement. I analysed how he operates within the transnational social field through his accumulation and maintaining of multiple identities and his propensity to shift and develop hybrid identities. Thereby I established the changing relationship to his Korean identity in the course of his "routes" from his diasporic situation in Thailand and his integration with the Korean diasporic youth community at the international university in Germany. To examine the factors influencing Eric's process of "becoming" Korean, I demonstrated how transnational mobilities constitute a major part in shaping Eric's relationship with his Korean identity as well as the transnational media sources at his disposal for enhancing his fluency in Korean youth pop-culture.

According to my inquiries concerning Eric's situational and temporal identity processes, I explored how his identity constructions are highly context-specific and dependent on the expectations and cultural context of those he interacts with. Tuning into the "mindsets" of others, whether they be interviewers or his friends, Eric displays the ability to "harmonise with" members from different groups and shift his positionalities during times of "disidentification" (Muñoz, 1999). In addition to the turn towards a more meaningful relationship with his Korean identity, Eric's stories underline the immense flexibility that is prevalent in his self-representation and identification. Therefore, growing up and living in a fast-paced multicultural world, Eric exhibits high competence to move fluidly between social

spaces comprised of his family members, diasporic Korean and international friends spread transnationally across Thailand, Germany and South Korea.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I attempted to shed light on the dynamic processes of identity construction, especially those informed by contemporary multi-cultural and diasporic youth individuals who are living and operating within transnational contexts. To do so, I examined how two individuals of Thai and Korean descent with a shared international school education background in Thailand manage their multiple nested identities temporarily and situationally in their everyday experiences. As my study was incentivised by my own experiences and the research question established on my existing friendship with Ploy and Eric, I based my analysis largely on the interactive and informal interviews with occasional references to past shared experiences and background stories as well as some ethnographical approaches to their social media pages and activity. I presented the data I gathered through the theoretical framework of situational and temporal identity constructions through the lens of transnational youth migrations and the significance of the transnational social field. Then I discussed my findings via concepts of nested identities, essentialist and anti-essentialist strategies which I implemented to address their identity shifts and manoeuvring within specific situations.

In discussing Ploy's case, I demonstrated that her initiatives to shift her sense of identification and representation is influenced by the different social spaces, cultural cues and circumstances. Her stories of consciously reconstructing her identity in the face of others to evade judgement provides insight into how negative stereotypes and being affiliated to Western sources composes the space in which she decides to define herself. Thus, shifting between identities of Thai national, subnational, commoner and an international young female student in spaces ranging from Thai society, an educational Western setting in Thailand and the US, to communities situated among her family, friends and social media, Ploy displays the facility to switch, borrow, and contest attributes of her cultural personalities in a strategic manner.

Eric's case as another particular transnational youth example allowed me to explore the parallels to Ploy's stories in which his experiences led towards his re-identification to his Korean heritage. The intersectional factors of growing up in an educational environment

where an international community was present and influential in his developmental years and the educational environment of his university where he met a diverse cohort of students including the group of Koreans coming to study abroad, shows to tell that the social spaces Eric is embedded in is marked by a fast-paced fluidity in which transnational interactions and mobility can define the direction in which individuals develop their identifications. Because of the high prevalence with which the social spaces he operates within are underlined by transnational and global forces, Eric's propensity to shift between his nested identities of Korean national, expat, and international young male student is crucial to understanding his flexibility of switching between "mindsets".

In my analysis of both my friends' cases, I demonstrated how young individuals growing up in a fast paced and ever-changing social field can develop an array of nested identities that are complexly interwoven interjectionally, situationally and temporarily. Social contexts composed of cultural cues such as stereotypes, societal expectations, exoticized notions or assimilatory motives accompany a person's active decision to represent oneself a particular way.

In both chapters, I dedicated a portion to exploring the significant role of personal values in determining the core sense of identification each individual constructed despite the great agility in their personalities. Looking at the personal and highly individual processes each person brought for consideration, I evaluated the social processes in my friends' experiences and upbringings that are deeply contextual and indicative of the societies they are living in. Henceforth, I was granted the opportunity not only to examine micro processes but further the implications of reinvention and cosmopolitan values that today's globalized world stipulates.

While an increasing amount of academic literature and research is going into the area of transnational youth migration and identification, considering individuals of third-culture upbringing in particular of international educational background will serve as a curious and, I believe, informative area to be explored. Furthermore, my research indicates that building on existing ties with individuals with whom one grew up with and shares a similar experience can open a gateway to connections and stories that may otherwise be hidden away. My positionality as someone standing in-between my friends' reality and that in the name of academic research, provided a sense of identification with my informants and an intention to present their stories within a form and framework through which my readers could empathize with.

Despite my best efforts to present the stories of my friends' as genuine and coherent a way I thought was possible, I am conscious of my defects not to think it probable that I have committed several errors in presenting partially an anthropological, ethnographic and biographical study. I recognize that further examination into the effects of social online media on one's sense of self and rigorous ethnographic work on a wide range of youth individuals can provide the benefits of examining the wider patterns of cosmopolitan values and fluid identities of which I have only scratched the surface. Personally, my interest in the subject resides within the individual's accounts to provide deep and vulnerable stories with which people of different backgrounds can come to empathize with. Thus, while my ability to provide a sufficiently anthropological and triangular approach for this study was limited, I hope that ultimately, I was able to present the reader with a product which in its time of making made the most of the resources available.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1:

P: I don't know why I do this but whenever I meet new [Thai] people [in Thailand] or whenever I am like in a ride like an Uber or something and we [the driver and I] are having a conversation and the conversation diverts to "Where do you go to school?" A lot of the times I'm *so...* what's the word... I'm *so...* I really want to say that I'm at a Thai university as opposed to telling the truth that I'm in an international [university]. Like, that I go to college in America. I don't know why. But I feel like, if I tell people that I go to college in America, they would have a totally different idea of me and I feel like, that the idea that they would have of me would not be me. It's almost like... I see myself differently from someone who goes to college—who is Thai and goes to college in America. I feel like I want to separate myself from them. Even though I am that person, you know?

K: Yeah

P: So I guess with my experiences, when people learn more about that.. I expect that they would have a different idea of who I am.

K: Hm. Why does that bother you?

P: I don't know. I think it comes down to the privilege thing. I don't want them to.. feel bad or see myself as more privileged than them. So yeah, a lot of the times I lie and say that I go to university in Chiang Mai. And whenever I say "Oh no, I go to university in America" The first question, all the time, would be "Oh wow you must be rich."

K: Oh

P: Which in my opinion I'm not.

K: Yeah.

P: You know? I feel like my family's not crazy wealthy. We're just, you know what I mean, a normal middle class family. But I guess a normal middle class family in my definition would be different from a Thai middle class family.

K: Mm! What you're saying is giving me flashbacks to my time in Chiang Mai. Growing up and being a *luk krueng*, you know, being literally labelled a 'half-child', everyone around you perceives you as more privileged to them. I mean the presumption automatically is that one of your parents, and most likely your dad, is Western and that he is going to have enough money to support you.

P: Yeah

K: And that is true in my case. But it also puts you in this double-bind where you feel like you don't want to be seen that way because it changes the dynamic between you and those around you completely.

P: Yeah! It's like I blend in, you know, and they see myself as they. (Laughs.) Saying 'they'. But people see myself as, you know, on the same level as them or the same as them. And one thing can change that. You know? Like one thing. In saying "I don't go to school here. I go to school in America." That changes the whole dynamic. Which I don't like.

K: Mm yeah. Would you say that it's easy to act and be perceived by others as one of them? As being Thai?

P: Yeah I think so. From the many car rides that I've gotten, I feel like it's very easy... I don't know whether I'm like a serial liar or something (both laugh) but sometimes I would just make up completely different stories... but also because I don't like telling people my private information too and I feel like, you know, it's not their business.

K: (Laughs) Yeah.

P: In different scenarios I'd say, "Oh yeah, I have a job. I'm a waitress." Which is half true because I do work at my mom's restaurant. So yeah, it'd be very easy to blend in and I think it also prevents people from asking more questions. Like if I said I was a waitress they'd be like "Oh. Ok." Whereas if I said "I go to college in America" they'd be like "Oh, your parents are rich huh? How much are they paying? You have a boyfriend?" You know? Like really invasive questions to me.

K: Mm

P: I feel like another question that I got during high school when I said "I go to an international school" was "Oh, so you're dad's white?" or "Oh you're adopted so your dad's white?" And I feel like, they're already thinking "OK. The mom is a stay at home mom who does nothing and she goes around to—" Which there's nothing wrong with that, right? But you know, "She's got a rich dad and she's very, privileged and that.." And I don't know if I... if I'm the one who's judgemental. You know what I mean? And I don't know if *I'm* the one who sees people like that and judge them and therefore I don't want to put myself in that bubble... Or I don't know if that's what they judge of me? Like, if that's what they're assuming of me and I don't like that.

K: Mhm. Yeah. I can relate to that. And it's something I am still experiencing, be it in Thailand or here. See, whenever I say that my dad's German and my mom's Thai, I almost feel this obligation, to follow it up with "Oh, they met at a school as teachers." Because I don't want to, you know, give any notion that "Oh, they met at some one-night stand." Whether in a Thai or German/European context, I feel like the idea of a Western man only pursuing a Thai woman/prostitute follows me around and I have this urge to defend myself and point out that my parents aren't like that and that I'm not the result of that.

P: Yeah, yeah. Exactly, exactly.

K: Yeah. And then.. I know what you mean, it's like wait, who is it being judgemental. Is it actually just me? Am I being ashamed for what isn't?

P: Mm!

K: And that because of it, one constantly feels the need to justify oneself. (Laughs.) Justifying that. One's existence.

P: Yeah. I definitely feel like I have to justify myself a lot in.. you know, situations like that.

K: Does that usually happen to you mainly in Thailand or also in the US?

P: I think definitely more in Thailand. I get a different experience entirely with my friends at college because they're generally more privileged than I am so they feel like *they* have to justify themselves to *me*.

K: Huh!

P: You know? So it's like the opposite experience really. I feel like going to a Liberal Arts school that's like *really* expensive.. you get a lot of people who come from very privileged families. But, who also are like woke in that sense, you know?

K: Wait. I don't understand the meaning of woke. Can you explain it to me?

P: Oh! It's like.. aware of... social injustices.

K: Aah ok. So like socially aware?

P: Yeah yeah

K: I mean that's a good attribute no?

P: Mm. (Laughs) I think so! I feel like a lot of times it could be... ah! This is introspective actually cuz in my experience with my friends it could be... you see, I couldn't really care less if they have a big house or lots of money. Like we'd go to coffee, they buy a drink and then be like "Oh, that was my dad's money." Like "That wasn't my money." I'd be like, "You don't need to be telling me that." So I feel like, maybe, I could not worry about that without justifying myself either.

personal communication, 28 February 2021

## Appendix 2:

K: You said that you identified with being Thai more than you do with Chiang Mai or Isaan but have you ever come closer to identifying with your Isaan heritage?

P: Uhh never. I don't think so. I can't speak the dialect, I can only understand it. And I don't really look Isaan because I have dark skin from my dad. And usually when people see me they think I'm from the south because that's where people have skin like me. So I don't think I've ever been associated with Isaan except for when I tell people that my mom's from there. People are always like “โอดผิวสีอย่างนี้เป็นคนใต้หรือ?” (Oh, with a skin colour like that, are you a southerner?) I'm like “No. I'm actually from Chiang Mai” And they're like “WhAT! สาวเชียงใหม่ต้องสีผิวขาว!” (Chiang Mai ladies must have white skin!) And I'm like, “Well, I grew up in Chiang Mai. But my mom is from Isaan.” And they're like „Oh whAT!“ (both laugh)

K: How did you interpret their surprise, was it genuine or in what ways did they express it?

P: Not like, as exaggerated as that but like “Oh, wh—oh really?” Just like intrigued I guess.

K: Mm. Did you ever feel like you were looked down upon because of your skin colour?

P: You know, funnily enough, good question too, but I only ever feel looked down upon whenever I am with my boyfriend. Because I feel like people think I'm a prostitute. Or that, you know, it's always... when you see a Thai woman and a white man on the street or whatever, it's always usually a white man and the woman has very tan skin... And you know, people associate them with coming from Isaan or coming from poorer parts of the country and like got together with a white man through prostitution or through, you know, other means like that.

K: It's so disappointing to hear. My mom gets it too. I ask her from time to time whether she perceives it and she says all the time. Somehow, she doesn't let it get to her because she sees others as not knowing the full story.

P: Yeah. My mom too. And what's crazy is that she's like “Well, I actually am the head of the family. I own the business and he's helping me.” You know? But people would never think that. Like the first thing people would think of is the stereotypical like white man and poor Thai woman who's in it because of the money.

K: Do you think that generally Thai people want together with a Western person?

P: I think... I think it's definitely played up cuz there's this notion of like คู่ฝรั่ง or แฟนฝรั่ง (foreigner's wife/girlfriend) right? And it's like “Woahhh you got แฟนฝรั่ง, that's crazy!” I think it's partly due to how Western is seen as like... more dominant or more superior? So in the same way that luk kruengs are more looked up on. I think in the same way as when you're a Thai woman and you got with a Western man, in the same way you're status will be elevated almost? I think it's down to maybe like... what do you call it, socio-economic aspects of it. Where a western man or whatever is seen as someone who would make your life better. Improve your life. Like you get to fly a plane and go abroad, go to Europe or whatever.

K: Yeah

P: Yeah I think because of that there's.. it's like revered.

K: Is it just awe that you think is there? Or whether there are any other views attached or general views or judgements?

P: I wouldn't know.. uhm. Like from my understanding of it it's like awe and something you'd want to attain to? But I don't think that.. Thai people, like especially Thai people who are like upper middle class or are, you know, pretty fortunate and got lots of money, I don't think they really care to get with a foreigner. As in a white person, whatever that means.

K: So you think it's more of a class phenomenon?

P: I think so. I think that's... my understanding. Because I don't see it in the Thai popular media that's consumed by like teenagers. I don't see that they are really crazy about white people. It's more like Korean people who teenagers or like young girls wanna get with.



K: Riight. Like K Pop.

P: Yeah like K Pop and stuff like that. But with farang I think it's more the older generation. I could be *totally* wrong also.

K: If you don't mind, could you talk about when you're in public spaces with your boyfriend?

P: Oh yeah, we get a lot of stares from like old men and women who don't care to conceal it. They just outright stare. I don't know what that means. I don't know if they're judging— how they're judging. But you know, we get that a lot. And sometimes when I'm out with my boyfriend I feel like I don't wanna dress so.. openly? I feel like I sh— I have to watch the way I dress more. Because it subjects me to more judgement and criticism from like outsiders. I shouldn't give a shit about it really but...

K: Yeah it's there.

P: Yeah I'm a bit self-conscious about that.

K: Mhm. Has he noticed it?

P: Yeah he has. It was even on the bike today. Like people would be driving past and just stare.

K: You said you're on Koh Chang right now. Is the attitude that you get from the people there different than in the north, in Chiang Mai?

P: Yeah I was just going to say. We don't get it so much in Chiang Mai but maybe because there are more foreigners living there and there's more... people there might be more... how to say it

K: Like used to it?

P: Yeah used to it and more.. open? I think that in Chiang Mai, there's lots of young people and more people of all races and ages. So it's not weird to see an interracial couple. You see old white men with young Thai women too... But then you get to also see same age couples of different races and whatnot right. But here I think there's less diversity with couples so I think that's why we stand out. But just because I think Chiang Mai being a bigger city and that.

personal communication, 20 March 2021

### Appendix 3:

K: Was there anything else [in her cultural interactions in the US] that caught you off guard?

Ploy: Mm... let me think about it. Oh, (laughs) I guess, teachers being very impressed that I'm an international student, specifically a Thai student. I've been singled out by teachers being like, "Oh, so Ploy. Since you're, you know, from Thailand, why don't you tell us something about Thai politics." In a way that like my identity, my being Thai, would be almost singled out in the classroom setting that it would almost be impossible to escape from that role of being Thai, you know what I mean? That whatever comment I say or whatever input I give to the class would always be prompted by the fact that I am Thai.

P: But it was in one particular social studies class about Japanese culture. I guess like me being Asian factored in why I was singled out in that class but, you know, she could have asked anybody else who wasn't Asian to give input to the class but, I don't know.

K: Yeah. Well, how many people were in the class just to have an idea of the setting.

P: Like 18 people perhaps? 18, 20 is usually the maximum.

K: Yeah. Makes me think of my year. Because in my year we're also around 20 and I'm the only 'Asian', you know. But then I've never really received that kind of attention. I guess it's more like teacher based than interactive.

P: Yeah. Is it weird for you to be the Asian one?

K: It kind of was. I mean no one labelled me that way but I felt a little weird because I guess it made me feel more Asian, you know?

P: Yeah yeah

K: I guess I never really thought myself as Asian because I was always perceived as half which is also like.. because being half also means you're not fully Thai and then you come here and then you come here and then you are kind of expected to act like a full Thai person.

P: Yeah... that's so interesting. And I've had the same comments from friends who say that they go to college, or like wherever they are, and are expected to be Asian whereas when in they're in Thailand they're luk krueng.

K: Yeah. Can you relate to that? I mean of course not the luk krueng part but that when you have to represent yourself as Thai or you're expected to contribute from a Thai perspective, that there were times when you felt either responsible to give your opinion from a Thai perspective or whether you felt guilty for not being able to give it as you would imagine a Thai person who didn't grow up with your experiences would've done it.

P: You know, both. It's like, "Oh shit. What if I can't authentically represent or give a Thai perspective in this comment." Or "Oh shoot, I should think really hard because maybe someone in my circumstance isn't able to fully able to represent a Thai perspective." And like sometimes I would not even answer. Like, "Oh sorry, I don't know. I can't answer this question."

K: So, you do sometimes feel the pressure of that.

P: I think I feel the pressure in the same way that I feel um, you know, sitting in a Grab and telling people my mish-story or whatever, it's like in the same way where I'm expected to show myself as Thai to a Thai person and also in college like represent myself as an authentic Thai person or whatever to a non-Thai person. I think that the pressure is the same.

K: Mhm. Do you feel it's more of a disadvantage or an advantage to be surrounded by such expectations?

P: I think like I wouldn't wanna say that it's a burden but, you know, in a place where there's so little... like there's not many people to represent your identity, it's difficult to be the one who is burdened with the task of doing that. You know? But whereas if it was in a setting of a university in Thailand and there's many Thai students and you're asked to express your opinions as a Thai student, I think that would be a lot easier because there's so many different perspectives and so

many different possible inputs that if you were to give an opinion, you would know that that's one opinion but other opinions from like a Thai person or whatever would still be heard whereas if you're in a setting where you're the only representative, it's like you give your opinion but you also recognise that there's so many other opinions that, you know, yours isn't the only one that exists in a Thai society or setting.

K: Mhm. Well, in situations like those do you sometimes try to explain that the way, the position you are in is like different from the common Thai person?

P: No. Because like (laughs) I'm embarrassed of that in that... like it'd almost expose me. If I say that [I'm different] I almost expect people to be like „AHEY! So, you're not really Thai then!” (Both laugh.) You know? Since these people have such high expectations that you are Thai. So much so that they single you out for being Thai. I feel like if I say, “Hey, um, actually I might not have the experience of like a common Thai person”, I feel like they'd be like „hEY! You're fake!” You know?

K: Mmm. So you've never done it even to your friends?

P: No. I guess because I hold on so much to the fact that I am Thai and I want to be seen as that. And so like, to reveal that I'm not really [Thai] well, I am but I mean that I've got a different experience, I feel like it disqualifies me... (laughs) As silly as that sounds.

K: That's not silly at all. Have you ever felt like you've gotten out of your way into being more Thai or what you believe is more Thai?

P: I guess I can get away with it more with my, like white friends. Or friends who don't really know Thailand, you know? I don't think I go out of my way but I think I can get away with saying, “Oh, this is what we do in Thailand.” And for them not to question it. But if I were to say, “Oh this is what we do in Thailand,” in a setting where everyone around me is Thai, I think I would be more doubtful of myself and question, you know, internally like, “Ooh is this correct? I wouldn't wanna be wrong.” You know? Whereas in a setting with just my friends I'd be like, “Oh yeah,” you know, “I'm right.”

K: Hm. When you say that „This is Thai.” Do you draw from your own experiences, from how you lived. Or from what you believed other common Thai people did.

P: Me. Yeah. Which is why I guess in that setting I am even more confident to voice or to like share my experiences because, you know to me, that's— a Thai experience.

K: Mhm. Do you ever use that trust that people have or expect... do you ever use that to like, I don't know, to represent things that would be to your advantage perhaps?

P: Ahh to use it to my advantage? Um... I don't think I use it to my advantage, but I think I milk the fact that I'm Thai to seem more interesting in some situations. Like I would tell stories about Loy Krathong and Song Kran and people would be like super invested because it's so.. you know, different from their culture and people wanna listen. So like, for that, you know, I'm proud to represent that and use that to seem interesting even though Songkran isn't me (both laugh) but it's part of my culture. So, I'd be like “You know, sometimes the water would be ice cold.” Like, “People would put ice in the water and throw it at you.” And they're like „whAT! That's crAZY! You'd be slapped in America!” (Both laugh.) Yeah so that. Or tell stories of lanterns cuz people would just think of Tangled when I talked about Loy Krathong, you know? So, in that way it's like really for everyone a wow factor and they're like, “Ohmygod, that's like real life Tangled.” (Both laugh.)

personal communication, 8 March 2021

## Appendix 4

E: Ok, so, normally I don't go in reading people consciously thinking, "Ok, I'm gonna, you know, please this guy" or something. But then that would happen in cases of like interviews or something like that, right? Like when I was applying for the teaching job in Korea, at the academy. I guess then for sure I went in thinking, consciously trying, even more than usual to leave a good first impression. And I know for a fact that it worked because when I was leaving, she said, "Oh, you're the nicest interviewee I've seen ever." Or something like... not nicest but "Oh, we connect so well!" She was very... like I left a very good first impression. And I got the job, so I guess it was successful. Yeah so that was one. For sure I was trying to first kinda see her personality. Right, because I've never met this person and she's... she looked 50 or so? And to kinda get her background, right. Is she more of a relaxed or more of pressuring...? Whatever. But you can tell after a couple exchanges of hellos or something. Like when starts asking questions, you know by then. And, you know, after talking a bit. I guess in situations like that when it's an interview or something, there's a goal I want to achieve, right. So, all the words and the stuff I would say would kinda be fuelled towards that goal. Not... maybe not persuading but something like, dropping hints, right. But then without any pressure.

K: Mhm

E: Rather like... I say what they wanna hear. That's for sure. I never say something that might challenge them even the slightest. It's like if I was structuring a sentence for example. Like the beginning and the end would be what they wanna hear, but then in the middle I kinda drop in... oh, for example. I sent an email to a professor yesterday trying to persuade him of something. For example, it was like... Oh, so he had some idea, I had some idea. But I didn't like his idea and I wanted him to do with mine. So, I wrote like, "Oh your ways are... your ideas are a very good compromise with blablalblabla and of course I would like to learn your course"—I was trying not to—"Of course I would like to learn your course" and in the middle I would say what I think, "However, blablalbalba." But then the last part of the sentence was like, "But still, I understand your opinion. I would of course see the importance, I respect the course blablalbla. But please have another consideration." Or something.

K: Yeah.

E: And I always do that. Especially when I'm writing something to get my way. I always do that. But maybe that's just common sense or something. But then I think I also do that—it's such a habit that I also do that while talking,.. unconsciously perhaps. Yeah so basically say what they wanna hear but then kinda like slowly pushing them to do what I wanna get. So yeah I think that's kinda pretty much it. And like being.. yeah putting myself low? Like being really humble. Like really really humble. And putting myself below the other person and going with everything they say without putting up any resistance unless, of course it goes wildly off [my comfort zone]. Yeah.

K: When you describe the positioning of putting yourself below the other person. Usually we think of like a, like literally a hierarchy kinda feeling... It gives off the notion that, you know, if you think about it generally, that the person below is usually the one with like.. lack of agency or freedom to act. Or that they're somehow being subjected to the other person on top.

E: Right

K: But does that— is that the kind of feeling you have? Like you're not in control? Or that you're being controlled by the other person? Because it doesn't really sound like.. you suffer from the position placement.

E: Yeah umm... maybe it's like... For sure no. But it's somewhat like.. I'm actually above. But then I put myself below.

K: Mhm

E: So I act like.. so I'm actually manipulating them right? But then.. I pretend.. it's like acting in that position.

K: Mhm

E: But then the mastermind would be actually. So I would be here, my physical body (he raises right hand level to the camera and his chest). They would be here (raises left hand above the right one). But my brain would be here (does a sprinkling motion with his fingers beside his headhead. Both laugh). But no I'm never... but like me putting myself there means that if they try to like do something I would actually go with as well, unless it's really bad. If they want me to do something, like they ask something, I would actually continue in that act of being below them.

K: Mhm

E: But then that is part of the masterplan right. That's.. yeah. That's like, you get their trust and everything.

personal communication, 31 March 2021

## Appendix 5

Kathrin: When you're in-between the Korean and international group and – because you say they're very opposing from one another – are you sometimes in situations where you see those differences and you have like conflicting emotions? Or you understand where they're coming from but then you don't know how to make them reconcile?

Eric: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I actually... exactly what you ... So, for example, I would be talking to the Korean guys, you know just talking, and some topic comes up and... Unfortunately, they're very against LGBTQ [rights]. Yeah. Koreans are typically very... I would even say against. That much. And I'm completely fine. Like I don't care. It's just, you know, it's whatever. And if they would be talking like that... I feel very uncomfortable. And like, yeah. I do make my stand. But I don't try to convince them or make an argument. For example, that very topic [LGBTQ rights]. Most... no, I'm sure all of them are against and when they do bring forth that topic I would say, "Oh, but I'm completely fine. I have friends who are fine with it. I have friends who I know they are [gay]. So, I don't mind." And they would be like, "What!" But then I don't... I don't try to convince them. But that actually makes me uncomfortable when stuff like that happens. Like sometimes the very conservative ideas that they would have would make me feel like... (He shudders.) And same for— not so much the other way around. Because they would be— I wouldn't feel like, "Oh my god, these guys are so liberal." That wouldn't happen. It would be like, "Wow, these guys are so conservative" with the Koreans. Like for sure that does happen. Or sometimes when I would be with the international guys and when they do make some comments on the Korean guys being really conservative. Like I know but I kinda feel like, "Hmm should I feel attacked?"

K: Mm

E: Because they are making a statement about Koreans. Just any comment for example. But like. Yeah for example if they're like, "Ohmygod the Koreans don't hang out. They're so exclusive!" Then I have to think. Ok I'm not. But should I.. like what stance do I have to.. yeah stuff like that does happen and I'm just like, "Ehh. I don't know. Should I?"

K: Yeah.

E: Like I personally have never felt attacked about anything when, even if I was put under direct racism, I wouldn't feel personally bad, I'd just be like, "You're stupid". But the thought, "What should my stance be? Am I supposed to like feel bad about that? Should I try to convince them otherwise? Am I supposed to just go with it?" That does come into my mind.

K: Mm. Yeah, I get that. It's the same when someone says something hurtful about German or Thai culture to me. Hmm. Do you feel you're more loyal to one group or the other?

E: I don't think so. The thing is, I wouldn't say I'm more loyal to one but then going back to what I said. If someone made a bad comment about, "Ohmygod these international people are so ..." whatever. That doesn't really affect me. But if someone said, "Ohmygod these Korean people are so..." That does make me think one more time.

K: Mhm

E: I don't know if... I don't know why that is. I don't know if that has any meaning or if you can derive something from it. But in the end if I had to be grouped into one it would be with the Koreans.

K: By who? Oh, you mean yourself?

E: I would be Korean. I would call myself Korean. International Korean but I would sound Korean. So maybe that's why. Like I would not like deny my nationality. I would say I might be different in some ways but never deny it.

personal communication, 11 March 2021

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