

Half and Whole

By Annabel Taylor – Walt Whitman High School

Eden Center, a Vietnamese shopping center in Falls Church, Virginia, lives among the sun-drenched memories of my childhood — there's the waft of *bánh bao*, the neon lights of “open” signs and the sounds of karaoke reverberating from the inner depths of the mall. My family would go to the restaurant Rice Paper most often. I always ordered the same thing — a coconut juice and *Bún Chả Hanoi*, which consists of vermicelli noodles, rice paper and marinated pork.

Afterwards, when the sun dipped lower in the sky, we would get boba or red bean cakes shaped like fish. This was the place where I felt most at peace, swinging hand-in-hand between my parents, making silly faces with my brother, trailing behind my grandparents as they navigated the grocery aisles. At Eden Center, I never questioned whether being mixed-race invalidated my connection to my heritage.

Having never been to Vietnam, little me wondered if this was what it was like — rows and rows of *pho* and *banh mi* shops bubbling with energy, racks of *ao dais* and Buddha trinkets, a little community where one could do everything from buy custom made jewelry to get their dry cleaning done. As I got older, I realized that Eden Center was not an exact replica of Vietnam, only a microcosm that developed its own traditions, culture and crowd of diverse individuals. Similarly, my America isn't my parent's America. It's completely and utterly mine, built from the experiences that only I can fully understand being mixed race.

I may never be able to speak Vietnamese fluently (or even proficiently) with the perfect intonation of a Northern accent, but I have a strong passive understanding for it, listening in on the conversations around me. I may not look fully Vietnamese, but I do comprehend the intricacies of the South Asian values my mom and grandparents taught me about family, wellbeing, humility and perseverance. Though I may never feel acclimated to the American traditions I watch my friends' families taking part in, I do understand the complexity of growing up in a political environment that is constantly fluctuating. I may have grown up with a different background, but I have a deep affection for the old American films and music that my dad introduced me to.

Now I know that I don't have to fill in one racial checkbox or another, figuratively speaking. The beauty of multiculturalism lies in its aversion to assimilation. Being two races shouldn't force me to deduct one from my identity. Instead, being biracial allows me to exist at ease in the cultural sphere I've always known — Vietnamese and American. I am a constantly evolving amalgamation of the cultures I grew up with and am still learning about. Half does not mean broken in any sense of the word. It means that I am full — of tradition, novelty and the love of my family, ancestors and above all, myself.