

A Response to the English 306 Discussion on *A Short Essay on Being*

In the end, it was “pad thai” that I made: something that repulsed me but that others ate up. And although everyone complained about it not being “authentic,” that is, not being the way that they were used to having it in restaurants, it was all gone by 3 in the morning. Although the real Buddhist was now going to bed when the sun set and waking up when the sun rose, he had gotten up at three in the morning to eat whatever was left of the noodles, then went back to sleep again.

This is the second to last paragraph in Jenny Bouilly’s “A Short Essay on Being,” one of the strongest, most meaningful essays that I have had the pleasure of reading. I read it through one of my college-level classes, and I remember being thrilled to discuss it. I often get nervous when speaking aloud, and so I had prepared exactly what I wanted to say the night before and thought about it throughout my morning until 11 AM when class would begin. Never had I connected to an essay like this before; the message was brilliant, and brilliantly delivered. Finally, someone was speaking about an experience I related to—everyone would be enlightened by what Jenny Bouilly had to say!

But that all changed when we got to class. Discussion ensued, but nothing that I had planned to say panned out, because it didn’t fit into the conversation. We talked about “pot thai,” and about Thai food, and connecting food to writing. We discussed the “thai way,” but not in the way I’d hoped. And finally, we discussed the meaning of the essay. The meaning of all of Bouilly’s story, of her descriptions, of her childhood and her experiences as a half-Thai woman. And we came to the following conclusion: there is no point.

And that was that. We were sitting in a vaguely rectangular shape, each person sitting at a computer that was one of many lined against the classroom walls, facing inwards so we could all face each other. The question was posed to the rectangle: “*So what can we take away here?*” One person along the long edge of the room spoke up: “*Maybe this shows us that your essay doesn’t always need a clear point... you can just write*”. Another in the back corner agreed. Yet

another said, “*An essay can be whatever you want, and sometime that means no form, no meaning*”. Before long, every face along the rectangle’s perimeter was nodding in agreement. The class came to a consensus that this was just an essay that rants, an essay that never really had a point, Bouilly just started it to vent and get things off her chest and that there was no moral to the story.

If Bouilly had been there, she would have nodded along with everyone, thanked them for giving her such great insight. Just as she did when one of her graduate school friends corrected her pronunciation of *pot thai*, insisting it was *pad thai* instead. Even though her friend knew Bouilly was Thai, knew she had been back to visit, knew Bouilly’s mother was Thai and that Bouilly was more fluent than she would ever be, she still insisted. And Bouilly nodded her head and thanked her for her correction. But me? I was *physically shaking*. I’d never gotten dizzy before. I’d never experienced physical symptoms—it’s always been mental. But I didn’t know how to respond to this consensus. I tried. Oh boy did I try. Some thoughts began as benign and respectful. *Actually, there is meaning here. Actually, I disagree*. Others came more from anger, beginning with aggressive *Hold on one second’s* and *Do you even hear yourselves at all?* But nothing was coming together, it was all fragments and fractions of thoughts, and I could not find the strength to raise my hand.

I was reacting this way because while reading this essay, and listening to the class’ reaction, I kept thinking about small me- younger me, about five years old.

I thought about the small me who stood next to her white father in a New Hampshire Dunkin Donuts, the subject of mystery for ten long minutes for a woman who kept inching closer and closer. She was very much in my personal space, a young girl’s personal space, but this was justified because of her inquiry. She asked my father where I was from and why I was so exotic

looking and following the lines of conversation, she came to learn I was only half white. She exclaimed, “Well of COURSE! Your mother must be *something*”. Small me gave a polite smile and nodded my head.

I thought about my white grandmother’s funeral, where all seven of my Chinese mother’s siblings and their families came to pay their respects, and a white man yelled out during the burial, “Where do these Asians even think they’re coming from? They lost?”

The times when people have asked my father if my mother is a mail-order-bride, and if she’s returnable. The times when people will speak directly to my father’s face, even if he hasn’t said a word, after my mother spoke directly to them. The times when people have asked me if my mother speaks English well enough to carry a conversation. The times when people have asked if my mother speaks Chinese, because if she doesn’t, she’s not “really” Chinese.

The times when I’ve stood up for myself as an Asian American, or a fellow Asian American, but I’ve been told that that’s not valid, because there is no racism against Asians. The times I’ve been told Asians can’t and don’t struggle. The times I’ve been told to shut up and resume my place as a docile, Asian woman. The times I’ve been corrected about something that I know very much about, but obviously these strangers, these non-Asians know better, and thus I cannot bring any information to the table. The times when I’ve been corrected about being Chinese, or been told I’m “not Chinese enough” to know what “truly authentic” food is, or how to order at a restaurant.

The times when men have asked me if I’d like to be submissive in the house, but more specifically, in bed, “like my ancestors were”.

I thought about the numerous times when I've been asked, "what *are* you?", as if the part of me that's not white is alien.

Because in my eyes, Jenny Bouilly laid her point out very clearly throughout her essay and was especially direct in the portion I began this essay with: "*In the end, 'pad thai' was not something that I made: something that repulsed me but others ate up.* People who think they know best continuously rewrite Bouilly's culture, her self, and her being, whether it be something as small as a noodle recipe or as large as a whole religion. And yet she does not correct them, instead allowing them "to eventually come to learn the errors of their ways and have them come to you for forgiveness later," no matter how wrong they are. This was her whole point. To show the world and the readers of her work what it was like to be Thai, to be Asian American in America, to show her frustration and her value. Instead of seeing this, we saw it as a pointless rant.

Instead of saying anything that day, or even bringing it up in the following days, I hoped that someone would eventually see the errors of what we had said, and that someone would suddenly understand, and seek forgiveness. See that they had been wrong.

But this never happened.

And I took on Bouilly's role. I sat along with everyone else, nodding my head as people spoke, as if I agreed—when I was so far from agreement.

Examining all this together shows that there is a much larger issue in our classroom, our schools, and our country. We make Asian culture what we want it to be. We mold it to the stereotypes we have created, changing them as we go along, using them to our advantage, no matter how mistaken those stereotypes are. But when those of Asian descent are no longer

needed, we are invisible. In class that day, the issue was invisible. Bouilly's point was invisible. I felt invisible.

I almost feel guilty writing this. This isn't how I was raised: I was raised to not speak back, to speak with regard, to treat elders and peers and specialists and teachers and professors with the utmost respect. I feel guilty, because I am saying that my class was wrong. And to say that they are wrong almost feels disrespectful. Either way, I have two separate messages: one for my class, and the rest of America; and a second for people like me, male or female, whether you're full, half, or only have a fraction of Asian culture in you.

To My Class:

I am disappointed in you. I have never had a stronger reaction to something that I've heard in school than I did in class that day. I thought that in a room full of smart, educated, forward-thinking minds, you would understand. But you didn't, and that was foolish—but it is not your fault.

We have grown up in a society where we are indirectly taught to perpetuate racial stereotypes about *everyone* who is not white. Though we have opened up a conversation about Black Americans, we have not opened a conversation about Asian Americans. Asian Americans are seen as the “Model Minority”- the minority who does everything perfectly, and thus experiences no racism or struggle. So let's open a discussion.

1. We are the “Model Minority”.

The concept of a “Model Minority” is this: that the minority in question is a monolithic, group of people made of two-parent families and close-knit communities who leaned on hard

work and education to reach wealth, intelligence, and fight discrimination and racial bias. The model minority here is, of course, the Asian minority.

Yet this whole concept twists the reality of Asians living in America. We are not a monolith: Asians in America are made up of people from dozens of countries, and we are certainly not all wealthy. Take the Vietnamese population in Boston as just one example: the poverty rates for both Vietnamese families and individuals is double that of statewide rates, with the median household income being just above \$32,000 a year (Lo).

Many Asian families do have two-parent family structures. Yet these are not always happy marriages; there is abuse, and there is staying together just to save money. There are single parents, single mothers, and single fathers.

Education, as we all know, is hard to achieve. It's expensive. A large portion of Asian families cannot afford to send their children to college, or a child will choose to work for their family business.

These simple things are things that need to be pointed out... saying that the Asian American people are all the same, and are a model for how to "overcome racism and discrimination" is bullshit. Asia Americans are used as a tactic to show other races that "they can do it too". NPR highlighted this troubling idea when examining Andrew Sullivan's essay that ended with the following:

"Today, Asian-Americans are among the most prosperous, well-educated, and successful ethnic groups in America. What gives? It couldn't possibly be that they maintained solid two-parent family structures, had social networks that looked after one another, placed enormous emphasis on education and hard work, and thereby turned false, negative stereotypes into true, positive ones, could it? It couldn't be that all whites are not racists or that the American dream still lives?"

Janelle Wong, director of Asian American studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, names this a tenacious conservative strategy, which involves "1) ignoring the role that selective recruitment of highly educated Asian immigrants has played in Asian American success followed by 2) making a flawed comparison between Asian Americans and other groups, particularly Black Americans, to argue that racism, including more than two centuries of black enslavement, can be overcome by hard work and strong family values" (Chow).

As Wong says, this is detrimental to Asian Americans because it puts it all in one group, when many do not identify with this model. It's detrimental to others, because it frames racism as if it is not the racist's fault, but the minority's. It's detrimental to our fight as minorities- all minorities- in America- pushing each us against each other instead of fighting to end discrimination against all of us.

2. We are fetishized.

Seen as sexually submissive, demure, exotic creatures for White America to have their way with. We are supposed to be submissive everywhere else, as well, not just the home. You've heard the stories- halfies only exist because some white man went and had a thing for Asians, and then made a halfie baby overseas. Take a dollar for the amount of times I've heard an inappropriate comment about my white dad marrying my Chinese mom, or the number of times I've been asked how I'll like being dominated because I'm Asian.... You'd be rich.

3. We are meant for medicine, law, and IT.

How many Asian American athletes can you name? Actors? Singers? Politicians? The answer, unfortunately, is not many. Young Asians aren't told by society that they can't be politicians and make social change, or be a strong professional or college athlete, or be great on

the stage. They feel they do not belong on these platforms. They aren't given examples, because the people in the generation before them weren't given examples, and the generation before them wasn't either... we're told that's not our place. How many lost talents have died or gone unnoticed because of this stereotype?

4. There is no racism against Asians.

I once had a friend call someone a chink. My Chinese friend and I looked at him, saying, "You know you can't say that, right?" We weren't angry, and there was no anger in our voice. His girlfriend defended him, saying that she didn't even *know* that that was a derogatory term. He defensively said that he could say the word "chink" because it wasn't really racist, it wasn't really bad, because racism against Asians doesn't exist. Yet he had just used the word to describe someone horribly based on their race, making assumptions about them because of what they looked like, treating them differently for that same reason... And if that isn't racism, what is?

This is just barely opening the discussion- there is so much to discuss, so much to go over, so much time to make up for... so let's leave it at this: We are invisible to your eyes. Our challenges are invisible to your eyes. And this needs to change.

To People Like Me:

Where do I even start? You already know what I'm explaining to them... and I don't think I'm even doing the issue justice I'm not even sure if I'm doing *you* justice. Because it is so, so utterly complicated.

You have been raised to be respectful, to work hard, to take your shoes off in your home, to bring friends parents flowers and gifts when they invite you. You have been raised to eat what is in front of you without complaining and always say *thank you*. (Of course, this is based on my

family's experience and that of my friends' and the whole point of this essay is to show that we are not all the same... but I trust that at least some of this is familiar, or you know what I am speaking about.)

So to hear that you should speak up against your professors, your teachers, your friends... this feels wrong. This may make you shake, may make you dizzy. But it is *right*. You deserve to be heard. You deserve to stand up for yourself. You deserve to make those people feel like fools when they call you a chink or they say your mom doesn't deserve to be in this country. You deserve to do what you want to do, what you're good at, no matter what the people on the screen tell you.

And that's weird to hear, isn't it? Because our country just doesn't tell us that. But we have a responsibility for the next generation. We need to show them that they can be confident, loud, assertive, strong, powerful people. We need to show them that they're allowed to be themselves. We need to show them that they cannot allow themselves to be manipulated just to fit other people's expectations.

So the next time someone says something racist? Tell them they're wrong. Because we can do that while still remaining true to ourselves.

I wonder- if Jenny Bouilly read this, would she disapprove? Should I have gone with the regular way, the Thai way, and let everyone discover their mistakes on their own? Or would she approve, finally glad that someone like her said something?

I hope I didn't let her down. But I made this choice to write no matter what she would say. I made the choice to write this for my little cousins, for the kids I coach Chinese Volleyball

to, for Asian men and women my age, for the ones in high school, for my mom's sisters and her brothers. I made the choice to write this for all of my Asian friends who have been told they can't pursue an athletic career because that's not where they belong, for the women in nail salons who are barked at, for the men who are told that they can't be attractive to a different race. This is for small me, who didn't know what to do when I was poked and prodded by strangers because I was "interesting" to them, something to tell their friends they say later.

This is for you- you are not invisible, and you will no longer be ignored.

Sources

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