

I am Asian, not a Musician

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As a female Asian student in the United States, I have borne the brunt of racism. In my presence, there are always people who can't resist pointing out small eyes or cracking math puns. I've always wondered what humor could be derived from those jokes because of the offense rooted in the words. I thought the heart of such jesting—if it can truly be called that—was comedic stupidity. It was not until several months later that I realized it's not stupidity because the majority of us recognize what we are implying. Most of the time, we sense what we are saying is wrong, but we wave away our guilt by reminding ourselves of that it's just a joke; deluded, we continue to believe that society is eradicating racism. But we must strip back that flimsy excuse to expose our hypocrisies, because how can racism be erased when we refuse to see how we are still contributing to it? We must understand how we have become desensitized, arriving at the conclusion that we have clouded our moral compasses, and the fog is not clearing because we refuse to believe it's there.

Last July, I enjoyed a wind quintet concert featuring student performers. As my family prepared for the outing, my mother insisted I dress appropriately for the occasion, so I swapped my typical jeans and t-shirt ensemble for a black, a-line dress.

The sun was setting in a burst of gold, crimson, and plum as my parents and I pulled up to the concert venue. The two-story, white stucco house crowned the peak of a hill overlooking a river valley. Its large second-floor balcony was illuminated by lengths of white string light and, below it, a small makeshift stage was being raised so that the guests upstairs could have a perfect view of the scenery and the musicians.

For ten minutes or so, I mingled with my parents on the balcony until, with my parents' blessing, I extricated myself from the quiet buzz of conversation and wandered into the piano room. The room showcased a polished Steinway & Sons grand piano and impressionist paintings. I found myself drawn to many of the paintings on the walls. I was interrupted from my reverie, however, by a light tap on my shoulder.

A middle-aged woman wearing a bright yellow sundress beamed at me when I turned around.

"What do you play, dearie?" she inquired with a touch of a Southern accent.

"Sorry?" I hesitated slightly in my reply. I wondered what she meant.

"Are you a musician?" She asked, still smiling.

A musician? “No...” I replied. I was unsure of how she had arrived at that conclusion; I wasn’t carrying an instrument or anywhere near the stage outside.

“Oh, my mistake, dearie,” she apologized and left me to wallow in my confusion.

Paintings forgotten, I wondered how she had arrived at that presumption. My best guess was that she saw a girl of average height with tanned skin, brown eyes and black hair and assumed I was the flutist or something. After all, it’s a genetic mutation for Asians to be born without dark chocolate eyes and ebony locks.

I was hurt, but not because she thought I was a musician; her simple act of assumption stung. She took my physical appearance as an indication of my talents as though there couldn’t be much more to me than the stereotypes attached to my features.

From the way she approached and asked me, I knew the lady in the yellow dress meant no offense. I was consciously aware of this fact but, up until now, I mostly discarded it and focused more on my emotions and the act itself. It was easy to do so, and I fed off my frustration for much longer than was wise. I fumed over the injustice of it all and wondered how the world was still so backward that that assumption could be made. Now, however, I see I focused my energies in the wrong places; I let my emotions control me. Her sincerity and unconscious nature of her actions, not the actions themselves or my reaction to them, are the crux of the issue. It was *unconscious* racism, and that scares me more than any hate crime.

According to Psychology Today, the unconscious is "where most of the work of the mind gets done; it's the repository of automatic skills, the source of intuition and dreams, and an engine of information processing." The things we absorb into our unconscious define us whether we know something or not. So, if racism has become a contributor to “the source of intuition and dreams,” then what will become of society? How are we so unaware of this change?

In his article “Heart of Whiteness,” Tobias Wolff states, “Every unjust society tells itself that [racism is being eradicated], and over time the stain touches everyone.” He argues the effect society is carving onto everyone’s mindset is the biggest hurdle to eradicating racism, but I believe it is also the solution. Wolff’s daughter is a prime example. When she was in preschool, she frequently talked about a girl named Alice. She and Alice did everything together. However, when the Wolffs met Alice, they were surprised to see she was black.

Isn’t that amazing? The preschooler never deemed it necessary to tell her father that her best friend was black. Her racial reflexes were programmed differently in a new time of global education.

That gives me hope.

Now, more than ever before, empathy and equality are being stressed at home and school. So with each new generation, doesn't our power to right racial inequalities grow stronger as our society increasingly incorporates these values? Each previous generation has the duty to teach the future ones, and maybe enough time and positive effort will eradicate racism. The mark racism has left on human history is not one that can be washed out overnight, but with each well-educated generation, it will fade until no parent finds it strange that "Alice" may be black.