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Spring 3-28-2023

### Cultural Autobiography- Elena Amonette

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#### Recommended Citation

Amonette, Elena, "Cultural Autobiography- Elena Amonette" (2023). *Belmont University Research Symposium (BURS)*. 262.

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Dr. Littlejohn

Honors Asian Culture Seminar

28 March 2023

### Cultural Autobiography

As a biracial person, I am pulled towards two vastly different cultures. Eating McDonald's before meeting up with my Laotian family never seemed to sit right with me, but neither did the way my friends gawked at the pictures on our mantel of me in traditional Laotian attire. I have eaten Christmas dinners that ranged from eggrolls to turkey, and a few years I've even celebrated New Year's twice, in January and in April. I have wondered both what to answer for my ethnicity on standardized testing and why I didn't really look like any one of the Disney princesses. Though in these senses my life seems to be largely contradictory, I am so grateful for my unique cultural blend and would not trade my experiences for anything else.

Even my own name does not fall neatly into a category. "Elena Inthavanh Amonette". A popular Hispanic first name often leads people astray in regard to my ethnic background, and the French "Amonette" further confuses the matter. As far as my Laotian middle name, I have been told that it means "magnolia". In contrast to my cultural jumble of a name, my little brother received a very stereotypical American name: Robert Benjamin Amonette. Just like Robert Stanton Amonette (dad), the Robert Amonette before that (granddad), and before that.

My mother immigrated to America from Laos when she was five years old, the youngest of her nine siblings. This story is a bit of family lore, passed down to me from my mother and to her from her siblings. According to what I have been told, my grandfather was a colonel in the Laotian military and, as a higher military official, was being hunted down during the Communist

takeover of Laos. He fled, swimming in the middle of the night across the Mekong River to Thailand, where he sent a letter to my grandmother with instructions to bring the family to meet him. From there, they lived in a refugee camp in the Philippines until my great-uncle sponsored them and bought plane tickets to America. Her entire family spoke no English, so my grandparents were only able to get factory jobs. For a family of 11, this was not easy.

My mother's childhood reflected this difficulty, and it is through these small glimpses into her life that I am able to learn the value of what I have been given. The largest barrier for her was that extreme poverty estranged her from her classmates. Poverty completely permeated their entire lives. It was the kind of struggle where you have to spit in your own food to prevent your siblings from taking it, where your only clothes are hand-me-downs donated by the church, and where your ticket for free lunch is a blessing yet a branding. Cultural differences also greatly contributed to this separation from her peers. They were the "smelly Asian kids" forced to sit in the back of the bus, confronted with the unexpected inequalities that accompanied their newfound opportunity in America.

As the youngest in the family, my mother was one of the only ones who was able to attend college, since the older siblings had to work. Though most of my family is fairly well-integrated into American culture, the degree to which varies since the siblings do occupy such a large age range. Many of my older aunts and uncles still have a prevalent accent and have retained all of their Lao, while my mother cannot speak it as fluently. Most of the older siblings also tend to have friends within the Asian community, whereas the younger siblings are more comfortable with relationships outside those groups. America has caused an evolution of my mother's cultural and personal beliefs as well, in some ways differing from her family,

particularly regarding religion. Though some of my Asian family would be considered Buddhist, she converted to Christianity in college, where she met my father at Lipscomb University.

Though my father may not have a dramatic story, spanning across various nations and continents, he makes up for it in sheer quantity. In contrast to my mother, I have a million stories from my father about his childhood. He grew up in Lebanon, TN and lived there all his life. He had a very normal, American upbringing and was raised with typical Southern values. He was brought up as Christian, which is part of the reason why he ended up at Lipscomb. Much of this upbringing is reflected in the way that he taught me and my brother, as he often used his stories to share his many tidbits of wisdom. His culture shines through to me in many ways, from his Southern aphorisms to his work ethic and desire for success.

In both of my parents' families, their marriage was the first interracial marriage. This made me stand out (quite literally too- I am a foot taller than any of my Asian family). While my parents were the first interracial couple in the family, they were not the last. Breaking down these cultural barriers was difficult at first, but my parents have been instrumental in creating openness and exposure to other cultures, on both sides of the family. On my mom's side of the family, most holidays and traditions are now a cultural blend. We usually offer a variety of food options on Christmas and Thanksgiving to cater to the younger, more Americanized children.

The influence of both cultures is most evident in my life when I compare my life, actions, and personality to that of my cousins. In comparison to some of my cousins, I am largely Westernized, due to both the influence of my American father but also the impact of my mother as the youngest of the first generation. The older cousins can speak Lao at about the level of my mother, while many younger cousins such as myself cannot. I also have a tendency to be more outspoken, a traditionally American characteristic, while much of my family can be fairly

reserved. In retrospect, studying my culture more intimately has allowed me to trace how the small influences of culture have intersected to create who I am.

Growing up as someone who is biracial, I did not clearly recognize the differences between culture for a long time. Throughout most of elementary school, I didn't even realize that my family wasn't conventional. Occasionally, small cultural differences would make me feel self-conscious, like my "weird" middle name, but these were only ever minor insecurities. However, I do think that I struggled to identify racism as a child. Classmates might have made comments about "eating dogs" or "slanted eyes" but I don't think I recognized this as disrespectful or wrong. I never experienced any malice necessarily, but rather a childish lack of cultural awareness. Thankfully, I was lucky enough to not go through any true bullying or feel excluded from my peers. Instead, I felt that my unique cultural experiences added many positives to my life. One of the reasons I am most grateful for being part of two cultures is the fact that it made cultural diversity normal in my life. I never really saw cultural lines until I grew up, and this especially was reflected in the diversity of friendships I developed even at a young age. I was particularly well equipped to deal with unfamiliar cultures. In fact, one of my best friends was Indian, and I often went to her family gatherings, sometimes even temple too. I never felt out of place exactly, since in reality I was out of place everywhere, even with my own family.

My culture has gifted with so many unique experiences throughout my life, as well as given me a cultural sensitivity that I would not have otherwise had. The stories and memories that I have gained over the years have taught me so much about the importance of cultural diversity, and I am so thankful to have this in my life. Though I used to wish I fit into a single category, being part of two different cultures has made me appreciate the beauty of being different, in more ways than just culturally.

