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American Culture

In Cuba we have the impression that Americans don't express their emotions, that they speak in low voices, and that they are boring. When I arrived, I met some Americans who were like that, but I met many others who were not. There are some Americans who are funny, some who are loud. Another false impression is that it is easy to make money here. After I arrived here, I realized that it is not so easy to make money, and you have to sacrifice yourself to make it. I also had heard that American people stay in their own houses a lot, and do not visit each other as much as we did in Cuba, and I did find this to be true. I did not know that they were so selfish, although here that is called "individualism." I had a harsh awakening when I realized that it is hard to find people who will help you. It was a difficult process of becoming more individualistic, but I had to adjust myself, in order to succeed. I agree with Lam's opinion that "pleasure is at the center of America's culture" (134). As I interact with Americans more and more each day, I see examples of individualism, lack of emotions, and materialism, qualities which I think makes them centered on pleasure.

American culture is all about "myself," only worrying about me and being disconnected from others. This attitude makes them individualists. For instance, they do not accept any help from other people, because they think they can do it by themselves. I discovered this myself recently at my workplace. I work at Costco in the deli department, and the manager was working next to me while we were shredding hot chicken off the bone. Usually we wear a pair of cotton gloves underneath a pair of disposable gloves. She had only the disposable gloves on and remarked to me "God, this is hot!" So I offered her my cotton gloves and she said "No, I'm fine."

Even though I knew that she was burning her hands, she didn't want my help. This is a perfect example of individualism in American culture. In her essay, Segal discusses this tendency in American culture. She had taught her students not to ask for help but rather to rely upon themselves and had told them that it was sexist for a man to always open the door for a woman just because she's a woman. Then when she was carrying a bunch of books and an umbrella, with her arms full, a male student hesitated to open the door for her because she had taught him not to. Both the manager at Costco and Segal became victims of their own individualism.

I am Cuban and we are used to being warm and charming with other people. We express our emotions to the people we love, and we take care of them because we enjoy doing that. When a family member comes home from work or school, we do not just ignore them. We greet them warmly with a hug and kisses, ask them if they have eaten that day, ask them if they had a good day, and tell them that we missed them. I have found that in the American tradition, people are not so used to expressing their emotions. For example, my best friend is Cuban and she is married to an American man. He's a policeman and he works a lot of overtime. Sometimes she does not see him for two or three days. When he gets home, he only says "hello" to her. During those two or three days, he may or may not call her, and he does not seem to care about her, like if something bad happened to her, or if she has been eating alright. It does not mean that he does not love her; he does. Because my friend is Cuban, sometimes she wonders if he loves her or not, but it seems that we just have such different traditions. I have also seen another example where Americans do not express their emotions. I have noticed that if someone gets very ill, like with cancer, sometimes people do not worry about it so much, or the way they express it is so unemotional. In Cuba, we worry about our family members a lot, we express our emotions, and you can see on our face that we are worried. At friends' houses, I have seen the faces of

Americans when they are told bad news about their family members and they do not even seem to react--their faces are blank. In Cuba, we would say “Oh, no, my God,” and we would cry, have a sad expression on our faces, and be very dramatic. Lam, in his essay about American and Vietnamese cultures, supports the idea of Americans being less emotional than other cultures. They are so unemotional that they do not even talk about death very much. They do not take death seriously and even make fun of it in movies; or they avoid talking about it at all. Being unemotional basically means not sharing your emotions with anyone other than yourself.

Another trend of American society is being extremely materialistic—everything revolves around money. Commercials on American television persuade you to buy a lot of things you might not need. We become convinced that we are becoming more American if we buy certain things. We may believe that the things being announced are of better quality than those we already have. For example, with many electronic devices, such as cell phones, computers, stereo systems, and televisions, it seems like they purposely build them with a short-term life so that we have to buy a new one soon. When the new model cell phone of the Razor came out, they cost \$300, but now after just several months, you can get one free if you enroll in a plan. Those new phones were promoted so much that everyone thought they had to have one, but the truth is that they are really poor quality. Americans were so materialistic that they had to have the latest gadget, even if they fell apart right away. The companies know that they can sell, just based on how good the advertising is, so that’s what they focus on, not the quality. In his essay Lam talks about how his parents put his grandmother in a nursing home when she got old. In my opinion, this was because his parents were too busy working and making money and they did not have time to take care of the old lady. These are a few examples that show how Americans are obsessed with money and material objects. Money becomes a substitute for love and “spiritual

comfort” (132).

Americans constantly think of their own benefit. Individualism, a lack of emotions, and materialism are characteristics of many Americans, which leads them to make pleasure their primary concern. I think that even though Americans are so focused on their own pleasure, they do not seem very happy with their life. In contrast, in Cuba we help each other, we show our emotions, and we are not so concerned with material things. In Cuba we have so little, while Americans have so much, but we are happier.