

Generations

*Written by Sydney Olney, Phillips Academy Andover Panel Member
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As I go through a family photo album, wedged between my mom and a stack of textbooks for the following term on our battle-worn couch (two children and sixteen years can do a number on furniture), I come across a picture from 2006. I see a girl wearing a fringed dress and moccasins, probably made in an assembly-line continents away. Next to her is a toddler, disgruntled and pouty in a matching set of clothes. These children are both white.

Looking through another album, I see pictures of my mother. Flipping backwards, watching her wrinkles become less pronounced and the colors of the pictures fading, my eyes rest on a page from her college days. Written on a piece of scrap is “Mexico Night”, which I could only assume was a frat party’s idea of a good theme. My mother, wearing a sombrero, smiled and posed with three young men in brown face. Needless to say, all four of them are white.

When I first see this picture, I want to close the album and forget I saw anything. That week a college in Texas had had a brown face scandal at one of its state universities, and the fact that my mother’s picture was only a couple of decades in the past and just a state away (she attended college in Arizona) makes an unpleasant feeling rise in my stomach. My mom looks up from her laptop, follows my gaze to the sepia-toned photograph, and sighs, “Those were different times, honey. We were stupid kids, and didn’t know any better.”

Perhaps I could buy that. It’s easy to blame ignorance on youth, or the culture you grow up in, or almost any other factor. But one thing didn’t quite fit. This blonde college girl had grown up into a caring mother who acknowledges to her daughter the error of her ways in the past. But almost twenty years after that picture was wedged in between the pages of a photo album, the picture of my younger brother and I dressed as Native Americans for Halloween was taken.

Looking to my left at the stack of textbooks, Foner’s Give Me Liberty!, Andover’s general choice of reading for our History 300 course, something inside me twinges. I had read for my entire life about the horrors the first Americans had gone through. I am not referring to the pilgrims, or the Europeans who “discovered” the continent. I’m referring to the indigenous peoples of North and South America who were raped, robbed, and murdered by white colonizers. To think that the blood of these people was spilled so that America could be a “great” nation, one where college students satirized entire cultures for a night of fun and a child’s first or second Halloween costume was a heavily oppressed racial minority makes me slightly nauseous. It would be so easy to just pin the blame on my mother for being part of an older generation, but part of me realizes I cannot do that. Knowingly or otherwise, I help perpetuate this cycle of intentional ignorance with silence.

I close the albums and go to bed early, head spinning with a newfound agency. However, with the start of a busy winter term, it is quickly pushed aside to make room for work, friends, and sports. A year later, I offer to write this piece for *The Tavern*. A part of me wanted to keep this story private, and perhaps talk about a safer, less personal experience, but I also knew that wouldn't be effective. Until people acknowledge the flaws that bring about a culture where mistakes are ignored and trespasses against others are disregarded for the sake of fleeting dignity, nothing will change.