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Things My Father Didn't Teach Me: Navigating Racial Rage in America as an Asian American

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As an Asian American woman, I often walk a knife edge in navigating racial politics. In some spaces, I am not “colored” enough to be considered a person of color—or a “real” person of color with racialized experiences—and in others, I am far too different to be considered white. Asian Americans are often seen as being a “model” minority, one that is smart and achievement-oriented, hard-working and not looking to cause problems (Poon, Squire, Kodama, Byrd, Chan, Manzano, Furr, & Bishundat, 2016). In other cases, we are “forever foreigner,” never fully assimilated into America, always an outsider or immigrant (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007)—hence the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII while Italian and German Americans remained free. Because of the complex histories of how Asians have been perceived and treated in this country (Takaki, 1998), particularly in regards to how they’ve been used against other racial groups (Leonardo, 2009), Asians Americans tend to be seen as “other” by many groups (Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2012). We are neither here nor there in the black-white binary of race in America (Wing, 2007); we are seen often as the enemy and rarely the ally. And that is why I use this metaphor of a knife edge to indicate my tenuousness—the constant peril of falling wrong.

One of the most predominant stereotypes of Asian Americans positions us as quiet and docile, not prone to making trouble, often apolitical. We put our heads down and work, eschewing racial awareness for financial success. As a professor who frankly addresses race and social justice in her classroom, work place, and community, I am unexpected. In multiple situations, people have assumed I will go along with racially loaded statements about blacks, or quietly accept deferential (mis)treatment, or refrain from strong views about the current state of racial violence and inequity and been surprised when I don't.

Perhaps these tensions are not entirely surprising as I, and so many of my fellow Asian Americans, have had no training in how to deal with these situations from our families of origin and only gained recent (for me, post-high school) understanding of it within our own communities. I grew up with my father telling me that people treated “Orientals” differently and that I would have to prove myself, but he never talked about microaggressions or how to deal with highly racialized situations. He only spoke of the expectation of mistreatment, not how to process it or address it. As I encountered various racialized situations, I handled some better than others. Each was a learning process, both about how the world perceived me but also how I chose to engage in the world.

The Invisibility of Asian Americans

There has been much written about the burden of being non-white in American society. However, the ongoing invisibility of Asian Americans and their issues creates a continuous feedback loop of self-doubt and inaction.

Scenario 1: The Gnawing Ambiguity of Racism

A few years ago, my husband (who is white), my young children, and I stopped for lunch at a family restaurant in a small town in Wisconsin on our way to a water park. We waited for almost 30 minutes as other (white) families got seated, with only a cursory acknowledgement that we were seen. With the exception of a Latino busser, I was the only non-white person in the restaurant. My husband was incredulous and kept asking me what was going on. We ultimately left the restaurant frustrated, without saying anything to the staff, assuming we were ignored because I was Asian. Neither of us had been prepared by our families to effectively deal with such a situation—mine had prepared me to expect it but not how to react. Should I have asked to speak to a manager? Should I have called out what I felt? Should I have better explained to my children what was going on when they were hungry and frustrated we were leaving? All I was left with was a sense of impotent rage. Ironically, I usually resist going to small local restaurants when traveling for fear of these types of reactions (I am claiming my own stereotypical assumptions here), and I had relented to my husband finally on this occasion. My sense of vindication was not comforting.

While the above-scenario is not unique to Asian Americans (nor the first time this has happened to me—although it was a first for my husband), our peculiar invisibility makes these situations even more internally fraught. We do not have access to a broader community of multi-generational experiences from which to draw upon and understand—only what we suspect has happened and a desire for some resolution but a lack of clarity on how to achieve it.

Beyond a Black-White Binary

When the world is black and white, it is hard to navigate whose “side” you are on, even as those sides simultaneously embrace and reject you, while also leveraging you for their own purposes. The in-betweenness of being Asian feels a bit like a bad game of tug of war where I am desperately just trying to gain a foothold.

Scenario 2: Racial Layers and Players

Several years ago, when my children were quite young, we walked by a school bus full of children (who appeared to be Black) who called out the window asking if I was Chinese (I’m Korean, for what it’s worth) and calling me “Chinese lady.” A white woman who happened to be walking by shook her head sympathetically at me and pronounced such behavior “shameful” and attempted to scold the children. My son, then 3, kept asking me why they were calling me Chinese and why the woman was yelling at the children.

In that complicated intersection of racial presumptions and misconceptions from all the players, how could I explain to him or the woman or the school bus full of children the full context of what was going on? How could I unpack all those layers? I later wrote a piece for the local newspaper about the experience, trying to make sense of what happened. It did not allay the shame I felt being mocked by children in front of my own children nor the frustration I felt in the judgement the woman projected on to the children.

Who Is Us? vs. Who Is Them?

My Asian-ness is a foil that others project on to me an assumption of neutrality, of blankness that makes for some interesting situations. People voice in front of me things they would never say to a “real” person of color.

They assume I will not take offense, that I am more “us” than “them.” So I find myself caught in situations where I must decide how to acknowledge and confront, possibly defuse or possibly escalate a situation. How will I choose to react to a situation or statement that I think is unjust or unfair? As an educator, must I always make something a teachable moment? Must I always be patient and tolerant of where people come from? Or am I sometimes allowed moments of rage and frustration? Or do I submit to the quiet and passive stereotype? And what does it mean for me to choose one over the other?

Scenario 3: Standing with/for Others

Over a year ago, I was at the airport protesting “the Muslim travel ban” with my family and several thousands of others. As we were trying to make our way to where the main protest was, we rode the escalator ahead of a group of white, very tanned travelers who had obviously just gotten back from vacation (Note: We were in the international terminal, so they were coming from an international trip). One of the men in the group very loudly said how people were wasting their time, that they should all “just go home.” With the news that people—including elders and children—were being held for hours in limbo at the airport when all they wanted to do was “go home” and my own experiences of being told to “go back where you came from,” I lost my temper and yelled at him that that’s exactly what people wanted to do. Unlike him, though, they weren’t able to make that choice. He declared it stupid and repeatedly said he didn’t care, which just stoked my rage. I cursed him out...with my children there, which prompted him to sarcastically praise my great parenting skills and what a role model I must be. We then parted ways as the shuttle between terminals came, and I was left with my tears of rage.

I don’t care for the way that I handled this situation, especially in trying to explain to my children what had happened. I realize in writing this that I have also seen my father engage in strong language that involved racial epithets on both sides. I have seen modeled how one can *react*, but not necessarily how *to act* and certainly not in ways that might feel more productive or healing. Part of this is knowing that sometimes people are looking for a fight, looking to agitate and not learn or change, and that walking away can be okay in these situations. In some cases, it may even be

self-preservation, as there can be a heavy cost for engaging. In my heightened emotional state, I could not unpack his ignorant statements for my children and discuss why his comments were wrong or even ignore them. Instead I got sucked into his bid for attention and conflict. Looking back now, I realize that I can teach my children that there are always choices in how we re/act and that we can control our responses to others.

Inside-Outside

In each of these situations, I am at times both insider and outsider and other times, solely outsider. I am continuously confronted with the choice of addressing the inequity of the situation or swallowing my rage and frustration and remaining quiet. In these times, where everything is heightened and loaded, scenarios like these are particularly challenging. The dueling frames of love and hate emerge over and over again—from the “love Trump’s hate” slogans to the “hate has no home here” yard signs peppering my community. As I find myself in these situations, I repeatedly make decisions about how I will react. Do I take Daryl Davis’ position of befriending avowed racists and converting them one by one through love? Or do I tear down, expose, and embarrass the perpetrators “by any means necessary” a la Antifa? Is it about personal realization—whatever that means—or some larger, loftier goal? How do I determine what my end goal is? Which approach is more effective? Perhaps, most importantly, which approach won’t suffocate or kill me? I wrestle with these questions over and over. There is so much to be angry at. So much to hate. So much to rage at over and over. But I think that all this rage cannot continue to shoot off like so many personal geysers. There is a price to pay for remaining in that perpetual “fight or flight” response.

And while there are Asian American activists and leaders who have gone before, it is a still relatively small and disparate group—and almost none within my own personal sphere. So how do I continue to muddle through, all the while teaching my own children what I was not taught? What does it look like to respond differently? To imagine a way forward that isn’t about sacrificing one’s values but also isn’t about imagining so many others as the enemy? How would it feel for me—for us—to let go of the rage and to embrace others’ full humanity? ALL others? Freire teaches that until all are liberated, even the oppressor, none are totally free. Perhaps our in-betweenness, not just that of Asian Americans but of all

others—for no one is only one thing, is what can help us fumble towards both sides, forging together an understanding of justice and equity that includes all, that liberates all. It is more suffocating to me to be silent than it is to speak up. Perhaps the choice between rage or silence is an artificial one, though, just like the black-white binary. I want my children to imagine more choices than that. We can act without always reacting. We can choose *not* to engage without being silent. We can be thoughtful and protective of others, but ourselves as well.

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