

To the Girl I Was Three Months Ago

When I started writing this essay, I wasn't sure where to begin, or who to address, so I thought, why not myself? This is an essay, but also a letter to my younger self. A reflection of all the things that have since happened the past three months.

And an update too, if you will, of how your mind has changed since then.

Memory one: you're arguing at the dinner table again.

You don't remember *exactly* what it's on. Something something free speech and black people taking personal responsibility, etc. You think it might end with you calling *Mama* a racist.

You don't really remember.

The point is, *Black Lives Matter* seems to be just another topic in a long list of ideas that you and *Mama* have never seen eye-to-eye on.

Later, you think, maybe, we were never arguing about *BLM*. Maybe we were arguing about something else all along. And maybe this is just another topic that emphasizes our divide.

Truth is, I can't begin discussing Black Lives Matter without context. Black Lives Matter (and its offshoot movements) do not exist as singular discussions pertaining to only the Black and white community; if you are to understand what this movement implies for you and the Asian community at large, you must understand this one thing that *Māmā* has never quite:

To be Chinese is to be defined by your ethnic heritage. The yellowness, the monolids, and so on.

Chinese culture is tied directly to the way we look.

The current American identity, on the other hand, allegedly had no color, because it is built off of an ideology: land of the free and home to us all. Modern American culture is unique precisely because of this; our mindsets and language have been molded by all subsets within the frame. Because of this, we are able to assimilate into white society, given that we are able to pick up their culture and mindset. Once we understand and wear this culture ourselves, then, we can give back to society, economically and culturally—the way *Māmā* has, the past 20 years they were here.

What I think you witnessed, all over your Instagram feed in your room in the suburbs, was the fragmentation of this *identity*. America is currently warring over the colors of her identity— *Black Lives Matter* is only, I think, a symptom of a country that coming to terms with a deeply racist past.

Here is what I was thinking, the other day: the original American identity was always white, courtesy of the pilgrims fleeing England, four hundred years ago. Sure, the original American identity was constructed off the ideas of freedom from tyranny. But this freedom from tyranny was only possible because while white Americans fought the British, enslaved black labor kept the economy afloat. And it was enslaved black men who laid the very stones erecting the White House.

The current American identity, the one you and your family enjoy today, has only recently existed. *Because* Black activists fought for their respect and place in a society that literally enslaved them, white Americans allowed former slaves to assimilate culturally and begin contributing economically. What follows is history; culture naturally adapted to showcase two races and not one. And there was room on the stage for more races.

And so, Asian-Americans were eventually allowed to immigrate and thrive here.

Memory two: Eileen Huang writes a letter to the Chinese American community, condemning anti-blackness. She implies our silence to movements like Black Lives Matter is complicity to white supremacy, and a lot of other things.

Māmā says, I hope you don't grow up privileged like that.

Māmā says, I hope I don't have to pay sixty thousand a year for you to come home and call me a racist.

It's impossible, also, to talk about Black Lives Matter without mention of the *Bamboo Ceiling*, or *The Model Minority*, the struggle over affirmative action, or all the other new activist terms in the Asian-American sphere.

It might seem confusing, but the gist is: Asian-Americans are so affluent because they have quietly subsided into white society, blah blah blah, and in doing so they learn the inherent racisms white people have and subconsciously uphold themselves leading to a history of anti-blackness, etc.

The truth I realized later, though, is that perhaps, the activist youth of my age have only served to perpetuate the model minority myth more. The majority of them go to schools like Phillips Exeter or Andover; in the near future, they will go to schools like Yale and Columbia. Their activism and initiative defy the quiet, meek stereotype of the well-behaved Asian doctor; their implications that all successful Asian-Americans are only successful because they uphold the tenants of white supremacy—well, isn't that a paradox?

Chinese culture has always three things: prideful, hard-working, and prideful over their hard work.

Between inevitable language gaps and subversions of traditional Chinese American family roles (the son should never disrespect his father's authority and etc.): maybe it is no wonder our words make our parents feel so dismissed. And naturally, our alleged disrespect results in further defensiveness from their end.

There is a sense, in our social justice activism circles, that we must be extra vocal about Black Lives Matter, simply because our parents...aren't So we must post things on social media and write open letters and do other vocal, passionate things to subconsciously make up for their allegedly racist failings, which come in the form of comments like, “*Nǚ'ér*, do not stay out late and go into that *hēirén qū*. It is unsafe and you will be hurt.”

In an age of social media, there isn't just pressure to have the perfect hair and friends. There is also this pressure to be *woke*, to be morally...high. Recent trends on social media call for *accountability*, for us to *have difficult conversations*, to *do the activist work at home*. The ideal concept is for us bright young people to go home and educate our parents and hold them accountable on racism and all that.

But in most realities, this ends up with hormonal teenagers calling their parents racist at the dinner table. We teenagers were never exactly good at communication in the first place; conversations regarding racial relationships, in particular, depend on linguistic nuances that the majority of Asian-American parents are unable to pick up. Neither do we want to accept the idea that our parents have somehow been complicit in the brutal, stomach-turning deaths of George Floyd and a thousand other Black men. And if their alleged silence *has* been complicit, perhaps it is easier to...just be angry. To hold them “accountable,” because that may silence your own guilt.

A side note: *Māmā* is a teacher who has never treated a student different from the other. This new age of social media social justice asks for *constant* allyship; constant service to dismantle white supremacy. *Māmā* is a full-time teacher, a full-time mother, a part-time volunteer for the Chinese school.

Is *Māmā* a racist because she does not have the time or energy to campaign constantly? Because she prioritizes the well-being of her family and the stability of her job? Because *Black Lives Matter*, to her, is unreal: a death on a television, a black-and-white photo.

But are *we*, the next generation, all that different?

A recent observation I made was the short life-term of activism.

I used to look up to my activist friends. But the majority of them, once finished with their pro-black activism, will go to an Ivy League school and then end up doctors and engineers and management consultants—more likely than not, we upper-middle class Chinese Americans will end up just like our parents. And in that sense, our complicity to white supremacy is far greater: because we have leveraged the black community's trauma as a steppingstone for our college applications and later careers.

Today, I am still a staunch supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement; I am Chinese American, and I owe the latter part of my identity to the cultural impact of Black Americans. In a country built off of enslaved labor, perhaps it is inevitable that we are all racist.

But that doesn't mean we are all *evil*; life is far too gray. To hold these conversations with my parents, I simply cannot point fingers and *accuse*.

Because too many of my generation have turned Black Lives Matter into an Instagram aesthetic or a matter of their moral superiority; this only alienates our (voting) parents more. To truly hold ourselves accountable, to understand the implications behind the "American" parts of our identities, to effectively convince our parents to support Black Lives Matter in the long run—perhaps it also means that before we strive to hold *others* accountable for their intentions and actions, we should strive to always check our own.