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Fall 12-18-2020

### The Asian Diaspora, a storytelling project

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## The Asian Diaspora, a storytelling project

By Kevin Truong

As an Asian American, I've experienced a lot of hate and racism when it comes to my Asian identity. Sadly, much of this hate has come from myself.

Growing up as a kid in Portland, Oregon, I was ashamed of two things: I was ashamed of being gay and I was ashamed of being Asian American. In my head, being ashamed of my queerness made sense—I was literally being told in various ways that it was wrong to be gay. Luckily, I had a process to unlearn a lot of this self-hate. I came out to friends in my early twenties, I went to queer spaces, I attended Pride, I started dating and eventually I came out to my family. By my mid-twenties, I had come to a place of acceptance regarding my identity as a gay man.

That wasn't the case when it came to my Asian American identity and the self-hate I had because of it. As a kid I was never told it was wrong to be Asian. People were simply mispronouncing my name. School administrators were mistaking me for the only other Vietnamese boy in my school. Friends were telling me they would never date an Asian boy. Faces like mine were being erased from popular culture. People were laughing at me. And I was laughing with them.

I've only recently begun the process of unlearning the self-hate I've had for being Asian American because I've only recently begun to realize the self-hate was even there.

As we continually see incidents of anti-Asian violence and sentiment across the United States, it can be easy to feign shock and disbelief when an

Asian man's finger is bitten off in New York City by a stranger. Or when a 76-year-old Asian woman is forced to defend herself after being assaulted in San Francisco. Or when six Asian women in Atlanta are murdered by the same person in the span of one hour at their places of work.

But let's not fool ourselves. This is the same country that interned Japanese Americans during World War II. This is the same country where Vincent Chin was beaten to death by two white men who were subsequently given no jail time. The truth is, to some people, my Asian American face means I'll forever be a foreigner in my own country. Black and brown people continually face racism and violence in this country, and until we can own up to that, we shouldn't be surprised when Black and brown people are continually attacked and killed.

The following are testimonials from other Asians and Asian Americans about their experiences with racism and hate:

*Brogan, Portland, Oregon:*

"These are some of the racial slurs that have been directed at me and my mother: FOB, Gook, Mulan, Chink, Jap, Slant-eyes, Dog eater. Growing up, I felt ashamed and often wished that one day I would wake up and not be Chinese anymore. In addition to hearing these slurs at school and out in the world, I saw my mom constantly pressured and made uncomfortable by predatory men—society had taught them that Asian women are subservient. Society allowed them to treat us as sub-human. Stop violence against our elders. Stop fetishizing us. Stop stereotyping us. Stop discounting and quieting us."

*Muhammed, Portland, Oregon:*

"[The United States] is a nice country. People are nice. But a little problem I

had was due to my name, some people don't like it. So, I changed the name. Muhammad to Mo. Getting a job was a problem sometimes. I had one place, they fired me from the job...no reason. He said, "I can't understand your language."

I speak English and I'm a graduate.

I wrote a letter to the company, and they gave me the back money and everything, and they said, "We're sorry about that. You are fine." And then they hired me back. Then I was going to be an assistant manager over there. Same place.

These things are personal things that people are doing. That's a personal matter. Not the country's fault or anything."

*Janey, Portland, Oregon:*

"It is all too easy to condemn an act of violence when it results in bodily harm, or worse, death. Why though, do we even let it get this far? The violence of racism is pervasive in everyday life for BIPOC, perhaps most predominantly in the form of microaggressions that often translate into trauma. These seemingly inconsequential acts add up and contribute to the normalization of a culture that culminates in hate crimes.

Microaggressions cut deeper when they come from your loved ones, your mentors, your friends. To give you an idea of how this shit stays with you, one of my earliest memories of a microaggression came from my 4th grade teacher when I was seven or eight. My class was assembled in a line in the hallway, and I was standing near my teacher at the front. This authority figure, who was charged with the molding of young minds, decided to use my last name as a punchline—she asked me, "Do people call your family and then say, 'Oops, I got the WONG number!' when you pick up?" I remember looking at her in confusion at the time. Now, it just makes me fume.

Stop being negligent with words and actions.

Stop white supremacy, xenophobia, and toxic masculinity.

We need to start recognizing the interconnectedness of systems of oppression. Our fights against racism, climate change, misogyny, transphobia, police brutality and the carceral state are not and cannot be treated as mutually exclusive.

Start the unglamorous, arduous, and ongoing work of decolonizing your mind.”

*Carrie, Portland, Oregon:*

“I am a gay Asian American. The intersectionality has always been an issue in my life ever since I realized I was gay. Being a lesbian, I have always had to navigate that around being Chinese, especially around my very Chinese family. That has always been the forefront of my life. Even being in the healthcare industry most of the discrimination and microaggression has been from a place of homophobia. This past year however, everything flipped around. I have never felt so Chinese, I haven't had my Asian identity more prominent than my gayness ever since I was a child. Even in my own office, my patients were constantly making racist comments or jokes, some even question my ability to do my job. I had a white woman tell me to stop complaining about racism, and if I was angry about it, just "own it".

I would like the world to know. I would like the white folks to know. I am not any less than a doctor because of the color of my skin. Do not tell me or any person of color to stop complaining about racism. You cannot tell us how to react and how to process what is happening. It is not as simple as "owning it". It is a multi-step process to get over this trauma. This is another example of white privilege.”

*In Tai's own words:*

"My family on both sides instilled in me a strong sense of identity from a young age, as they knew I would encounter discrimination in my life. We left Japan when I was three and my grandparents frequently sent our family care packages. Tons of Japanese VHS tapes, Pokémon cards, snacks and clothing which I thoroughly enjoyed and would share with my cousins and friends. This combined with the lessons, energy, pride and pain of also being a Black man in America were my foundation. There weren't many Black or Asian students in my elementary school, and I have distinct memories of my grandmother talking to my class about Black history, reading books to us and talking to us about Africa. I also have distinct memories of my mother talking to my classes about Japanese culture and bringing in memorabilia and food too.

I attribute my ability to shrug off racism when I was younger to my family instilling these values in me. However, I hate seeing people being taken advantage of and as I entered college, I became more vocal with addressing racist behavior. One of the most common examples I've seen have been with individuals who speak English as a second or third language. Seeing my mother struggle to learn and speak the language was a pain point for me and was an early peek into a type of racism that immigrants experience in America. Even if they're multilingual, which most Americans ironically fail to do.

The majority of experiences I've had with racism around my Asian identity has been when people make an ignorant or racist remark about Asian people—not knowing that I'm half-Japanese and can speak and write the language. I always follow up these instances with correcting them and addressing why it's not acceptable. It's exhausting at times, but our racial identity is something always present and if I can protect and be a voice for marginalized communities by speaking up then I would gladly address these challenges.

What do I want to stop?

The cycles of hatred and discrimination that have plagued this country for

centuries. The mass-murder of Native Americans, slavery, Jim Crow laws, Chinese Exclusion Act, putting Japanese Americans in internment camps during WW II. It comes from a place of hatred, fear and insecurities. This same sentiment has driven us to apply labels and [made us] unable to provide health care and citizenship for America's undocumented population. This same sentiment has driven America's treatment of Black people. And this has driven the rise in hate crimes and attacks on Asian Americans."

*Samson, Portland, Oregon:*

"I've experienced a lot of racism resulting in shame. Shame of who I am as an Asian American and as a queer person. It often feels like I don't fit in or belong. Or that I can never truly be myself around others. I've been called names. I've been threatened. I've been made to feel unsafe. I want to stop others from viewing me as the "other" in America. I grew up on a farm in Arkansas raising chickens. I was in 4-H Club and Future Farmers of America. I have my lived experiences as an American and I deserve to be American unhindered. I wish people would get to know me before having these ideas that I don't belong based on how I look."

*Vivi, Portland, Oregon:*

"Although I've had slurs and ignorance hurled my way, my most impactful experience with racism has been in healing from my own internalized racism. 20 plus years of taking in messages from dominant culture about what was desirable, attractive, and good—and realizing how these values didn't mirror myself or my family. Decades of witnessing people mock our names and language, disdain or

fetishize our physical features, and feign disgust at our foods led me to distance myself from myself.

I began to reconnect with my Asian identity 10 years ago after I mindlessly made a self-deprecating comment about being Vietnamese and a dear friend called me out. This friend informed me that what I was saying didn't just affect myself, but her as well as we share that same identity. She let me know that my words ripple out and affect others too, that I can't deprecate myself without also deprecating my community. It was a humbling and significant moment.

I am relearning how to connect to my Vietnamese heritage and culture. I feel things very deeply these days—the immense pride and joy, the harm and fear, the helplessness and hopefulness.

People need to know, stop overlooking us, stop taking only the pieces you like and dismissing the rest, stop mocking and laughing at us and stop hurting and killing us.”

*Filza, Portland, Oregon:*

“A high school teacher asked me to rewrite a senior thesis as my self-reflection did not explain enough how I was affected as a "Pakistani woman"—because he knew my self-reflection better than me. I have resented rewriting this for 20 years.

I cannot tell you how many times I've been asked to bring up my Pakistani-Muslim-ness when it had nothing to do with what I was doing.

To this day, I am not sure which "demographic or race" box to check. There is no box for "South Asian." I usually check "Asian." But I have been told numerous times that I am not traditionally "Asian."

Sometimes I straighten out my naturally curly hair, and I am usually flooded with compliments. I can't help but think that this is because people don't like my normally 'ethnic' look.”



*Jessica, Portland, Oregon:*

"It's a strange feeling to be fetishized and feared at the same time. I remember being excited to go into medicine and help my community heal and save lives. I didn't realize that I would also need to heal from fear, from harassment, from assault, from vandalism to the very clinic that provides care to the community. Fear breeds hate. Just stop! I am not submissive! I do not need to be feared! Stop! And you'll have room to breed something better!"

*Ashwini, Portland, Oregon:*

"I want collective trauma as a rallying cry to stop!

People are not their trauma, we are whole people with inter-generational wisdom, culture, life and much more.

I want us all to thrive and for people to bring equity so a meritocracy can exist, and people's talents are nurtured so they can share their gifts to the world safely.

As a screenwriter, my values are justice and equity. I was born to bring those erased and marginalized from history to screens, and to create safe spaces for people in the arts."

