

Passivity is Passé, Critical Essay by Jasmine Cui, Grade 12, Age 16, The Harley School, Rochester, NY

As children of minority, we had been taught to apologize lest we risked becoming the next Michael Brown or Ahmed Mohamed or Xinran Ji. In the immigrant community, it was a habit so deeply ingrained in us that it felt not so much like a habit, so much as it did a way of life - a movement which came as fluidly as breathing. We had cultivated a society fraught with passivity. One which allowed others to pass over, through, and by us. We told ourselves that we were simply “living cautiously.” I’m not sure we were living at all. In retrospect, it was quite ridiculous if someone shot you, the Emergency Room doctor wouldn’t say “oh, well, get him some ice. Have a Band-Aid.” No, they’d say, “get him to surgery and give him some goddamn sutures.” In similar vein, we were merely applying a topical treatment, to an issue which ran deeper and was far more severe than we liked to admit. And in doing so, we had facilitated the spread of an epidemic. We had allowed the society around us to become profoundly racist.

I remember the way it crashed into our car. The van’s silvery body shimmering up the hill, colliding into the driver’s side of our vehicle. I still remember the way that policewoman stood two years ago, feigning interest, as my mother explained in broken English that ‘the man should give me right of way, he was drive on the wrong side.’ The officer sides with a thin Caucasian man. From the backseat I see him standing in the grass. Arrogantly, he watches from the roadside, smirking. Words burn in my cheek, rolling like hot marbles, ‘mom, she’s

not even listening to you.’ ‘Shh,’ mother silences me sternly. ‘But mom there’s no point I explain---.’ ‘Shh!’ my mother interjects. Her temple throbs with anger, ‘let the adults discuss.’ What ensued was no discussion. It was an explanation, the kind given by students who have been called to the headmaster’s office. A false confession, littered with “I’m sorrys” and “it was my faults.” Each syllable. Each letter, another letter of apology for something she had not done. I felt my blood boil. Breathe in. Breathe out. Nod. Smile. Apologize.

The kind of racism we see today, is not necessarily the overt racism of the past. This means, that oftentimes, we don’t even see it, causing us to falsely believe that it “really isn’t so much of a problem anymore.” In my mother’s case, I doubt that policewoman had racism at the forefront of her thoughts. Instead, her actions were the culmination of the biases she had been taught over the years. Most likely, they came as second nature. But, when this happens we cannot apologize as my mother did. If we don’t fight back, how will anyone know that what they’re doing is wrong?

I remember the way the woman at the DMV counter slowed her speech—ever so slightly—as my father approached the counter. She pretends to listen as he explains a registrar error. She acts as if she can’t hear him through his heavy accent. I don’t think she’s trying. He becomes increasingly frustrated. The woman becomes increasingly engrossed in her game of solitaire. The hot marbles scald. Now they reach the roof of my mouth, treacherous words threatening escape. But, my father escapes before my words can. He, a man who graduated from

Harvard, finished medical school while taking care of 2 children and an American citizen of 12 years. . .he says, “I’m sorry for wasting your time.” I’m sorry for wasting your time. And in that moment, it feels as if nothing, not affability, not intelligence, not even success. . .no. . .none of it means as much as the color of your skin. I implode quietly. Breathe in. Breathe out. Nod. Smile. Apologize.

Today, we rarely see or hear of burning crosses, and racially motivated lynchings and the like, but even when we do society is quick to condemn the culprits. And yet, what we fail to see the smaller, more sinister ways, racism has manifested in our every- day lives. Despite the fact that America, a predominantly white country, has had a lengthy record of discrimination against African Americans, Janelle Boule, in his essay “The Gulf that Divides Us”, wrote, “Many whites—including many millennials— believe that discrimination against whites is more prevalent than discrimination against blacks. Moreover, a Slate poll reported that 62 percent of millennials believe that having a black president shows that minorities have the same opportunities as whites. And yet, as American journalist, Nicholas Kristof points out, “The U.S. has a greater wealth gap between whites and blacks than South Africa had during the apartheid.” Considering this, how can we even begin to claim equal opportunity? Some people like to say that Asians are all rich doctors, lawyers, and dentists. However, the reality is that, on average, Asian families still make less than the average white family. Although my father is a psychiatrist today, this doesn’t mean we have not known

poverty. My dad came to this country with only 50 dollars and for a long time all we could afford was boxed macaroni.

I remember the way ethnic jokes became vogue. A friend once remarked that the school trends were jelly bracelets, bell bottoms, and thinly veiled racism. It was an uncomfortable year. I had reached the age of unease. Unease was a sensation that manifested itself in dry throat and chapped lips. It was a feeling that burned hotter than shame. A feeling that socked you in the gut every time someone whispered the “chink.” Despite this, I bought into the trends, thinking of the quips as a small price to pay, a fee for something all adolescents wanted more than the new Tamogatchi: acceptance. “Ha-ha, Asian parents aren’t strict. Mine are letting me become any kind of doctor I want. Hey, so yesterday, my mom told me I could go and play. . .the damn piano for 3 more hours. Wanna hear a joke? My social life.” Each day I would choke down my discomfort. Each day I would go home nauseous and empty, telling myself that none of it mattered anyways. I mean, they were just jokes. It all meant nothing. And then, it meant everything. Breathe in. Breathe out. Nod. Smile. Apologize.

I remember the way in sixth grade, my little sister began riding my bus and on the very first day, a boy in a bright, orange jacket pointed at her and shouted, “LOOK IT’S THE GIRL WHO MADE MY SNEAKERS.” Even the bus driver smirked. In one sentence, this boy had reduced an entire human into nothing more than a pair of Nike trainers. As the vehicle rocked with laughter, I rocked in my seat, quivering with anger. I felt an urgent tug on my sleeve and heard my sister’s voice ask,

“Jasmine, why aren’t you doing anything?” At once, I felt disoriented and disgusted and small. But before I could make amends “orange jacket” screamed, “I’M GOING TO DEPORT YOU!” Again, peals of laughter ensued. Through tears, my sister asked, “can he do that?” At this, I stood up and yelled, “YOU CAN’T DEPORT US. WE ARE AMERICAN.” Suddenly, the bus lurched forward, throwing me backwards. I crumpled in the seat, quiet tears rolling in twin streams down my cheeks. I sat for a second, steeped in regret; silently swearing to never again sit through another rice paddy or chopstick joke. Silently swearing to never again be passive. That day, as I climbed off the bus, I heard my sister thank me for saving her. And yet, she. . .she was the one who had saved me. Breathe in. Breathe out. Nod. Smile. Never apologize.

I will remember the way I stood before you today, deeply and profoundly unafraid. Defiantly unapologetic. Standing here, in the fight against my own vicious cycle of passivity. Standing here, hoping to give a voice to those who have gone for so long without one. Standing here because in Slate’s 2014 article, “Why do millennials not understand

racism,” it was reported that 41 percent of white millennials say that the government “pays too much attention to the problems of racial minority.” When in reality it pays too little attention. Because 67 percent of adolescents believe that race is not a “barrier to accomplishments.” Because Jeb Bush still uses the phrase “anchor baby” on public television. Because, even today, I am still called a FOB. Because it’s a shame that a country who so desperately sought freedom could take so easily take it away from those who seek it with equal desperation. And, because the racism and discrimination which stems from passivity affect all of us, whether you are Asian, white, black, purple, rainbow, straight, gay, or undecided. It affects, not just me and my sister but all of the sisters and brothers and mothers and fathers and uncles and aunties and everyone everywhere. This is why I, no we. . .we cannot afford to be passive any longer.

It was once asked, if not now, when? If not here, where? If not us, who? I tell you, it must begin now. It must begin here. And it must begin with us.

Summers at the Bottom of the Ocean, Poetry by Aidan Forster, Grade 10, Age 15, Fine Arts Center, Greenville, SC

1.

The clink of a belt being undone is the most sexual noise—
more so than whispers of white sheets,
cousins to the cold morning wind. Here is where it happens.

A bed, regulation bunk, raised halfway into the air
on stilts. We are two parasites balanced
on the head of a great heron. Its wings are elongated—

its beak turned towards the window
The threads of sunlight unspool.
His sheets are blue— the door is locked—

his hands fumble with the brown leather belt
around his waist. Something in its clink,
the whisper of leather and metal, two passionate lovers,

is more than I can bear. I once thought a kingfisher
was a fish and not a bird— I marveled at its nest
floating above the waves, fashioned from mermaid combs

and fan shells, broken pieces of pinkish coral. A kingfisher
is a bird— there is no mystery in its feathers, but rather a cracked sunset.
He didn't know either— content in his ignorance he played with my hair.

Afterwards, we buy two bottles of Coke from the vending machine
in the hall. We drink them as the sun busies itself around us.
I didn't think once about my father.

2.

My secrets are black. They live between my shoulder blades
(two mountain peaks the sun only reaches in summer)
and throw raucous parties. I wonder why they never vacation—

the beach, the shore! Potential inherent in the gentle dunes
and lap of the waves at the ankles. At a Halloween party
I didn't attend, my father announced that he knew my secret.

I heard this secondhand.
As a consolation prize, I got a pat on the back and a smile.
My father isn't aware of the shade of my secret—

darker than the black flap of the subconscious—
he plays a game of words with me
when all that's between us is open air and the emergency brake.

3.

I was a boy, and then I wasn't.
The exact moment of change is fleeting, a band of light
off the scales of mackerel laid out on the morning ice.

Light pitches across the waves.
Waves pitch around the boat. The only time I went deep-sea fishing
a man sold baby sharks in jars of pink liquid.

Between his fingers were sand dollars, and all the doves
in their cracks sang in the wind. My father turned me away
from the baby sharks. Instead he plucked a sand dollar

from behind his ear and put it in my little hand. I asked
what day it was— the sand dollar was smooth in my palm—
It was Thursday, and there was a finality in the wind—

salt, or maybe a version of it that only exists
on open ocean. Dolphins cut through the surf and cackle
at the softness of our flesh, our feet which clunk about on the deck.

That was a past summer—
but all summers are inherent in each other,
Russian nesting dolls sheltering microcosms

of heat and sexuality, each smaller and smaller,
all the better to force a change. I was a boy and then I wasn't—
I grasped the moment as it happened— he wore a sand dollar necklace,

so white against his olive skin. He was a pure product
of the Mediterranean, a Grecian egg cracked over the brim
of the horizon. Its colors were the most beautiful I had ever seen.

4.

My mother is a pharmacist. Some nights, she sits
at the computer and listens to a man lecture on Hepatitis B.
During these times, the house is quiet. My brother uses headphones.

My father grades papers. My mother paints her nails and sometimes falls
asleep.

Pharmacists must continue learning to keep their license.
I wonder if bottling my attraction and slapping a label on it

would count as Continuing Education.

**Caution: Use at own risk. Do not consume more than twice a day.
Ground into a pulp, may gleam under fluorescent light.**

She doesn't know— she wasn't at the party.

5.

More and more everything comes back to kissing, or words like it.
Kissing, kiss, kiln, kin, clan, clang, tang, angel,
angle, spangle, sparkle, parka, mark, ark, arc, arch, fin.

Fin, as in end, as in a stream of consciousness to be corked.

You cannot cork an ocean current—
Coriolis, sitting in an arm chair or on a yacht,

might say that between puffs. Back to kissing—

like God making us from clay and dust instead of gold—
inane, imperfect. The lionfish mate by dancing,

swirling up and down around each other like ribbons
in the fingers of young girls. Don't feel bad.
They have had more time than us to get it all together.

6.

Kingfishers are birds, not fish. Halcyon is crying on a shore somewhere.

7.

I want to be kissed in the backseat of a car.
His parents', preferably. I want to feel the leather seats
on my back, its own kind of skin,

and his hands in my hair and his lips on my lips
and maybe a sunset. Maybe we're by the coast
and can get our toes wet in between episodes.

Maybe the sand is littered with shells and I can pick apart
this mosaic in search of shark teeth. A shark tooth
between my thumb and index finger to rub myself away.

I imagine it would come from the alien reaches
of some trench— suspended in a constant darkening,
a rapid absence of light— and all that's left is a millennium.

Through some transitive property of touch
I would be on the bottom of the ocean—
a thumb, a flash of light behind the eyes, and the rapidity

of water flooding to compensate for my displacement.
So much for just a thumb, small as a kiss between passing entities
at the advent of the new millennium.

***Fear Itself*, Critical Essay by Daniel Wu, Grade 10, Age 15,
Timber Creek High School, Orlando, FL**

The topic I explore, and ultimately reject, in my essay, I find to be the basis of Anti-Tolerance. By briefly exploring Fear of the Other and its ingrained role within modern prejudice, I hope to enlighten readers to their own cognitive biases, and encourage each of them to reject an oppressive mindset. This course of action will lead to tolerance, and an egalitarian society.

In the wake of a horrible attack on Paris, in an age where it seems new threats are called in daily, the political forum is understandably abuzz with discussion of how best to “win” the “War on Terror”. It seems that every one of us exists in a cultural milieu of fear; our TVs are constantly calling out new horrors, every unknown face presents an unknown risk, and each tick of a clock reminds us of our ever impending mortality.

The fact of the matter is, the War on Terror started far before the events of 9/11. From the first of us to the last of us, we are each engaged in our own War on Terror. The emerging narrative of our byzantine machinations to defeat fear, a veritable spider web of justification, oppression, and voluntary blindness, has never made the call for change so fierce. From the first civilizations onward, fear, the emotional equivalent of our physical appendixes, has created and continues to create a sprawling butterfly effect of institutional quandaries: racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and elitism, just to name a few, and

continues to perpetuate worldwide issues, such as global warming, world hunger, and indeed, the colloquial “War on Terror”. Surely some fears are helpful, but the ongoing, unending, in fact, accelerating, impacts of our progressive fear of the Other must be combated. It seems that a consilience of fields points to one conclusion: This fear is redundant and damaging.

What is fear? We cannot look to a simplistic, “common sense” definition. Fear is best comprehended as a subconscious avoidance of perceived threats, a state of being in which threats are dismissed in varying ways, positive, and negative. At its root, fear is anchored in an ancient biological response. Johnson, a reporter with Discover, explains, “[Fear causes us] to display defensive behavior in response to threatening stimuli...fear turns out to be one of the most essential techniques that natural selection stumbled across to increase the survival odds of organisms in an unpredictable environment...For people who have undergone serious trauma...memories of fear can sometimes play a dominant role in shaping personality”.[1] The sum of our everyday interactions, our personalities, are constructed within an environment of our fears, and therefore our fears underlie each tenet of our modern societies. Fear is thus an antique of a hunter-gatherer existence – a nod to the primal past of our species, from times where every shadow hid wolves, where every unknown was a danger. However, humanity is no longer facing hungry wolves, or angry bears; the world around us is safer relative to our hunter-gatherer past. Our greatest resource competitors? Ourselves. Food has transformed into jobs, wealth, and success, while

bears and wolves have transformed into Others. The fear that once unified humanity against perilous nature, has transformed into a wedge. As Lars Svendsen, professor of philosophy puts it: “A paradoxical trait of the culture of fear is that it emerges at a time when, by all accounts, we are living more securely than ever before in human history.”[2]

What of the Other? The Other is just that: the other. A wild card, an unknown, and thus, an implicitly perpetuated threat. Humans, listening to an age-old, species-ingrained mandate, fear what they do not know, what is unfamiliar, alien, different, and separate. Other. Hegel, in his Propaedeutic, describes it as such: “I am a being for itself which is for-itself only through another. Therefore the Other penetrates me to the heart. I cannot doubt him without doubting myself, since self-consciousness is real only in so far as it recognizes its echo in another.”[3] The Other, in Hegel’s view, is thus essential, and inherent in the Self – required to maintain its Selfness. Without it, self-consciousness cannot be achieved.

Applied culturally, this concept takes on a different spin. We, through the lens of the Other, analyze our own social identities and groups, and question our assumed superiority, our need to feel successful, accepted, and defined. To ensure superiority, we are urged, nay, required, to ensure the Other, the metric and lens by which we measure ourselves, is inferior. A crusade must thusly be leveraged against the Other within civil society: a grand campaign to oppress, marginalize, and subjugate. Human Schadenfreude in its everlasting glory.

In an effort to identify and secure Self, we look at the Other, and fear it. We fear its inscrutability, its distinct nature, its “*differentness*”. This response, encoded in our very substance, manifests in an ardent drive to assert dominance. In response to such a fear of the alien, of the unknown, or such a crisis of self-identity, we seek to gain security by ignoring, demonizing, and destroying the societal Other. In this way, we classify the other, we assume it is understandable, inferior, and thus, without threat. We cognitively negate fear of the Other by percolating it through a sieve of mediocrity and oppression. Fear is and has always pushed humanity to atrocity, in hopes of achieving “security”.

Beauvior puts it as such: “The category of the Other is as original as consciousness itself...Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night...Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. If three travelers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile ‘others’ out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are ‘strangers’ and suspect... Jews are ‘different’ for the anti-Semite, Negroes are ‘inferior’ for American racists, aborigines are ‘natives’ for colonists, proletarians are the ‘lower class’ for the privileged.”[4] Seen from this angle, it becomes readily apparent that racism, sexism, elitism, and other forms of oppression seem to form from a common spring: A jagged primal dread of the unknown, and a need for self-validation, accompanied by a base

refusal to accept the humanity of others and to promulgate an ethic of care in our worldly affairs. In psychology, the analogous phenomenon is the In-group, Out-group effect. All summated, it is Fear of the Other.

And yet, this bleak picture is also shortsighted. With every social Self, of any size, there is its social Anti-Self, an Other. The West calls it the East, the North from the South, and Blue the Red. Sunnis and Shias, Whites and Blacks, We and They, I and You. Violent cycles within cycles, nesting dolls of hate and unity, spirals never-ending. Even as We unite, We divide – Social Selves overlapping, contained in niches of an ever sprawling complex of divisions and unions. With such an intricate complex of loyalties acting on each individual Self, oppression, discrimination, and persecution become expected on every scale. Global divisions retard global solutions, resulting in American Exceptionalism, economic warfare, and the gradual rise of nationalism within the global arena. Yet, humanity can abolish these crises, and burn down the overhead burdens of our own creation. Reject the inherent fears humanity holds, and accept all as Selves, instead of Others.

Our society is afflicted with appendicitis. Humanity needs a mind frame shift, a determined rejection of the Otherizing fear apparatus within our societal consciousness, to move forward, as a

species. Only after society counters the root problem, only after we nullify the backdrop of fear in which we operate, do we have a chance of enforcing enduring solutions to societal oppression and global issues. I leave you with this: Do we really have to fear Fear Itself?

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Footnotes

- [1] Johnson, *Fear in the Brain*.
- [2] Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Fear*, Pg. 7.
- [3] Hegel, *The Philosophical Propaedeutic*, Pg. 20.
- [4] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Pg. 3.