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## A Comparison of the Ideas of Culture in the Essays *The Nomads of Language* by Ariel Dorfman and *Introduction* by Eva Hoffman

Culture is and forever will be a complicated idea, outlining the way in which different peoples communicate and interact with one another. It doesn't just cover where people are born or the language they speak, but also their values, behavior, beliefs, and symbols that shape who we are as a person. Ariel Dorfman, in *"The Nomads of Language"*, pointed out that the backbone of culture as a whole is language. Essentially, without language culture may not exist because it is the foremost way in which people communicate. It is what fundamentally differentiates us from other animals. In Eva Hoffman's essay *"Introduction"* which is a part of the series of essays *The Inner Lives of Cultures*, she speaks about the power of language, but more importantly culture as a whole. Hoffman says, "...culture exists within us, and it constructs our consciousness and subjectivity -- our perceptions, ideas and even feelings" (Hoffman, 7). Tzvetan Todorov in his essay *"Barbarism, Civilisation, Cultures"* also a part of *The Inner Lives of Culture* talks about the separation between being barbaric and civilised and what it has to do with culture. He states that a civilisation is not taking what you know as normal and imposing it on people who are different, but rather understanding the foreign and "enlarging the circle of humanity" (Todorov, 16).

*"City of Clowns"*, a short story, by Daniel Alarcón is about a young man, Oscar, whose father just passed away, and his struggle to come to terms with his own identity. It takes place in Lima, Peru, where he moved when he was eight years old, but still considers it his hometown. He was originally born in a small mountain town called Pasco where there is little opportunity and many people in the town are poor. This is where Oscar's mother meets Don Hugo, his father, even though they spend much of their time apart because Don Hugo works in Lima. It is obvious that Oscar thinks that the nicest thing his father ever did for him was move to Lima. The story opens with Don Hugo's death and his former wife and new wife mopping floors to pay for the debt he owed before he passed. Carmela, is the woman Don Hugo left Oscar and his mother for, and they had three children together. Oscar doesn't seem bitter over his father leaving the family, as it had been many years. He says, "My father's dying was not news. I knew this, and there was no reason for it to be surprising or troubling. It wasn't in fact" (20). He works for a newspaper and is asked to write an article about clowns. Throughout his journey he meets clowns, becomes a clown, and ultimately realizes that his identity is eerily similar to his father's. Oscar realizes that the diversity in places he grew up affected him greatly in the struggle to come to terms with who he really is. This coincides with the main theme of the story which is that where you come from and where you're heading for all have an impact on your life. These

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ideas are presented in the image of a clown, who are usually seen as maybe feeling out of place, especially in Lima, and therefore cover up their image and feelings with this outlandish outward appearance that hides who they really are underneath.

“City of Clowns” shows how culture is always plural and ever changing and how it affects the way we identify ourselves and the people around us. The image of a clown is significant throughout this story. Beginning with when Oscar and his parents first arrive to Lima and get off the bus. Don Hugo basically uses his son to get what he wants, such as money from things he steals out of houses he does construction for. The first glimpse we get of a clown sort of image occurs when Don Hugo attempts to take a box when they get off the bus, and as Oscar realizes that they brought only bags, not boxes, his father gives him a grin. This type of behavior signals what is to come later down the road for Oscar and his relationship with his father. He explains “another angle” (29) that his father has to make money. He would start a job for a wealthy family and show as much respect as possible. He would get familiar with his surroundings and make mental notes of every item of value, putting on an outward appearance of a good, honest man, but inwardly devising his plan to steal when the time is right. This connects back to the clown image of having, almost, two different personalities and knowing when to express which one at the right time. Don Hugo would also use different tactics such as pity, specifically toward the Ascárate’s, to get what he wanted. While simultaneously using his son as a tool to do this. This is evident when he goes to their house, where his wife works, and asks if he could put a word in if he hears of any families in Oscar’s new school that need construction done to their house. Another way of manipulating someone to get what you want by outward appearances.

Oscar’s change in name while attending a prestigious school from his own, sometimes Chino, and then to Piraña shows how his change in surroundings affected him as a person. Since he didn’t grow up with these kids, they view him as an outsider, and after hearing where he’s from they have no association with that place other than what they heard, therefore giving him that nickname for that sole reason. From that first day when the nickname was given, all throughout school it haunted him. Oscar says, “I was a joke. A nerdy kid from the ghetto. I was too skinny. Too weak. Even when I played well or ran fast, they hurled insults at me. In San Juan, we’d joke about how I would beat up these pitucos, but the reality was different. They wielded their power carelessly, sometimes unconsciously. They could cut me out with a comment or simply with silence” (37). This laid the backbone to connecting Oscar with his father, by embedding in him a desire to get back at these kids, and not in a nice way. Ultimately, he had seen his father do it for so long, that it was merely nothing new to him. He was ecstatic at the thought that he would get to break into these miserable kids houses and steal all their belongings. While he asks his dad about this, Oscar points out his broad smile and how it evened everything out. The smile of Don Hugo, once again, bridges the association of a clown and how it ultimately had an effect on Oscar in the coming years. They begin working on a house of a boy’s family, Andrés, who goes

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to school with Oscar. Throughout the process the boy taunts Oscar, flaunting his wealth and so called power over him. All the while Oscar is unbothered by this, knowing that eventually he would get his sort of revenge against the boy who despised him just because of class. Social class is also a big theme in the “City of Clowns”, with where you are from in the city, or country, determining how you will be treated. Clowns come in close to beggars on the social class and are usually just ignored by people, except kids who are amused at the sight. Especially, in a city, such as Lima, where violence was prevalent, people liked to show where they were on the social class. I think that as Oscar grew up and experienced different things with his dad, he definitely did change. He explains that he’s done many illegal things to make money, all learnt from his father. Although, he does have a good job and finished school he still has a lot of his father in him. This is shown when his mother says, “And you, Chino... you’re just like your father” (28).

The short story by Daniel Alarcón, “City of Clowns” shows how culture, difference, and change all contribute to how we identify ourselves as a person in society. Being born one place with a totally different set of beliefs, values, and way of life, and then having to move somewhere else completely definitely alters our way of viewing the world. In one hand we identify with where we came from and what was embedded deep inside us from our childhood and the desire to stay with the known. But, on the other hand we must assimilate to the other culture almost entirely, and keep our traditions and beliefs to ourselves, as to not offend or irritate someone else, and in effect jump feet first into the unknown. This touches on “Barbarism, Civilisation, Cultures” where Todorov said, “Every individual is multicultural; within each, cultures interact as criss-crossed alluvial plains. Individual identity stems from the encounter of multiple collective identities within one and the same person; each of our various affiliations contributes to the formation of the unique creature that we are.” (Todorov, 21). Even if you are born into one culture and never travel anywhere else, you still have multiple cultures in you because of foreign peoples who have come there in the past or present.

The idea of culture and civilisations inter-mingling, especially in this generation, is significant to not only me but to anyone who is a living, breathing human being. Especially in New York City, where it is an ubiquitous fact that is impossible to steer clear from. Having lived in Brooklyn all my life, and more specifically in an ever-diversifying area nonetheless, I know of the mixes of cultures and how it affects our everyday life and also how we choose to identify ourselves. Growing up and hearing stories from my parents and grandparents who have also been here, mostly, their whole lives, has really put migration and cultures into perspective. They would say how it didn’t happen overnight, but slowly and surely, you would see a neighborhood, popping up with stores that had a different language on the awning out front. Then, more and more people from that culture would come and reside in those places, because it was what was familiar to them, in such a foreign place. Eventually, the people who were living there prior, start to become interested in these other cultures. They will become neighbors, shop in their shops,

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and the children will go to school with each other. But, sometimes you can tell when someone is putting on an outward appearance but on the inside feels something totally different. These people would tend to keep to themselves and not assimilate themselves with the place they were in at all. Only longing to go back where they came from. This can also tie back to the symbol a clown conveys, they serve basically to be laughed at. They dress up in a funny costume, and do stupid things to themselves, all to make someone laugh and to entertain them. There isn't a more obvious way of showing that someone is smiling, than to actually paint a huge smile on their face. Of course, the figurative aspect of this is hiding something inside of you with a totally different appearance, essentially "fooling" people, as a clown may literally do. I think this is common in a place where cultures are interwoven and people want to mask their true feelings, which ultimately is used to identify who we are.

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