

MY ADOPTED HOME

Us vs. Them

Tuesday, May 15 2012

Marcella Purnama

Every time we international students walk into a tutorial, we instinctively walk to the table that has other international students. When we hang out, we usually hang out with international students. But why does this segregation happen?

Although not all people live by this formula, and certainly many international students are able to befriend the opposite side of the equation, the majority is not really comfortable in doing so. I, for one, always see a barrier between international students and the locals, separating us from them.

Recently, I started my internship. 90% of my colleagues are locals. I feel totally exposed. I'm the only one with black hair, small eyes— definitely all-out Asian. I am way out of my comfort zone.

I don't get the jokes they make. I don't know what they are talking about. I stutter, trying to find the right words to tell a story, and that really hinders communication.

But despite all that, they welcome me with open arms, throwing me an afternoon tea party on my birthday and giving me a birthday card signed by my colleagues.

However, I know that racism occurs. Every day. I may not be the one experiencing it, but there's no doubt that it happens.

Last month, we international students trembled upon hearing the news that Chinese students got beaten up in Sydney. Too many people watched them being robbed and assaulted without offering any help. Then we came to the horrifying question, "What if it happens to me?"

We began to wonder, "Does Australia really welcome us with open arms?"

Racism. We know it exists, yet we act as if it doesn't.

I wonder if the locals hate us, just like any person would if their peaceful country was suddenly flooded with foreigners. I wonder if they look down on us, or think of us differently.

After living in Melbourne for more than two years and having some local friends, I gather up my courage to ask one of them this question, "What do you think of foreigners? Are people being racist towards us, or...?"

And she replies, "Well, I can't speak for all people, but there is definitely racism. It depends on the person."

Of course we know that it exists. We pay 10 times the university fee, double the public transport fee, get offered less jobs, have smaller wages, and

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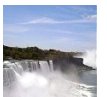


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I don't date much. The few meals I ate out with my last boyfriend count, generically speaking, as we gazed at each other over the table and crap. But they could be thought of as more of a blip, or abhorrence if you will, in an otherwise date-less plateau.

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sometimes we have to endure being in tutorials whose tutors show discrimination. We know— we just act as if we don't.

But the truth is, we love Australia. We respect the locals. We enjoy the relaxed culture. We try hard to master the English language, and we try hard to get out of our comfort zone and go all out in exploring Melbourne.

We, in a sense, want to be welcomed, too.

Some of my friends' best friends are locals, and I know in my heart that we can get along— more than just petty talks in tutorials, asking 'how was your weekend' and 'how's your assignment going?'

Maybe one day, international students will feel like they belong here, without needing to fear for their safety.

Maybe one day, it won't be 'us or them'.

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Submissions are now open and close at 5pm, Friday 25 May 2012.

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