



*Borderlands:  
It's a family affair.  
#2*

In trying to discourage interracial coupling, "friends" and family members will often appeal "but what about the *children*?" implying, or flatly telling you, that mixed kids make misfits who will never truly belong or be accepted anywhere. Though many of us struggle to find communities that see us as whole people, many of us triumph. We are proud to be mixed and multi-cultural, we are stronger for the adversity we overcame.

In telling our stories, we may feel obligated to hide the sometimes ugly ways that growing up in interracial families complicated our experiences and our understanding of the world. We may feel pressure to prove that interracial families can be just as happy and healthy as monoracial ones, rather than acknowledge they are also just as dysfunctional. This zine intends to celebrate the interracial family, as well as air out our dirty laundry. While talking about how racism- internalized, interpersonal and institutional- effected our families and our upbringing isn't the first thing we might want to share about the mixed experience, we cannot have honest or meaningful dialogues without exploring these histories. - *Nia*

**BECAUSE NOT TALKING**

**ABOUT RACE AND**

**RACISM DOES NOT**

**MAKE THEM GO AWAY.**

## Things My Mother Told Me

by juli jeong martin

There's a story my mom tells about when I was a little girl, maybe five or six. I was standing on a chair next to the ironing board, helping her de-lint a sweater. She warned me not to touch the iron because it was hot, but I did anyway, and burned the back of my hand. I didn't say anything, didn't let on at all that I had hurt myself, just continued to studiously remove pills from the sweater's surface with packing tape. She later found me in the bathroom trying to treat the wound myself.

My parents told me I was adopted at a very young age, as I one day announced that I *knew* why I didn't look like my brother and sister – "because I didn't come from mommy's tummy". I vividly remember being about four years old and sitting on the couch, staring off out the window, dreaming of my mythic homeland where all the hair was thick and black like mine. People were always telling me how beautiful my hair was – no matter their intentions, it only served to single me out as foreign.

At five I was just entering kindergarten, in a class where I was one of two people of color and in a school where I was one of three. At five I had announced with glee to my mother, "Look Mom! Another Juliana!" upon spotting another Asian girl. At five I already knew what it meant to be different.

Which brings us back to the bathroom and the burn I wouldn't have had if only I'd listened to my mother. The burn that would sell me out as a bad child, an unworthy child, a child who didn't belong. The burn that could return me to the backwards little country that didn't want me in the first place; the burn that would render me an orphan twice. I could see red letters on official looking papers: TOUCHED THE IRON AFTER BEING TOLD NOT TO.

I don't know where this anxiety came from, I can't recall who first planted the seed of fear in my mind. Perhaps it was kids in my school who taunted me, who said that because my parents bought me they could send me back. Or maybe it was the underlying feeling of being the odd one out, of not belonging. Maybe it was my browner skin, my slanted eyes, my beautiful hair and the ways in which these things separated me from my family and everyone I knew.

She tells this story to me because it frightened her to realize that she had a child who would internalize and hide her pain. She tells this story because she thinks it will help explain who I became a decade later, still someone who internalized and hid my pain, still someone who curled up in the bathroom to treat wounds I wouldn't have if I just listened to my mother.

My family would attribute this early incident and later behaviors to the mental illness that still keeps a tight hold on me. But to what do we attribute this illness? Is it biology? Imbalanced chemicals and faulty genes? Or is it something less organic?

People don't want to realize that there is trauma in being adopted, no matter how young you are when it happens. And there's a trauma to growing up adopted, too. There's a trauma in every person who asks you where your parents are when they're standing

right beside you; there's a trauma in every teasing, every playground rhyme that mocks your eyes, every teacher that makes you tell the class why you were given up. There's a trauma in knowing that your parents will never understand how this feels, no matter how many times they say they do.

She tells this story because she wants to find fault in me since birth, wants to absolve herself of responsibility for my illness. She doesn't want to believe that my adoption has anything to do with my bipolar; she wants to still feel like she saved me.

I tell you this story because for too many years, people have told my stories for me. I am ready to speak for myself.

So where do I begin?

My story begins in a place that is frequently referred to as "backwards" nation, "third world" country or perhaps just a "patriarchal" society. I call it the homeland.

At this point in my story, the faces are blurry, the characters undeveloped, their motivations unclear. At this point in my story, I had a different name: Hye Won. I don't know where it came from, whether it was the final parental act of a young, unwed mother or the careful construction of a seasoned social worker; all I know is that it is written in steady type on the handful of papers that are supposed to tell me who I am.

That's the thing, you see, my entire history is subject to change, open to revision. It's fiction, "based on a true story" and "inspired by actual events". There are always facts redacted, dates changed, something modified to make my story more beautiful. The editor's pen was well intentioned, but in its artful movements, it erased the foundation on which I build my life.

It has taken a lot to get me here. But where am I?

Sometimes I wonder if I am exceptional in my disability, or if this is just our story. Certainly I know other adoptees that are "better adjusted", but I wonder if this struggle is universal. The struggle to feel good enough, worthy, deserving. The struggle to not break down when people leave your life; to not see their absence as a mother leaving, never to return.

It isn't just abandonment, it's everything that follows, too. It's every glare, every stare, every question about where you came from, why you were abandoned, do you want to find your birthmother? It's every time you're asked if your father is your husband, because, well, that's just what Asian women *do*. Every playground rhyme that mocks your eyes, every child who says that you can't do that because you have black hair and every person who tries to guess "what" you are.

It's growing up in the midst of all this hatred, all the while being told by doctors, social workers and adoptive parents that you don't feel any different. Having everyone you meet tell you how *lucky* you are to be *chosen* that way, and don't you feel *grateful*? It's always finding flaws in yourself and not the other, not the system. It's never knowing the word "racism" applied to you, because Asians are the model minority and hey, we're colorblind anyway. It's finding self-worth when there are no faces like yours, no one you can see living your pain and rising above, beyond.

My mother always told called it "ignorance", and said that in my silence, I was superior. Today I stretch my vocal chords past her, past them, past history. Today I write my story: for the first time, not the last time, but for all time.



Juli is a queer Korean adoptee, activist and poet. She is currently a student at Oberlin College, where she lives with her chosen queer family and bakes amazing vegan delights. Juli recently printed her first chapbook, "a stranger's

womb/and other exiles", and founded "Grinding Up Stones: the Asian Adoptee 'Zine" ([www.grindingupstones.com](http://www.grindingupstones.com)) . She lives for her people and would love to hear from you - so email her at:

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### **The Sweetness of Hauntings**

By Charlotte Albrecht

I remember this story I never wrote, this dream I never had. It's more a moment of recollection, a piecing-together of a collective history. Its textures are more real to me than the plot or chronology. Even the characters elude me, shifting in my memory from one day to the next. Some days the story starts as I think about Jaleelah. My mother's mother's mother came to this country in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when she was 15 or 16, recently forced at gunpoint into marriage and pregnant; came to bring herself closer to the mother who had left to start a new life, a new family. Jaleelah's life seemed to change dramatically from the moment her father died from scarlet fever and her mother decided to leave her three children in the middle of the night with another man, bound for Amreeka. Jaleelah was tough, fiercely independent, and made sure that everyone knew she was in charge – not her husband. I know of the legacy of strong

women who came after her and wonder of those who came before. I miss her.

Other days, when I think about the history of my Lebanese half, things start with my mother's father's father, Nick, who I never knew and know very little about. He was a hard worker, and, along with his wife and nine children, he ran a restaurant and an orchard. My mother told me of an encounter within the family about my great-grandfather. This youngish man, a relative, approached someone at a gathering who he recognized as a Lebanese elder. "You must have known my great, great uncle," he said excitedly, "Nick Karem." The elder's face changed quickly. "Queer. Nick Karem was a queer," came the sharp reply.

The rumors have always been that my great grandfather was bisexual, but I was told never to mention this to my grandpa. He refused to talk about it. But the evidence seemed clear: we knew he was queer in some way because he was found regularly having been assaulted, the results of his attempts at cruising. My great grandfather was one of the transgressives of the family, not just because of his sexuality and his refusal to repress it, but also because of his severity as a father. He always seemed to be more of a harsh employer than a father from what I was told. Those are the two most circulating, and most salient, facts about my great grandfather. They have everything to do with how he was never quite able to be the upstanding, middle class, white protestant heteronormative man he was supposed to become.

But perhaps it is this sourness mixed with the hints of his unruly desire so rumored long after his death that keeps him around me. Some persistent spirit of him remains in my consciousness. He

and Jaleelah both seem to haunt me. I dream that phantoms appear in the scraps that remain of what came before me – on the phone with my mother, in a photo once lost, in a performance, the news, or a figure on the street. Or just that feeling I got, sitting on the couch, watching the old home interviews of Jaleelah, the hair on my arms standing on edge. There I am on the screen, sitting stiff-as-a-board next to her. I'm about 11 years old, slightly facing the camera like a good little interviewer. In the midst of my embarrassment of witnessing the awkward performance of my pre-teen self, I am hit with a wave of intensity, the comedy of the moment colliding with the gravity of retracing my family's assimilation.

I'm following ghosts and fighting translucency. If this sounds contradictory, then watch me as I play six degrees of separation with my skin: light, olive, mixed, German, Lebanese, Arab-American. Give me one more degree and the U.S. census and I'll take us to "Caucasian". I try to find synonyms for "white" and this is what I'm given: "colorless, unpigmented, bleached, natural". On to the second one: "pale, pallid, wan, ashen, bloodless, waxen, chalky, pasty, washed out, drained, drawn, ghostly, deathly". And yet another: "Caucasian, European". If there's one thing I can tell you, it's that the ghosts that surround me are not colorless, or bloodless, or drained, or deathly. And they most certainly are not white.



**Charlotte Albrecht** is a mixed (Lebanese- and German- American) queer femme who grew up in Louisville, Kentucky and currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She spends most of her time working toward a PhD in feminist studies at the

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## **Notes of Family and Home**

By Jackie Wang

*What do you think of when you hear the word 'home'?*

*Home.* Home is thought of as a space of safety, of unification, of support, of comfort. Home is the space of families, and families are insular, heterosexual, monoracial. Families are the basic and most natural unit of society. Home is separate from society; home protects us from society; home is where we return when we are hurt by the external world and feel alienated by society. Home is where we are always welcome, always accepted, always cared for.

*The myth of the home*

For mixed-race, LGBTQ folks, disabled folks, and transracially adopted folks, this notion of "home" is inadequate in describing family experiences. For such people, the meaning of "home" may not conjure the image of the house with an open door and a welcome sign; for our space within the home may be in dark closets and hidden corridors.

Whereas home is usually thought of a space of comfort because it excludes the outside world; for LGBTQ people, home may be considered a place of discomfort because it excludes them. For mixed-race people, the division between public/private, inside/outside or home vs. the external world does not hold up. Racism, which is usually thought of as something that strangers do to people of color (i.e. something that happens in the external world), makes its way into the mixed-race home through inter-family racism. Racism gets reenacted within the home. Home becomes a space of danger, which destroys the notion of home as a refuge or space of safety.

For me, notions of family are hardly simple. My dad is a Chinese-born, Taiwanese-raised immigrant; my mom is an Italian-New Yorker with bipolar disorder; my older brother is a prisoner who also has multiple learning disabilities; my little brother is a dreadlocked punk rocker; and I—among other things—am a queer woman. Growing up, my little brother and I always joked that we had the most fucked up family ever.

### *Growing up biracial*

My race and my sexuality have confused strangers, and even close friends, throughout my life. As a child growing up in a predominantly white area of Florida, I was constantly questioned and ridiculed about my race. One of my earliest experiences of racial discrimination was when I was around the age of five. I asked a classmate if I could use his markers, and he said no on the basis that I was "black." This confused me deeply as a child; I wasn't black, but what was I?

In elementary school the kids would constantly make fun of Asian people. They would hold their fingers to their eyes to make them slanted and say things like "ching chong king kong had a big ding dong" and talk about how Chinese people ate cats. Even young kids conceived of Asians as the exotic "Other." To them, they are people so fundamentally different from their white American ideal that they warranted ridicule. As a result I felt intensely self-loathing. I literally thought I was an alien and was convinced that I wasn't normal. I wanted to be normal, and normal to my peers was white. But I could never be considered white because my physical appearance marked my difference.

Talking to other Asian American people about their childhoods has always, in my experience, garnered the same description of an intense longing to be white and to be accepted by their white peers. My young cousin, who is fully Chinese, refused to speak Chinese and even out-right said she only wanted teachers who had blond hair and blue eyes. But because both of her parents were Chinese, Mandarin was still spoken in the household, Chinese food was still cooked, and other cultural practices remained intact. For me it was a little different.

Because I was biracial, and specifically part-white, living in a predominantly white area, my entire Chinese heritage was vulnerable to eradication. And that is what happened. My part-white background led to a relentless obsession with trying to prove my whiteness and in proving my whiteness, I rejected my Asian heritage. But this wasn't something that I did alone by a sheer act of will. It was thrust upon me in myriad of ways, most painfully in my household.

My mom acted like a white supremacist. I find it difficult to identify her behavior as such, but when I reflect on her behavior and comments now, I realize that it was overt white supremacy. When I was a child, she would tell me things like, "Chinese people are backwards." She habitually denied my brothers and me contact with my dad's side on the family for no legitimate reason. She would constantly assert her superiority over Chinese people on the basis of her whiteness. She never denied us access to our Italian heritage, and we frequently visited our Italian family members in New York.

The most painful part about this denial of a whole half of our family was that my brothers and I deeply loved our Chinese relatives. Visiting them in New York when we were children were some of the only times we felt proud of being Chinese. We always had fun, and the atmosphere was always colorful and lively. But for many, many years we were forbidden from trying to see or talk to them. Even worse, my mom created lies to justify this prohibition.

When my Chinese grandfather was dying, I was not allowed to visit him, nor was I allowed to attend his funeral. Not only that, but my mother said she was glad my grandfather was dead, and was completely insensitive to the trauma my dad was experiencing. This was a deeply painful experience for me. I was angry at my mom for denying me access to family that I loved, and for trying to pit me against my family on the basis that they were Chinese. Right before my grandfather died he shared poignant stories with my dad when he was visiting him in the hospital (he hadn't seen him for seven years). My dad told me some of these stories, and I can't think of them without crying. One of them was about when my grandpa was leaving my hometown in Florida to return to New York. I was crying at the

airport because I didn't want him to leave. My dad was also crying, but his back was turned away to hide his tears. My grandpa saw my dad wipe a tear from his face, and said it was very moving. The disconnection that existed between my dad's family and our household upsets me most. I knew that the loss of being able to see Grandpa would never be recovered.

To my mom, Chinese people were primitive, abusive, and devoid of all emotion. But she could justify marrying a Chinese man if he was willing to give up his Chinese heritage. He only spoke Chinese when he was on the phone with his non-English speaking family. He never talked about his family, about life in China and Taiwan, or anything else relating to his pre-American past. After moving to America he never, ever went back to China or Taiwan until I asked him to take me when I was in high school. Although he could never get rid of his Chinese accent or physical markings, he could learn about American history, watch American movies, learn about American pop culture, and adjust to the American way of life. It pains me to see my dad interact with my mom's family. They treat him like he's stupid; like he can't understand anything. But I know that my dad is deeply understanding, observant, and sensitive. It makes me angry to see them treat him poorly just because he's a Chinese immigrant.

As I grew up, I began to reclaim my Asian heritage. At the same time, I became angry at my dad for not teaching me Mandarin because I felt that it fundamentally alienated me from my family and other Chinese people. But I'm not mad at my dad anymore and I've taken up Chinese in college. I understand that my linguistic deficiencies were the result of cultural hegemony and white normativity. I understand that my dad, a Chinese-born and Taiwanese-raised immigrant, felt an intense pressure to adjust to American society. This pressure was further exacerbated by living in a

white community and entering an interracial marriage.

Looking back on it now, I realize that my main two best friends growing up were also multiracial. In elementary and middle school my best friend Paula was half black and half white. In high school my best friend was mostly Puerto Rican mixed with some Italian. Reflecting on my relationships with them, I realize that we all had similar experiences. There was the initial confusion of identity, early rejection of our "difference," and later reclamation and resituating of our difference. Crystal, like me, struggled with a feeling of alienation from much of her family (and her heritage) as a result of not speaking their language.

Part of embracing the side of me that I rejected as a child consisted of learning my family's narratives, talking to my dad about his past, and visiting my extended family in China. After my brother and I became proud of who we were, there was a transformation in both my parents. My dad began to excitedly share stories with us. My mom, albeit not perfect, began to embrace the humanity of Chinese people.



**Jackie Wang** is 20 year old radical queer, mixed-race hapa woman majoring in cultural studies and gender studies at New College of Florida. She self-publishes memoir-style zines that relate her personal experiences to sexual and racial politics. She recently co-directed a forthcoming documentary on anti-

authoritarian, autonomist and anarchist people of color. She also enjoys gardening, picking fruit, radical mental health, and sharing food.

## THROUGH HYBRIDIZED EYES: CREATION OF A THIRD SPACE

BY JILLIAN FORD

I have a shelf on my bookcase, reserved only for us. I have Danzy Senna and James McBride and Rebecca Walker and Gregory Howard Williams. So I have *Caucasia* and *The Color of Water* and *Black White and Jewish* and *Life on the Color Line*, respectively. Frederick Douglass, Bob Marley, and Barack Obama are up there too, telling their stories. The shelf houses a couple anthologies as well, though I haven't explored the issue much by way of the Academy. Perhaps my pull towards novels, memoirs, and autobiographies mirrors the intensely personal pull of my own lived experiences.

From madd early on, I knew that my identity was a contested one. I recognized from the time I can remember that my subjectivity was complicated. Going to visit the paternal branch of my family on Chicago's South Side was a yearly high point for me, as a child of color growing up in a predominantly White upstate New York town. Having the opportunity to visit England as a child and adolescent allowed me to connect with the maternal side of my family in ways that were equally exciting, though largely different. A week in Chicago was an all-black experience, with the exception of my mother. Time spent in southeast England was all white, with the exception of my father, sister, brother, and myself. I recognize that a history of world hegemony renders true those two previous sentences, but such was the way we were raised. Like so many children I knew with Black daddys and White mothers, we were told that we were Black children (with real light skin). It wasn't until I got to college that I began exploring my biracial identity in ways that gave me room to claim a

previously undefined category. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let's jump back to 1990.

I was in the sixth grade when Nelson Mandela was freed from 27 years in prison. At age 11, I made sense of the news in undoubtedly middle-school ways, as I tried to fit his release into a context that I understood. As an awkward pre-teen, I was in the process of constructing my own hybridized identity: rockin' Cross Colours Malcolm X gear while standing to pledge allegiance to the flag; actions that simultaneously set me apart from my White and Black classmates, respectively. Regarding Mandela's emancipation, I recall a sense of cloudy exhilaration – excited because bad people would now quickly change their ways; fuzzy because the world seemed much bigger then. South Africa seemed so far away. Coming down on the right side of justice in the instance of Apartheid was easy. It was less clear to me where to fall during the O.J. trial.

It was spring of my sophomore year in high school when O.J.'s infamous car chase ensued with the LAPD. It was the weekend after an intense lacrosse tournament in which I had participated with my otherwise all-white team. I remember watching the chase on my teammate's small color tv, and it seemed to go on forever. I never could have imagined how long the actual trial would have gone on, nor how vigorously it would test my racial allegiance. For a year and a half, the trial dragged on, and the kids at my school—like the nation as a whole—became increasingly guarded about their positions: the White kids "knew" he was guilty, and the Black kids believed he was not. By October of 1995, I was a senior in high school. Several of my Black classmates had brought radios to school the day we were to hear the verdict. There we sat at lunch, playing a fierce game of

spades and listening simultaneously to the coverage. I remember getting up to get an ice cream bar just before the judge announced "not guilty." And I remember hearing the cafeteria erupt in noise after the verdict. I couldn't tell if the cheers or the boos were louder, but I do remember locking eyes with the White lunch lady, and I saw what seemed like *genuine* sadness. I remember her light blue eyes filling up with tears, and I remember her blinking them back as though she didn't want me to see her pain. I remember feeling torn at that moment. And then I remember emerging from the line, cheering.

There have been other events too, like Rodney King and Mariah Carey and Duke Lacrosse and Michael Jackson (not in that order, of course). There has been Bill Clinton and Hilary Clinton and Andrew Young saying outrageous things about Clinton's blackness. There has been Hurricane Katrina and Amadou Diallo and Jena 6. There have been refugees from Haiti and Black and Brown and White immigrants from many places and Barack Obama. There has been Michelle Obama. There have been failing schools and Clarence Thomas and September 11<sup>th</sup>. There has been Afghanistan. There has been Iraq.

Space disallows me from discussing my thoughts about each of the aforementioned events or people-as-events. I do know, though, that my experiences in each of these instances have been mediated through my multiple identities. As societal norms push us toward such false dichotomies, my childhood and adolescent racial identity development nearly always felt tested. The sense that I was being pulled—or at times, pushed—by two warring camps created within me a fierce desire to claim a third space. My on-going desire to encourage my whole self to be present in all contexts renders the

puzzle not yet finished. I continue to negotiate my identity, but assert unflinchingly this: the power that propels me daily is that which is generated by goddess-inspired space that repels static categories and rigid definitions of "finished" individuals. I encourage others to explore their subjective complexities, and I link arms with those who use their imaginations to create new language to speak to new identities.



**Jillian Ford** is a community activist and organizer in Atlanta, Georgia. Most recently, she has been involved in working on the United States Social Forum and the Atlanta Childcare Collective. Ford is doctoral student at Emory University, studying social justice education. Her research focuses on political activism among queer youth of color.

### **Finding Asian America as a biracial woman**

By Claudia Leung

I have always related to my Asian-ness through whiteness, and vice-versa. I am never simply, unproblematically 'both' Asian and white, but I switch back and forth between the two, and use each standpoint to view my own identity more critically. This is not simply because I am biracial, that I grew up in a multiracial environment, that I have an Asian parent and a white American parent. I have many friends who share these characteristics and more (including my own sister) who seem to find it much simpler and more expedient to live with a monoracial identity. My physical appearance, my use of language, habits and mannerisms, and tendency toward introspection and self-critique all made the biracial thing a lot more salient for me than for others. And then, of course, there were my parents.

My relationship to Asianness through whiteness is the product of living in a white-dominated society, in a home dominated by my white mother who studies and lives her anthropology background in the courses she teaches at a local community college on 'Intercultural Communication.' From my charismatic and teacherly mother, I learned that there were different 'types' of people and that while we can and should not discriminate, it is ultimately appropriate and necessary to communicate differently with different groups, to be

'culturally sensitive' to their ways of doing things. I grew up around a mother who would speak about her husband in this way, often when he was within earshot, telling her daughters about how he communicated and the best way in which she thought we could talk to him. My understanding of race was shaped also by what I learned about gender from my parents - my mother always mediated my relationship to my father, and so I learned that men and Asians were people with whom it was difficult to communicate. White women were neutral, whereas others became foreign to me even as I grew up surrounded by them.

Since coming to college and forming my own independence from my parents, I've begun the process of seeing my own whiteness, and that of my family, through an Asian American lens. It may never be smooth, but it's become a little easier for me to talk about the problems I have with my mother. She's shown me many ways in which she herself has been critical of her own whiteness, though I still have a lot of issues with her and how she raised my sister and me to think about race and ethnicity.

The shift in my attitude towards my parents has been reflective of my own attitude and/or development of a racial identity politic. I have begun to understand, on the one hand, how my mom's ways of dealing with (and ignorance of) her own whiteness have affected me, even as I do not share that identity with her. On the other hand, the frustration and anger I had with my father throughout much of High School for 'failing' to teach me to speak Chinese, or for not 'standing up' to my mother more often, has turned into a more nuanced understanding of how hard adjusting to U.S. culture is for first-generation immigrant parents.

My relationship to my father, and however that ties in to my identity as Chinese, Chinese American, Asian American, or Asian, is quiet. My father is not much of a talker in any language, and certainly doesn't wield the academic language of my mother's and my liberal arts educations. For him, there must seem to be a vast gulf between the moment where I decided not to be Chinese anymore (at age five, when I refused to speak Cantonese with my grandparents anymore) and the moment when I decided to be a mixed-race Asian American (at age twenty, roughly last spring).

So in some ways, I feel like I relate to Asianness as someone whom has grown up white, privileged, 'normal'. In other ways I think I have always been aware of how I am 'racially different'. When strangers ask me "What nationality are you?" and I answer (accurately) "American," they respond "Yes, but what else?" Even for someone who grew up with the economic and social privileges I did, the fact that my face inspires the desire in others to have certainty and knowledge of What Exactly I Am makes it impossible for me to ever be racially 'normal.' And as someone who cares about social justice and identity, I find it useful to create identities for myself that are resistant to normative status.

So I am writing, painting, teaching myself into the picture frame, (re)claiming an Asian American identity while still remaining aware of the ways in which I have benefited from white privilege. Reaching out to and building community across racial and social lines in the attempt to become not just a better person, or a better activist, but happier. It is through several years of searching, through the kindness of friends, the privilege of scholarship, the community of organizations, that I have begun to understand Asian American as

this: as encompassing identities that are neither fixed nor static, never have been and never will be. As a word that is not merely descriptive of those who may identify themselves or may be identified by it, but that is proscriptive, that is taken on, associated with, adopted. It is a word that is created constantly by those people who choose to make something of it. A word that can and has meant creativity, community, resistance, love.

**Claudia Leung** is originally from Cupertino, California, a suburb in Silicon Valley. She graduated this May from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota with a degree in Humanities, Media, and Cultural Studies, and concentrations in American Studies and Geography. Her many interests include cooking, art, and social justice. She has facilitated discussions on race and racism at her college, worked as a Katrina-relief volunteer in New Orleans and is currently teaching social studies to middle schoolers in Saint Paul. She sees a future for herself in urban planning, media justice advocacy, or education.

## A Pattern

by Nadia Abou-Karr

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Young Arab American girl grows up with a media landscape full of images of Arab men as cold-blooded murderers, fanatical terrorists and rapists with a fetish for white women.

Young Arab American girl's father is a "deadbeat dad." One of her uncles beats his wife and kids. She echoes the sentiments her white friends express about Arab men. She disses Arab men when they approach her in the club. She goes to college, builds close friendships with Arab men, and begins to question her own socialization. She can articulate the media's impact on her perception of Arab men, but is uncomfortable talking about the impact that her own family structure and experiences had on her perception of Arab men. She recognizes a trauma in her cousins, her Arab female friends, and herself; we are scared of men and marriage because of what our fathers, uncles and cousins have done to us.

We are erased from popular community mythology because our narrative does not adequately contradict the colonialist feminism that unfairly vilifies Arab men. The community does not feel empowered by our stories so we don't get to tell our stories.

Grown Arab American girl just got up the courage to ask, in a public place, what the fuck is up?

## The Browning of America and the Questions We Don't Ask

By Stevie Peace

My father has given it a lot of thought and reasoning, and has come to the conclusion that eventually everyone in the United States will be mixed-race.

"It's an unstoppable trend," he said to the family at the dinner table once. "It used to be, there were no mixed-race people, but people have gotten more accepting, and they're marrying regardless of race, and then their kids will just continue that cycle until we'll all just be shades of brown. There will only be one race left in the world—a mix of everything we have today." (Implicit in this conclusion is that, once everyone is mixed, race and racism will no longer exist.)

Avoiding for a moment the assumptions of inevitable progress and heterosexuality as a given in this scenario, this seems to be a nice thought. It will be an interesting day (probably pretty boring, too) when I no longer have to sit under the interrogative lens, when all the complexities I feel and struggle with are shared by every person I turn to, when we can finally get on to the business of transcendence.

But we're not on that trajectory. There is no grand convergence plan. Instead we have questions, questions we are not supposed to ask:

—Does form always follow function? Does a continuous mixing of genes for skin color mean a general browning of the masses? My mother is Asian-American and my Dad is white. They had two daughters and a son. Mom's sister also married a white man; they had two sons. Same formula, but there's no denying my cousins look heavily Asian, and my sisters and I have passed as white very easily.

--Can you go from mixed to unmixed? My older cousin married a Japanese woman; their daughter has no hint of white in her. My older sister married a white man. *Their* daughters have no hint of Asian in *them*. My nieces will assume their whiteness effortlessly. They will never know the interrogative lens as I have, for there is nothing to interrogate—there is nothing at stake. Is this common? Will most mixed-race people grow up never really believing they are mixed-race?

--Who chooses to love and marry someone of a different race, and why? I want to believe that all the multiracial families out there were forged together through desire, love, and commitment alone. And yet, if it were race-blind love alone that guided us, why are over 40% of today's multiracial youth *Asian multiracials*, the vast majority of whom are *Asian-white*? (Asian-Americans are only 5% of the U.S. population.) Why do Japanese-Americans have the highest rates BY FAR for interracial marriage and multiracial children? (Japanese-Americans are 0.4% of the U.S. population!) It's now universal knowledge that Black men are overrepresented in our prisons. Why hasn't Asian overrepresentation in mixed-race America received similar attention? Does anyone even know about it? (Are we afraid to know about it?)

--Who chooses to love and marry someone of "their own race," and why? (Since it's clear that, aside from the Asian folks, most all other people of color are distinctly NOT marrying across races.) I am Asian multiracial, but I grew up white and believed I was white. The vast majority of my peers and friends were white. This continued up into college. All that time, I only dated white women. They were the only ones I ever desired. Women of color have been around me my whole life, but I never once considered them attractive until very, very recently. How have I learned this? How do so many of us learn this? How is this similar to the development of my queer identity—that is, only just now finding men and trannies attractive and dating them? How is it fundamentally different?

--So much about the mixed-race discussions is focused on birth. What about death? All of my biological grandparents had passed before I was born. Mom's father died from a heart attack in 1960, just before his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, and her mother died in 1945 at the age of 30. (Mom wasn't even five years old at the time.) But my older sister has strong memories of visits with Dad's father; she loved him dearly. Was Mom bitter? Did she wonder how things would have turned out if

her parents had been alive to cement a deep place in the ever-glowing adolescent world I shared with my sisters, parents named Ju Fu Gene and Wong Gam Liu? Did she wonder whether the stresses her parents encountered growing up Chinese in Augusta, and the ferocity with which they pushed to assimilate their children, combine to end their lives too soon? How are longevity and race related, and how does that affect interracial marriage and multiracial families?

--How much of the mixed-race promise of the future is bittersweet? What did Mom and Dad have to do in order to enjoy the blessings of grandchildren? What fear did Mom especially feel, watching her children grow up without grandparents, as she did? Will interracial marriage ever be free of assimilation and white supremacy (as well as the prices exacted on people of color)? Will my nieces ever come to understand what loves, memories, and questions live in them now? What will they lose? If we'll all someday be shades of brown, will we be smart about it, will we know our responsibilities, will we stay rooted even in our transcendence? If we don't—what will *we* lose?



**Stevie Peace** is a writer and organizer in St. Paul, Minnesota. He's indebted to rich Asian American/Asian multiracial histories, resilient people of color, and landscapes of queer world-making—they have taught him much. He does not like half-assing; he loves to be surprised. He's graduated from humming to singing

absent-mindedly. [steviepeace@riseup.net](mailto:steviepeace@riseup.net)

## The Marginalization of Korean Military Wives

Patti Duncan

*"We are all Koreans, the same people, all of us. The women who married foreigners, we are all the same Koreans. Don't look down on us."*

Born the daughter of a Korean immigrant woman and a U.S. serviceman, I grew up very aware of the ways in which other Koreans and Korean Americans viewed my mother. I witnessed the discrimination she faced by some white people within U.S. society, but the disparagement from other Koreans was even more painful and difficult to comprehend. My mother encountered this treatment in the form of contemptuous looks, ridicule, avoidance, and rejection within various Korean community gatherings and organizations. As her daughter, I experienced it too, mostly in the form of constant reminders that neither she nor I could ever be Korean enough to fully belong within the Korean community of my hometown.

But I grew up dreaming of Korea. Somehow I imagined it as the answer to all my questions and problems, explaining the mysteries of growing up in a mixed-race military household, where my mother's alienation and displacement surfaced as a constant and recurring theme of my childhood. As a child, I spoke only a smattering of Korean words, encouraged to speak "English only" at school and in other public places. I ate *bulgogi* and *kimchi* in private with my mother,

knowing that most of my American friends would not appreciate my mother's Korean cooking. I outgrew the *hanbok* my mother brought for me from Korea, and I assimilated as much as I could into a typical (white) American adolescence. But I grew up being constantly asked, "Where are you from?" ("No, where are you *really* from?") and sometimes the more egregious "What are you?" While I witnessed my mother's encounters with hostile Americans who treated her like a child or a second-class citizen, and I saw other Koreans ignore her too, I also know that she made friends with other women like herself, who had married G.I.s and had biracial children in America. As a child, I wondered what it would feel like to live in Korea. When my mother talked about "home," she always meant Korea, and I, too, began to imagine Korea as my home and my birthright, the place where all my questions would find answers.

During the fall of 2004, I traveled to Korea for the first time in my life. I knew I needed to go, and I knew it was time to go. Earlier in the year, I'd received a horoscope that told me that 2004 would be year I'd find "home." "Perhaps you'll go explore the land where your ancestors lived and died for many generations," it said, "or maybe you'll make a pilgrimage to a storied place that holds the key to a mystery you desperately need to clarify."<sup>2</sup> With a research sabbatical from my university and a courtesy appointment set up at Ewha Woman's University in Seoul, I left in September to explore the land of my ancestors and see what I could find. I was fortunate to have as my travel companion a Korean American adoptee and graduate student, Christina Vidlund, who decided to join me for her own pilgrimage. During our time in Korea, we found a community of Korean American activists attempting to make their lives in Korea, searching for

answers to various questions, and attempting to understand what it means to be Korean today. We researched the experiences of *kijich'on* (camptown) women, working near the U.S. military bases that continue to flourish in South Korea. We explored Christina's adoption history. We studied the language. We learned about the oppression of Amerasians in Korea.<sup>3</sup> We attempted to understand the complex and unequal relationship between Korea and the U.S. And we slowly began to define and explore our own relationships to a country that has existed primarily in the imagination for both of us until now.

While my time in Korea was overwhelmingly a positive experience, and I learned a great deal about my family and my own identity, I also learned some difficult truths. I learned that Amerasians are regarded as the dregs of Korean society, and that our mothers—those Korean women who married U.S. soldiers, often referred to as "war brides" or "military brides"—are viewed in extremely negative ways and rejected by segments of both Korean and American society.<sup>4</sup>

In Korea, the women who marry American men are stigmatized as prostitutes and treated with contempt because of their association with U.S. military bases and G.I.s. While not all internationally married Korean women have worked as prostitutes, it is true that since the 1950s, many Korean women have worked within the sex or service industry in military camptowns. Due to poverty, the death of one or both parents during and after the war, divorce, sexual abuse or rape (and subsequent rejection from one's family), human trafficking, and a host of other factors, over one million Korean women

have worked as prostitutes since the war.<sup>5</sup> It is important to remember that this system is condoned and bolstered by both the U.S. and Korean governments. The Status of Forces Agreement signed by South Korea and the U.S. in 1966 gave the U.S. military wide latitude in Korea, including the free use of land for military activities (and for the establishment of over one hundred military bases and installations in the country).<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this agreement also sometimes translated into the U.S. military's free use of Korean women, resulting in increases in violence against Korean women near camptowns, increased births of Amerasian children, and higher rates of transnational adoption.

Once in the U.S., Korean military brides are often viewed with suspicion and subjected to racist stereotypes, pity, hostility, and/or discrimination. "The fact that they have mingled flesh and blood with foreigners...in a society that has been racially and culturally homogeneous for thousands of years makes them pariahs, a disgrace to themselves and their people, Korean by birth but no longer Korean in body and spirit."<sup>7</sup> Even second-generation Koreans often ignore or look down upon them.

Katharine Moon suggests another reason why these women have been rendered invisible and nearly written out of Korean and Korean American history: "Koreans have not wanted reminders of the war lurking around them and the insecurity that their newfound wealth and international power have been built on" (8). Women like my mother are living symbols of the devastation of the Korean war and partition, and their children are physical reminders of poverty, political instability, separation from family, war, and the consequent dependence on the U.S. Also, Korean women who married Americans, and their children—Amerasians like myself—signify the unequal neoimperialist relationship between the U.S. and Korea.

But these women have been crucial to the immigration of Koreans to the U.S. Since 1950, over a hundred thousand Korean women have immigrated to the U.S. as wives of American servicemen. According to Yuh, they have been on the frontlines of contact between Korean and American people, and they represent "the critical first link in chain migrations of Koreans through the 1970s and 1980s and, as such, have been instrumental in the construction of Korean immigrant communities" (4). Many Korean Americans have a military bride in their own family, someone who paved the way for others to enter the country by sponsoring relatives and helping secure employment and housing.

While women like my mother experience a deep feeling of *han*—the pain and grief arising from injustice and suffering, a consequence of their rejection from Korean and Korean American communities—they continue to identify as Korean. They eat Korean food, speak to one another in Korean, teach their children about Korea, and continually, consistently, long for home. I learned a great deal during my time in Korea. Most of all, however, I learned to appreciate my mother's courage and strength. She left everything she knew behind to come to America with the hope of a better life. I know she did this, to a great extent, for my benefit. She risked everything so that my experiences growing up would be better than hers had been, and so that I would have opportunities never available to her. For many years, I was not aware of these facts. But now I understand more about the difficult choices my mother had to make during a tumultuous time in Korea's history. I remain critical of the policies and governments of both the U.S. and Korea, and I believe my home, like my mother's, lies somewhere in between.

## Recommended Race Blogs

Racialicious.com- "the intersection of race and pop culture"

Reappropriate.com- "a personal and political blog written by an angry Asian American woman"

Ta-nehisi.com – just check it

Transgriot.blogspot.com – "News, opinions, commentary, history and a little creative writing from an African-American transwoman"

Brownfemipower.com – see for yourself

Lightskinnededgirl.typepad.com/my\_weblog – "a mixed chick's thoughts on a mixed-up world"

Muslimahmediawatch.blogspot.com – "looking at Muslim women in the media and pop culture"

Racewire.org – the ColorLines blog

Angryasianman.com – what it sounds like

## Current recommended reads:

Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity and Adoption

by Randal Kennedy

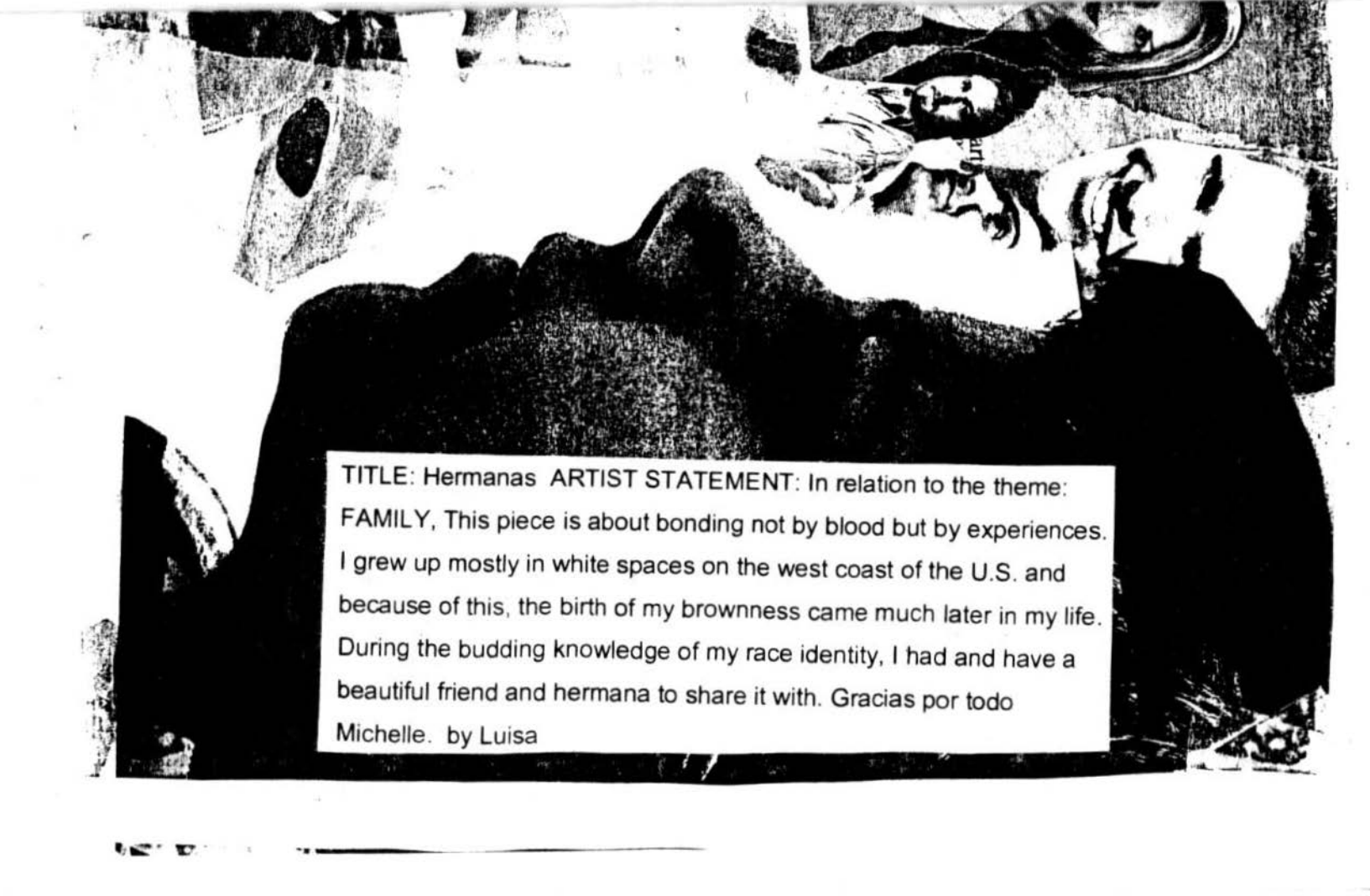
ColorLines Magazine – ColorLines.com

Borderlands is an on-going project. You are eligible to submit personal stories (prose *only*) if you are a person of color who identifies as mixed-race, bicultural or transracially adopted. Email submissions to oxette@riseup.net in .rtf format. Thank you!

–Nia King, Editor

**“WE ARE NOT A  
MONOCHROMATIC  
PEOPLE.”**

**—Angry Black White Boy,  
by Adam Mansbach**



TITLE: Hermanas ARTIST STATEMENT: In relation to the theme:  
FAMILY, This piece is about bonding not by blood but by experiences.  
I grew up mostly in white spaces on the west coast of the U.S. and  
because of this, the birth of my brownness came much later in my life.  
During the budding knowledge of my race identity, I had and have a  
beautiful friend and hermana to share it with. Gracias por todo  
Michelle. by Luisa