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Madness in the Municipality

Neil Doherty

My hometown has a reputation for being unabashedly different, and with good cause. Whether it be the omnipresent Reverend Larry Love sipping a double latte in a marching band uniform and roller skates or the Afro-haired white women on their way to a yoga class at the YMCA, a spirit of unrestrained eccentricity pervades the city in which I live. Nowhere else could one possibly encounter middle-aged male hippies sporting braids or witness such a flagrant display of female armpit hair. Yes, the People's Republic is not your ordinary hometown. It is Cambridge, the refuge of the unresolved, where one can jump aboard the latest trends and boisterously express outrage at every aspect of capitalist society simultaneously.

But there is more to Cambridge than its obvious idiosyncrasies. After all, it is home to the illustrious Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The presence of such institutions assures devout Cantabrigians that they are situated in the Athens of America, where smug dismissal toward anyone outside New England must surely be warranted. The idealization of the educational establishment in Cambridge borders on obsessional, but given the fact that many Cantabrigians spent their college years tie-dyed and tripped out, their newfound zeal for an actual education for their children is understandable. For the aspiring parent, much can be said for living in a community where coffee-house patrons vigorously demonstrate their erudition with *Atlantic Monthly* vocabularies — and scone crumbs — flying wildly out of their mouths.

Among the espresso-imbibing savants of Cambridge, the Charles River is a familiar topic of debate, one that clearly reveals the divisions within the People's Republic. Nature lovers fear for the civil rights of the riverside geese, who, they believe, have been abused by Harvard University in its attempts to expand its jurisdiction. The environmentally indifferent argue that the geese are an important food source for the city's enterprising mendicants and therefore should not be protected. And the joggers, roller-bladers, and bicyclists simply consider the geese an interference in their riverside recreational pursuits. Signs wave, eyes roll, and horns honk during the ensuing protests that grace the banks of the Charles.

Cambridge is not merely a city of differences, but of contradictions. While it presents itself as committed to inclusion and social cohesion, a ride on the "T" tells the inside story. Pink-haired punks, palm-piloting geeks, bumper-sticker revolutionaries, and chic consumers all frequent the Red Line, but each group gets off at its respective subway stop. Yuppies typically leave at Porter Square, with its profusion of pseudo-European shops dealing in imported, impractical goods. At close proximity is Harvard Square, the undisputed hub of Cambridge for the affluent, the academically privileged, and the suburbanite. Here one encounters Cantabrigian capitalism at its most despised. Rebellion against the establishment is visibly evident in the

teenage Goths who denounce Harvard Square in black garb, neon-streaked hair, and pale, multipierced skin. Next comes Central Square, where radical nonconformity is the norm and activists, picketers, and disillusioned intellectuals are a loud presence. With its differences in race, ethnicity, class, religion, education, political ideology, and sexual preference, Central Square is the only area of Cambridge where a claim to diversity could possibly be substantiated. One stop further on the Red Line brings you to Kendall Square, where multiculturalism promptly vanishes. Home to MIT, Kendall is predictably frequented by techies and computer virtuosos who rarely leave the square's gray modernist confines.

So where do I fit in? I'm a Riversider, seven minutes from Central Square. I like my neighborhood's diversity and the intellectual stimulation and amusement it provides. I'm hardly a radical, but I appreciate the idealism and passion of the activists around me. I share their commitment to improving the lives of others through social change, although loud and colorful is not quite my style. Whatever changes I want to work toward, I am never at a loss for community resources, including an encouraging cast of characters from the theater that is Cambridge. Yes, the People's Republic, thankfully, is not your ordinary hometown.

But where, you might ask, do I get these brilliant insights, the magnificently jaundiced eye, the curled lip, to make such sweeping, damning, and contradictory observations? As a senior at the Cambridge Rindge & Latin High School, I've had to tone down my invective in order to get into college. I'm a staunch Irish Catholic (yes, we still exist), seventeen years of age, whose intolerance, bigotry, and refusal to conform to Cantabrigian liberalism have resulted in Buddhist symbols being set aflame in my backyard while transsexuals in pink pajamas have sent me threatening letters, modeling themselves on the Ku Klux Klan, of which I'm a suspected member. I dine regularly on riverside geese, typically hunting them with a shotgun and a Southern accent when I'm not shopping at Abercrombie & Fitch. Finally, I enjoy writing and hope you liked this essay. ❀