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Inside the no-man's-land Between Cultural Identities: A Neurophenomenological Exploration of Intercultural Life

Abstract. How do intercultural individuals experience the no-man's-land between two cultures at the brain and phenomenological level? Based on ten in-depth interviews and recent findings in cultural neuroscience, this article develops a neurophenomenological perspective to understand how intercultural individuals navigate their self-identity, authenticity and belonging in this no-man's-land, where isolation and self-doubt loom large, and intergenerational conflict is a common struggle. It argues that we need to find a radically new methodological and philosophical framework to understand these individuals, in order to avoid a politics of self-hate and anger.

Keywords: migration, intercultural experience, cultural identity, brain studies, neurophenomenology

1 Introduction

Edward Said, one of the master chroniclers of no-man's-land spaces created by colonial empires and modern nation states, famously declared that "exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (2001: 173). For those who have ever traversed or were forced to set up rudimentary dwellings in what I call the no-man's-land between different cultures, Said's quote most likely rings painfully true.

Being intercultural is understood by many outsiders as an exciting plethora of criss-crossing cultural, linguistic and culinary experiences, unrivalled and intimate access to the cultural discourses taking place in the public arenas and living rooms of differing societies, and intercultural individuals' seemingly eerie ability to switch effortlessly between their multiple cultural and linguistic identities. Yet as Said's quote indicates, as soon as one turns around the compelling corner of exile's merits, the actual lived experience of existing in the no-man's-land between cultures – a special kind of double exile – hits one like a brick wall.

What is it about this everyday experience between two (or more) cultures that makes it both strangely compelling and yet heartbreakingly painful for intercultural individuals to endure? Why are intercultural individuals never completely at home in either of their two cultures? How do they deal with the conflicting

emotions of pride and contentment, but also bewilderment, embarrassment and shame, in regard to their existential displacement? How do their private, social, mnemonic, sensual, physical and neurocognitive selves adapt to and inhabit the landscape of this peculiar no-man's-land? How does life in the no-man's-land between cultures affect their sense of reality, stability and well-being?

This paper tries to outline this peculiar no-man's-land experience through ten, in-depth interviews with a diverse group of individuals in Germany, the US and Canada, who all live between "Eastern" and "Western" cultures, and have either first or second generation refugee or immigrant experience. The interviews offer a phenomenological window into the everyday lived experience of intercultural people, showing that despite significant differences in their biographies, family backgrounds and age, the interview subjects share a number of common struggles and anxieties.

However, I argue that a phenomenological account is incomplete without an understanding of the corresponding neurobiological dimensions of the intercultural experience. Investigations into how biculturality and bilinguality affect our brains have already yielded promising results in the new field of cultural neuroscience (Ames & Fiske, 2010; Chiao & et al., 2010). Cultural environments can significantly shape anything from our visual perception to our sense of self at the neural level, even if we enter new cultural environments – such as through immigration and refugee experiences – as adults. Moreover, bicultural individuals' brains seem to have special abilities in terms of 'identity switching', allowing them to activate distinct neural networks depending on which cultural environment they are in.

The reasons for introducing a neurophenomenological perspective are not arbitrary: the everyday lived experience in the intercultural no-man's-land takes place first and foremost in the bodies and brains of its inhabitants. Indeed, it is one's body that becomes one of the major battlegrounds over which identities are ascribed and denied, the place where one's humanity and dignity are at stake in the most visceral and inescapable way. Including a neurobiological dimension therefore acknowledges the fact that the intercultural experience is biologically real and not just an imaginary construct, and lends a corporeal visibility and concreteness to an experience often marked by invisibility, isolation and self-doubt.

The cultural cross-cutting potential of the neurophenomenological perspective is echoed in Shylock's famous speech in Shakespeare's *The merchant of Venice*. Shylock, a Venetian Jewish moneylender, himself stuck between religious and socio-cultural identities as Jew in Christian Venice, pleads in this passage:

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, do we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that." (Act 3, Scene 1, 58–68)

It is remarkable that Shakespeare chooses to chiefly use imagery of Shylock's body, his organs and physiological experience to plead his shared humanity with the rest of society.

This is why in this paper I contend that linking the neurobiological dimension of the intercultural existence with its philosophical and conceptual foundation is both enlightening and necessary: for intercultural people, the physical and neurobiological part of their existence is an inescapable stage on which the everyday negotiations about their identity, dignity and humanity play out in full force. Therefore developing a neurophenomenological perspective to make sense of the conditions of intercultural existence is a first step towards creating a new language and framework through which intercultural people can relate to themselves, and leave behind the bitter shores of isolation and self-doubt.

Thus this paper differs from previous approaches in intercultural and transcultural studies, where the focus has either rested on a more sociological framing of intercultural communication (Heringer, 2010; Lüsebrink, 2016) or more abstract, philosophical investigations couched almost exclusively in Western philosophical theories about belonging and cosmopolitanism (Welsch, 1995). Instead, what this paper aims to do is to give an intimate phenomenological insight of the underchronicled intercultural voices within the no-man's-land, by letting them speak directly through the interviews below, as well as by investigating their experience of biculturality at the brain level. This, I argue, is necessary in order for us to create a genuinely new language and framework through which we can relate to the inhabitants of this no-man's-land, and through which they might be able to finally relate to themselves.

2 Interview method

The interviews for this paper were conducted in face-to-face settings, except in one case, where a skype setup was used instead. Interview subjects were asked questions from a prepared set of twelve questions[1] on the topics of intercultural

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1   See Appendix.

experience in the West, bilinguality, intergenerational issues, self-identification and the meaning of home. In order to protect the anonymity of the interview subjects, each subject has been assigned a number and will be referred to e.g. as 'subject 1' or 'S1'.

3 Displacement and Estrangement

"My sense of place is warped" – this is how S8 sums up her experience of migration and dislocation between the US and Korea. Born in the 1970s in the US to Korean parents, S8 moved back to Korea with her mother and siblings when she was nine months old. Her father stayed behind in the US and was sent recorded cassette tapes from Korea of S8 speaking toddler Korean. Now these tapes are a haunting trace from the past for S8, since she does not speak fluent Korean anymore. When she was two years old, they moved back to the US and reunited with her father, beginning a journey of successful immigrant assimilation there, but also one of first language loss. S8 was highly successful academically, graduating with a Ph.D. degree in Russian literature from an ivy league university, speaking many languages by the time she reached adulthood – except Korean.

She reports that feeling stuck between identities, and the resulting shame and frustration from this, only lasted until elementary school for her, where she wanted to "feel invisible". After elementary school, the question of identity was not so much in doubt as the ability to ascribe herself to a place. "Where are you from is such a basic question, but hard to answer for me", S8 says, "My answer is a paragraph rather than a word. Even on my facebook profile I leave it blank".

It is interesting that even though S8's immediate experience of dislocation took place in her toddler years, the scattered memories and stories from that period, as well as her parents serving as a reminder of their family's criss-crossing journeys between two countries and cultures, are powerful enough to affect her sense of geocultural dislocation and estrangement way into adulthood.

It is encouraging to note that S8 felt that her sense of shame of about her Korean background faded away shortly after elementary school, which might be credited to the US's relatively flexible and open definition of what it means to be an American, as well as the fact that possessing a hyphenated identity (Korean-American) was already an integral part of the American immigrant landscape and, to a degree, also the educational discourse.

Another example of this kind of cultural-linguistic displacement can be observed in the life story of S5, who grew up in East Germany with Mongolian parents; they had initially arrived into the Communist DDR. The Mongolian community in East Germany back then (and still today) was extremely small

or non-existent, which increased a sense of cultural estrangement and isolation during S5's childhood. S5's father, an academic and researcher, was the one who upheld Mongolian culture at home, yet when he died a young death, leaving behind S5's mother and her siblings who were left to fend for themselves in a newly reunified Germany, only her mother was left to continue the family's bicultural legacy. This just increased S5's sense that "my parents were the last anchor of Mongolian culture for me".

Even when her father was still alive, S5 reports that "Mongolian culture was always experienced in a surrogate form". S5 reports feelings of regret and sadness about the elusive nature of her Mongolian heritage, as well as a painful sense of loss of a world, language and culture that always figured as a crucial backdrop to her life growing up in Germany, and yet feels perpetually unattainable.

However, cultural memories might not always be sought out, as S7's account of avoiding "cultural triggers" shows. S7 was born and grew up in Armenia until her parents fled the Nagorno-Karabakh War in the late 1980s to escape violence and ethnic cleansing, fleeing first to Russia and then the US. S7 remembers clearly the traumatic period of flight, fear and instability, which deeply marked her late childhood and youth. Despite these hardships, S7 fulfilled her dream of becoming a designer by studying in New York after her arrival in the US and taking up a designer job in Virginia, where she engages in volunteering and activism for refugees in her community.

Despite her empowering refugee story, and her eventual success in US society, S7's relationship to her Armenian identity is ambivalent. On one occasion, she is reluctant to go to an Armenian food festival held in her area because she does not know which traumatic memories the event, the food and Armenian people there will potentially trigger, making her decide to avoid the festival altogether. This "cultural trigger" avoidance is not due to S7's denial of her Armenian past, nor her lack of care for the Armenian community, on the contrary, she conveys much thoughtfulness, empathy and concern on how to keep her refugee experience alive through her community activism and service. Rather, her story shows that intercultural individuals, especially those with traumatic pasts, have to make difficult and conflicting decisions in their everyday lives about how they relate to their 'home' culture, weighing the needs for their communal responsibilities against their own mental and emotional wellbeing.

Estrangement also appears in the context of social relationships. S6, an Indian-American immigrant who grew up in India and Singapore until he reached adulthood, says that what makes him feel most estranged within his intercultural identity are social relationships. "I am too blunt for Americans", he explains, which often leads to feelings of displacement and non-belonging in

social contexts and his workplace. Yet when he is back in India, he notices his American socialization and the way it clashes with Indian social mores.

This 'double identity exile' is also reported by S3, a Chinese musician who spent her young adulthood in the 2000s in music conservatories in Austria and Germany, and now lives in Berlin. In a telling quote, she exclaimed with some exasperation that "In Germany I feel like the Chinese, but when I return to China I feel like I am German."

Although Chinese is her first language and she identifies as Chinese in many ways, S3 describes how the 'double identity exile' plays out in social relationships when she visits China today: "Chinese society is undergoing such rapid changes; when I go to China I can get anxious about interacting with friends and acquaintances because we often seem to misunderstand each other. The social rules and cues about communication and status are shifting constantly, at times I have offended people without knowing why (especially on social media) or people talk to me in such a convoluted and indirect fashion that the German in me just blurts out to them 'Can you please say that again in a straightforward way?' It's exhausting."

In another Chinese-German identity story from an older generation, S1 recounts the dizzying turn of events that led her to leave China for Germany in the early 1980s. Born in 1963 in Wuhan province, S1 made it to Germany on a coveted Chinese government scholarship to study bioengineering. he first learned English during the Maoist years with a teacher who had studied in the UK and had been branded as a "rightwing element" by the Communists. She was lucky, had she entered her high school three years earlier, she would have been sent to the countryside for backbreaking labor, forfeiting any chance at an education.

Instead, S1 went on to win the first English competition staged in her province after the end of Mao Zedong's dictatorial reign, which helped her being admitted to Wuhan University at age 17. Through an exchange with Shanghai's Goethe Institute, she was tasked to learn German from scratch, giving her only one and a half years to learn the language and take the notoriously difficult German Abitur high school examination. When S1 arrived in Germany, her bioengineering professors in Hamburg could not believe that she had just begun learning German less than two years ago, and that she had passed the German Abitur within this incredibly short time.

The existential pressures under which S1 acquired both English and German in China, her family's efforts at providing an education for their daughter in a country that had been politically and culturally ravaged to the point of almost complete destruction under Mao, and the fact that failing at learning these

foreign languages was not an option contributed to S1's sense of pride, but also bewilderment at that part of her life's history. "Sometimes when I look back at that period I wonder, did this really happen? How did I manage all those hurdles? It seems surreal. It is scary to think about what would have happened if things hadn't worked out. Politics messed up our lives. Yet when I remember my past self then, I was upbeat, I just threw myself in completely."

Her sense of 'double exile' emerged when she temporarily moved back to Shanghai in the 1990s due to her husband's work placement. She recounts with anger and hurt the way how she and her husband were treated by the Chinese local authorities and border guards, who subjected them to searches and inspection, with a threat of violence. "They treated us 'returning Chinese' with a special mix of hostility, envy and lack of respect. After that traumatic experience, I didn't feel Chinese anymore. We went back to Germany pretty soon afterwards."

The Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 increased her sense of alienation from a government on which she and many in her generation had pinned a lot of hope for reform after the dark Maoist years. With a bittersweet chuckle, she says "Someone once asked me, in my early years in Germany, what I would do if I won the lottery. Without any hesitation, I replied: 'Donate the money to the Chinese Education Ministry, so they can send out even more students on scholarships, just like myself. ' How stupid and naive I was then!".

Estrangement and isolation do not just affect an intercultural individual's private sense of self and place, but they can also have political consequences. S9, a Chinese woman who came to the US to study for her Ph.D. and now holds a high-level position in finance in New York, recounts how during the 2016 Presidential election, many of her fellow Chinese friends and colleagues turned against the Democrats because they felt that Democrats did not care about racist jokes and attacks against Chinese that had taken place in the US media and public sphere in the previous years. Most important however, they felt that Democrats' support for Affirmative Action effectively discriminated against Asians who performed well academically, since the policy favored admission of other disadvantaged groups such as African-Americans and Latinos.

"Theoretically we should be for the Democrats, they are more pro-immigrant", S9 explains, "but this time, I know a lot of Chinese who support Trump, simply because we feel totally ignored and even actively discriminated against under the identity politics that the Democrats are carrying out. We know that Trump is not on the side of immigrants. But then, currently, no one is speaking up for us. We are being punished under Affirmative Action for doing too well, it just feels incredibly enraging and unfair. I studied and worked here for so many

years, and yet I don't feel that there might ever be a dignified place for Chinese like me in US society."

This is a reminder that feeling estranged and ignored in one's cultural-political identity is potentially destabilizing for liberal democratic society, because of the erosion of trust in fair treatment that takes place. As Devleena Ghosh warns us, "exile does not necessarily produce liberal cosmopolitan citizens, it may easily create unreconstructed nationalists and fundamentalists" (Ghosh, 2008: 279). The political effects of not feeling at home in one's host country should not be underestimated, since it can actively fuel distrust in government and the fairness of liberal democratic society, isolationism from other groups and the erosion of cross-cutting solidarity. In its most extreme form, it fosters the preference for a more divisive and aggressive kind of politics.

4 Self-erasure and authenticity

For intercultural individuals, answering simple questions such as "Where are you from?" or "What's your nationality?" can seem like an impossible feat.

S6, the Indian-American who reported estrangement in social relationships, sums it up most devastatingly as "I've given up telling my life story". He explains that he usually makes his answers about his biography and belonging dependent on who listens, presuming to be misunderstood in social encounters in the first place. This preemptive self-erasure reported by S6 is an integral part of the everyday life of intercultural individuals, and can have crushing long-term effects on one's sense of personal self-worth, dignity and belonging (McCormick, 2003; Santa Ana, 2004).

Similarly, S7, the former Armenian refugee who now lives in the US as a designer, says that "The story that I tell about my life varies, depending on who listens. If people just went by my accent, they'd think I am Russian. In fact, few people know about my Armenian background and traumatic life story attached to it. I carefully choose who I can reveal myself fully to, to avoid judgment and awkwardness". S7 chooses to reveal her whole self during certain settings, such as her community activism and volunteering for refugees, serving as a speaker for the International Rescue Committee (IRC) who advocates for acceptance towards refugees and volunteering her design skills

S7 persits against objections of her mother, who would prefer that she didn't speak about the traumatic events in their family's life in their newfound home in the US. "You want people to know you for some reason. Speaking publicly about my refugee story helps me to own that part of my past.", S7 says, trying to

make sense of her quest for authenticity and the regaining of control over her life's narrative.

A person's name can become another intimate intercultural battleground over which one's authenticity is fought out. S2 is a distinguished Chinese-American young architect whose parents' immigration journey led her from China to Germany, Canada and finally the US. S2 speaks about her two names – one Chinese, one Western – as a source of anguish in the US. "I gave myself my Western name", she says, "but I am also my Chinese name – it feels odd to be split like this. In the US, well-meaning White Americans will ask me why I don't use my Chinese name, so that I can return to my 'heritage', as if this were a switch button. Even if I used my Chinese name, there is no way for me to go back to a pristine, unadulterated heritage of my identity. I am my Western name, even though I am also my Chinese name."

S2's self-naming speaks to a determined effort at agency and self-inventiveness, yet it also shows that even with those efforts, intercultural minorities are still unable to eschew interrogative examinations about their 'roots' and 'heritage', effectively having to constantly to prove that they belong – even if they feel that both their bicultural names are authentic representation of their self.

One of the most intimate spheres where self-erasure and authenticity is at stake for interculturals is in the realm of romantic relationships. How does one love others from within the no-man's-land between cultures? How can one stay true to one's intercultural self in this potentially most fickle and vulnerable realm of social relationships?

S3, the Chinese musician who now lives in Berlin, recounts her loneliness during her years at musical conservatories in Austria and Germany as a young adult. Having left Beijing's music conservatory as a rising star for Austria at age 18, and subsequently winning two International music competitions, pressure was high on her to focus on her musical career in Europe rather than explore intimate social relationships in her new home county.

When she moved to Berlin, her first boyfriend there was German but she ended up marrying a Chinese man. She recounts that being with a German compared to a Chinese man felt very different. Her German boyfriend was verbally and emotionally very affective and generous, and professed respect towards her individuality and freedom, however, he would at times display a bothersome cultural and didactic condescension towards her Asian woman, as if, despite her own accomplishments on the European stage, he had to educate her about what it meant to become a (cultured) European. The Chinese boyfriend that S3 met after him pursued a somewhat more conservative and partrichal approach to romantic relationships, benignly but still persistently stalking her with Chinese

food and medical care until she relented to go out with him, however paying much less attention to explicit verbal and emotional affection.

Yet she went on to marry her Chinese boyfriend because "I realized that I was my least true authentic self with my German boyfriend, I was always trying to be this German me, which is part of me, but just too exhausting to uphold everyday in the romantic realm, where you are supposed to find relaxation and ease. With my Chinese boyfriend, I could say a phrase in Chinese to describe reality, and he knew immediately what I meant. Strangely, in a sense I felt more at home with my Chinese boyfriend, even though my German boyfriend had a better sense of who I was in my new identity in the West".

S3's account is exemplary for the dilemma that many intercultural individuals face when it comes to deciding which part of their intercultural selves they want to reveal and pursue with those people most intimate and closest to them. It is also representative for the sacrifices made in one's authenticity in order to find happiness with a significant other, who might never be able to grasp the full extent of the landscape of one's intercultural no-man's-land. Whoever S3 would have chosen, her feelings of cultural dislocation and the seemingly impossible quest for complete authenticity could not have been fully attained with either of the two men.

Finally, at the intellectual and creative level, intercultural individuals face similar challenges. S2, the Chinese-American young architect, expresses frustration at the fact that in architecture school, a dogmatic kind of Western functionalism often leaves very little room for other cultural and gendered aesthetic ideals. For example, S2 recounts how her architecture professors chide her for wanting to use color and decorations in her models, even though for her, "color, decorations and culture-specific ornaments in a living structure are deeply emotional expressions for me, yet I am told that it's superfluous and wrong. I can have a strong emotional reaction upon entering a Gothic church without actually being religious". Eventually, due to her own determination, S2 is awarded a special fellowship to travel to India to explore these questions in the context of Indian architecture.

How does S2's vision, influenced by her experience of living between the cultures as an Asian woman, fit into the mainstream Western architectural standards of 'the good life', as defined in relation to aesthetic space? What possible negative effects does this have on S2's faith in her intercultural aesthetic sense of judgment?

From another intellectual perspective, S1 is a Indian research mathematician who moved to Canada much later in her life, when many fundamental aspects of her cultural identity were already formed by her Indian years. Unlike some of the

other younger interview subjects, S1 does not experience such a strong disruption to her sense of self and place upon her move to the West, rather, what stands out most is the experience of clashing values between two cultures.

In describing what bothers her most, she gives an account of the different cultural research communities, in which "the Indian approach to knowledge is not centered on personal glory", compared to the Western approach to science that forces people on individualist and at times egotistical tracks. After surviving a life-threatening illness, S1 reassesses her own relationship to her previously predominantly 'Western' way of doing mathematics, rediscovering what she describes as the 'artistic' aspects of maths, in addition, she revisits more spiritual sources within Indian culture, such as Indian classical dance and music, as a way of connecting to the world.

Her moving out of India allows her to reassess her home culture, where she operated in a mainly 'Western' intellectual way when she lived there, with a new-found holistic, intercultural authenticity of her mind and body. This shows that even when cultural dislocations happen later in life, they can still have a profound effect in terms of one's values and worldviews.

5 Intergenerational dilemmas and conflict

Without doubt, one of the most conflicted and devastating areas in which intercultural individuals come to feel the pains and limits of their cultural belonging is within their intergenerational relationships with parents, siblings and their own children. It is one thing if an outsider accuses you of being "too Korean" or "too American", or of having "betrayed your heritage", it is yet another, more devastating blow if this accusation comes from within your most intimate family circle.

When commenting on how their intercultural identities are experienced intergenerationally, all interview subjects report varying degrees of tension, dilemma and despair. For S8, her Korean parental generation, also known as "the great generation", was known to keep traumatic historical and personal events hidden from others and to speak of the painful past as little as possible. This is summed up best in the laconic opening line of Min Jin Lee's novel *Pachinko* (2017) about a Korean immigrant family's journey in Japan in the 20th century: "History has failed us, but no matter".

In a similar vein, the topic that appeared across a majority of the interviews was the way how first generation immigrants struggle to provide support or even just acknowledge the painful challenges their children face in light of living between two (or more) cultures. "Growing up in the West, you don't know what

suffering is compared to what our generation went through"; "Why do you need to keep bringing up our refugee past? I would rather you didn't talk about this in our new life, things are not as bad as you say."; but also "You have become too German/American, you are forgetting where we came from", were all commonly uttered phrases in intercultural families.

Indeed, the topics of intergenerational memory erasure, blame and guilt, and questioning of the second generation's identity authenticity are central in academic studies and literary works on the intergenerational transmission of trauma to Holocaust survivors' children (Brett, 1994; Wiseman, Metzl, & Barber, 2006), as well as amongst present-day refugee populations (Sangalang & Vang, 2017).

The sense of isolation from the cultural and historical narratives of one's parental generation is increased by the fact that even siblings in intercultural families can accuse each other of identity inauthenticity and betrayal. S6 reports how his younger sister, who came to the US at a much earlier age than him, has told him that he was "too Indian", in turn, the sister had been reprimanded by him that she had become "too American" since they arrived in their new home country.

This irritation and frustration at another family member's 'swaying' towards one particular geocultural identity can also be experienced by the second generation towards the first one. In a special biographical twist, S4, a Chinese-German young man who grew up in France and Germany, but then moved back to China with his parents as a teenager and lived there in the German expat community in Beijing, describes how alienating it felt when his mother, upon returning to China, changed in her personality and behavior. "She was two different people in these two countries; in Germany she embodied her former foreign student and immigrant identity, being patient and humble around others; in China, she was short-tempered and domineering. " The change, he suggests, could be attributed to the exploitative socio-economic power structures that were taking form in China during the early 2000s, and which might have contributed to changing his mother's behavior upon her re-submersion into Chinese society. This story reflects how "exiles internalize the double consciousness of their originary place and their present location" (Ghosh, 2008: 279), and with an added twist in S4's biography, how this double consciousness can turn against itself upon the return of his family to their so called 'originary place'.

From different generational perspective, S1 describes her anxieties as a first generation immigrant towards her children who grew up in Germany. She worries that she might be unable to pass down the memory of her Chinese years to her sons, since they are out of touch with the China of her childhood and youth,

as well as present-day China. One reason why she agreed to be interviewed is to preserve her story and memory for the second generation.

In another more racially charged account of self-censure, S1 talks about her concern for her sons when growing up in German society as Asian young males. She was aware that their Chinese body types did not fit into the German standard of male strength and beauty, which is why she encouraged them to do physical exercise and workout, in order to become physically more appealing to their peers and teachers. One is unsure whether one should feel more pain at S1's attempts at changing her son's physically authentic selves in order to fit into the standards of the White German mainstream, or the fact that her efforts at preempting racist exclusion of her children might have inadvertently instilled further body shaming.

This is a poignant example of how the first intercultural generation faces impossible decisions in terms of self-erasure, authenticity and survival for their children, where well-meaning strategies of assimilation can lead to further isolation and alienation of both generations into their respective no-man's-land between the cultures.

6 Cultural and private sense of home

Given the chilling realities of estrangement, loneliness and self-erasure that intercultural individuals have to face in their everyday lives, one would assume that a quest for 'home' would be discarded as hopeless and futile.

Yet, as Said has put it, "exiles, émigrés, refugees and expatriates uprooted from their lands must make do in new surroundings, and the creativity as well as sadness that can be seen in what they do is one of the experiences that has still to find its chroniclers" (2001: xiv). Indeed, the interview subjects engaged in exactly this melancholic creativity highlighted by Said – through their inventiveness and resilience in creating new personal and intercultural homes wherever they settle anew, often creating new value systems and coping mechanisms to achieve this goal (Kim, 2015).

At the heart of this, I argue, lies a radical reclaiming of the neurophenomenological reality that has been denied to them by both sides of the cultural borders, by the societies where they felt the crippling effects of racial and cultural exclusion, as well as by parents and family members who accuse them of having betrayed their heritage. This radical reclaiming stands in contrast to a hostile *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) in which the most basic biological, physical and emotional ways of

being human can never be taken for granted and are always threatened by the uncertainty and dissolution of one's cultural and historical belonging.

The process of this radical reclaiming is reflected in how various interview subjects describe how they try to create a sense of home through a kind of mindfulness about their physical and geocultural presence in their everyday lives, where memories of and responsibilities towards their specific cultural communities and traumas are weaved into as integral but separate strands. "I try to be absolutely present", S7 says, "finding home in the relationships that I built, in who I am in this moment irrespective of my biography and background, that's how I ground myself". S6 describes how he learned to separate his sense of self does from his sense of place during his immigration experience. "It made me very aware of the present and who is in my life", he says, "and of how I can be at peace with my body and all its incoherencies through my own awareness of it. Being aware helps me own present existence". Various interview subjects also report seeking out friends who have similarly intercultural and displaced biographies, attaining a sense of home from the company of those who know what cultural homelessness means.

S8, on the other hand, finds a sense of home in the nomadic motion that has marked her life: moving around. "I don't think I could live in one place forever", she explains, "I get a sense of freedom and strangely, home, from moving, from having the freedom to move, even if that's within one town."

The responsibilities of parenthood and the question of what we are to our own intercultural children can also shift one's sense of home. S3 describes how the birth of her son changed her sense of home dramatically. Whereas beforehand, she felt neither completely at home in China or Germany after she had moved out of China as a young adult, she now claims her home in Berlin because that is where her son is growing up. "This is our responsibility", she says, "to be the home of our children. My son is growing up as a child of Chinese parents in Berlin, he has many identities, too. All I can give him is my own self as his stable home."

In perhaps the most poignant and moving example of reclaiming of neuro-phenomenological reality, one of the interview subjects says that she used to feel that "when I was in Germany, I didn't belong to the extent that it didn't seem that the birdsong outside of the window was meant for me. It was meant for someone else, someone with German ears, someone who could justify their physical existence in this place. Now I don't feel that way anymore. The birds are singing for me, too."

7 Culture in the brain

In addition to experiencing similar phenomenological experiences of living inside the no-man's-land between cultures, intercultural individuals also share a unique neural signature due to their biculturality. The neurobiological foundation of intercultural experience highlights an acutely physical and visceral aspect of an experience that is frequently denied its reality.

It would exceed the scope of this paper to give an exhaustive account of the field of cultural neuroscience, however, a couple of insights are worth mentioning here in connection with the interview insights:

(1) Previously, cultural psychologists have studied how culture shapes our sense of self, distinguishing between collectivist (e.g. China, Japan, Korea) vs. individualist societies (e.g. the USA) and their respective ideas of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Cultural neuroscientists tested this theory at the brain level, with remarkable findings: In fMRI studies that asked Westerners and Chinese to think about themselves and their mother, the brain area usually implicated in self-reference was activated for both groups when prompted to think about themselves, however, only in Chinese did this *same brain area* for self-reference activate *as well* when prompted to think about their mother (Zhu, Zhang, Fan, & Han, 2007). This was interpreted as evidence at the brain level that Chinese did indeed view their mother as identical to themselves, as a member of a more collectivist and interdependent society would.

When we connect this neurocognitive finding to the interviews discussed in this paper, it makes sense that many interview subjects reported feeling estrangement and displacement: If the way how an intercultural individuals relates to their family and wider society differs so significantly at the brain level – to the extent that compared to Westerners, wholly different brain regions are involved when thinking about others – it makes sense that the immigration experience of moving from a non-Western to a Western country would feel so disorienting and estranging. The idea we have about our Self and how it relates to others is such a fundamental basis for our *Lebenswelt* that any disruption of this idea must undoubtedly be experienced as neurobiologically challenging. It ruptures not only our sense of place but also our sense of home, both issues which arose repeatedly in the interviews.

(2) Recent neuroimaging evidence suggests that there exist cultural differences in how East Asians and Westerners process situations visually and conceptually. Compared with East Asians, Westerners' visual processing is more object-focused, whereas the East Asians pay more attention to the

background and context (Goh & et al. 2007). In addition, the same study showed that elderly East Asians showed a near absence of object-processing at the neural level, much more so than younger participants, probably due to the former group's longer immersion in East Asian culture due to their age. These findings could potentially help illuminate the neurocognitive dynamics at play during the intergenerational conflicts reported amongst almost interview subjects: If East Asians ascribe so much more importance to the background and holistic context of a situation than Westerners, one would expect that within one intercultural family, confusion and frustration would easily arise when interpreting and discussing social situations, other people's behavior and the morality behind one's own actions. Added to this, if culture is able to 'solidify' these habits of perception and moral worldviews at the neural level as people age, it is not surprising that intergenerational conflicts were experienced by second generation immigrants as especially intractable and hopeless.

(3) In a study on Asian-Americans and their ability to switch between their respective bicultural identities, Joan Chiao and her colleagues (2009) found that even though some Asian-Americans participants might express behaviorally or in their self-judgment a preference for being American or Western (e.g. in order to conform to social expectations of the host country), when actually studied at the neural level, their cultural self-construal *also* activated Asian collectivist neural structures.

In fact, when studied at the brain level, bicultural individuals were showed remarkable agility in switching between their two identities, depending on which one was primed. The fact that only fMRI methods were able to detect this dynamic bicultural identity switching (whereas traditional survey or behavioral methods might only pick up a Western identity) shows how important it is to involve cultural neuroscience in understanding the subconscious or suppressed identities of intercultural people. This corresponds to the fact that many interview subjects reported self-erasure of their 'Eastern' identity in public, and a constant and often hidden switching between their two cultural identities as they try to negotiate the social world around them. We should use the brain data on bicultural identity switching to dispel shame around being bicultural in the West, and to highlight the enormous cognitive capacities and skills bicultural individuals learned to develop as they attempt to establish their humanity between two cultures. This can provide the basis for a novel identity authenticity based on self-worth and visibility.

8 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to draw a first neurophenomenological sketch of life inside the no-man's-land between cultures, from the point of view of its inhabitants' lived experience, as well as the neurobiological basis of their intercultural brains. The vision is to find a new language and framework through which intercultural individuals can begin to understand and describe themselves. It is a first step towards humanizing these people in a holistic way, which also includes the bodily and neurobiological basis of their everyday lived reality.

Finding a new humanizing language means to finally step outside of the boundaries of the no-man's-land between cultures – a land in which intercultural individuals have hitherto suffered and survived in largely by themselves, often underchronicled and voiceless, and in isolation from their Western host society's discourses on politics and the good life. This isolation, if turned inwards, can lead to disastrous outcomes in terms of mental well-being, self-erasure and sense of belonging. If turned outwards, it can potentially fuel a politics of distrust, division and anger — dangerously undermining the kind of cross-cultural solidarity that is needed in today's hyperdiverse liberal democracies.

This is why a neurophenomenological perspective is so crucial — because it allows us to say this:

"Yes, you are an inhabitant of the no man's between cultures. Both you and the landscape of this no-man's-land are real, taking place through and within your brain and body. Your brain and body are marked by being simultaneously at home in two (or more) cultures, and yet not being at home fully in either of them. You carry the unique neurobiological manifestation of your intercultural existence within you. And no matter how much others and eventually you yourself come to doubt the everyday experiences that you are going through in this no-man's-land, you are not completely isolated in the peculiar singularity of your intercultural predicament but connected to others through the universal basis of the human brain – this one biological reality that at once humbles and unites us."

Once words like these are uttered, a new dialogue on cross-cutting solidarity in a hyperdiverse, divided world stands a chance to begin.

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Appendix

12 interview questions

1. Tell me your life story until now, especially moments that involved moving from East to West (or vice versa).
2. Which life story do you usually tell people in the West and non-Western world?
3. How does your bi-or multilinguality affect your emotions and thinking in everyday life?
4. Do you ever feel stuck between your identities? Please specify situations.
5. What is your sense of home?
6. How much does a sense of place matter to you, i.e. does your birthplace affect you, is there a specific place where you would like to be buried one day?
7. What is your relationship to moving and being settled?
8. What is your relationships with your parents' and family's cultural identity?
9. Do you ever feel torn, ashamed or rejected about not belonging fully to one cultural society?
10. Do you ever hide your bicultural identity in order to fit in?
11. Is there a place in this world – social, political, aesthetic – where you feel you can express all of your identities freely?
12. How would you like to be treated as a full human being, in terms of your different identities? What is your sense of well-being in the intercultural no-man's-land?