

Outside/Inside

As one of the few Filipino students in our community, I felt that I had a duty to share my culture on campus. For the past three years, I have been leading a Filipino American History Month celebration. Despite leading these activities, wearing the traditional costume, and speaking Tagalog, I was once approached with the question, “Are you a real Filipino?” While I was not born or raised in the Philippines, I answered, “Yes.”

This encounter makes me think back to what it was like for me growing up in a large Filipino community in Virginia Beach where many of my classmates were Filipino. In middle school, the Filipino group was viewed as the “cool” one that many people wanted to be a part of. I wasn’t directly a part of this group but benefitted from its social influence just by being Filipino. One girl (half Filipino, half white) dyed her hair black and tried to learn Tagalog and dance in an effort to fit in. Is that what it means to be Filipino?

I had no concept of identity then. Things changed in high school when the Filipino student population shrunk to just a handful. I was close friends with four Filipina girls who are all VB natives. 2 were part of a traditional Filipino dance group in Virginia Beach. 2 claimed to know and speak Tagalog. 2 didn’t. 1 has been to the Philippines. 4 haven’t. Another girl I knew was ashamed of her Filipino middle name and used to hide it when she was younger. What does it mean to be Filipino?

I struggle with the “dichotomy” of being an American and being a Filipino. In either case, I am either too much or not enough and have to defend my identity in order to receive validation for being what I am. My existence is made up of these experiences, which eventually snowballed to form the identity crisis I had while working on this project (haha).

In the end, I am Filipino American. I am a crude combination of these two cultures, which is mimicked in my art in how I combined different media and concepts.