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Sample Student Reflections on Richmond Hill Teaching Tour

Sample 1

1. Describe your reaction to the field trip.

The field trip to Richmond Hill was a very enriching experience. The neighborhood is very culturally diverse, and is home to people of many different ethnic and religious backgrounds. There are numerous mosques, churches, and mandirs reflecting the identities of the immigrants from the Caribbean most of whom are descendants of indentured servants who were brought to the Caribbean from India. There are also synagogues and various sectarian churches and even the city's largest Sikh temple in this religiously diverse neighborhood (Haller 3). The Indo-Caribbean Alliance is a social services agency (with Guyanese and Trinidadian leaders) which works in and is responsible for many positive changes in the neighborhood. This agency has also helped add important books from many Indo-Caribbean authors to the local library to promote cultural education. There are numerous "sari stores, Guyanese bakeries and restaurants, and fish and vegetable markets" on Liberty Avenue catering to the Indo-Caribbean population and attract shoppers from all over the region (Haller 3). Many of the restaurants such as "Tropical Isle" and "Island Kraue Burgers and BBQ" have names that are reminiscent of and create a connection to the Islands. Transportation is not a problem with major subway lines and buses in the area, and adding to the many attractions of the area is also "Forest Park" with tons of activities to attract visitors.

2. Describe your experience at the Roti Shop in particular.

“Singh's Roti Shop” was bustling with customers eager to order from the large variety of Caribbean dishes available at the restaurant. The restaurant had customers from various backgrounds with a large presence of Indo-Caribbean customers. Given that the area around the restaurant is very commercial, and people from all over the region visit the area, the Roti shop likely never experiences a shortage of business and many people of Indo-Caribbean descent working and living in the area also find their way in to the restaurant that serves familiar food. The spacious restaurant had no shortage of seating and the overall environment was appealing whether one was looking to eat alone or with company of friends. The variety of dishes included various curries, rich dishes, sweets, and of course Doubles. Some I found more familiar looking than others, but, all in all, every dish available provided a sense of familiarity due to being historically related to Indian cuisine which is very similar to Pakistani (my background) and Bangladeshi cuisine because of there being a historical and colonial connection between the nations. However, the sauces available were more of a mystery to me, nonetheless, proving to be delicious. The flavor of the food was on the milder side with more sweetness, and the refrigerated drinks (of which I tried one) imported from back home had an unfamiliar and acidic yet pleasant orange flavored twist, which I described to a classmate as a “kick” in the flavor.

3. Choose one of the spaces that we visited and and discuss how it provides a sense of community and diasporic identity for Trinidadian and Guyanese migrants from the Caribbean? How does this space foster certain elements of Indo-Caribbean identity?

The Roti shop provides a great sense of community for the Indo-Caribbean Americans through the congregation of the group of people under the same roof as they enjoy not just the food of their homelands but also experience the cultural identity that binds them. Adding to this cultural identity is also religious identity and the identity which the culture of music creates. To create

this atmosphere of shared identity, the Roti shop had Hindi bhajans (religious melodies) being played in preparation for Divali (the festival of lights), which was to take place just a day or so later. The playing of this music added to the sense of community and diasporic identity for those of Indo-Caribbean descent and religiously devout present at the restaurant. The restaurant also had a poster advertising an upcoming concert with singers of Chutney Soca, which is very popular “Guyanese music, while Indian influenced, is marked by a faster West Indian style” (Berger 3). This kind of music has a special place in the lives of the Indo-Caribbean Americans as it relates strongly to the culture that they call distinctly their own.

4. How is it spatially arranged? How is negotiating this space complicated by issues of gender, class, race, religion, and sexuality?

The diversity of the races, cultures, and religions present in the area is evident by looking at the structures and buildings representing the various groups. The presence of an area called “Little Guyana” alongside Liberty Avenue itself displays a sharp contrast with the various other groups who occupy the area. The Guyanese find it confusing to identify themselves as Asians but are not white, black, or Hispanic either. The greatest of conflicts and uneasiness comes, perhaps, from the shared history with their Indian counterparts. The history being referred to here, is that of the shared ancestry that existed before the now-Caribbean Indians were forced to leave their homeland of India. However, due to the geographic separation which resulted due to indentureship during colonial times, the people of the Caribbean have presently formed their own unique identity and even culture. And, despite the tensions which sometimes surface upon interactions between the two groups, being able to have a place, namely Richmond Hill, that they can call distinctly their own gives the Indo-Caribbean Americans of this area a sense of identity apart from that shared history. Although the “video stores are stocked mostly with

romantic musicals from India's Bollywood industry,” the Guyanese have long since evolved into a people with their own identity and beliefs. For example, the “Indian caste system has withered to virtual insignificance” in Guyana (Berger 4).

5. What are the benefits of being associated with an immigrant community like Richmond Hill?

The benefits of being associated with an immigrant community like Richmond Hill are many. For one, the area offers both an “urban and a suburban living,” which can be an ideal environment for immigrants who are looking to find a home away from home (that is, to find a better life with elements that of the homeland) where to raise children and start a family. The Diversity of the area is another benefit. Aside from having other races and groups, the area is diverse in the numbers of Guyanese and Trinidadians. Many of the Guyanese immigrants started to settle in the area in the “1960s,” and, as a result, the newer generations are not only comfortable in living away from their ancestral homelands but have also become exposed to other cultures, cuisines, and customs from all over the world, helping to develop and promote understanding and acceptance of others. Also great is the fact that the younger generation has access and exposure to their own native foods which also allows them to claim their cultural heritage especially when Indian cuisine is thought to be the authentic one (Bernstein 3). Foods such as Doubles, which are easily found everywhere in Richmond Hill, tell the story of the history of the ancestral struggle for preserving self identity and holding on to belief.

6. What might be some of the negative outcomes of immigrant communities like Richmond Hill?

The negatives outcomes, which are naturally a part of a community of minorities come in various forms for the Indo-Caribbean migrants of Richmond Hill. The biggest, perhaps, is the severed connection with the motherland, which, in turn, has led to a search for a new identity and not simply a description as Asian. The financial struggles which immigrants often face are

increased greatly due to this type of community being insular. That is, aside from the fact that many migrants rent basements and house family members due to housing space being limited, there are also limited resources and things like garbage pickup are managed by the community of their own accord (Haller 3). The diversity of the community and their own distinct identity is not acknowledged by the government, and, because of this, the community is at a loss of resources and sponsorship and must manage this at the expense of the residents.

Sample Student Reflection 2

1. Richmond Hill is a neighborhood filled with culture and diversity. As soon as I entered the library, I noticed a Sikh man reading a book about Indo Caribbean culture which proved to me the sense of community people have in this neighborhood. A Sikh man who can look past his own culture and be interested in and want to learn about the other ethnicities in his community represents the tolerance and unity of this community and the library plays an important role in uniting the members of this community, as it has an area of “Caribbean” books and the more people know of their own culture and the cultures around them the more they appreciate the beauty of each different culture. I personally enjoyed the vibrant colors of Diwali decorations being sold on the street and the elegant dresses of Indian culture. There were a lot of businesses, especially food related, and they were made to be appealing to all cultures such as the Caribbean Chinese food, Indian food, Caribbean and American food. Different cultures are often found in various neighborhoods but what was not common to me was different religious places in the same neighborhood. My neighborhood is only surrounded with churches, so it was surprising to see a under construction Mosque, a Temple, and a Church all within a block of each other which

I think is important for a peaceful community. The Mosque, Temple and Church are symbolic for the different religions in this community and specifically, Indo-Caribbean culture because, as we see in the novel *The Swinging Bridge*, the characters are Caribbean yet their religion varies showing their open mind and tolerance for every religion.

2. The Roti Shop looked small from outside, but once we got through the doors I noticed that was quite the contrary. Skipping breakfast that morning, arriving to The Roti Shop made me hungry instantly. The smell of what could be described as Chinese food, and Indian food reminded me of Pakistani restaurants I have been to. The menu was once again appealing to all as it had American food such as roasted chicken, Indian food such as Curry, Chinese food such as Lo Mein and especially Caribbean food such as doubles. They even had the option for food to be spicy or mild so all can enjoy it. I was very excited to try doubles, as the Double with Slight Pepper video and one of the other student in my class's presentation made them look delicious and that was completely true! The chana in the doubles was like a food in Pakistan which is called chanapuri and it made me think of how similar the cultures are. Pakistan and India were once the same country, before Pakistan became independent in 1947, however they follow much of the same culture and one of them is the food that they eat. Similarly, Guyana and Trinidad have roots in India in which Pakistan was also included at one time in history, which ties these cultures together.
3. A couple blocks down from the Library just before we got to the street with Diwali candles being sold, I noticed a church, a mosque and a temple all in the same neighborhood. The mosque was under construction, and it proved how the Christian and Hindu community are open to inviting a different religion to be a part of their neighborhood. Trinidadian and Guyanese migrants from the

Caribbean can be any religion such as Hindu, Muslim, or Christian and the different places of worship captured the diasporic identity of the cultures well.

4. One of the roti shops that we passed by had a religious Hindu “Murti” which is used for religious purposes by the front door of the entrance where it was clearly visible to the customers and that might cause a complication because, it might not make some Muslims or Christians or any other religion feel welcomed in the store. Liberty Avenue which some people know as "Little Guyana" includes West Indians, Guyanese, and Trinidadian shops and though they have many groceries or supplies that anyone may need, people who are not West Indian, Guyanese or Trinidadian may have a hard time believing their supplies or groceries can be found there.
5. The benefits of being associated with an immigrant community like Richmond Hill is the sense of belonging somewhere and being able to feel close to your hometown. The community is clearly open to all cultures and religions so it might be easy for one to fit in and the businesses are meant to be appealing to all so one shouldn't have to stray far to find what they need. Associating oneself with Richmond Hill shows the person is not only in touch with their roots but also open minded to other cultures such as Guyanese, Trinidadian, West Indian, Jamaican and Indian. The benefits of being a part of this community is also that immigrants do not have to change their identity in American society while being able to fulfill the reason they came to America.
6. Some of the negative outcomes of immigrant communities like Richmond Hill is racism they may face from other cultures or races as one may assume they are not open to other cultures if they are close to their own which in most cases is false. Another negative outcome might be having to follow cultural rules or traditions even if one does not want to. The result of creolization may be that a person might not know or have been taught about one specific culture

or even any culture, causing them to adopt Western culture while their families follow another. Mona rejects Toronto which is famous for its Indian communities similar to Richmond Hill. Mona's rejection shows her lack of knowledge to the Caribbean, in which case the person may negotiate their identity by staying close to their family who are of the same descent as them but have a different cultural identity outside of their homes to be able to balance both cultures or the lack of any culture.