

## Learning to Shout

It was the early 90's in Nebraska, and each week, our teachers would ask one of the parents to read their child's favorite book to the class. My Korean mother, who was also the school nurse's aide at the time, was very excited to read my favorite book, and I was so ecstatic to have her read it. It was a book about a young boy who builds a spaceship and travels to each planet in the solar system, and it was colorful and the best ever.

At that point, my mom could do no wrong either. She was strong, incisive, protective, and her skin had the most beautiful brown glow. Often maligned by other Koreans for her dark "farmer's skin," I saw nothing but a radiant goddess, wanting to be just like her and to maybe someday be half as beautiful as her. A mama's boy growing up, I lived most of my early years peeking out at strangers from behind her legs because she was my protection. She had a sharp tongue, quick wit, one hell of a stink eye, perfectly painted nails, and fabulous fashion sense—that kind of inherent style, grace, and confidence that only women of color exude, and that white people would try their best to appropriate in about 20 years' time. It had become a family legend that when my brother was in a baby stroller, that a German shepherd charged at them, and in all of her maternal rage, she barked and chased the dog down the street to protect her son. She has a winning sense of humor, lovingly joking that I was born queer and that I'm so sensitive and artistic solely because she spent her entire pregnancy eating ice cream and reading Harlequin romance novels to learn English. When a band teacher wouldn't let me play the piccolo, she marched right into their office, calmly closed the door, and shared words. I got to play the piccolo. When people would harass me and called me names in the street and in stores, she would simply squeeze my hand and lift my chin. My father would listen to her intently, loved her with all fibers of his being, and praised her for her strong will and iron constitution. He pretty regularly tells the story about the way my mom "roughed him up" when they first met at a skating rink in South Carolina in the '70s because she mistook him for someone else, proceeding to pick him up by his shirt and scream at him—he said that was the moment he knew he would marry her. They've been married ever since, for more than 40 years. She is a pillar of strength and fortitude. The quintessential immigrant woman who worked hard, raised a family, and somehow never forgot her worth.

So, when she came to *my* class to read *my* favorite book, I was filled with pride. All of us students sat down in the corner of the room, looking up at her in her chair as she held the book out to read. As she began reading, within moments, my classmates began to imitate her accent and pulling the corners of their eyes. They started laughing at the way she pronounced words. Their laughter became deafening and uproarious as they looked between my mother, and then to me, to me, and then to my mother. I remember sitting on the floor, willing myself not to cry, turning beet red, holding my breath, and counting the words until my mother would stop. Suddenly, I never wanted to read this book again, and I wanted my mother to disappear. For the first time in my life, the strong and infallible woman I knew seemed to melt away right in front of me. Rather than being the strong-willed, fierce, and sharp-tongued woman I knew, at that moment, the queen before me had faded, and she chose to ignore what was happening rather than to confront it. Instead of inquiring about why this happened (because deep down, I already *knew* why it happened), I misplaced my feelings of pain and rage and proceeded to publicly humiliate my mother, getting so angry that she couldn't "say the words right." For some time afterward, when kids would imitate her, I'd laugh with them. When neighborhood kids would open up our "kimchi fridge" that sat in the garage filled with Korean food and ingredients, and they would scream "Ew!" or "Gross," I'd close the fridge really quickly and change the subject. I would crassly correct her when certain English words came from her mouth. I started turning my nose up at the delicious Korean foods she would cook for us. I tried desperately to wash away the color she gave me, to

rebuke the wisdom she imparted to me, and to deny the lineage of strong Korean women I'd come from. The woman I'd held as my paragon of strength and authenticity was now just a voiceless Korean woman by my own design. I tried so desperately to blame her for my own racial suffering without ever stopping to think about how she suffered in that moment or in the many, many other moments in her life that she was dehumanized at the hands of racism and white supremacy.

It took me years to recognize where to file that memory, how that story operated in the narrative of my life, how something like this could happen, and where that experience fell in the larger landscape of North American racism. While pivotal to my understanding of my raced "self," in the grand scheme of racism and the way I'd encountered it discussed in mediated and educational spaces, I was constantly told that these experiences didn't feel "racist enough" to warrant discussion or liberation. I was fed lies about "model minorities" and made to think that because of my proximity to whiteness, that the atrocities and hardships I faced were *my fault* rather than the flawlessly executed mechanics of white supremacy. I was never educated about the numerous [uprisings](#) of the AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) community throughout the '70s in Chinatowns across the country. I was never educated about the [Chinese railroad worker strike](#) in 1867, protesting unequal and inhumane labor conditions, becoming the largest labor strike of the era. I was never educated about the [Oahu sugar strike](#), demonstrating an early form of Asian solidarity of various communities throughout the broader Asian diaspora. I was never educated about AAPI participation in the liberation struggles for other non-AAPI communities. I was never educated about the legacies of Asian activism and solidarity occurring for hundreds of years throughout US history, because a model minority myth is predicated on erasing those histories, severing those relationships built on mutual solidarity, minimizing those struggles, and rendering our relationship with racial violence all but invisible. I was never educated that we *have* had a voice, and for generations! But, like a good and model Asian, I fell silent. And subsequently, my silence toward my own oppression and the oppression of others within my own community allowed those outside the community to remain silent to my oppression as well. I suffered alone, and now I knew why my mother, as strong as she was, also suffered in silence.

When we consider the domestic and racially motivated terrorism that claimed the lives of six Asian women, or the [brutal attacks on Asian elders](#), or the countless microaggressions related to COVID-19 that have emerged within the past year, it is very easy for us to imagine that this form of racism is new, novel, or even temporary. The uncomfortable reality is that this racism has deep roots, spanning hundreds of years. Systemic anti-Asian racism has been institutionalized and normalized repeatedly throughout US history, often [situated contextually](#) within watershed moments. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Immigration Act of 1924, the internment of Japanese citizens in 1942, repeated "Yellow Peril" imagery throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary mediated portrayals of Asian immigrants as docile, silent, and exploitable workers, while their second generation children are represented as desperate to assimilate, and desperate to abandon their communities and traditions for white spaces, are just a few of the many ways that anti-Asian racism permeates our culture, our laws, and our history.

Part of learning these histories, though, comes with the critical need to have the sometimes-uncomfortable conversations as well. See, we can and do experience racism. We can and do experience suffering. We can and do experience the deep roots of white supremacy, but we experience them while simultaneously participating in a culture that also rewards anti-Blackness. We cannot decry injustice without also looking inward to identify how our own communities benefit from anti-Black racism. White supremacy operates at its core through anti-Black racism. Our suffering as AAPI operates through the mechanisms of Black suffering. As a byproduct of white supremacy, anti-Blackness has and continues to lay the blueprint for *all* racism. The ability to render us "eternal foreigners" is facilitated in part by the

brand of nationalism that emerged throughout, and after, the enslavement of Black people and the genocide of Indigenous people. Our (racist) positioning as the "model minority" is predicated in part on our willingness to engage in structural anti-Blackness and to turn a blind eye to racism and systemic violence against the Black community. The sheer audacity exercised every time Asians are told how we should feel about racism and whether crimes against us *are indeed* racist and racially motivated are directly informed and shaped by the white supremacist tactics learned through generations of rhetorical pushback against Black liberation movements. When the white media focuses on "[Black criminality](#)" for our suffering, like it did when reporting the damage to Korean businesses during the LA uprisings in the '90s, yet failed to address the way that that suffering—and in many cases, the examples of surrogate whiteness that was applied to AAPI during Asian and Black conflict by a white judicial system—is fashioned by and because of white supremacy, this becomes a story told through the lens of anti-Blackness. When the [countless times](#) that Black and Asian unity has taken place over the course of *decades* as a form of mutual empowerment is not in the news, but singular and individual conflicts are magnified and sensationalized to divide these communities *are* in the news, that tactic is rooted in anti-Blackness. When white media establishments tweet articles about "[How Black People Can Be Strong Allies to Asian Americans Right Now.](#)" rather than stories like "How White People Can Work to End the Structures of Racism That They Created"—regardless of whether the articles are helpful and well-intentioned or not—we see that it is an active *division* or the reminders of past divisions that are put in the center of the conversations about BIPOC solidarity. Focusing on how someone else should be Black and *present*, rather than examining why you are white and *absent*, is predicated on a history of anti-Blackness. Part of knowing our histories in the US as AAPI also means acknowledging the systems that that hatred and racism exist within.

The only way to truly combat white supremacy is to recognize how it affects *all* communities of color. Liberation and justice for us cannot happen without liberation and justice for *all* BIPOC communities, and being earnest and accountable opens that path toward justice. For white people working in solidarity with us, white supremacy is squarely *your* creation; thus, it is *your* responsibility to address the root of the problem. Gone are the days where you can blame someone's age, the context of their upbringing, or the fact that they're having a really "bad day" for the things they do or say. *Whether or not you do or say racist things yourself, you are still directly implicated in what your ancestors created and from what you continue to benefit from.* Simply choosing not to use racial slurs or choosing not to appropriate another culture is not enough to combat white supremacy. For non-Black people of color, it is *our* job to examine and decry the ways that anti-Blackness is deeply entrenched in the values of our own communities and to address those as part of our path to liberation. Only by doing so are we *truly* seeking justice for the AAPI community.

Like Amy Tan suggests in "The Joy Luck Club," our voices have a certain magical quality to them, and when we learn to shout, when we realize that our voices carry with them all of the good intentions of our foremothers, we can move mountains. It is a magic rooted in our ancestors' suffering—ancestors who "cast spells" to protect us from the systems that tried to swallow them. Our magic is, in part, a kind of resilience that we *shouldn't* have to exercise as we do, yet somehow, we always find within us each and every time a white supremacist "has a bad day." Our magic is in the voices that bellow from within our stomachs filled with the food of our ancestors. That magic, however, works best when it's used to protect each other. So, while we in the AAPI community are learning more and more each day, each generation, to shout for ourselves, let's also remember to use our voices to shout for and protect the Black community, who have *always* been the first, and many times the *only* ones to shout for us, to hold our hands, to protect us. Let's use our voices to shout for our Indigenous family, whose histories include genocide and the theft of lands, resources, stories, and even their children in the name of US

nationalism. We must shout to protect our Latinx family, many of whom share convergent immigrant narratives with us while being treated as less than citizens, as disposable. Let's remember that our struggles as BIPOC may look different, but our magic is the same. While we rally to be heard, while we exercise the magic in our voices, remember that we must also shout to uplift those impacted by the same structures that enable the continuous violence against our elders and ourselves.

As I look back on the moment my mother read the book to my elementary class, I see myself sitting on the floor, in silence, choking on my words and holding back tears as my mother's beautiful accent was ridiculed by my classmates. I've since repented for pushing her away, coming to terms with the fact that I'll carry that shame with me for as long as I carry her eyes in my head and her sway in my step. But at that moment, to see my mother suddenly become *human*, to see the impenetrable fortress I knew and loved become rendered a silent statue in the face of racism and ridicule, was devastating. Unable to step into the fray to protect her, we were both inevitably bound by our silence. For a long time, though, I was filled with the guilt of the many other silences that pervaded my own lived experiences: being called out of my name and not confronting the people who do it, being denied service or treated differently at establishments and not demanding to speak to a manager, being harassed with racial and homophobic slurs by law enforcement and choosing to simply shed tears in silence, being told I'm simultaneously not American enough or not Korean enough and choosing to "just ignore it," being told any one of the many racist "dog-eating" jokes and then being told to "lighten up" when I find them offensive, being told that I'm one of the "acceptable ones" because I kept my head down, being used as a number for diversity headcounts yet being treated as if my experiences don't matter when I speak out about systemic racism, and subsequently retreating with my tail between my legs.

In all of these moments, and in learning about any one of the almost 4,000 reports (not including the many that surely go unreported) of [anti-Asian violence and hatred](#), I'm triggered thinking back to another moment in elementary school, when I was grabbed by a group of white boys, held down, and whipped with switches until my back and legs bled. When my father marched me up and confronted one of the boy's father, showing him my injuries, he responded with a blank stare, while I just cried in utter humiliation. In silence. The sad reality is that my experiences in the '90s, or my mother's experiences in the '70s, are not unlike the stories of many other AAPI in 2021, and my heart breaks anew for my extended community each time a new experience of racial violence emerges. My heart bleeds from the experiences we've all held onto in silence. But my mother needs me now. Our elders need us now. We need each other now. Our stories need to be heard, and we deserve to tell them.

It is time for us to shout.

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Below are several resources, people to follow on social media that address these issues, and opportunities for outreach and advocacy, if you are interested in contributing your time or resources:

**FOLLOW:**

@beyonkz  
@Redcanarysong  
@Napawf\_atl  
@Stopaapihate

@Asianamericangirlclub  
@Sophfei  
@Amandangocnguyen  
@Nextshark  
@aapiwomenlead  
@goldhouseco  
@napawf  
@asianaaf  
@Diversityinacademia  
@asianmentalhealthcollective

**DONATE:**

<https://www.napawf.org/>

<https://www.aaldef.org/>

<https://Gofundme.com/aapi>

<https://Advancingjustice-atlanta.org/donate>

**REPORT:**

Stopaapihate.com

Standagainsthatred.org

**RESOURCES:**

Anti-asianviolenceresources.carrd.co