i am.
Interviewer's Note

“When you look in the mirror, you must realize that you are Asian. That is your race.
You are not American. You are Korean. You may be Filipino, but Filipinos aren’t really
Asian. Learn your proper values.” Someone I find very dear said this to me just last
semester. Their statement was in the context of many conversations on my identity, with
the question of who I am and their expectations of who I should be constantly cropping up.
What I found most frustrating was the fact that someone I love and whom I’ve known my
whole life seemed so ready to define me according to set categories.

I wanted to respond, but didn’t know how. I ended up using my journal to pin down
my thoughts and attempt to untangle this whole complex notion of my identity. Eventually,
I decided to bring that conversation outside of my journal and am incredibly grateful for
what came out of those interactions. Upon talking to members of our community, I realized
that how I grapple with defining who I am is an experience that many people share at Yale-NUS. While I can’t articulate how, listening to their stories ended up helping me gain a lot
more clarity on my own.

With the huge help of Sara and Lishani under the Diversity and Inclusion Program, I
created I Am to capture, at least in part, the nuances and various intersections of identity of
the individuals within our community. The following publication features interviews that I
conducted throughout the course of this semester. Each interviewee provided incredibly
thoughtful and eloquent reflections on the different questions on identity that I posed. I
hope that you take the time to read them through!”
What is "Diversity"?

Here at Yale-NUS College, the Diversity and Inclusion Program actively engages with our school community to celebrate the array of backgrounds, belief systems, and lived experiences of all students, faculty, and staff members. Yet when we talk about diversity on campus, two questions come to my mind: How does one define “diversity”? How is diversity at Yale-NUS—a special microcosm in and of itself— informs by the wider context of Singapore (and vice versa)? I sat down with members of the Diversity and Inclusion Program to get their thoughts. Below are responses from three separate interviews I had with Sara (Manager of Diversity and Inclusion), Lishani (Student Associate for Diversity and Inclusion), and D (Dean’s Fellow Associate for the Diversity and Inclusion Program).

Interviewer: Diversity is a really broad and nuanced concept. How do you, or how does the diversity program, define “diversity”?

Lishani: I think to me, diversity is just people who think differently from me, who have had different experiences… In my mind I have an image of [diversity]… I think of my suite. I think of classes with NS men whose experiences are so new to me. People always talk about diversity in terms of how many passports we have on campus.

Sara: I guess for me [diversity] really boils down to lived experiences and being able to talk to one another about lived experiences. Diversity is being able to share your own personal stories and being able to hear other people’s personal stories. Diversity is being able to openly express personal identities and social identities… I think of how we have people who are coming from different—not just countries, ethnicities, or cultural backgrounds—but also just different lived experiences. No two Singaporean students are the same. No two international students are the same. Yet we make so many assumptions about other people based on, “Oh you’re local”, or “You’re international”. At the very basic level, I want to encourage students to see beyond those initial assumptions and engage with one another beyond the initial impressions.

D: I think it’s important to remember that we are Diversity and Inclusion… I was at the exchange trip to Yale during Spring Break… but I extended my stay, and on the Friday after Yale-NUS left… the African American Cultural Center had an exhibit for Black History Month. [The Center] had some former deans there to speak and one of them… talked about how “diversity” and “inclusion” are distinct. Diversity is about getting people of different backgrounds into the same space, or just getting them on the same campus… Inclusion is where everyone who’s from those various backgrounds… actually feels like they have a stake in that conversation, that they have an event that represents them, that they… have a purpose on this campus as well. So Diversity, for me, can’t come without [inclusion]. Diversity is embracing, not just tolerating, every aspect of identity that this campus holds in the student body and among the staff and faculty… Diversity to me is radical acceptance of all people, even people whom you’ve never taken the time to understand before.
What is "Diversity"?

Interviewer: How do you think diversity at Yale-NUS is informed by the wider context of Singapore, and how does diversity at Yale-NUS translate into the wider context of Singapore?

D: I think it’s inherently informed by the wider context of Singapore. It’s in the different contexts that students have whenever they’re entering our workshops or discussions, film screenings, or lectures. They’re bringing the larger Singaporean context into the room.

Lishani: We do have a majority of Singaporeans on campus, which I think does affect how programming works. I think international students to a large extent live in kind of a bubble – to some, Singapore is Yale-NUS and Orchard Road. I think that definitely learning more about Singaporean culture helps everyone – it helps Singaporean students celebrate their culture and it helps us [international students] learn about it, which is so important.

Sara: Colleges tend to be incubators for social change. They equip students with the skills that they need to bring about social change in whatever big or small way. So the things that student groups are doing, the things that individual students are doing, I think, are all in preparation for social change in the future in Singapore. I think we’re also looking at collaborating with off-campus organizations and looking at how we can bring more of Singapore into Yale-NUS. I guess I tend to be more focused on the individual. I think for me a big one is being able to equip students with the skills and the language to be able to talk about difference, and especially talk about cultural differences and have uncomfortable conversations. Or, interrupt moments of discomfort, interrupt moments of discrimination… Giving students that neutral language to describe cultural difference is, for me, an important part of how students can take what they’re learning inside of Yale-NUS to the broader Singaporean community [and] to other communities that they are a part of all over the world. We’re working on creating a cultural calendar where we can input some of those holidays that students are celebrating at home to highlight a little bit more of the stuff that we sometimes might take for granted or sometimes might forget. [For example]… I work at the Dean of Students Office, I used to be a Dean’s Fellow, but maybe the fact that I grew up in Pakistan might be forgotten. So how do I [and] how can I create moments where I can bring that in and have that recognized as well? … Let’s not talk about theory, let’s not talk about big ideas, but let’s start from who I am.
Annette

Born in Los Angeles, raised in Vietnam, and Taiwanese by descent, Annette, Class of 2017, reflected on her notions of home and her sense of belonging, as well as how those definitions have changed for her since coming to Singapore.
Annette.

Interviewer: I guess just to start, could you tell me a little bit about where home is for you?

Annette: I'll outline my background for you. My family is from Taiwan, but part of my family escaped China to come to Taiwan as refugees. In that sense, we're not completely Taiwanese in the family itself. When my mom and dad were married, they left [Taiwan for] New Zealand. I never grew up in Taiwan—my parents moved [from New Zealand] to Vietnam where [my brother and I] were raised. We were raised in quite an international environment there and went to international schools, hence [my American] accent and also [my] lack of exposure to a lot of aspects of Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese life. I guess when I was in Vietnam, home was Taiwan because it was the only other thing to, not compare Vietnam to, but life [in Vietnam] was always a little confusing without me knowing it. For example, there were language differences... and [I didn't make] the step towards assimilating... and understanding the importance of [that assimilation].

When I came to Singapore, I realized [that] I was finally outside of a context that was not my own. I was able to reflect on what home meant and where I thought I belonged. Vietnam really came up very strongly because I realized how much I could only identify with that mode of life I had in Vietnam, without that mode of life being [fully] Vietnamese or very widely shared. But I think what constitutes belonging is common experience, or similar experiences that can be shared and identified with. I felt quite lost when I first got to Singapore because I realized how unstable my notions of home were. Now, looking back, I realize that my notions of home lie in memory: The memories I had in Vietnam that were really my own and within my own limited social circles and circles of activity. I can't ask to be identified with the larger culture, and that's fine now. What is important is the experience that I had, and I'm really grateful for that.

Interviewer: Just to clarify, were you born in Vietnam?

Annette: I skipped that step. I was born in Los Angeles. After a year, [my family] moved to New Zealand. After maybe two and a half years, we moved to Vietnam.

Interviewer: Could you tell me some of the more prominent memories you have that [give] you [a] sense of belonging in Vietnam?

Annette: I guess [for] most of my life, most of my memories are in school. Those aren't actually the most prominent ones, even though I was so [focused]... on academics at the time. I've realized a lot of [the academics] weren't as important—it wasn't very spiritually fulfilling, even though it taught me so much. What I end up remembering and thinking about are a lot of instances at home, or those moments between certain things, like with my parents going between Vietnam and Taiwan with my grandparents [who live in Taiwan]. [or] those moments [I] had with [my] family before going to high school [and] college.

Some of my more outstanding memories, I guess, would be, also with my—home we call her ayi—our nanny. She started working for my parents when I was around 8 years old or 7. By the time I was graduating [high school], I realized how important she was in my life and what an important part of our family she was. I've thought about her a lot more since coming to college, [having been] away from her. She gives me a lot of memories that I never really thought of when I was in Ho Chi Minh City. I think off the way she [would take] care of me, the way that she [would communicate] with me, [and] the way she [would bring] me into her own experiences without really thinking of the cultural barriers.

There are two levels to [these cultural barriers]. First, she's not a family member by blood. She's employed and she's [in Vietnam] doing work. [Second] is the language barrier... she speaks Cantonese and Vietnamese fluently, but not Mandarin. So Mandarin is something that she learned on top of everything while she was working at our house. [Mandarin was] the only [language] we [used to] communicate, but since coming to college, I've been trying to learn Vietnamese. I realize how important [knowing the language is] and how much I missed out on [growing up]. Now, [my ayi] and I are communicating with Vietnamese and Mandarin. She's like my teacher [for Vietnamese]—she teaches me... so many words, so it's like a new relationship. We go to the market together sometimes and walk around. She introduces me to new things—she buys me all sorts of treats at the market. I feel that the only way I'm becoming... better respecting of the privilege of living in Vietnam is by getting to know people [like my ayi] who have been in my life and [have been] essential to my life and my upbringing.
Annette.

Interviewer: So you mentioned that upon coming to Singapore, you began to... experience, greater moments of reflection on your sense of belonging in Vietnam [as well as] appreciation for the relationships you have with your family. I was wondering if you could talk to me a little bit more about that reflection process. Were there moments that occurred at school that sort of facilitated that?

Annette: I'd never lived outside of Vietnam before - in Taiwan, the way I would identify myself would be... [as] an American Taiwanese... [because] my Chinese was not so developed... and that was very easy. [I] already [had] a set category. Then I came to Singapore. I remember upon coming that I didn't know how to identify because I had no reason to say that I was Vietnamese, but I felt like that [was] how I wanted to [identify] myself. I had no real reasons to call myself Taiwanese, and my passport upon coming here was American. When I came here, I met [two students]... [who asked me]. "Where are you from?" and I was like "I'm from the U.S.!?" They [said], "Great, us too!" At that point. I was telling myself, "Oh my gosh, I feel like a liar," because I [didn't] know what I was talking about.

Then I realized upon meeting people who [were in] lots of different situations - who, [for example], were foreigners growing up in a different country - [that] they were very assimilated. Everyone in our school really cares about assimilation, and a lot of people came to Singapore really trying to better understand Singapore, better understand Singlish, and all these things that I came actually taking for granted. [I came to Singapore thinking], I know Southeast Asia, but actually, I really didn't. Then there were all these people who come from countries, [whether the] countries [that they were born in] or countries they consider home [and that they] were very heavily invested in. And I realized that I had never had that growing up. I never paid attention to assimilating.

I think [meeting those people] was a very good reminder to me of how important it is to have different viewpoints that come from your own experience and culture. I think my focus in high school was fitting in, in a way where I could speak English at the same level as everyone else because my parents don't speak in [fluent] English. At school, I needed to speak all in English [in order to] understand that sort of culture. whatever it was. But then I realized: That's not the point. The point is to embrace whatever background you come [from] and try to bring that into the mix.

So, Yale-NUS really helped me do that. It made me interested in my own upbringing and what more I could learn from it. Being in Singapore is fascinating because it's the first time I get to experience a place without the structures of family [and] in a very, very different institution, and in a very different environment. Through my friends, I've learned so much about this place. I cannot claim that [Singapore] is necessarily a second home to me. right? I don't know enough about it yet. But, Yale-NUS really is a family.

Interviewer: Yale-NUS is like a home for you?

Annette: Yeah... I know it's transitory. We've been moving around [from RC1 to the new campus], and [the class of 2017] will be graduating soon. But the fact that [my experience at Yale-NUS] allowed me to reflect on my identity in a very safe, comfortable way - that seems a bit like home, I guess.

Interviewer: So how do you, yourself, identify now?

Annette: I used to really care about being able to say, "Yes, I am from Vietnam..." with conviction. I really wanted to get to that point. Now, I don't think that is important anymore. [Someone] who went to my high school once said something that really resonated with me and that made me see things in a different way. He said, "I don't think we should limit ourselves by national barriers. I think our individual experiences say more than that." And I realized that I didn't need to seek validation anymore.

I can be interested in a culture and want to be a part of it... respect [a culture] without necessarily being a part of it... [or] take part in [a culture] and have a say [in it] without being identified with it. Knowing my friends [from Yale-NUS] for a couple of years now, we've gotten to a point where we're all asking these questions together no matter what our upbringings are. It's no longer, "Where are you from?" and "X is from Y and her family is A and B." Rather, [the answer is] more complex because we know each other.

In a sense, we've been building a new cultural context together. [which] completely changes... these conversations. In the beginning, there was a bit of talk about the Singaporeans and the internationals. Slowly, I saw that disappeared [from] my own [point of view]. Now, I think it's really about looking at individuals and where they're headed in life and how their background may affect them more or not.
Annette.

Interviewer: Being at Yale-NUS and sort of becoming more familiar with the community and expanding upon conversations based on individual experience are really important aspects that you touched on. I'm wondering: What was it like for you being in the Himalayas? How did that help you clarify some of the definitions of belonging that you began considering more upon coming to Singapore, though this time within a different context?

Annette: Actually, in my first two years upon coming to Singapore, I was really bad at using the public transport system. I felt quite immobile and [was] kind of frustrated by that. I felt like it was hard to move to a different country because I hadn’t really done that before. But upon going to the Himalayas, I thought, “Ok. This time, I’m going to get it right. I have four months in a different country. I’m going to try as much as possible to become assimilated.” But, we went there and were in a very established, very old international school… [which] was not an environment that I had not been in before. It was totally comfortable where we lived. And it wasn’t — I thought that we might be living in the town itself and that I would be challenged to speak Hindi every day — but really, it wasn’t like that. It was a very different experience and very amazing and challenging for reasons I had not expected.

I realized then that there are all sorts of communities around the world. Woodstock, which is the school we stayed in, was assimilated and it cares for its community in its own way. [Looking back at my time] in Vietnam. I was very frustrated that I lived in a walled compound, and [that] my school was walled as well. I realized how strange that was… [having] physical barriers to engaging with the outside. [It] wasn’t [strange] for everyone, but it was for me because I lived in the outskirts and I didn’t really have much interaction [on my commute] between home and school. [It became] like [a journey from one] walled place to another walled place.

In Woodstock, you can kind of tell that there’s that safe inner environment [of an] international school — everyone can speak English to each other. [and] they can also speak Hindi. But [Woodstock] was [also] very much connected to the outside. There’s a way of living as foreigners — for people who are not local — in another place without having that division. You can still have your condensed unit, but show that you care about the community and be a part of it… in a way that I just did not know was very possible.

[The experience] was amazing because we had so many wonderful people around us who were great support systems. For me, it was a lot more about those personal relationships as being the most important focal point… I think especially impactful to me was [that] we had two Indian dorm parents who would always challenge our Hindi, or challenge us in many different ways. They really cared. They were like parental figures when we were away [who came from] a very, very different cultural upbringing. But when people care about each other, that’s all there is, right? The cultural differences only make it more interesting.

Interviewer: And cultural differences become a way of embracing… rather than feeling like you’re an outsider, in a way?

Annette: You can feel like you’re an outsider without it being uncomfortable. There are many humorous moments that come out of it [and] a lot of self-reflective moments. But, I think the constants are care and support. [With those constants], the cultural aspect didn’t frustrate me anymore. A lot of the students were Americans going to school in Pittsburg, so it was quite different between us and them, at first. But we became a very supportive group and we spoke about our differences in a very humorous manner… I’ve learned so much from that and it’s changed my experience at Yale-NUS.
Wei Han, Class of 2019, met me at Saga Common Lounge for this interview. He talked to me about his role as an everyday Singaporean and how he sees this role shaping the country’s evolving national narrative.
Wei Han.

Interviewer: Remind me again what classes you’re taking this semester?

Wei Han: I’m taking [Philosophy and Political Thought II], [Literature and Humanities II], [Quantitative Reasoning], and 14th century Singapore.

Interviewer: And how are you liking those classes? You wanted to major in history, right?

Wei Han: Yes. 14th century Singapore is very, very exciting for me... I’m very into Singaporean history and Southeast Asian history, so this [class] is right up my [alley].

Interviewer: And your love of Singaporean history – is that deeply rooted? When did that start, your interest?

Wei Han: I’ve always found Singaporean history very fascinating in terms of how our national narrative is constantly being shaped and reshaped... I will constantly try to find new angles to tell the story depending on the hip new trend... of today. Even in Junior College, I did a paper on nationalism and the Malaysia cup. The Malaysia Cup was this [football] competition that Singapore joined... and we won quite a bit until 1994, [the year that Singapore] left the Malaysia Cup.

Interviewer: Nationalism – how would you define Singaporean nationalism? How would you characterize it?

Wei Han: Wow, how would I characterize Singaporean nationalism?

Interviewer: Yeah. or what about it appeals to you that [makes] you want to study it?

Wei Han: I think that the most standard answer would be that Singapore was a country before we became a nation... When we first became independent in 1965, there was no one common narrative thread that unified the whole country other than geographical space. So it’s [been] a journey for the last 50 years and [for] the government, specifically, in trying to create this identity and create this narrative. It [will be] very interesting to see how it [will go]... I think moving forward in the next 50 years for Singapore, a very big thing will be whether we can successfully own an identity that can bring all of us together. It’s pretty clear now that [Singapore’s identity] is something that is outside of the government. The government is not able, or might not really be able, to foster this identity. It should be a bottom-up kind of thing. In a way, the role of the every day Singaporean is becoming bigger and bigger, especially now, which is why I think this is a very exciting time to study this. Because I hope in the future that I can do something with this.

Interviewer: So the role of the every day Singaporean is something that is really interesting for me. I guess, what is your role as an everyday Singaporean? How do you see your role in this national narrative?

Wei Han: How do I see my role?

Interviewer: I guess a way to think about it is, right now you’re talking about how Singapore is on its way to owning a Singaporean identity that’s very much in the works. What do you see the Singaporean identity evolving into, and how do you see your role as an everyday Singaporean shaping that?

Wei Han: Ok. I think – I hope – [that] eventually, Singapore will gain some sort of intrinsic sense of self [and] that we can find [and] create for ourselves a certain kind of love and trust in the nation because we believe in ourselves regardless of whether our GDP is leading [in] the world or how we rank compared to other people. I think that chasing relevance in the world creates a lot of insecurity for us. I hope that moving forward, we can be enough with ourselves... look at where we’ve come from, who we are, and work... out of a space of abundance and be OK with what we have.
Wei Han.

Wei Han: On the idea of abundance... We talk about income inequality. Let's say if I'm part of the upper class, or I have money, or I have enough to spare... that means that when I come from a space of abundance, I'll be more likely to say, "OK, let me see what I can do to help everybody else." Whereas when I come from a space of scarcity, I'll forever be thinking, "OK, I'm rich now but I can be richer." You keep chasing that, and that race never ends. And I think that's a big thing in Singapore. A lot of our national narratives have come from this. Even in the past, we always shape ourselves in terms of, "We don't have natural resources, we've got to have this reputation to the outside world so that people will invest in us," and things like that. It comes to the point where we've always been chasing this external reputation. I hope that moving forward, my vision of Singapore will be one where we treasure the internal identity more than external recognition. As an ordinary Singaporean, that means really believing in this and living it with my community... by [having] friends, family, NUS, and when I grow up... and in whatever I do, by bringing that kind of spirit [of abundance], and inspiring people in any small way that I can. Honestly speaking though, when I grow up, I really want to be a history teacher... When I think about this national identity, nationalism, what is it [Singapore wants] to be moving forward, it's within this context of... the classroom. How do I inspire this sense of love, trust, or community within my students?

Interviewer: Who inspired [those values] in you? Or who were the people that inspired that?

Wei Han: I think that along my educational journey, there have been a lot of very inspirational teachers. I used to have this history teacher who was phenomenal. She's really passionate about the things that she's talking about, and she really loves history. More than that, she takes on this huge, extra step for students. When it [came] to deadlines, some profs [were] like, just stick to it. Whereas [this] teacher would constantly check in and say, "Are you ok? Is everything going well, your progress?" You [never] felt like you were running your journey by yourself. And I think that [gave] a lot of confidence in students. They [believed] that there was mentorship.

I also had this other teacher [during Junior College], this General Paper teacher. He's a very genuine person who shares a lot about emotions and the things that he feels. In GP, one of the things that he talked about was [that] in the paper [we had to write], there [would] always be a question on the Singaporean context. So for the bulk of that paper, if you [wanted] to ensure that you [would] do well, you would have to really know the Singaporean context. We spent a lot of time exploring, thinking about... the issues that Singapore goes through, and about what Singapore needs to create in order to reach to where we want to be.

... I taught as an intern back in 2013... and the experience was very meaningful for me because... when I went in... I wasn't really sure what I could do. I was thrown into a really deep end of the pool. I had to teach and plan the entire secondary school's syllabus. I taught 200 students over 6 months, which is the entire Sec 2 history course in that school. I wasn't really sure about whether I was capable or not... but by putting everything that I had into it - because I really, really, wanted to make good of it - [I] really felt like the students were learning something.

... A lot of them already finished their O Level examinations, and they got back their results recently. A lot of them [messaged] me and [told] me about it. They asked me for advice on school and stuff. I [told] them, why [message] me (instead of your) teachers who are in school now? [They said], "Because you care." And it's just that thing. That in addition to being academic, it's important to have that passion, that care, and commitment to the individual [student]. And I think that's a big part of wanting to create trust and inspiration. You've got to really put your best into it. At least, that's all I knew [what] to do when I was an intern for that school.

[That applies] even in the army... When I was posted in the air force, I think that [I] was really lucky. In my unit, I [was] the youngest... there [were] people who are 23, 26, [but] everyone [guided] me. It's very interesting because when I was there, everybody really just took me in... and they really cared. I think part of paying it forward is [that] in the same way they [cared] for me, I now [care] for other people and I really try and help them... My unit had B of us, and at my one-year mark [out of two years of full time National Service], the previous in charge [left]. We had to decide who [was] going to be the next in charge. The whole group of guys, who [were] all older than me, decided that they really wanted me to be [the next] in charge. I was like, "Wow, are you all sure of this?" Because I always make mistakes. It was just so amazing that for the next year, everyone just really looked out for me and... always [backed] me up when I [made] decisions. Even if I [saw] something and it [turned] out to get us into trouble, everybody just stuck together with me.
Wei Han.

Wei Han: I think that there’s a very big misconception about people when they deal with National Service. They think that National Service is two years, right? And that’s all there is, correct? But actually I think that National Service [is]... everything that happens after those two years. Not just in terms of, “Oh, I need to go back to camp to do all these things,” but [in terms of] how you are going to... actively serve Singapore [which is] a much longer journey than just two years. The two years was a space where I truly learned that there were people around me who were willing and able to help me, and who cared deeply enough to help each other improve. At Yale-NUS, I kind of found a community like this in my suite. We are all looking out for each other, we are all willing and able to talk to each other and help each other improve because we care, and I love that.

Bringing it back to my vision of Singapore, I really hope that one day we can reach a stage where all of us are in the space... it’s super idealistic... but I hope that eventually Singapore can be in a space where we form communities, or we’ve become a big community where we can be honest and sincere enough with each other, keeping in mind that we care very deeply for each other... and move together to build a better Singapore, I guess.

Interviewer: In Singapore, there are some racial tensions that also play out. For example, there’s a lot of dialogue about discrimination against the Malay population. So, I was wondering, what is your take on some of the divisions that are [taking place]? And what can be done to alleviate those tensions?

Wei Han: I think that there are two types of tension that I see in my head. The first type of tension is... Singapore in the 1950s where there would be active race riots and people [would be] angry enough to take action. There’s a second type of tension [of]: We exist, you exist, but we are two separate communities. We are OK with each other, [but only] in [those] separate communities. I feel that [this] is where Singapore is right now, where there’s an acknowledgment of different cultures, and to a certain extent, an acceptance of different cultures. But... I hope [in the future] we... actively embrace the people here. I think even right now, a very big thing about Singapore is not about race tensions... but a certain sense of xenophobia that’s permeating through. Moving forward, I think the cause of all this insecurity is that we come from a space of deep scarcity. We keep feeling that [what we have] is not enough. But I know for a fact, that actually Singapore has – OK, I can’t say for a fact – but Singapore has enough. We actually do have enough. And what we need is a change of mindset that is very deeply rooted in our culture to come to a space where we realize that we are all enough. Which goes back to that point about abundance, right?

... Once we feel that abundance inside, we can look to anybody else, be it a migrant worker or [a person] of [a] different racial or ethnic [background]... [and] say, OK let’s talk about this, you will start slowly moving forward. I think that’s something we need. We actually need this progress. Not just to say, “Oh, why did you do this?” and then post online and be angry about it. But to really open up and be in touch [and embrace] each other’s cultures. This is really idealistic. It’s very difficult to do. And I think that a very good space to start is actually in school. Which is why that as someone who wants to teach in the future, this is something that I feel is very important and something that I feel very strongly for.
Ami Firdaus, Class of 2017, sat down with me over lunch back in March for this interview. He talked to me about the various facets and layers of how he identifies himself, including his definition of “home”, some of the challenges that he has faced as a Malay-Singaporean, and how he continues to find himself here at Yale-NUS.
Ami.

Interviewer: Just to start off: How would you define “Ami”?

Ami: Simply put, I would define Ami as a Malay-Singaporean. But, I think that there are a lot of nuances beneath the Malay. Firstly, I’m not even full Malay… I’m not really sure what the exact breakdown is but I don’t think it really matters. Both my parents are roughly half Malay… my mom’s also roughly half Chinese and my dad is… half Sri Lankan… does this answer your question?

Interviewer: I guess another way to approach it is, where is home for you?

Ami: Where is home? I feel like this is going to sound super cheesy, but home… is found in people. I think Singapore can be a very confusing place to call home sometimes, and I only mean this spatially because honestly, the Singapore I saw 10 years ago is barely here. We are changing so fast in the city that spatial-wise, it’s hard for me to look at a place like, let’s say, Orchard Road, and be like, “Yeah, this is home.” 10 years ago [Orchard Road] didn’t look like [it does now] at all… It [was] like Clementi town, kind of… That’s why I say home is [found in] the people.

[Home is also] the sounds of Singlish that I hear as I walk past Singaporean crowds, [which feels] 10 times amplified when I’m not in Singapore. If I’m in Japan, walking on the street, and I hear Singlish… I just perk up and [think], “Oh, [this reminds me of] home.”

… I know I might be over-romanticizing it, but [Singlish] does have some sort of effect like that [for me]. I feel like it’s similar to a familiar smell of coffee. It just perks you up.

Interviewer: Could you tell me more about where you grew up?

Ami: Where I grew up? I moved around a lot when I was young. I still move around a lot, actually. I [first lived in] Pasir Ris, I moved when I was 3 to Geylang. So that’s in the east. When I was 7, I moved to Ang Mo Kio, and then when I was 11, I moved to Serangoon North. The longest I have stayed [in one place] was in Serangoon North. Then when I was [around] 19, I moved to Bedok. I think 2 years ago. I moved to Punggol, and then two months ago, I moved to Tampines. This month, I’m moving back to Punggol.

Interviewer: Would you say that the different places that you’ve lived have different characteristics? Or is there one sense of a Singaporean identity that pervades all?

Ami: I think we can safely say in general that there is one identity. Singapore is quite a small city already, but – and I know it would be paradoxical for me to say this – but despite that, I still think that there were differences in my experiences living in these different towns. One [aspect of those differences] is spatial.

… I remember in Pasir Ris, my block was brick red and just by the highway, and by a park… and it was the kind of park that you can’t really find in Singapore… wide and sweeping, and [had] very little trees… [which] is very weird for Singaporean parks because Singaporean parks had a lot of trees. … Geylang was completely urban… [and there, I lived in] a very old block. When I moved to Ang Mo Kio, this was the first time I had this notion of. “Oh, this is a Chinese town.”

… When I lived in Geylang, there were a lot of Malay people, relatively speaking. Even Pasir Ris had quite a few… when I moved to Ang Mo Kio, [I felt], “Oh wow, everyone’s Chinese here”… the mood [was] completely different. And anyway, in Geylang, there was this old Malay market that was there, so there’s this ethnic tag to the place that was completely missing in Ang Mo Kio.

… I don’t know what it was about [Ang Mo Kio]… maybe it’s just coincidental, but [Ang Mo Kio] is also the place where I first struggled with my ethnic identity. I remember wishing I was Chinese. I don’t know, I just thought that it would be easier.

And also around that age [in elementary or primary school]… was the first time that I feel like I had to defeat the stereotype that was being cast on me as a Malay person, as a person who can’t study, or something. It’s a very typical stereotype of indigenous people.
Interviewer: Could you talk to me a little bit more about the stereotypes that were sort of imposed on you?

Ami: Yeah, so… people will always joke… [and say to me], “You just want to sit in the corner, play the guitar, smoke cigarettes”; “You can’t really study”… even now, I get [those jokes] from time to time… I hop into a taxi and [the driver would say], “Where are you going?” and I say, “NUS,” and they’ll be like, “Oh, are you a student there?” and I [say], “Yeah.” Then [they ask], “Are you Malay?” and [I say], “Yeah,” and then [they say], “Wow, you’re one of the smart ones.”

… I actually wrote a paper on this for MST, where the Malays have been considered a subaltern… [whereas] success stories for the Indian and Chinese communities is a norm, it’s an exception for the Malay community… there’s this sense of voicelessness… your default is supposed to be failure, [and] you’re not really supposed to have as much social mobility.

… Even before I left for middle school [and] elementary school, I wanted to really prove everyone wrong. So I just studied hard and was just happy I was doing well because it was disproving [those stereotypes]… that was the first time I kind of marked ethnicity to social mobility… [I] was really young for that kind of thinking, but I was very conscious of it. I guess as a minority person, you kind of have no choice but to be conscious about it because you’re driven into the corner [and can] either swim with it or rise above it.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you want to share before closing off?

Ami: I guess a place like Yale-NUS – this sounds so promotional but I actually mean it – a place like Yale-NUS has actually allowed me to… find myself. Before this I really didn’t know who I was because I had to contend with all these categories and stereotypes. I guess I was too busy fending them off to really think about who I am as a person other than [as] a reactionary being, trying to prove everyone wrong.

I guess I’m still coming to terms with that, trying to find myself, my own space. A place like Yale-NUS is really good for that, I feel, because… I am almost never tagged to my ethnicity here. I still am, but not really in a negative way. I don’t get stereotypes thrown at me… it just does not matter here.

[Yale-NUS] is actually really an international community, and I think… diversity is not just having people from many places in one place… Just because you put many ethnicities or many different types of people in one room doesn’t mean there is diversity in the room… The idea of diversity has to come from the interaction and linkages between the people. Here, [those interactions and linkages] are really effortless… [though] not completely.
Emeka "Mr. O" Ojukwu

Below are snippets from a longer interview that I had with Mr. O, Saga College Dean’s Fellow, back in February. In this conversation, he talked to me about his journey toward finding his purpose while also sharing some reflections on his racial and religious identity.
Emeka.

Interviewer: As an advisor, you’re… helping people find their paths. But you [were also saying that] you haven’t quite found your own yet. At the same time, I feel that when you’re in that type of position where you have to inspire confidence in other people, you [also need] a certain self-assuredness with yourself. I just want to ask, what was that process for you in finding that self-confidence and that self-assuredness?

Mr. O: I think [I was in] elementary school… [when] I had to change my goals. I was always like, I may not be the best looking knife in the drawer, but I was determined to be the sharpest one. So, I have a lazy eye. One of the eyes, I can control, the other eye I just can’t control as well as the other one, so it tends to wander. When you have such an obvious… condition, other people comment on it as well. When [I was] younger, I honestly don’t think I got teased as much as I probably could’ve, but naturally, you [still] have some teasing [that went] on.

The story goes that my mom was very sick when I was born. I was born 2 months premature… [and] she was losing a lot of blood [while giving birth to me]. Very fortunately, she didn’t die… For me to be able to survive that sort of situation… to be alive and not have a deformity, [with] the only downfall being the lack of eye muscles being fully developed – [that’s] a blessing in itself. My mom made this promise to God that if I [were] born safely, and [if] we were both able to survive, that she would give me to Him. She honored that promise by naming me Emeka.

My full name is Udochukwu Emeka Ojukwu. I believe Udochukwu means “God has done wonderful things.” Emeka means “peace of God.” So essentially, [my name is] just a way of saying, “Thank you God for doing this.” In high school… people [were] more conscious in saying [to me], “You know you can take surgery.” I thought about it, but then my mindset was: No, I don’t want surgery. For me, [my eye is] a constant reminder of how blessed I am to be here, in this moment. Of course, I’m never not aware of [my eye]. Right now, I don’t know if it’s looking straight at you or not. You wonder how other people [will] react [to it]. At the same time… [if] someone’s not going to acknowledge me… pay attention to me or [if] they’re going to disavow me just because of that, then I don’t know that is someone I want to be around in the first place. Now with that said, if something happens where I do need surgery, I’ll get the surgery. But surgery is not necessarily on my mind right now. I was born this way.

The other part, too, I would say is [that] my father had a car accident when I was in 8th grade that left him paralyzed from the waist down. Priorities shifted very early on for [my family]. I was 14, my older brother was 13 and my little brother was 12 at the time. [In that type of situation], the cute girl in class [is] no longer your main concern. Your main concern is more, who’s going to feed dad today? Who’s going to get him out of bed today? Who’s going to help him take care of bodily functions? When you sort of realize… the bigger aspects of life, certain things just don’t bug you as much.

Interviewer: Would you say you’ve found your purpose here as a guide for students? Or are you still searching, in a way?

Mr. O: I think I’m very much still trying to find my purpose. I’m very much still trying to figure out what it is and what to do long term in life. But at the same time… I know that I’m finding a lot of contentment from what I do now. I found a lot of contentment in college, too. For me, it was always like: Alright, the schoolwork is always going to be there. But don’t let that overcome the bonds that you can make with people. When I look back at my college experience, I’m not thinking about that test that I stayed up studying for… I’m thinking about the sort of connections I was able to make with people and the good times that we had. But, of course, you don’t want to get so caught up… that you don’t do your schoolwork, or you don’t take care of business, academically speaking. It’s a classic thing, [finding] that balance and whatnot.

…It’s one of those things where I’m just excited about being here and the work that I do here and the opportunities of growth that I have here. I know there’s always going to be that tension… career wise, [that question of], what are you actually doing? [But] I don’t know… I have a good education… I have what I think is a good personality to where I could get a job somewhere and succeed in that place. I just sort of need to do the work and continually develop myself. And for me… I get up, get a book, and start reading it. It’s [about] branching out more… listening to… different ideas, and just finding excitement in those things [while] trying to get you guys as students to find some type of excitement in that, too.
Emeka.

Mr. O: ... It’s just that the balance has become of how much attention you give to the system versus the individual, because you do need people fighting to change the system. There’s a lot in the system itself — whether government or the institution of society itself — that does actively put forces that are detrimental to people or gives a higher privilege to other people. The struggle that I’m trying to figure out now is that you don’t want to pay so much attention to individual people and what they can do better that we neglect the importance of... fighting to change the system that’s in place. I think the trouble is, you need people doing both... you need someone [saying]... yes, there are these societal things going on that are working against you, but that doesn’t mean that you yourself can’t rise above it. But understand that you need to do some hard work in order to do that. If I sit here... there’s no guarantee that society is going to change. You may still be in this [same] position looking around at everyone else, asking yourself, why am I here? And they’re over there? Part of it is society, but also part of it is how much work did you actually do. What did you yourself do to improve yourself, but also the other people around you? Because you know, we’re all in this together at the end of the day.

Interviewer: Yeah, very interesting. I guess what I’m getting is that at the same time you’re very in tune with your personal growth and your individual growth, there are times when individual growth can be hindered by the obstacles that are presented by the larger system, like societally imposed norms, for example. I was wondering whether you could articulate for me the specific challenges that the system has posed in your life, or with the students that you’ve worked with?

Mr. O: One interesting thing that comes to my mind would be being black and... [attending] schools that are predominantly white. At Amherst, for example, with the Trayvon Martin situation, you had this kid who had a hoodie on... the talk of, “Well, you shouldn’t wear hoodies” or “If you wear a hoodie, make sure there’s Harvard on it” [would go around]. And [I thought]: Is that really what’s necessary?

In high school, the underclassmen would call me “fleece man” because I had these brightly colored fleece jackets... So like bright orange, bright yellow or whatever. I would kind of make it a point at times to wear those things at night because it’s like, “Hey I’m here. I know I have dark skin, I am not a threat. I am here.” So when that situation with Trayvon Martin happened when I was in college, there were times when it would be snowing outside, and so you’d have to layer up, right? You’d have your shorts on, you’d put your pants over your shorts, and the only pants big enough to do that were either my pair of blue jeans or a pair of just, thick, black pants. I would put a shirt on and then I had a black hoodie, and I would look in the mirror and [think], “Whoa, is this a little too dark today?” Sometimes, I would be like “Yeah, it is, so let’s get something bright on.” But then sometimes I was like, “No. This is fine.” I am fine. And I’d just walk out and do it. It would be in the middle of the day, and [I knew that] I [wouldn’t be] coming back to my room until nighttime anyway. So I’d just prepare myself for walking around like a dark figure in the night and [the] sort of implications that may have had with people. So it’s more of a conscious thing at times, of what impression I’m giving off. But at the same time, [you ask] yourself, is this really your fault? Is it on you or is it on someone else to question themselves?

Interviewer: Can I ask, what religion do you practice?

Mr. O: I am Christian, but my parents go to two separate churches. My dad goes to a Lutheran Church and my mom goes to a more African-based church... so for a while, I was going between churches. I still go between churches now.

... We also would go to another church at night... they’d call it the Prayer House. The [priests] would only speak Ibo — my parents are Nigerian, so this is their native tongue. My brothers and I don’t know Ibo. We would go and we would just make up conversations in our head, try to infer what’s going on, but essentially, we’d just sit and stare off into space a lot. One time, we went there and... they called for the children to come up. Everyone came up and prayed or whatever, and they had me stand up. I was like, “What’s going on?” ... Soon, the children were supposed to go back to the audience. But they [told me], no, you [stay and sit] over here.
Mr. O: ... On the drive back home, I asked my mom, what happened? What’s going on? What did I do? [My mom told me that] they saw something in me, that God has blessed me in some way, and [the priests] wanted to make sure that my parents do their proper ways of making sure that gift gets shown. And... they wanted me to do certain things to make sure that gift gets shown. So they had me fast, they had me read the books of the prophets... I was in middle school, maybe younger. Then things started to change when I was in high school.

... My high school was Presbyterian based, so we had chapel every Sunday and then convocation every Wednesday... but my pastor, he understood [that] it was an international school so everyone there [was] not Christian. So [he needed] to sort of adapt [his] message to [one] of a universal love rather than, this is the only way to find love. That resonated with me because for a lot of my upbringing until then, Christianity was the only way. You [needed] to follow ... [the] rules. Gradually, I started questioning - not necessarily questioning; I don’t think I questioned the existence of God - but I questioned this sort of ideology I was getting from my home experience [that] those who weren’t following [one] method were in trouble.

... I want to figure out this whole God thing myself. I didn’t want to keep mindlessly, blindly going to Church. That sort of also transferred from high school into college as well to where my sort of stance right now is [that] I am Christian. Though the question I always come back to is... if I wasn’t born into a Christian home, would I still be Christian? Would I be Islamic, would I be Hindu, would I be Confucius? And if I wasn’t, would that other me be condemned to hell because I’m not following this religion? And that’s a scary thought. If God’s really about that, then I don’t know that that’s an interpretation of God that I want to follow. So in terms of my faith... yes, I am Christian... but some would say I’m not a true Christian because I believe it’s a form of finding salvation. [though] I don’t believe it’s the only form of finding salvation.

... Honestly, I think more people in the world need to hear that sort of viewpoint from Christians... yes, I am Christian, but that doesn’t mean I’m condemning you. I think people need to meet other people who feel a similar way, like, “Hey, here’s my stance, I respect yours as well.”

Interviewer: There are a lot of aspects to your identity, a lot of different nuances and fundamental values by which you live. But I just want to hear you articulate: Who is Mr. O?

Mr. O: I guess my gut is always to say that my parents are Nigerian. I was born in America, [I am] Christian, and whatnot. But, to be more, to go deeper into it, I think right now I am in a huge self-improvement mode, trying to learn for. I don’t want to say [for] the sake of learning, but I’m not in college anymore. I can’t trust anyone to teach me or to help me learn anymore. Period. Point blank. And so all this energy or education or knowledge that I’m going to get is really on me to go out there and pursue.
Last school year, Ilya, Class of 2018, organized Yale-NUS College’s very first Hijab Day. This year, Hijab Day expanded into a three-part series that kicked off Diversity Week. In this interview, Ilya talked to me about what inspired her to organize Hijab Day while reflecting on how wearing the hijab has helped her become more in touch with Islam.
Ilya

Interviewer: Could you tell me more about Hijab Day and maybe touch upon what inspired it for you?

Ilya: ... Last year, I conducted Hijab Day [for the first time] because there’s this [global initiative], World Hijab Day... [that] people carry out in their own neighborhoods, schools, or communities. The idea is to invite both Muslims and non-Muslims to wear the hijab and to confront any misconceptions that they might have [about it], especially because in some areas of the world, there are negative connotations attached to [the hijab], like oppression. I think that World Hijab Day creates a space for conversation [that helps to dispel] those kinds of notions, especially when you talk to people who actually wear the hijab and [ask] why they choose to wear it. I thought that it was very cool, and I wanted to try it at Yale-NUS, especially because last year, before Hazirah came in, I was the only student who wore it. I did get a lot of questions from my friends about my own experiences. They would ask [questions like], “Don’t you feel Hot?” or “Do you wear it when you go to sleep?” [They asked] more practical questions, but sometimes they would also ask me [questions like], “What made you want to wear the hijab?” So, last year, the motivation was more that I thought [the idea] was cool and that [the event] would be fun to try... at Yale-NUS, especially because we have such a diverse student population. I got some of my closer friends to agree with me, and then I opened it up to the entire student population. We got quite a lot of people who participated.

This year, I conducted Hijab Day with Hazirah, who is a freshman. We actually met when we were in secondary school so we knew each other before she came. With Hazirah and the support of Sara and DOS, we created a more elaborate program [for] Hijab Day. [The event] was a three-part series. The first part was a sharing by me and Hazirah about the hijab and why we chose to wear it... the crux of it was to show that personal experiences of women surrounding the hijab [are] very different. Some people will wear it when they’re very young and for different reasons and others will choose to wear it after they get married. There are a lot of different factors to consider about whether or not you want to wear it, and [showing that] was one of the purposes in conducting that talk. After that, there was a day when we invited... whoever [was interested] to try [wearing the hijab] for a day. The next day, there was a post-event sharing session [where people came together] to talk about how [they felt] wearing the hijab [and to bring up] any questions that they had about it. We also tried talking more about the concept of World Hijab Day itself. For example, is it problematic [because it brings up issues like] cultural appropriation?

Interviewer: Why do you wear the hijab and what significance does it hold for you?

Ilya: I wore it only four years ago, when I was 16. I wore it with the intention of wanting to practice my religion more. When I was 14, I read this book about the soul and the journey of the soul from before we are born to after we die, but from the Islamic perspective. It got me thinking a lot about my priorities... and made me feel like putting spirituality and God more towards the center of my life. So I started to try and do my five daily prayers, which is the obligation of all Muslims. I guess slowly, the idea of wanting to wear the hijab came to my mind because I thought that with all the blessings that I have, that I should at least try to abide by the things which are obligatory for me... like daily prayers and wearing the hijab.

When I first expressed my intention of wearing [the hijab], my dad and my brother were like, “Ok, if you want to wear it, just wear it.” But my dad... [told me]: “Just make sure that you are committed to it and don’t do it on a whim... so think about it carefully, and don’t wear it now without knowing whether or not you will continue wearing it in the future.” But with my mom, it was a different story. She only started wearing [the hijab] 10 years after she got married to my dad. So when I told her about it, she disapproved of it because she was thinking about... the commitment issue and... job prospects. She said it would be more difficult to apply for certain kinds of jobs if you wear it. But slowly, I just wore it anyway, and I think that [gradually], she realized that I wasn’t doing it on a whim. It’s very interesting, because now, it’s one thing that we both bond over—buying Hijabs, or trying to find new clothes for Hari Raya, especially because she likes all this fashion stuff.
Ilya

Interviewer: You mentioned that you first wanted to wear the hijab to practice your religion and become closer to it. Do you feel that you have become closer to your religion having worn the hijab for four years? And if so, how?

Ilya: I feel that in a way, yes... I know that there are certain things that I shouldn’t be doing... like going to clubs and parties, that I wouldn’t mind just going there to drop by and see. But the fact that I have this on... makes me feel very, very awkward to just be in certain places and in certain social settings. I think it’s good, in a way, because [wearing the hijab] prevents me from doing things that I know I shouldn’t do or from wanting to be seen in a certain way by the public.

Interviewer: And you talked to me about how, in the three-part series of Hijab Day, the first part involved sharing personal experiences about why women wear the hijab and confronting the misconceptions that are often associated with it. Could you [tell me] some of the misconceptions that you faced in the four years that you’ve been wearing [the hijab]?

Ilya: One of the most common misconceptions is that you’re forced to wear it. I recognize that this is true of many women, especially those who were raised in strict families or communities and [are] expected to wear it at a young age [when they] perhaps do not yet understand the significance of it or want to wear it. But for many others, it is a personal choice. And the second [most common misconception], I think, is that it’s a very easy process of transitioning from not wearing to wearing it... there are many factors to think about before you actually start. Most of the time, it’s not one push or pull factor that determines someone’s decision. One of my friends asked me after the session if there [were] one thing that I [would] want everyone to know about the hijab, I said that you can’t really pinpoint someone’s intention of wearing it. [Hajirah and I] wear it for religious purposes... we want to get closer to our religion. But it comes with a lot of baggage. Also, [The hijab] becomes a political statement, it becomes a statement about women’s empowerment, women’s disempowerment. A lot of times, at least for me, I don’t necessarily want to be associated with all of these things.

Interviewer: How do you mentally rise above [that baggage], like the political attachment and the women’s empowerment, and sort of just, in your own mind, keep centered on the religious aspect?

Ilya: I think one way is to make sure that I continue practicing the religion even when I’m alone and out of public view. So, doing my prayers and things like that. In general, I think that it itself brings me back to my purpose in life. Everything that I do should gravitate towards that. I think also, I’ve gotten comfortable with doing things based on my own comfort level. So I just wear it and if people want to say anything, then I just think, “OK, I’ll let you say [those things].” but if [they] want to come and talk to me about it, then I’m also open to that.