



Dismantling the Single Story

The Racial Imaginary (English 114-23)

The Racial Imaginary Course is appreciative of your attendance at our event aimed towards dismantling the “single story.” We are also thankful for the support of our sponsors: the Yale Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration, and the “Belonging at Yale” initiative.

This booklet is a collection of personal essays, interview-based pieces, and open letters created by students of the Racial Imaginary course. Our individual goals in creating these works varied. Collectively, our goal was to draw from class readings, discussions, and research to share stories, experiences, and ideas that somehow contribute to the dismantling of the single story.

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Shajaraat Zaytoon

Yasmeen Abed

Every September my sisters and I help baba pick all of the olives off the olive tree in our backyard. The bark is rough and thick and the leaves are a vibrant dark greyish-green color with gnarled branches that are teeming with ripe olives. The decade-old tree stands strong even during the driest of California summers. We strategically place buckets around the tree to catch any olives that might fall. My baba directs my sisters and I to various sections of the tree so we can maximize our picking. We gather around the tree and ask baba about his memories of growing up in Kuwait and what his father and grandfather's lives were like growing up in a small village in Palestine called Aseerah. He tells us a romantic story of simplicity. His grandfather, Saeed, was classically handsome. He had gentle blue eyes that always held a faraway look in them as though he were seeing the world for the first time again. He was never seen without wearing the traditional keffiyah, or scarf, which has come to be a symbol of Palestinian nationalism. Saeed would sit under the shade of his olive trees and eat za'atar with bread and olive oil. He would sit among his children and sing Palestinian folk songs while reflecting upon his life and future. Sometimes, he would become so enamored by the beauty of nature that he would sleep under the olive trees. Passed down through generations, the shajaraat zeytoon has been the main source of income for my father's family. Inherited from their ancestors, the olive trees are a symbol of Palestinian identity. Even all the way in America my father planted an olive tree to remind himself of his roots. Each olive picked represents a hardship, a victory, a sadness, a happiness.

As my baba tells us stories of his family, we fill our buckets full to the brim with ripe green olives. Baba slips in and out of his native tongue, Arabic, as he recounts the times he and his brothers would visit Aseerah. As my father begins to tell us

about a particular amusing memory that sticks out to him, his voice becomes animated and his warm brown eyes light up. He recalls he and his brothers wanting to ride donkeys whenever they visited Palestine. Villagers who passed by would laugh at them for choosing to ride donkeys instead of cars. Aseerah is famous for its olives and the village's name is actually derived from the phrase "Asir-as-Zaytoon" which is the activity of extracting oil from the olives. As my sisters and I help baba pick olives from our own tree he tells us how his grandfather, Saeed, would collect the olives from his olive tree orchard in Palestine. Saeed would hit the trees with a stick and the olives would fall onto blankets. He and his sons who worked with him would gather all of the olives and place them in burlap sacks. They would hoist the heavy sacks of olives onto donkeys who would then walk for miles to transport the olives to the oil extraction presses.

Baba passionately remarks that his grandfather would meticulously clean under each olive tree with his bare hands. Saeed's intimate connection with the land was not simply economic - it was never an exchange but a partnership. The tenderness that he showed the soil was reciprocated in the most delightful of ways. His life and family's future relied on whatever the land produced, and the land reciprocated this trust. Olive trees were his livelihood. Olive trees were his birthright. Saeed's legacy was his orchard of olive trees. He intended for his six children to divide his land between themselves. Now, that same land is a point of contention. He was deprived of his heritage because of a choice that his children were forced to make.

Baba paints a picture of vitality. The land his father grew up on was rich and the soil was fertile. He recounts sprawling orchards of olive trees that go on for miles. The aroma is green and almost edible and as I continue to pick the olives, I too can imagine the Mediterranean sun shining down upon me as I enjoy the fruits of my labor. A quiet contentment fills me as I think about the beautiful memories I am able to share with my father. I feel like I am partaking in a history that I otherwise might never have experienced.

My baba swears that the olive oil that comes from these trees is blessed. Olive trees grown in the “Holy Land” produce olive oil that he believes is healing for the mind, body, and soul. My father, a deeply religious man, believes that the Zaytoon is sacred as its name has been invoked by God in the Quran. Spirituality is critical in maintaining a connection to land, so my father has found that planting an olive tree in America helps sustain this connection. Land is not simply soil, it relates to all aspects of existence. This implied sanctity necessitates the land’s preservation and protection. Baba aches for a taste of the olives from the same olive trees that he imagines his ancestors tended to for thousands of years. No other olive can evoke the same imagery or legacy that these olives can. The olives in California, while tasty, do not capture the same history that the Palestinian olives do. The blood shed, the physical labor, and the tears wept all due to the loss of an orchard of olive trees.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish proclaimed that, “If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them, their oil would become tears.” The olive harvest is a celebration in Palestine where farmers take pride in their hard work. It is a beautiful tradition that has been stained by the ugliness of war and occupation. Orchards of olive trees have been cut down and burnt by settlers, stifling farmers’ abilities to provide for their families. But olive trees have a robust root system that can revive itself even when the above ground structure is destroyed; they are indestructible. Just as the olive trees stand strong in the driest of conditions, Palestinians remain resilient in the harshest of conditions. Baba preserves his family’s stories by retelling them, by replanting them. In the early 1950s my grandfather, Mohammad, was forced to leave behind his beloved orchard of olive trees. He left to Kuwait for work but after his village was occupied he was unable to return. In his absence his father, Saeed, passed away so many of the olive trees were left unattended and died. And any other trees that were salvageable were seized by the settlers. My grandfather, Mohammad, has dementia so it was difficult to get information in the form of memories about olive trees and leaving Palestine. But even with this handicap, he has never forgotten that he cannot return.

Sometimes I think that planting an olive tree in his own backyard is my baba’s form of resistance. He cannot recover what once was but he can ensure that he never forgets.

As I watch my baba pick olive after olive, I can feel his longing. What he would give to run his hands through the soil that his grandfather so cherished. I struggle to fully understand what connection it is he feels to the land. This distance is hard to overcome when I have never personally faced those struggles. My memory cannot extend to what it does not know. I hope that participating in tradition will forge a link between myself and my ancestors in Palestine. Maybe one day I will have an olive tree in my own backyard where I will tell my own children the stories of my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. For now my best contribution is to put words to the feelings I know so many Palestinians experience, especially in a time where we associate Palestinians only with war and sacrifice. We ignore the simplicity of their pleasures. It has never been about having the most land; it has been about having land they can call their own. A simple dignity that every Palestinian begs to be afforded.

What I Have Accomplished Is What People Should See

Biradater Adarkwah

I identify as an African-American woman from Richmond, California. Richmond is known to be a low-income city filled with drugs and gang violence. There were not many opportunities given to me due to the lack of resources. In Richmond, most people identify as black or Hispanic while whites are the minority. The few interactions that I did have with white people were from my school staff members who cared a lot about helping each student attain success. My teachers helped me overcome the barriers I faced as an African-American girl coming from this urban neighborhood. My racial identity also placed me at the bottom of the social hierarchy in this country and forced me to work twice as hard to prove myself. If it wasn't for the encouragement that I received from the people around me, I would have not been motivated to chase big goals because there is an idea that a black girl like me from a city like Richmond isn't likely to become successful. This was the "single story" placed upon my identity that everyone who cared about me made sure to dismantle. My teachers saw potential in me and recommended that I take advanced courses and apply to challenging programs that would push me out of my comfort zone. My family was always there mentally to support me whenever I felt like the work was too difficult. Everyone assured me that I am not this single story. Unfortunately, while my loved ones tried hard to break this story, others continued to remind me of it.

The summer right before I started my first year at Yale, I worked at a considerably lavish restaurant in the Bay Area. The

restaurant was located in Berkeley which had a higher population of white people compared to Richmond. After working there for most of my summer break, my coworkers found out that I would soon be leaving to attend college. Everyone was excited to hear that I was attending a prestigious school and knew that I worked very hard to earn my admission there. This news was especially cherished for all of the black coworkers and managers who were proud to see one of their own achieving something that we were not expected to do based on where we come from and how we look like. However, this excitement was not the case for everyone at my job. One of the white managers had the most shocked response to the news once he heard. From his facial expression and the comments that he made, it was clear that he was surprised that a girl like me was able to get into a school like Yale. As his eyes widened and eyebrows raised, he rhetorically asked how I got into a school like that. Although he may not have commented on my race directly, it was obvious what he was basing his beliefs off of because he did not know me at all. That was the second conversation I had ever had with him so he did not know enough information about me to make a stark response like he did. Overhearing his response, another black coworker was disappointed. She reminded me that even though I can work so hard to overcome every negative image placed upon my identity, people will still believe in them.

This encounter stuck with me as I was preparing for my move to New Haven. Yale was going to be a new environment for me with people from different parts of the world. Were these people going to perceive me the same way as my manager did? I knew I was capable of dismantling this single story because I had been doing that my entire life. I have always sought ways to excel in different aspects in my life whether it be in academics or talents. But how many times would I have to show this capability for other people? Coming to Yale, this interaction made me also think about the other students with similar experiences. When you look at the diverse population at Yale, one can see that this single narrative is not true for everyone. I've met peers of mine who also come from different low-income

neighborhoods with low resources but used every opportunity they had to excel. These are the people that I find myself connecting with as they understand my background and together help me dismantle these single stories.

Although Yale is attempting to diversify its student population, their actions are not decentering the dominance of the single stories that those in power continually place upon marginalized groups. Yale claims to be committed to admitting the most capable individuals from around the world who have diverse backgrounds and experiences. Their commitment can be seen in their student population. Although some may not know the exact statistics of the demographics, it is common knowledge that the student population is not all white. In fact, about 57.3% of the student population at Yale are people of color. Despite this knowledge, my white manager still believed that I was not capable of receiving admission in a school like that. His shock, which was based on only knowing information about my background, confirmed how the narrative of destined unsuccessfulness was still believed by people. So why is it that people outside this university are aware that people of color attend this prestigious university yet the narrative of marginalized groups is still believed?

The reason why diversity in this university is not helping to stop the spreading of this narrative is because diversity essentially protects the power of the stories told by white people. In “We Need a Decolonized, Not a ‘Diverse’ Education,” Zoe Samudzi explains how diversity is intended to be “based on difference” which tends to “include whiteness.” This inclusion of whiteness is what keeps the dominance of these narratives. Curriculums need to focus more about the stories of marginalized groups through their own lens. There is no doubt that the history we learn in schools is taught in the perspective of whites. Countless times we learn about some of the greatest leaders in history who became successful and left legacies. Most of the time, these narratives are about white people. We hear fewer stories about successful people of color making an impact. When we do hear about these stories, they are usually told in a manner that minimizes the works of people of color and leave

“oppressive structures intact” (Samudzi). We are not expected to become successful because the history that we learn teaches us that white people are the successful ones. This is why our education upholds the stories of marginalized people, like myself, in our society because we are constantly exposed to them. As long as diversity is intended to allow every group, including whites, to share the center, these oppressive narratives will continue to persist.

Unfortunately, no one seems to challenge how diversity protects the dominant stories, which is why it is important to realize the consequences of this inaction. Why is it that marginalized people and I can work so hard to overcome the barriers placed upon our lives just for it to go unnoticed by some white people? This is because it is difficult for a person of color to break their single story since our society has instilled it systematically on us. If people were recognized based on their own experience, the concept of the single story would cease to exist because people would see how we are all so different. Every person who believes the narrative about a person like me without knowing me personally sets me back as it reminds me how my actions alone are not enough to stop this problem. All my life I’ve worked hard to do well in school with the goal of attending a great university to help me achieve a successful career. This is why I stayed after school to get extra help from teachers to do better in my classes. This is why I also joined extracurricular activities to stay out of the drug and violence that Richmond kids commonly fell into. I made sure to do everything that I could to set me on the path of success and my actions showed it. Anyone who knew me personally could testify that this was my character. So when my manager assumed my incapability without knowing me personally, it reminded me how my racial identity blocked people from knowing the real me.

It is important that everyone in the community contributes to stop the spread of these narratives. This contribution means that instead of universities, like Yale, spend their time focusing on diversifying their education, they should rather focus their efforts on decentering the dominance of

whiteness in their curriculum. To do this, as Samudzi suggests, we need to address the power in these stories and stop the normalization of these oppressive narratives. This means that our education needs to recognize the perspective in which our history is told, and its effects, and make efforts to stop this cycle. Likewise, it is important for every person to realize the stakes of these narratives and take personal actions to resist spreading these stories themselves.

I am very proud of coming from Richmond and overcoming the violence, drugs and lack of resources that this hometown has placed upon me. My dedication to achieve success is what people should see when they see me, not the stereotypical story that does not apply to me. My manager should have seen me through my own personal story and not what society has presumed of me based on my background. It shouldn't be my duty to have to constantly prove myself to others, even if that was the mindset I came into Yale with. I felt that my interaction with my manager was a glimpse of future interactions that I would have with other white people. Although this has not been the case at Yale so far, this is a burden that neither I, nor other marginalized people, should have to worry about. I am not what people assume of me at first glance. I am not a single story. Nobody is a single story.

I Have Been the Good Immigrant; Now What?

Martina Amate Perez



My sister, Vale(entina), and I sit by our Christmas tree while weaving through old photographs, diplomas, certificates, awards, medals, and trophies from the past 20 years of her life. She has recently dyed red hair (against our parents' wishes) and insists on playing Spanish trap instead of Christmas music (against my requests). We remind ourselves of memories, both good and bad, of our schooling years and lives as a whole. We tear up at some points and burst into laughter at others. She never fails to make me laugh (don't tell her I said that). Our laughs simmer down and she tells me:

"I read my [Yale] admissions file last year and regretted it."

"Why?"

"I realized I gave them exactly what they wanted. I gave them the "good immigrant." It was my authentic truth though, and I

think that's the saddest part about it. I was kinda mad, really. I thought, 'what has my life really been?'"

This started what became a five hour conversation delving into Vale's life story that has followed the "good immigrant" narrative. This conversation, along with a heated discussion I witnessed in a dorm at Yale, a tweet about DACA recipients, and an amazing article referred to me by my professor Helen Beyta Rubinstein, "The Ungrateful Refugee: 'We Have No Debt to Repay'" by Dina Nayeri, aligned in my head to make me wonder: what to make of the "good immigrant" narrative that made my sister's life beholden to a single story?

*

Vale started kindergarten at the Bicultural Bilingual School at E 109th Street—a public school. The fact that a six year old needed to show an ID to enter the school, that police officers patrolled the area everyday and that fights were a daily occurrence created an unsettling first impression of U.S. public education for our parents—the impression that that wasn't the best Vale could strive for, an impression that stuck. They turned to Catholic school instead.

And that's where it started for her. By *that* I mean, that is when she began her life trajectory of striving for "the best," striving for "success" because that was her duty, whatever that means. Every speech contest, every spelling bee, every science fair—she was there. She strove for the best. She did her best. She got the best. None of it ever made her *feel* good, but she knew it *was* good—more like necessary. Her only way out of whatever it is she feared to become. Her only way to prove her parents' sacrifices worthwhile. Where did this come from?

Excelling in school for Vale also meant taking ESL ("English As a Second Language") classes until the 5th grade even though she had perfected English by 3rd grade and probably had higher grammar and reading skills than many of her American born classmates. She was taken out of regular class time to learn "extra" English with the implicit expectation that she was to exceed the speaking and writing abilities of the typical kid her age to be considered just as good. Because *that*

hurt me"—an honest, colloquial grammatical error—prompted a different response coming out of the immigrant child's mouth than that of another.

No but get this, besides taking ESL classes past required years, our mother would also buy her books in English and read them with her. So they could practice their English together. She spent every hour not spent mopping the floors of the apartment building we lived in (a condition for having reduced rent), cooking, or mopping her own floors, to ensure her daughter's English was practiced and perfected.

She recalls the first time she explicitly established herself as *one of the good ones*. It was in fifth grade and her class was having a discussion about illegal immigrants and how they are "bad." One of her friends turned around and asked her: "You're legal, right?" "Yes."

This was fully a lie, as she would not obtain legal status for another four years. Yet, she was taken aback by an unexpected question from a friend and, in that moment, felt compelled to say what she wanted to hear.

Then high school came around. After being admitted on a full merit scholarship and being ranked #1 in her class, she was introduced to the world of the *Ivy League*. Though she genuinely doubted her chances of getting into such schools, she was advised to list at least a couple on her Common App because they were the best and that was what she must strive for. Her guidance counselor, trying to alleviate her concerns and doubts, told her:

"They'll like your story"

"My story?"

"Yes, they're suckers for those kind of stories, you know, the success stories. Your parents focusing on your education, getting your residency three years after a deportation notice..."

"Oh. Right."

Vale made sure to apply to Columbia because that was the only Ivy our father recognized. He would frequently pass by the school when making deliveries downtown. After hearing a few coworkers talking about how it's "one of the best," he came home that day to tell his daughter:

Deberías ir allí. (You should go there.)

Papi, that's not how that works, you need to submit an application and it's really hard and competitive.

Sí, sí, entonces solo trabaja duro y te aceptaran, verdad? (Yes, yes then you just work hard and they'll accept you, right?)

Sí, papi. (Yes, dad.)

She was not accepted into Columbia. But she *was* accepted at Yale, and a car ride explanation to her father of what Yale was—and how it was *the best*—made it all better. And here she is now. When she entered this unfamiliar elite space that is Yale, the mentality that had guided her entire life followed her. And now it seemed to have even higher stakes. She had gotten this far, how can she back down now? Of course, she found herself surrounded by people with a similar mentality. This mentality of “being the best” and “not giving up.” However, the difference for someone with an immigrant identity—the difference for her—is that the stakes felt higher. When your excellence has political and social implications, your options feel limited.

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Then Vale read her admissions file. She chose to do so for a paper on *how you got here* for the class *Education and Empire* early into her sophomore year. She recalls reading her personal statement back alongside commentary of the readers as shocking and hurtful. Her “story” read back to her as a subconscious profession of what a “good immigrant” she was—how she comes from a family of “good immigrants.” It read back to her as desperately trying to prove something...to prove *I will be a good contribution to your school like I am a good contribution to this country*. She felt compelled to express gratitude for her own struggle and that of her family's because it ended with her ultimate success.

This narrative of following the *rules*, always striving for the *best*, being *grateful* for the opportunity of being in this country and demonstrating that always, is what immigrants are praised and glamorized for. This is the *good* immigrant. This is the narrative immigrants are expected to uphold or else, they

are subjected to *another* narrative—one that demeans them as criminals, lazy, unworthy, and greedy.

Such a single story that praises exceptionality characterizes immigrants as debtors to this country. Like their existence and presence here somehow has to be repaid. Dina Nayeri explains it best in saying how immigrants' lists of accomplishments and contributions to this country take form as if that's the price of their existence and presence. Glamorizing immigrant “success stories”—the stories deemed successful by Western, white institutions, media outlets, politicians and fake woke white liberals—it places immense, crippling pressure on immigrants who believe this single story to be the only “right” story for them, the only acceptable path.

Yet, this narrow definition of immigrant success as exceptionality also means that immigrants who are not able to or simply choose not to conform to this single story are left invalidated, as being seen less than. It also erases the reality of other, equally as valid, versions of immigrant success that don't necessarily follow the rubric of white American bigoted expectations and standards.

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Reading her file marked a radical transformation of Vale's mentality and being. It made her reckon with this harmful narrative about immigrants—about herself. This means not singularly defining immigrant success according to Western standards. This means spending the rest of college years focusing on an idea of success that makes her *happy*—a shocking choice she did not think she could have, but also a privilege to have in the first place. This means Vale's not going to law school (sorry to break it to you, Mami & Papi). This means recognizing that immigrant success can be simply surviving and getting through each day in a dangerous anti-immigrant climate. It can be living your life inside of a church because that's the only safe space for you. It can be working at an Aeropostale store right out of college because you made really good friends there and that's enough for you. This means recognizing that many immigrants do not have opportunity to

adhere to this “good immigrant” tale because of a lack of resources, legal conditions, financial struggles but also many others simply choose not to—and are just as valid, just as worthy of being in this country. There is no “good” immigrant. Just people who deserve to live life as they can and choose.

For Vale, this “radical transformation” also means to stop being grateful. I don’t know how it came up, but a heated discussion inside the common room of a suite at Yale began with the question:

“Are you grateful for Yale?”

“No.”

“You don’t really mean that. How can you not be grateful?”

Vale found herself trying to explain herself to a room of non-immigrants who were shocked and unsettled at her declaration. This room of non-immigrants felt entitled to an explanation of her statement that had complicated feelings attached to it that she herself did not fully understand yet or at least could not fully articulate it in words that would satisfy others’ confusion or curiosity. That deeply bothered them. They could not fathom such a sentiment coming from someone who they presumed, of all people in the room, should have the most to be grateful for. They didn’t get it and she supposed they never would.

They implied a desire for her to profess gratitude without understanding that she had previously devoted her life to nothing but being grateful. I assume Vale wanted to scream out something along the lines of:

Saying you’re grateful creates a sense of you owing something for your presence that is linked to a deeper, problematic pattern struggle that transcends the institution of Yale.

Saying you’re grateful for an elite institution that glamorizes your immigrant struggle and hopes you get an ambitious job offer after graduation (because then their investment, them taking a chance on you, would have been worth it), saying you’re grateful for a country that will call you an alien and call your community criminals while praising you for beating the odds, odds that here seem to be flaunted, no longer seems right or, at least, necessary.

This discussion-debate reminded me again of Nayeri’s article that I had read, ironically, a couple hours beforehand, and her discussion of “gratitude politics.” She shows how affirming your being the “ungrateful immigrant” or “ungrateful refugee” is in a way reversing the script of the “good immigrant narrative.” By not always maintaining a “grateful face,” by realizing, in the words of Nayeri, that a person’s life is never a *bad investment*, Vale’s newfound mentality can be linked to that of Nayeri. Like Nayeri, Vale now moves forth in the world knowing her worth and not measuring it with anything other than their happiness.

I’ll say, then, that Vale reading her admissions file was not all that bad after all, or at least not a regret anymore. Is the good immigrant narrative etched in her brain completely gone? No. Will she continue to work to do away with it for good, once and for all? Yes. I will too.

Popo

Claire Chang

“*Maan maan sic!*”

Popo, my grandma, is serving me a bowl of wontons at her apartment in Brooklyn. She is literally telling me to eat slowly, but in Cantonese this phrase really means to enjoy my food. I am at her apartment in Brooklyn for the first time in many months; the last time I saw her was before my family and I went to Asia for summer vacation. Going to Hong Kong finally allowed me to meet the family members I had heard Popo complaining and gossiping about. The trip also allowed me to reflect on the relationship I had with her. I never realized how similar I am to her. According to my great aunts and uncles, my grandma is a person who is not afraid of speaking whatever is on her mind. “Your popo says whatever she wants to, even if it’s the hard thing and no one wants to hear it!” they told me. This is the truth. Once, when I was practicing writing my Chinese characters, she peered over my shoulder and exclaimed, “Wah! They’re so messy.” She then proceeded to make me write them correctly. I thought my characters looked nice and neat (I was even using a newly sharpened pencil), but not to her. My grandma believes that the truth, no matter how harsh it may sound, is better told straight up than sugarcoated, and my mom and I are a firm believer of this as a result of her teachings.

When I was conducting an interview with my grandparents about their life in Hong Kong and immigration experience in America, my grandma was once again being her outspoken and assertive self. Even though I was asking my grandpa (Gung Gung) about *his* life as a waiter in America, Popo would interject often, talking loudly over him, proclaiming that *she* knew better than he did the events of his life. “He got the red marks! Everything circled in red!” she declared, referring to Gung Gung’s grades in public school. When I asked about my great-grandmother (Gung Gung’s mom, who I called Tai Po),

who I knew had a bad relationship with my grandma, Popo’s face instantly darkened. “That woman didn’t do anything! She opened a laundromat and closed it within a month because she thought it was too dirty to wash other people’s dirty clothes. Then when I got married, she told me to open a laundromat, even though *she* found it to be too dirty. *Chee Seen!*” Clearly, my grandma has many strong opinions. Even though most people do not speak ill of the dead, because of the customs of Chinese reverence for our elders and deceased, Popo still speaks her mind and says what she wants about her mother-in-law.

The traits of outspokenness and assertiveness have served my grandma well in life. Her assertion has given her many job opportunities. For example, when she was forced to quit school in eighth grade because it was too expensive for her parents to send her along with six siblings to school, she worked at a factory in Hong Kong with her older sister, making \$5 an hour. She decided that she didn’t like being a machinery operator, left, and independently found another company to sew. However, because she was still underage and was only doing “baby work” that she didn’t like, she moved jobs to work as a receptionist at a doctor’s clinic, getting a good salary and opportunities to move up. I think Popo’s bosses saw her as capable of being a leader, which I attribute to her assertiveness. I also think her spunk was what attracted my taciturn, old-fashioned grandpa to her. Most Hong Kong girls still abided by “tradition” where they were subordinate to men and did not express their opinions – not my grandma. Her siblings and friends could always depend on her to say what she truly thought.

When Popo came to America, she was instantly put in factory work. Back then, almost all the Chinese immigrants in cities with established Chinese communities would waiter, do factory work, or open a laundromat. Popo balanced her job as a seamstress, where she was paid by the piece (a practice that has been illegal since 1938, but unenforced in Chinatown since owners of sweatshops routinely exploited their workers), with taking care of her family. She made sure she found a job where she could sew at home in order to raise her three children

properly, refusing to sacrifice one responsibility for the other. To make ends meet, she would drive around to factories with two other friends asking if there was any work they could do; if there was, they would split it three ways. This “freelancing” of sewing was relatively unheard of at the time; almost all women would bring their children with them to the factory, where the children would also perform tasks. It was rare for mothers to work from home for the sole purpose of raising children outside the factory. Popo had to be really assertive in fighting for a job where she could sew clothes from home since it was so uncommon. However, since she was also freelancing, she became a sought-after worker, ensuring that she almost always had some job opportunities.

Over many years, Popo worked her way up to be the factory forewoman, where it was her responsibility to make sure everything from the beginning to end of production ran smoothly. At one point, she was overseeing a factory of 109 people; her boss would give her an extra *penny* for every piece of clothing the workers finished. 20,000 pieces of clothing went out a week, she would get \$200, and this man would pocket \$25,000 by underpaying the seamstresses. Popo would always tell her boss that what he was doing was wrong and unfair, but he didn't really care and continued to undercut his workers. It was common in the factory world for the workers, mostly Chinese women, to go on strike demanding better treatment and pay from their bosses. Popo protested with them to make sure the boss paid them their due amount, and being a forewoman, she had a lot more power than the regular workers she was in charge of. She also did not have to support the workers; in fact, if she didn't she would have probably been paid more as a reward for being on the boss's side. As a working poor immigrant, the extra money was needed, yet she never supported any of her boss's malpractices.

When she finally had enough of her boss, she left that factory, and her boss's mother yelled and cursed at her. Popo, who did not let herself get treated like that by anyone, yelled right back, saying that they were unethical and exploitative. Her political involvement and outspokenness were rare back then

when most women and factory workers did not think to speak up on their horrible treatment. My grandmother did not compromise on her morals and was not afraid to use her voice. She instilled this trait in my mother, who instilled it in me. This is why people comment that I'm “not like other Asian girls” – I am vocal, instead of silent; I question things and do not blindly obey the status quo. All the women in my family know the power of our voice thanks to my grandma's example. We know that we have to be assertive and create our own space in a world that still views women, especially Chinese women, as second class.

As my grandma likes to say, “If we don't speak up, who will?”

A Letter to Abigail on Education and Black Liberation

Melat Eskender

Dear Abigail,

I would like to begin this letter with a brief memory. A memory which will contextualize this letter and why I have written it to you in particular. It was a week before Ohio's History Day, a tradition in Ohio public schools where students dress up as prominent figures from American history. My history teacher was behind her desk, preparing to project a list of American historical figures on the whiteboard. She was retrieving the list from the Ohio Department of Education's website, as per tradition for the annual event. The class coalesced around the board with giddy anticipation, eyes darting and body parts fidgeting as we waited. Figures were assigned on a first-come, first-served basis, therefore students were prepared to bolt to the teacher's desk once the list was revealed. As the list came into focus my joy faltered. While my white peers around me jumped from their seats and dashed into line to make their requests, I stood up with a sigh. It was clear that people that looked like me weren't considered important to American history. Of the list of dozens of individuals, only two were black: Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. I asked myself, "Why am I surprised?" It was apparent in our textbooks that, in the history told by colonizers, those who dared to explore, to defy, and to innovate were white.

In that moment, I was resigned to that version of history, but upon reflection, I am enraged. It has taken me years to come to terms with how institutionalized education has affected how I perceive the value my blackness and my voice. I am now still in

the process of unlearning the colonizer's perspective and reclaiming American history as my own. As your older cousin, I felt that it was my responsibility to produce a guiding text for when you begin this process. To detail for you my present and most intimate experiences and thought process surrounding this effort to decolonize my education. This is that text.

I tell you this with sincerity, Abigail, traditional American schools will not teach you your history. As I experienced in the fifth grade, institutional education chooses to cage black Americans in two time periods: the era of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. These schools would have you believe that black history solely consists of our subjugation and our responses to it. While these periods of momentous struggle are crucial to our learning, this telling of history erases our cultural achievements and contributions to society. Black people are also change makers and creators, but because of their blackness, their accomplishments aren't deemed as valuable, and therefore aren't included in traditional education. Our confines are even more narrow than they appear as a majority of the most prominent figures in these movements are erased. As a child, I never learned about the radical and magnificent Ella Baker, Huey P. Newton, or Malcom X. These individuals were only mentioned in contrast to a whitewashed, incrementalist depiction of Martin Luther King Jr. Their visions were revolutionary and challenged the ways wealth, power, and jobs were distributed in our country. They recognized racism as systematic, not as acts of individual evil. Rather than acknowledge the variety in their demands and in their methods of activism, schools have minimized the Civil Rights Movement to one man. The words of King were cherry-picked and distorted into a singular message of colorblindness. By the time you finish elementary school, you will have learned King's phrase which advocates for being judged not by the color of your skin, but by the content of your character. But you will never learn about King's urgent call to take action on police brutality and examine "the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers" (Eulogy). Forms of black resistance which are

considered unacceptable by the white public are excluded from your textbooks.

This is why I encourage you to seek an alternative education, an education built on the personal narratives of our community. We must reclaim our education and we must do so with the documentation of our and our people's experiences.

This alternative education can be found in narratives like Catina Bacote's "Up North." In this text, Bacote challenges traditional storytelling by centering her story around a black woman and her family. Bacote crafted a story which valued the perspective of black women and described her grandmother's experiences with a blunt clarity. I learned more about black perseverance in America in this text than I ever did in my textbooks. A particularly powerful moment was when Bacote's grandmother Louise boarded a Greyhound to the city that would become her future home. Along this journey, Louise gets off the bus in a small, rural town to get milk for her baby. She is met with hostile stares and palpable tension from the white residents around her. The reader is immersed in flashbacks of klan robes, white terror, and her time as a sharecropper. That same powerlessness she felt as a child, tied to a plantation she was forced to maintain for its white owner, came back to her. But so did a story her grandmother told her about small forms of resistance. There was this dipper, a tin cup, which was supposed to be used to provide water for her grandmother's white slave owners. Her grandmother, as an act of defiance, would drink from that same cup when she was alone or with friends. Although this resistance wasn't explicit, it was a way to take back some power and assert her humanity. This story gave Louise the strength to enter the gas station, buy what she needed, and get back on her bus. She came from a line of strong women who in their own ways stood up against racism, and this knowledge guided her. This is the power of the stories of your ancestors and your people. These stories will empower you and provide you with the foundation you need to see beyond American myths of democracy and freedom. This type of education will show you what it means to be black and American.

By consuming the narratives of your ancestors and your black brothers and sisters, you will learn of your own identity. You will learn how you fit into this country and what those before you have gone through to figure this out as well. By being grounded in your identity, you will be able to make your own decisions and judgments about our society. So, ask your parents and grandparents about their history. Take in their tribulations and triumphs and their experiences living in this world as black and as Ethiopian. Read about the lives of others who, like you, do not have their stories represented in institutional education. Reclaim your education.

Love, Mel

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To My Little Sister, Dani

Olivia Genao

To my little sister, Dani,

When I was younger I told people that our dad was destined to be a chef.

Sure, he would cook nightly meals with maybe a little more skill and zeal than the average parent, but what made me so sure that his purpose in life was to cook for others was much more related to the very specific image that was and always will be imprinted in my mind.

There's a very recognizable way in which his face lights up. This subtle but all-encompassing change in demeanor is usually accompanied by bouts of laughter, loud bachata music, and a demonstration of confident yet slightly disjointed Spanish dance moves.

When I was younger, I associated this image simply with our dad cooking. But as I've gotten older, I've realized that his palpable pride and bliss while he's cooking is much more connected to his background than it is to the act of composing a dish. And in the kitchen it's really only ever accompanied by Caribbean food— *platanos* sitting half sliced on the counter, *yucca con mojo* simmering on the stove.

It's incredible to me that this same person who is so proud of his culture, so content, and so sure of who he is, can sit across from me and say "I know where my home is but that doesn't mean I've found my community. I haven't."

He'll tell you that he hasn't always felt this way. He'll tell you that the place where he lives has transformed how he expresses his culture. He'll explain why even his siblings, with whom he shares two parents, identify differently than he does.

Dani, I'm telling you this because I've seen you begin to struggle. For a long time I struggled in the same way. I know that coming from a mixed background makes understanding our identities and place in the world hard. I know that it's tempting to identify with what we most resemble, because that decreases the chances that those around us will call it into question. I know that those around us will make it feel as though we can only *truly* be one thing. But I know that many of us don't only identify with what we resemble at first glance, if it's what we identify with at all.

Growing up, I never would've guessed that our dad had had such a similar struggle.

Today, Jamaica, Queens, New York is not a particularly diverse place. In the 1980s this was even more true. Knowing that his chances of graduating from his local high school in Flushing, Queens, were low, our dad woke up an hour before the rest of his family members, slurped the contents of a cup containing more sugar than coffee, hopped on his dirt bike and headed to school in the next city over. After school, he'd spend hours playing basketball with his black friends from his almost all-black high school who saw his caramel-colored skin and teasingly called him Hispanic slurs. He might also spend time with his porcelain-skinned girlfriend, whose friends and family members saw his unkempt, pronounced afro and called him black slurs. When

his dirt bike was stolen, he continued the routine on a ninja street bike. When that was stolen, he traveled in a Mazda rx7. When that was stolen, he walked.

Our dad is comfortable being called Hispanic. He's also comfortable checking the box that says "Black" when options like Hispanic aren't available. He understands that he is both. But when he's posed with the absurd, impossible, and painfully common question of "What are you?", he'll respond with neither. Instead, you'll get a single-word response: "Dominican." Ask him if he's Hispanic or if he's part black and he'll respond with a shrug, "technically, sure."

As a kid in Queens, he was burdened with labels he didn't own, and had no interest in owning. But whether he chose to play basketball one day or spend time on the Italian side of town the next, he returned at night to a house that was never quiet, with a kitchen that never stopped bustling, and a mother who would hover over his plate until every bite of *platanos* had been cleaned off of it. He'd go home to a place where he didn't have to question his culture or his identity because each were so deeply embedded in the food he was eating and the family that was surrounding him.

We know that when he graduated he moved to California, alone. There, people continued to classify him without knowing anything about his background. He still struggled to feel a sense of belonging in either the black community or the Hispanic community. But what was different was that there was no haven to return to at the end of the day. He recently told me that if he had known that, he isn't sure he would've left behind what he did.

But I think that if he hadn't left, he wouldn't have learned to have confidence in his identity even in the absence of a community that understood it, and maybe he wouldn't have been able to teach me to do the same.

Because in time you'll find that while your mixed appearance and culture mean you can't comfortably occupy space in the black community, the Latinx community will rarely offer you a seat without a sideways glance. You'll find that in these spaces and in others, people will make assumptions about both you—your upbringing, your values, your experiences— and about where you belong simply because the *exact* shade of your skin deviates from the shade expected.

But because of this you'll also find that the way you choose to identify doesn't have to align with the way strangers or peers choose to classify you. What you decide on will probably have some relation to our lineage and biology, but the fact that you chose a ethnic identity that feels most like *home* is of so much more importance.

I know that the Mexican half of us is what dominates our appearance. I know that at home, in LA, that's the part of us that it's easiest to find a community for, and it's the part of us that is met with the least skepticism. And I know that because of that, it's the part of us that's easiest to identify with. But I also know the guilt that comes with choosing one identity and feeling like you're abandoning another.

Just like our dad did, you'll see that society is all too eager to label you as one thing. But you'll also see that like most people, you're simply more than that.

Because when I think about my culture, I think about the remarkable and sizable Mexican community we had around us growing up. But I also think about the much smaller Dominican community that sometimes seemed to exist only in the confines of our kitchen. And that community has done just as much to shape who I've become.

When I was younger, I read our dad's willingness to slave away in the kitchen for hours as a love for cooking.

When I was younger, I saw his Sunday morning bachata dance sessions as him being in a good mood.

But now I understand that neither was that simple. Because of the many times my dad stood in the middle of the warmly lit kitchen, in the midst of a chaotic food scene, music in the air mingling with the unmistakable scent of spices, he never once failed to extend his hand and beckon us to join.

And he was inviting us to be a part of something much larger than a single dance.

Love, Olivia

Rebuking America's Racial Story

An Open Letter by Nader Granmayeh

Dear admitted Yale student,

As I settled into Yale's academic scene in August, one of the first lessons I learned was: "**race is a story**," an invented idea. The racial classifications we participate in a day to day basis serve to divide us.

This is how my English 114 seminar, The Racial Imaginary, was pitched to me before I elected to enroll in the class. **Race is a story**. I write to you, at the conclusion of this semester, with the intention of offering that new perspective on race in America.

Race is a story.

You ought to know I am speaking from a very specific perspective. I am a male born in New York City to parents of Iranian heritage. Despite not fitting traditional categories of "white," my skin color has afforded me great privilege in our society. Our class has interacted with pieces written by white authors that come off as self congratulatory and seem to want to divert attention away from them. The goal of this letter is not to do that. I, by no means, have been successful in changing my behavior to follow the goals I am going to set out here. In fact, part of my motivation behind writing this piece is to help me understand where I can adjust my behavior to make change. As you read this letter, it is important that I acknowledge I cannot speak to specific experiences of certain minority groups. I can, however, offer whomever is reading, regardless of race, a new lens to view our racial divisions through and a means of moving forward armed with that knowledge.

It may be clear to you how race physically impacts someone's body. Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Letter to my Son" primarily focuses on those who try to dispossess his agency over his body.

News coverage and historical recounts of racism frequently focus on the physical harm racism manifests as. The incredible effort to expose these shortcomings in our society today becomes a problem, though, when it is the only story we consume. Prior to taking this class, racism felt like a hateful ideology that I could never imagine participating in. Our efforts were best spent objecting to the people who fundamentally believed in the inferiority of races and help correct back against the way our implicit biases impact minorities. This worthy and impactful goal is not the full picture, though. Racism exists at a much deeper level than this single story might suggest. I, for example, have never felt a threat to the autonomy of my body, but I can also speak to my own experiences with race and prejudice. More specifically, I can speak to my experience outside our racial hierarchy despite my "white" label suggesting I should be empowered by it.

My Iranian heritage is one that is central to my identity. At times, I feel incredibly isolated from my peers. My cultural practices are different. I speak a different language at home. My parents were raised in a different country. That country is a state sponsor of terrorism. The word "Iran" is synonymous with "nuclear threat" or George Bush's "Axis of **Evil**." Introducing myself as Iranian, or Persian as many Iranians prefer to say, to defend against Iran's connotations, is sometimes worrisome; people have all sorts of biases. My traditional Iranian name is hard to pronounce and even I have trouble with how to say it. My college application essay focused on this crisis around the identity that is so central to me. How can something so important to me be a constant source of stress and division? None of the threatens my body. Yet it still instills in me a level of discomfort. Slurs aren't frequently sent in my direction, although the one time it was, six years ago, still sticks with me. These are experiences you would not know about had you simply looked at my classification as white. Very personally, a person of my heritage's story gets *erased* when I am lumped into the bucket of "whiteness."

When we talk about race in this binary, black or white way, we perpetuate the idea that there is something

fundamentally different between us that exists at a human level. Whiteness, and race more generally, is a constructed phenomenon meant to establish hierarchy. Participating in these distinctions is our first mistake as a society. Categorizing people by the color of their skin is the very basis of racism. The first step in dismantling our racial hierarchy is refusing to participate in it to begin with. Push our administrators and admissions officers to explain why Yale must publish and track “racial breakdowns” of their matriculating classes. The reason is to prove the diversity of our student body. But Black, Asian, White, Hispanic are all markers to signal what you have experienced, not an actual reflection of how different we are. My “whiteness” is a lie. The connotation of that classification misses who I am.

I am not suggesting one should be “color-blind” or ignore racial biases. I am simply saying that our overarching goal should be to no longer distribute people into rigid buckets of race that erase our individuality and are meant to divide us. I should not have filled in that box applying to this school. Nor should I have told the ACT they can group me as white for their statistics, either. Yale got my story, but it came through from my voice, not from my racial identification. Do not continue to allow those distinctions to define you.

Coates offers a similar framework in his open letter. He is sure to suggest people “believe themselves to be white” rather than inherently are “white,” and that the racial classification itself is rooted in a history of “domination and exclusion.”¹ In an interview with Barbara Fields Coates was clear that he was asking all Americans to “explore how the falsehoods of racecraft are made in everyday life, in order to work out how to unmake them.”² It is a constructed term; it is a **construct**. Thomas Chatterton Williams reiterated in a new book committing to teaching people to “*Unlearn[] Race*” that one’s “authentic identity is not whiteness.”³ The pride you might feel about your

culture and heritage is a separate classification than a general whiteness. I am proud of the Iranian community I am a part of and the traditions my family has passed down to be. I identify with being from the Middle East, but at its core, I am proud of my heritage, not of my classification.

Now, some might suggest, correctly, that the most impact we can make is by understanding our current racial system and working within it to even it out rather than devoting ourselves to breaking down the system entirely. I somewhat agree. I’d caution against losing sight of our main objective. But even so, as it exists today, there are still two impactful ways to break down the hierarchy established by race: decolonization and humanization.

Decolonization is a concept first introduced to me by an article written by Zoe Samudzi that our class analyzed. The article’s main advocacy, as given by the title, is rejecting the idea of a “diverse” education. Educators in today’s world, and notably at Yale, frequently “diversify” the range of topics their curriculum discusses and are satisfied with their attempt to be inclusive. This complacency is hugely problematic, as it “leaves oppressive structures intact, and in fact, insulates from criticism.” The theory is derived from a Ewe-Mina proverb: “until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” Applied in this context, as long as our attempts to diversify education relies on institutional and traditional stories, it will never give a clear and fair picture. Even worse, by repeating the institutional stories, like the United States’ decision to intern Japanese Americans during World War II, without the perspective of the hunted, the Japanese Americans, we re-enforce the story written by the hunter. A direct way to engage with this lesson is identify where your curriculum is falling short and guide discussion in class against it, if possible. Ask your teacher to include primary, first person narratives. If not, educate yourself on decolonized and personal narratives regarding the topic at hand. Research, read, explore

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFPwkOwaweo&feature=youtu.be>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/11/thomas-chatterton-williams-self-portrait-black-white/601408/>

the literature regarding the topic and learn what your traditional education misses. As I move forward, I plan on being active in class discussions when this problem arises. I want to show my classmates and educators that these stories are incomplete.

A similar curriculum shift needs to occur to include the idea of humanization. A lot of contemporary race discussions seem to unlink a person and their race; there seems to be very little connection between a human being and the debates being had over their bodies. Fundamentally, we need to inject humanity back into our discussions about race. Several African-American students at my high school voiced concern that our history curriculum focused too heavily on slavery, when the minority black population was treated as subhuman, and not enough on periods like the Harlem Renaissance, when black artistry and culture were on full display. This can often come as an effect of attempting to diversify our education. The stories told by the hunter will frequently try to downplay the humanity of the hunted. The problem is that continual emphasis on impersonal stories that paint a race as subhuman re-enforce that notion in our heads. A student sitting through a year of history that continuously hears about moments Africans Americans were dispossessed of their body begins to internalize that hierarchy. Any educator that tells those stories, and they *should*, also has a responsibility to celebrate the triumphs and humanity of those same people. As students, you and I should take a similar approach to decolonizing work. Call out these errors when you see them. Push for more discussions about the humanity of the “hunted.” Even when discussing slavery, insist your teacher includes sources and stories that talk about how Africans Americans tried maintained their humanity and bodily autonomy. If there is institutional pushback, call this out in class discussions. Research on your own and present the evidence in papers and assignments. Do not accept the finality that “this is how it's taught.”

Most importantly, I'm also asking you to be respectful. Too frequently in our current discourse we accuse others of bad intentions. We are too quick to find mistakes, blind spots, negligence and assign a single story of malice. You are fortunate

to be armed with this knowledge now. I am fortunate to go to an excellent school and lucky enough to get into this class. I am not morally superior to my peers who have not been afforded the same privilege. History teachers that don't do enough to incorporate the personal experience of Native Americans are not racist. Conflating their negligence, at worst, with a word used to describe those in our society who fundamentally believe in the inferiority of certain groups of people is a disservice and unproductive. As you go about doing your part to break the system we live in, I am asking that you channel people's desire to help and do not weaponize their mistakes against them. Well intentioned citizens, like yourself, deserved to be pointed in the right direction, not chastised for being less informed.

We are in this fight together.
- Nader Darius Granmayeh

Dear AP Curriculum Writer...

Amaris Hester

Dear AP Curriculum Writer,

I really enjoyed taking AP World History junior year. I think it was my favorite class of the entire AP suite, because it spanned the entirety of our human experience from prehistory to the present. Taking World History drastically changed how I viewed the world, and given the thousands of students you educate each year as one of the biggest education organizations in the United States, you have the power to drastically impact the perspectives of an entire generation. That's why I'm writing you to tell you why I'm so upset with how your AP curriculum changed the curriculum to only include the years after 1450.

I can understand why you might want to make these changes to the curriculum. It seems like that you wanted to allow teachers to be able to actually finish the curriculum; there might have been some problems with getting students through one very long and expansive curriculum (and therefore keeping students from being properly prepared for the AP test.) I think this is a valid concern - even my briskly-paced, one-chapter-a-week history teacher struggled to teach us everything, and I can easily see how this would be a welcome relief to stressed teachers and overwhelmed students. But I think is part of the rigor of the AP Program - students should be expected to learn lots of information relatively quickly, especially if the AP class is marketed as the equivalent to a college class. But if you don't buy this argument, there are many institutional steps that your organization could do to offset this crunch, like giving teachers a sample timeline to help them organize their lesson planning more efficiently. You could also curve the exam less strictly in to make it less necessary that students know absolutely all of the material, easing some of the pressures on teachers to teach

everything (given that only seven percent of students got fives on this exam in 2019, comparable to some of the notoriously difficult classes like AP Bio, it seems like you have plenty of room to give students leeway on this.) Given that you have plenty of alternatives, I don't think that the paradoxical step of putting less history in a history class is the most effective approach.

I think we differ in what a history education is really for. You've stated one reason for your curriculum change is because the current structure doesn't allow students to go in-depth about different periods in history, implying that you believe having more information about a smaller part of history is more important than knowing general trends about it. Under your new curriculum, some countries will certainly be emphasized more in class, promoting harmful ideas of which countries are more important than others. Prioritizing a curriculum that teaches a broader array of topics, as your previous one did, minimizes this effect because it encourages a more equitable distribution of time and attention, and therefore prevents you from using your authority as a prominent academic organization to sway student perceptions of the world. I would also add that much of this depth is unnecessary at the high school level. For students who are interested in studying history later on, the point of high school survey classes is to cover as much material as possible so they can find things that may pique their interests in college. For students who aren't interested in taking another history class, it's not likely these students are ever going to encounter this material ever again, so this is the school's one shot at educating them about the history of the world.

Although I am understanding of this curriculum change, there's one specific reason why I am against the changes you've decided to make to this curriculum: the erasure of much of the neglected histories of early non-European countries. I'm sure you've heard the TED talk by the writer Chimamanda Adichie warning about the "single story," where she explains the harms about reducing our view of someone else to just one narrative. For example, there's a particular part in which Adichie talks about her experiences coming to America, where she was

greeted by her roommate who was surprised that her life in Africa wasn't rife with poverty and conflicts. I think it's pretty common for other high school students to see Africa similarly to Adiche's roommate - I can say I did before I took AP World History. They develop this from the strife they see in the news, the want they see on television, and yes, the information taught to them in lessons at school; the things that are deemed "most important" for them to know about Africa are consistently negative. I can tell you that my perspectives on Africa were largely based on the AP Comparative Government class I took, which detailed each coup Nigeria experienced in its sixty years of existence, and the news articles I read, even on reputable news outlets, that predominately detailed the persistent political and economic challenges facing the continent.

These challenges facing Africa are real ones, to be sure. But only expounding on these challenges completely ignores the rich cultural heritage found across Africa and the history that developed it. To complete this narrative would require a student to go out of his or her way to find more aspects about African society and history, which very few have the time or the inclination to do. (And while I've used the example of Africa here because my view of the country was most transformed by this class, the same could be said about almost every non-European civilization your curriculum used to cover.)

Your curriculum used to be a solution to this exceedingly narrow view of Africa that I held. You taught about Mansa Musa, believed to be the richest man in the world. You taught about the salt and gold mines that brought wealth to the Kingdom of Ghana. You taught about the civilizations in Timbuktu. You taught about the Swahili traders. By reaching back past 1450 to teach the complete history of the world, you ensured that I received information that showed the power and wealth that African civilizations once had, extending past my limited "single story" of Africa nations. I now am able to look at Africa through a more discerning eye, seeing it as a place that has the potential to restore the richness and influence of its past. But now that you've effectively chopped the majority of human

history out of your World History curriculum, you make it so that students like me will never be taught this information and therefore never learn the more complete view of places like Africa that they are unfamiliar with.

I believe that this change to the curriculum is especially pernicious given the time period in which it begins - 1450. Around this time period, two major changes were happening in Europe: the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration. By beginning during the Renaissance, you introduce Europe during its peak, while ignoring the thousand-year time span in which Europe was ravished by warfare and failed to produce as many intellectual milestones than during the Renaissance. This, in fact, reinforces the single story that Europe has always been the most technologically, academically, and politically complex society in the world, when in fact it was outshadowed by the Islamic Empires and China throughout much of the pre-1450 time period. This is further compounded by the fact that 1450 coincides with the beginning of the Age of Exploration, when European powers began to colonize parts of Africa, Asia, and Americas. The issue at hand not so much the reduced coverage of Africa in later time periods, but the context in which Africa appears in them. Post 1450-events consistently puts these colonized territories in a subservient position relative to European societies, like as through colonization and slavery, making them seem less powerful in comparison and reinforcing the narrative of a powerful Europe triumphing over "uncivilized" lands. This also takes away a pre-colonial point of reference to what African society could have been if colonization hadn't happened, since the political structures that were introduced during the colonial period are considered to be a major contributor to the political strife and economic instability African countries experience.

Looking at the bigger picture, this maintenance of one single story of non-European cultures curriculum hinders the accomplishment of two goals of a strong history education: giving an accurate interpretation of the past and helping students understand cultures that are not their own. The dualities that I explained above mean that under your

curriculum, students will come away with a skewed and incorrect interpretation of world history. And since they most likely be unchallenged in their original narrow viewpoints by other institutions, like the media, they will operate under this faulty knowledge for life. And because students will not be encouraged to consider non-Europeans civilizations under a different light, they cannot possibly have a better understanding of their cultures. What good is a curriculum change if it means that students come out of the classroom worse off than if you had left it alone? You, as one of the most powerful institutions in American high school education, have the mandate to create the next generation of informed, forward-thinking citizens. Don't let us down now.

Amaris Hester

Dear White People: Let's Talk About Our Self-Segregation at Yale

Clayton Jelsma

In high school, we all hung out in the alcove. This was our place, our hangout spot. My friends and I would bring speakers to school just so we could dance here during breaks from class. We ate lunch in the alcove every day while blasting Reggaeton and Bollywood music. We'd roam the halls endlessly together with our laughs filling up the school. Everyone in high school knew my friends and me as the "diverse" group. However, we branded ourselves as "Friggin Do It:" a name we made up.

At first, the label of "diverse" was something that I had pride in. A label that I loved about my friend group. We were all together, sharing and partaking in one another's culture. However, it caused me to ignore the racial dynamics of our own friend group. Despite being "diverse," about half of my friends in "Friggin Do It" were white. There is nothing wrong with this at first glance. However, whether people knew it or not, there seemed to be a sense of white self-segregation within our friend group. Many of my friends who were white would hang out together more often, and they would unconsciously ignore the people of color in my friend group. This was not true for everyone, but the overall tendency was still there.

There were a lot of times when we did all hang out together. Our yearly trips to the Wilson County fairs, filled with stomach-turning rides and fried oreos. Our weekend hangouts at Rachel's house, where we would munch on her mom's famous chocolate chip cookies. And, of course, our lunches in the alcove every school day. Despite all our time together, little groups formed, as a result of the self-segregation, within the overall

friend group. I was oblivious at first because I always focused on how “diverse” we looked on the outside; it took me a while to see the racial dynamics underpinning our friend group.

My best friend, Aerial, pointed this out to me once she got left out of a trip to the Green Hills mall. She felt pushed to the side by some of the white members of our group, and I was not surprised. Actually, it was obvious when reflecting. Half of “Friggin Do It” spent weekends together, went to separate parties than the rest of the group, and hung out with other people as well. This half consisted mostly of white people, and not by coincidence. Sadly, I had to rely on Aerial to see these faults in our friend group; but, this is reality. Nonetheless, I opened my eyes to this form of self-segregation and how it operates all around us. This wasn’t just happening in our own friend group; it was all over the school.

Yes, the University School of Nashville, my high school, is a predominantly white institution, and white people make up most of the school. However, that does not excuse the fact that most friend groups were all white. Scrolling through the instagrams of so many of my high school peers, I would only see white people on their feed with maybe the occasional “token” person of color. Yet, these same white people put blame on the students of color for self-segregating. Everyone pointed towards the majority black friend group two grades below me as an example of self-segregation without looking upon themselves. We must break this narrative of blaming people of color for self-segregating when white people engage in this same trend on an even larger scale.

I see this practice of white self-segregation all too often. When I came to Yale, I was not surprised to encounter the same thing happening. Already, only a few months in, and there are what people call the “white girl squads” or the “Berkeley squad,” which all consist almost entirely of white people. This is common to see in the dining hall, on the street, and at parties.

Hema Patel, a first year in Saybrook College, sees this trend happening as well: “It happens for several reasons but the main one is that white people are always more comfortable with other white people, and honestly, people of color don’t always

want to maintain white friendships.” White people typically don’t want to put themselves in settings that are predominantly for people of color due to the uncomfot they might feel finally being in a place where they aren’t considered the majority. It is as if many white people can only handle people of color in small doses or moderation. When surrounded by mostly other white people, we usually don’t have to address our own prejudices and can ignore the wide range of struggles for people of color in this university. Many white people fall into this trap of sticking to the comfort zones of their all white or majority white friend groups. You and I don’t have to follow this mold. We need to break the white solidarity all around us.

The formation of these white friend groups may be more complicated than white people simply sticking with other white people. Hema notes that the creation of white self-segregation also may be due to the fact that people of color don’t always want to maintain white friendships. White people tend to take friends of color for granted, and we think we can ignore our prejudice just because we are friends with people of different races and ethnicities. So, even if you want friends of color, you can’t instantly expect to form these relationships. White people will always need to learn, adapt, and grow from our racist tendencies, and people of color aren’t to be relied on to guide this growth. You shouldn’t expect your friends of color to stick with you through your racism; they have no obligation to sit and watch you unlearn prejudice.

Aerial did not have to point out to me the white self-segregation in the friend group: it was not her job to show me, especially since this self-segregation is the product of white people’s actions. Yet, she still did anyway, and I’m grateful for that. However, I can’t rely on her to point out every prejudice or flaw; I have to begin to spot these myself and address them. I can’t expect Aerial to always stick with me through my blindness to racism and my own biases; yet, I can be grateful if she does. This goes the same for you. You must respect the decision of your friends of color if they don’t want to point out issues to you, if they would rather just spend time in spaces of color, or if they need a break from you. The creation of spaces of color, at least

partly, is due to people growing tired of constantly addressing the prejudice or blindness of their white peers. Although this may facilitate the formation of all white friend groups, you can't shame your friends of color for creating spaces without white people, for creating a place to feel free of this burden of constantly navigating racism.

Many people still blame these spaces as being sources of self-segregation, pressuring people of color to branch out into white spaces instead; however, this pressure should be pointed towards you and me. At Yale, the cultural centers are the main spaces of color within this predominantly white institution. These are important places because, like Hema said, being friends with white people can be taxing on people of color. Instead of blaming, we should self-reflect on the ways we promote self-segregation and on how we can counter this. It is not the responsibility of people of color to break up white friend groups and white space by actively working to be friends with white people. Rather, white people should look at themselves to tear down the white space we create. We should be the ones reaching out and trying to make friends with people of color.

In a 2007 edition of the Yale Daily News, Niko Bowie, the past publicity chair for the Af-Am House, writes on self-segregation at Yale, emphasizing that white students "should be willing to join — or at least be familiar with — the cultural groups that they claim self-segregate." This is where to begin breaking the mold of white self-segregation. A lot of white people don't realize that many of these spaces are open to white people as well. However, people, who choose to go to events at the House, La Casa, the NACC, the AACC, or other affinity groups, often expect to be welcomed by everyone just for stepping foot outside the comfort zone of their white friend groups. This is not the case, and it never will be, so you should not expect that. Yes, you should attempt to deviate from the inclination to self-segregate by putting yourself in new positions and environments, but you should not look to get a pat on the back by everyone for doing so.

Adrien, a student in Silliman College, expresses confusion about the cultural centers and events. He wants to partake in

certain programs that are "open to all," but he also understands and respects the need for spaces of color. As a result, Adrien is "against self-inviting himself to most cultural events and houses." Being friends with mostly POC, he typically waits until being invited to attend. There is no single answer for how to respectfully engage with other cultures, so it is hard to know if you are overstepping. As a white person myself, I can't tell you where you can go and where you can't in terms of the cultural houses and events. However, there are certain places and events that you should probably not be at; these are where people of color convene over shared experiences and identity; for instance, events like PL meetings and clubs like BSAY are not places to find yourself. Navigating these situations is something to constantly struggle with as a white person, and it's something to always learn and grow from. All you can do is be receptive to the people whose space you are in by acknowledging your presence as a white person and listening to their concerns.

Nothing More Than a Single Story

Jean-Joel Joojo Ocran

I lived most of my life near the Kaneshie Market, in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. Similar to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's story in her "The Danger of a Single Story," my parents believe I started writing as early as they could remember. Although not specific enough, I would also rather not disagree with them. After all, they still keep framed pieces of my letters to them on their birthdays, silver wedding, and other special events. They still keep the poems and stories I had made for them, as bad as they might have been as of then. Those times in my early childhood, I wrote stories about nuclear families and their vacation trips to wonderful places such as Disneyland. I wrote about rollercoasters and the four seasons. My characters were nothing like the people in Kaneshie. Yet, just like Adichie, as a child I had never lived outside my home country. I had never lived outside of Kaneshie or Ghana for that matter. We only had two seasons, the wet and the dry. And I lived with my extended family with several of my cousins. We had no vacation trips, no Disneyland. There were more crucial things to spend money on, and sometimes vacations meant more work than fun.

Just like Adichie, because I only read Western books, I formed the perception that all stories had to be written in the way the Western ones were written. All characters had to be just like those in my foreign books. Fortunately for me, one of our radio stations introduced a national reading project. This reading project would provide African story books at a reasonable cost and give rewards to those who could answer questions on them. Those were the favorite moments of my childhood. My father would return home late from work with the book for the month from the radio station. Of course he would add the incentive of not getting caned for reading. Unlike

my sister who would sometimes choose the cane, I loved reading these books. African books by African writers became my definition of amazing. *Weep not Child. The Dancing Money Box. Things Fall Apart. No Sweetness Here. Ananse In the Land of Idiots. Dilemma of A Ghost.* Just a few of the books I read and that I loved and that I remember. Similar to Adichie's experience, the Western books I read only taught me a single definition of what writing meant. They taught me what my characters were supposed to be like, the kinds of seasons there were and what my stories were supposed to be about. In the African books I read, I realized that there was not one way of telling a story. These books were about people I could relate more to. People who played Oware, a Ghanaian pebble game. People who mostly grew up sharing small spaces with cousins. People who were simply much more like I was.

In Kaneshie, we lived in a decent home. My father had sold plantain before. My mother had sold drinks on her head to make just enough money for school. They both worked very hard to thrive. That means for my cousins, siblings and me, school was our priority. Going to school was not an option, and doing well in school was a requirement. It was an expectation. Hearsay made us believe that if we did not study hard enough, we would be "poverty-stricken like those in the Kaneshie market." A place which was filled with what Theresa Ennin in *Makola*, one of my favorite Ghanaian poems about the busiest market in Ghana, would describe as "Urchins and school dropouts," "Leaders and teachers yet unborn." Just like Adichie thought about Fide, her family's house worker, my idea of the market woman was that she was poor. That was the only story I had heard of her. When she gave me a free meal one day after a number of encounters, I became stupefied. Was she not the same poor woman? The reason why I had not thought of her as a kind woman was because all I had heard about her was that she was poor, and that that was all she was. That was the "single story" I had heard of the market woman. By assuming that the market woman could be nothing but poor, I made one story of her become the only story I knew of her.

Several years later, I recollect this lesson as I leave Ghana to go to college in the United States, just like Adichie did when she left Nigeria to go to college in the United States. My American friend was shocked that I was a school editor, and that I had done all my work in English. What baffled him most was when I told him that English was the official language of Ghana. Just like Adichie's American roommate, this friend was surprised I spoke English so well. My friend's assumption of me was that because I was African, I had lived a pitiful life, the life shown by American TV shows of Africans in general. My friend also believed that since I had lived my whole life in Ghana, I had not been exposed to most of the infrastructure and technology America had. My friend thought of Africa as a country in which people lived the same lives. In many ways, Adichie's story felt very similar to mine. We both experienced the consequence of people's stereotypical understandings of Africa. Just like Adichie, in my home country, I had never consciously identified myself as African though I have also fully embraced that identity. In the U.S. I have suddenly become an "expert" on Africa. In late night philosophical discussions, I am supposed to know all about Rwanda and Ethiopia and be able to translate some Swahili words into English. In fact, I know little about these countries and I speak Ga, Twi, and Fante, which are all Ghanaian local languages. I am, however, trying to add Swahili to that list.

As time went on, I began to understand my American friend's preconceived notions about me, just as Adichie understood of her roommate's response of her. If I had grown up in America, and all I knew about Africa was from TV shows, I too would think of Africa as a place of war, sickness, hunger and poverty. Certainly, Africa has its problems. The Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs's 2017 Revision report explains that the African population is rapidly increasing beyond available resources and is expected to double in 2050. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) data released in October 2019 also explains that every 2 minutes a child in Africa dies of Malaria and that Sub-Saharan African children account for most of the deaths. Several

university graduates do not have jobs. I do not attempt to deny the reality of the problems Africa faces. I also do not isolate myself from these problems. In the era of 'Dumsor,' the name Ghanaians have given to power crisis, my friends and I as well as several other students had to use torch lights or candles to study for our national examination. Each day, to get to school, I had to take a 'trɔtrɔ' ride along some of the untarred and bumpy roads of Accra, then after, walk quite a distance to school. Although all of this is part of my story, it should not be the only story about me. To do so would ignore all the fun times I had with friends, all the gatherings around fire to talk, all the journeys we took and the jokes we made about each other, as well as the great bonds we made and even all the shared memories and shared struggle which at times became reference points in our enjoyable conversations.

Perhaps if I had not formed only one notion of the market woman, and had been at least told that she could be nice at times, I would not have been shocked at her kind gesture. After I had asked her how come she was so different from the rest, she asked me what I meant by "different" and what I meant by "rest." The truth is that I had no response to her questions. I realized that the notion that she was a market woman and therefore had to fit into a category of people reduces her humanity, and could be discouraging to any one in a category to move out of the defined characteristics of the group. That makes me wonder about what would change if the world was shown positive views of Africa. People would see the beautiful scenery, rivers and natural resources. They would see places like Kilimanjaro, the highest point of elevation in Africa, the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, and Nzulezo, a village on the surface of Lake Tandane in Ghana. Poverty would no longer be the single story of Africa. Neither would disease nor suffering. Then perhaps everyone one would think of Africa differently. They would learn about 'Kpanlogo' and 'Azonto,' some African dances and may appreciate African songs and the rich cultural heritage. African people would be more incentivized to create a better society since they are no longer perceived as possessing only negative attributes.

My story cannot represent the diversity of stories of Africans or Ghanaians or even friends who have shared similar memories and struggles. My story is literally a single story, one story. When we choose one story and make it the only story about a group of people we risk forming a biased opinion about them which dehumanizes them and which could be a danger to not only those people, but to us as people who rely on information to make our decisions and interactions. Even this story about myself does not provide all the details about my life, all my experiences, my interests, and the kinds of skills I possess. In the very fundamental unit of society, the individual, no single story can capture the actual story.

Overcoming Racial Stereotypes

Alvaro Perpuly

“You are only viewed as hard-working laborers, not a thinker, but a person built for manual labor.” These are the words spoken by my father, a Mexican who immigrated to the United States over twenty-nine years ago, about the picture many people have in mind about Mexicans.

The biggest struggle for my father immigrating to the United States was “being part of a stereotype and having to show everyone that you are more than just the Mexican stereotype.” He believes people only saw him and all the other Mexicans as “bound for manual labor” whether it’s stacking countless boxes in an agricultural packing house or picking fruits in a field on a hot steamy day. He, however, saw himself as bound for more than just manual labor as he studied hard during his time in college like myself and all other Yalies. He even went to the best university in all Latin America-- Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. After four hard years of countless all-nighters, stress, and exams, he graduated with a bachelor's degree in Biology. Shortly after graduation at a young age, he took a plane to Miami, Florida where he embarked on a new adult life filled with high hopes and dreams, especially in achieving the coveted “American Dream” everyone talks about. But instead, his degree was seen as nothing more than random letters on a single piece of white paper and had to end up stacking boxes in a packing house, even though he knew he had the intellect to contribute more to the agricultural packing house by using his brain and not just his body.

I was shocked to hear his story, especially as a student myself. I have high hopes and dreams after college and God knows I do not plan on working in manual labor stacking boxes after all my sleepless nights studying for different classes. But

for my father, a person who highly values his ideas and worked hard had no other option just because of him being a Mexican, where he was supposedly destined to do manual labor according to many in American society.

“It puts double the work on you as you need both to survive with little money and you need to work even harder than everyone else, especially white people to show that you are different and did have the intellect to think and do more.” To him, that meant working extra hours, learning the agricultural business beyond what his position required, and always preparing to do anything extra. My father then told me a story about how in the packing house he worked in, there was a board of directors and one of the board of directors named Philip detested him. He recalled overhearing a conversation where he referred to him as a “wetback” behind his back. Regardless of Philip not liking my father and vice versa, Philip was my dad’s boss and he had to follow orders for him. It was a moment of feeling powerless for him especially since he knows his boss had racist sentiments towards him. One of the things Philip would make my father do is to make his presentations for the Board of Directors meetings and my father would do it, without any credit for it. He spent countless hours creating the content of the presentations, making all those bar graphs and line graphs and all the other five million graphs used in company presentations, on top of his actual job of just stacking boxes. Philip would then use my father’s presentations for his Board of Directors meetings and Philip would get the credit despite not typing a single word or thinking of his own ideas.

Eventually, Bill, the president of the Packing House company, with whom my father is still good friends to this day after nearly three decades, found out that Philip did not create any of the presentations, but rather it was my father. Bill then requested that Philip personally invite my father to the Board of Directors meetings and have him give the presentation, not Philip. My father recalls how red Philip’s face was, being embarrassed and humiliated when he had to invite him to the Board of Directors meeting and watch my father give the presentation that he was supposed to be doing. It was a moment

of triumph for him and a little more than a month later did my father become the boss over Philip.

I had never imagined my father going through experiences like those. I knew my father had gone through some struggles in coming to the United States, but never like this.

My father then laughed for a second stating “But, I do remember the shock in all Board of Directors at that meeting when I was giving the presentation.” As a Mexican, he always saw that no one, at first, would turn to him to solve any problem or think that he would have the solution to any issue, whether that be a problem in the company or a problem in the real world. He was just seen as a hard worker in manual labor and nothing more. But he described when he did show people that he did have a solution to different problems, especially around the agricultural packing house and at that first Board of Directors meeting he went to, then his peers would be surprised. My father explained with a cold and straight face how “they were surprised because they just did not expect that level of thought from a Mexican.” Afterward, my father would then gain the respect of his coworkers, especially those in administrative positions and they changed their opinion on him. But it was then that my father had realized that “these people do really stereotype of every single Mexican that way.” They had only seen all Mexicans in the lens of the single story--a generalization of an entire race in the lens of one narrative, stereotype, or portrayal.

In my mind, I could only imagine how it would have felt like to be in my father’s shoes. In my lifetime, I have had some experiences of being part of a single narrative as a Mexican, such as deportation and ICE jokes, but for the most part, I would brush it off. After hearing my father’s story, I wonder about what I could have done myself in those situations to dismantle these stereotypes about Mexicans all being “illegals.” I have tried to some extent to dismantle Mexican single stories myself from my hard work to get into Yale to the amounts of energy I put into everything I do. But I only hope I can have the courage to do what my father did, especially since never have I had an experience where my livelihood, survival, and dignity was at

stake as a result of a single story. Nevertheless, my father was not just part of a single story, but also a story of overcoming it as he is now the owner of his own successful agricultural packing house over twenty-nine years later. However, I had to remember that his story is just one story of overcoming the single-story, but that is not the case for everyone.

“Unfortunately, the only way to get rid of those stereotypes and generalizations about Mexicans is to prove others wrong about who you are, which will require more work.” Mexicans and other minorities are always burdened with doing this extra work and they must make a larger effort to strive for success and go beyond the single-story. He then continued by asserting “and right now in the United States, it is more obvious that people have more stereotypes about Mexicans, especially with the President. It’s more toxic.” He feels that even though he has “found comfort” in his community and the United States, he is “being attacked every day” by people like the President who truly believe Mexicans are much worse things like rapists and drug-dealers.

When our conversation was done, I could think of nothing more to do than to thank my father for talking to me about these issues and giving him a long hug. The type of hug where it feels like time stops for a moment and nothing is happening around you. I do see my father’s point though that Mexicans in the United States are in pressing times right now, especially with a President who has fueled many people in the public to buy into these awful stereotypes of Mexicans. I too do feel attacked when the President makes these claims about Mexicans on national TV because I know it’s not just him saying that, but also the twenty thousand screaming fans at every rally he does and all the people who feel liberated by every word he says. But I see people like my father and many more of my family members as people who are dismantling the single-story by working their hearts out every day to show that Mexicans can be hard-working, not just in manual labor, but in every aspect, and that we are not criminals, but rather contributors to society at large. I see my family as inspiration to me where they have shown courage, resilience, and strength in times of hardship.

Their stories give me the motivation to work harder every day not just a better future for myself, but also to show everyone what Mexicans are capable of. We are more than a single-story, but rather a group of diverse and uniquely talented people.

Letter to My Mother

Labeebah Subair

Dear Mommy,

In the beginning of my English class, we read Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Letter to My Son," and I couldn't help but wonder what form this letter would have taken if you were the one writing it to me. I wondered if you'd tell me about what it means to be raised as a black, Nigerian, Muslim, immigrant, and single-parented girl in America.

This reminds me of the first story that you told me about what it meant for you to build our family here. You repeatedly explained how you "burned bridges" to get here, and remained hopeful that your sacrifices would be worth it. When you said "bridges burned," I knew that you didn't mean anything violent, or negative, it was simply your way of expressing how much of your life you had to leave behind to pursue a better future for both yourself and your family.

This was all for the sake of what America promised to you. In the TV shows, you saw the nuclear family who had everything you could ever want for yours; the fancy cars, the white picket fences, and wealth. You were sold the American dream. It seemed as though nobody ever explained to you that this dream was not meant to include you. In fact, it purposefully excluded people like you. Your blackness, foreignness, religiousness, lack of wealth, and newness in America classified you as a minority. Perhaps the only minority you knew of back home was based on lower socioeconomic status. So, when you got here, and had to learn about navigating life as a minoritized individual, it felt as though the many sacrifices you had made might not have been worth it.

On October first of 2009, you taught me a little bit about Nigeria's history. From what I remember, you said that we had been freed from the colonization of the British in 1960, and, therefore, we had to celebrate. You and I both noticed that the

concept of being colonized was rooted in deep evil, mainly because it required the theft of a people's land, belongings, lives and cultures for the purposes of exerting power and claiming more for oneself often through the means of violence. From you, I learned that colonization is violent and I am sure you would have written that to me because it plays such a large role within our lives.

After you explained this to me, I understood why we celebrate being independent, but as I grew, I soon began to associate whiteness with colonization. I thought about all of the bridges you had "burned", and how that hope, that promise you were so strongly attached to, was taken away from you almost immediately. I wondered whether, in the same way that Nigeria had been robbed of everything it owned, including its own identity, through colonization, America attempted to treat you similarly. I listened to the joy in your voice as you explained the significance of what it meant to be free. I watched as we danced alongside the floats, in our Ankara clothing down Second Avenue in Manhattan. The energy, happiness, and pride that exuded from this celebration left me in awe. Nigeria is still not free from the effects of colonization, yet we danced to the rhythms of the shekere and talking drums as if we were.

You never actually defined what it meant to be free.

Perhaps you wanted me to develop a definition of freedom on my own, and possibly would have said so in the letter you would have written to me.

I attempted to learn about my own freedom through you, but it seemed that you had never gotten to know what freedom felt like either.

I remember the first time that I wore my hijab to school in the sixth grade, the summer after my 11th birthday. You told me that I had to "own it." I was unaware that this would be the first time that I appeared more obviously Muslim. I felt most embarrassed about my Muslim identity when my friend Tariq joked with other boys in the class saying that I probably had a tattoo of Osama bin Laden on my chest. I felt it most when my own teacher told me to take my hat off because she was not used to seeing my hair covered. Even though I understood the reason

that I was covering my hair, I was still disturbed by the fact that being more evidently Muslim made me less acceptable within the spaces that I usually inhabited. I wondered how to “own” something that had this effect on my life. I thought something that constantly set me apart amongst my peers was something I would never want to own.

Later that night, I asked what you had meant when you said to “own it” in reference to my hijab. You explained to me that every part of my identity gave me another thing I ought to be proud of, another thing that nobody could ever take away from me, another thing that I couldn’t afford to negate because I have to live with it. To own one’s identity seemed simple after that conversation, but only doable when it lacked consequences. I wonder if you would have explained the difference between the two if you had written to me.

Only a few days later, Mr. Hanley told my Social Studies class that black children who grow up in a single-parent home often end up being led astray, or having bad relationships in the future because they are seeking the love that they never received from the parent that was not part of their lives. Nobody at school knew that this was a couple months after dad left. Hearing Mr. Hanley say that forced me to confront the fact that dad was no longer going to be with us. In fact, it made me wish that he would come back. I did not want to grow into the person that Mr. Hanley described.

Mr. Hanley attempted to use his authority over us children to force us to think in an oppressive manner. It was times like these that “owning” my identity would have been most useful because his interpretation of family dynamics failed to look past the stereotypical understanding of what a family was. He did not know our family’s circumstance and therefore, had no right to predict our futures. Mr. Hanley helped me to learn that I am the only person allowed to prescribe notions about my identity. Looking back, it was only another instance for me to learn that my identity was my own, but it was difficult for me to see it that way back then.

As I write this, I am thinking of all of the moments where I wished that I could strip away the part of my identity that was

being attacked. Would you have told me about similar experiences that you’ve had in the letter you wrote to me?

I never told you about what happened during my eighth-grade senior trip to Montreal. It could have been an amazing time, but quickly became a recreation of the same experiences I’d had with my identity back at home. As we inched towards the Canadian border, the officer asked for both our birth certificates and then our passports. First, I handed him my birth certificate awaiting his response. He hesitated, and squirmed his eyes at my birth certificate. I wondered if he thought it was illegitimate. My Nigerian birth certificate looked nothing like those of my peers. A laminated, worn sheet of lined paper that denoted my birth in the simplest manner failed to compare to those of my peers decorated, with prints, seals, and their specific details of birth. I then handed him my blue, American passport. I awaited his response. He seemed confused.

“Were you born outside of the United States? How old were you when your family migrated to the United States? Are you also a Nigerian citizen?”

The questions never ceased. Each question peeled back another part of my immigrant identity in a manner that forced me to confront it.

To have your identity questioned often forces you to critique it. As much as I attempted to “own” every part of me as you told me to, it only seemed to get more difficult. Owning my identity would not remove the pain that it often came with, it was more so understanding that the societal notions surrounding my identity are often untrue. They are often meant to be used as a means of oppression and internalized destruction for people like me. Recognizing this allowed me to see the beauty within my identity.

Very often, you tell me stories about black, Muslim women who achieve astounding things as a source of motivation. I remember when I used to fence and you were so excited to tell me about Ibtihaj Muhammad winning a medal in the 2016 Olympics. “Look baby, she’s just like you,” you’d say with such contagious excitement.

Every time you tell me about people like me who despite all the odds succeed, I always find more beauty and power within my identity. You have granted me the ability to constantly seek my own definitions of my identity rather than succumbing to the social and oppressive norms that people often prescribe me with. Every time I make the choice to “own” my identity, although sometimes it may not seem doable, I am empowering myself and my experiences by dispelling the narratives that society often attempts to force me to own.

With love,
Your own, Labeebah

Yes to It All

Jessica Wang

My father who gives math riddles on car rides, who loves to grill burgers every Sunday night, who fixes the microwave instead of buying a new one, told me on the day before break ended-- before I flew from the MSN airport in Madison, Wisconsin to LaGuardia and returned to life at Yale University -- that he was a protester at Tiananmen Square days before the massacre. I had sat my mother and father down at our kitchen table for an interview, with our dog lying at our feet. All three of us were seated in our pajamas, and my mother was squinting because she had left her reading glasses upstairs.

My dad is not a protester, I thought. Ever since I was young, I was told the story of my father moving to America from Shandong, China getting off a bus with one suitcase, one hundred dollars, and barely any English skills. He moved in as a student of University of Michigan and worked until he made enough money for my mother to fly to America as well. My father is an immigrant, sure. Yet, for me, for whatever reason, the idea that my father immigrated to a foreign country at the young age of twenty-three, only four years older than myself, feels as if it contradicts with the image of my father at twenty-two protesting the communist government.

I find it hard to create a comprehensive picture of who my parents are. I am guilty of viewing my parents and many other immigrants, as one-dimensional. They are fighting to survive, grasping at pennies, and struggling to mail packages at post offices because of their broken English – they do not have time to be picky or to care about complex issues such as spirituality or a personal relationship with God.

And so, when I set out to write a research essay for my English 114 assignment about Chinese immigrants and their mass conversion to Evangelical Christianity, a group of people that my parents are included in, I painted immigrants as victims

– a tool in the plan of Evangelicals to spread their white supremacist ideals through conversion, a helpless cog in the machine of white supremacy.

Yet, in doing so, I ignored their autonomy to choose to convert. I neglected to consider their faith in God and their ability to self-reflect on religion. I stripped them of the full comprehensive picture of their humanity.

That is why, for me, to hear that my father protested at the Tiananmen Square massacre as a junior in college, is difficult. Beyond the idea that I was afraid for my father's safety upon hearing this, hearing that my father had the autonomy and the gumption to protest expanded my view of him as an immigrant.

My father told me that he became a Christian as a product of what happened in Tiananmen Square – not for the reasons you might think, however. Not because he saw people die, which he didn't. He left the protest when the square fell into chaos, a few days before the massacre. Rather, he told me that he converted because of how the forum of Chinese graduate students at University of Michigan treated the situation after he immigrated to America about a year later. They wanted to fabricate a story to receive a green card.

They wanted to sign a petition to say that because of Tiananmen Square, they would be “treated very badly” if they returned to China. My father didn't approve of this petition. He grew up believing that the Chinese were very smart, that they worked hard, and that they had integrity, and for him to hear that these Chinese people were intentionally lying by manipulating the system made him feel as if he didn't know what the meaning of life was.

I chuckled at hearing this, and my father responded “No, seriously. I didn't.”

My father likes to talk, so much so, that he often speaks over my mother. “Okay listen to me,” he said when my mother tried to speak during the interview. However, at this point in the interview he let my mother speak. My mother told me, “Also, his dad died.”

My father's father died of lung cancer in 1994 shortly after my father moved to America.

And, so, at that point in his life, my father “was thinking a lot.” He had a lot of “deep thoughts” -- his words, not mine -- about how one should behave, the importance of integrity, and our purposes in this world. That is why, when he heard about Christianity, he felt attracted to it.

Christianity gave him an “anchor.” He felt that in believing in God, he knew his values. “Not only value,” my mother interjected. “You know the purpose of this life. You know where you come from, where you go to.”

And, of course, my ever-logical and scientific father quickly added that, “Logically, it also makes sense. There is a high percentage that it is true.”

For my mother, she is attracted to the grace in Christianity – the fact that it is full of love. My mother is someone who is undeniably full of love. My mother gave up her job as a software developer when she had three children, one after the other, and she again gave up her dream job as an elementary school teacher when I was hospitalized my junior year of high school, even after she had already spent late nights restarting her career in a completely different field. My mother sacrificed for me. My father explains that in Chinese culture, “you sacrifice yourself for the goodness of your entire family, entire race, entire country.” Those were the values they were raised with.

In Christianity, Jesus sacrificed himself. He died for the sins of humanity. That concept made everything “click” for my mother. “Yeah, that's true love,” she said. “If we love our kids, we sacrifice. It doesn't conflict with our values at all.”

My essay neglected to acknowledge the genuine reasons my parents and other Chinese immigrants find solace in Christianity. Christianity resonates, rather than conflicts, with a deep-rooted value, values that actually come from their Chinese culture.

My parents disputed one of the major points of my essay, the linguistic hierarchy that conversion often creates: “Speaking

English that other people can understand is important to your education, for your job...”

“--for survival as an immigrant.”

“It doesn’t mean that we think the Chinese are inferior to white people. There is no correlation.” Americans who go to China would not want to speak with American-accented Chinese. They would want to speak Chinese, and so it makes sense that Chinese people would want to speak English upon moving to America.

“Evolution says...those who fit better will survive,” my father said.

In their rebuttal, my parents even echoed a sentiment that we have been studying in our Racial Imaginary class. “Some white Americans maybe have white supremacist ideas, but to say the entire effort is from white supremacist, that’s not true.” They are against the generalization. My mother says that even saying the “Evangelical church” is a too broad of a term. “Maybe some of them have white supremacist ideals, but to say all? To generalize all of them is too radical.”

I do not doubt that my parents are wise and self-reflective. And yet, something sinister happens when I write about immigrants, when I think of the group rather than the individuals, rather than thinking of my parents whom I love.

My mother told me that in my essay, I sound like Mao Zedong. Mao believed “that religion is a tool for the upper class to control the lower class,” and that was the belief that my parents grew up with. My parents do not like communism. My mother refuses to vote for Bernie Sanders because she tells me she moved away from communist China for a reason.

My mother told me that her parents believed what I had written in my essay – that those who follow religion have been “brainwashed.” My mother did not have a good relationship with her parents while they were both alive. She cites her parents as one of the primary reasons she moved to America.

It hurts to think that is how my parents think I view them.

Is it possible to hold my beliefs about the institutional conversion of Chinese immigrants to Christianity to be true,

while also respecting the autonomy and intellect of my parents? Is it possible, while also keeping in mind the reasons why my parents converted, why they love God, and why they choose time and time again to identify as Christian?

And so, I must conclude that a single narrative cannot embody the complexities of whom people really are. Rather, people and their stories are compilations of seemingly contradictory statements. Yes, Christianity and the conversion of Chinese immigrants can spread white supremacist ideologies. Yes, my parents chose to be Christian and their faith undeniably occupies a positive space in their lives. Yes, I love God. Yes, I love my parents. Yes, to stories that hold multitudes and contradictions within.

Yes. Yes to it all.