ESSAY

Not Black, and Never White: I am a zebra, how about you?

by Dai Lin



"Film Noir 1" by Suzette Dushi

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In the years of puberty, I camouflaged. When they speak of diversity as the colors of a rainbow, they aspire to be my middle school. Students descended from 121 countries and more.

They call these your ‘Most Influential Development’ years for a reason.

Fumbling through hormones, we bumbled through the halls, between classes, and across the invisible boundaries of culture, whose names we’d learn to articulate, only later, from the unforgiving realities to follow.

In our fading innocence, we flowed seamlessly across the globe, thought to thought, voice to voice, country to country.

Our herd of 34 shuffled, huddled, cackled together. None was like another. Bonds and circles formed and popped like bubbles. After all, it was middle school.

It was only later, decades later, that I ingrained an obsession to group,
to map,
to fear.

*

Fact #1: In the womb, before stripes — zebras are black, not white.

It happened in graduate school. A program, prestigious and elite enough to manage a field trip to India.

We made our way north to learn about the Sikhs. I casually recalled aloud, “oh yeah, I think there were a few Sikhs in my middle school class,” and I inadvertently caused my pale-shaded classmate to leer at me.

“Are you *sure* about that?” he asked in a voice that made me doubt my very own existence.

“Y-y-yyeah?” I stammered in response.

“They have to wear a dastar you know? Have you seen one before?”

I shrugged and turned away. I wasn’t interested in the tone of this duet.

Sikhs were not uncommon in my middle school and present still in my high school. My curly brown-haired white classmate *intended* no harm, but the violence of his reaction sent me through decades of mental hard drive review.

I clicked “defragment disc” on my personal memories and resorted by race — an “updated” feature installed by my Master in Public Policy program. The output: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, African American, Israeli, Ethiopian, Brazilian, Korean, Filipino, Ukrainian,

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Russian, Romanian, Ecuadorian, and “white, of unknown European descent,” to name a few.

It’s not that I didn’t know at the time, it’s that we were zebras in migration. The differences across our stripes were camouflaged by the multicultural nature of our herd.

*

They call these your ‘Most Influential Development’ years, and so I took my zebra camouflage identity as my own.

In college, my rainbow herd went monochromatic. I played frisbee, which meant mostly everyone was white. A few of us were Asian, but never more than two teammates per class year. My stripes chameleon-ed away.

The herd before the stripes, always.

For a decade, I chameleon-ed to the shade of my habitat. It’s a privilege reserved for Asians my higher education had taught me.

*

Then I arrived in Cambridge, MA.

In the streets, tall, skinny, white men called to me, “you looking to marry for a green card?” At the bars, these strangers patted me on the head, sneaking their fingers through my hair. In classrooms, their foreign hands found my lower back and slid to my ass.

When I screamed, they raged in return: Asian women are quiet, they informed me. “You need to stop talking,” they said. To another woman from China, they whispered, “I know you oriental women like to fuck.” They stalked me. They threatened me to keep silent.

I reported it.

The higher education admin asked *me* to “educate” my stalker. They asked me thrice.

Others asked why don’t I go to the police? Well, you see, it’s because… at night, I bike by policemen shoving and beating Black people under streetlights for all to see.

I call my Black friend, a channel that wouldn’t obliterate my reality, and I blurted out, “I think I’m Black.”

She did not end our friendship right then and there though I wouldn’t have blamed her if she had.

“Let’s unpack this a bit,” she offered with the slow kind grace of a sun peeking beyond the clouds.

I sputtered the incoherence of shame.

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Fact #2: Zebras are immune to domestication.

In the face of racism, if I am not Black, then what am I?

I don't want to recede into the silence expected of me. I do not want to stay in the lane of abiding Chinese Americans — intelligent, respectful, and never causing a stir.

Last week, for the first time in our 14 years of friendship, the other Chinese American woman from my college frisbee team and I acknowledged our identity to one another. Out loud.

In college, you could be *very* Chinese — drinking bubble tea and having only Asian friends — or you could be white. And if you were white, you must never draw attention to your non-white-ness. After all, white-passing is a privilege, they'd taught us.

We danced on tiptoe around each other. Neither of us possessed the language, but both of us possessed the striving.

*

But what about language for my stripes?

Fact #3: A group of zebras is known as a zeal or a dazzle.

In the American canon, how many yearn for a return to middle school?

If you had been there — with me — then, you may too —

We were not *Black or White* **or** *Not Black and Not White.*

We were zebras. We made zeal. We dazzled.

*

That night in Cambridge, I had first phoned my white best friend, who cut me off when I called Boston racist. She had lived there, and she never saw a thing. "It's just segregated," she'd corrected me.

I held my tongue and found a polite path to hanging up.

Like that conversation on Sikhs, I did not want to perform another waltz.

Like that brown-haired white man, she also 'meant no harm.

But, the reality is, they both caused me deep, painful harm.

To exist, to breathe, to escape beatings, assaults, rapes, imprisonments — we dance between silence and voice — day in, day out. We are punished for our voice and we are punished for

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our silence, but

it is not me who is silent. It is you who practices silencing.

I refuse to call it “whiteness” for to divide is to enact the first step of colonization, of systemic oppression, of “domestication.” I need not further internalize oppression.

Fact #4: Zebras have excellent hearing abilities. Zebras communicate emotion with their large, round ears.

My other white friend keeps asking me if I’ve read *White Fragility*. No thank you, I do not need another white person giving name to a reality they will never experience, but I am glad you find it helpful. More words for your experience, I suppose.

He teaches me the difference between racism, prejudice, discrimination, and bias.

I tell him such distinctions relieve no felt pain for us.

*

As Audre Lorde stated, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

So, what tools shall we wield?

*

Well, it’s quite simple you see: just *listen*. Hear me out —

> “We are born into the oppressors and the oppressed. You are not to blame, but you are responsible.
>
> On this matter of race, you don’t live it. If you don’t live it, tell me, how can you name it?
>
> Instead, *listen*.
>
> Listen to our words, for we are speaking... always. Hear us speak how we speak. Do not ask of us to speak *how you speak.*
>
> Don’t you see?
>
> Asking us to speak *how you speak* is asking us to live differently.
>
> Asking us to live differently is…
>
> asking us not to live.
>
> So, next time you think to tell me how it is — tell me it is not racism, it is prejudice, segregation, bias — tell me it is not silencing, it is educating — tell me it is not

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domesticating, it is empowering — why don't you offer your silence instead?

We know how to speak. We know how to *language*. We do not want to yell. We do not want to talk over you. We do not want to oppress.

Why don't you look up the words I use — internalized oppression, cultural melancholia, intersectionality — if you choose to listen, you'll hear our song — loud, clear, ever-expanding!

Think again:

do we appear silent or are you silencing us?"

*

Can you feel our pain? Can you hear your violence?

I said I would not call it Whiteness, that I would not divide.

*

So, who, then, is this "you"?

I have been the "you" in an unfamiliar place. I have been the "you," as an American on foreign soil. I have been the "you" with my fancy diploma.

But then I stopped, and I listened.

Sometimes, I learn a new language. Sometimes, I learn new words. Mostly, I learn to hear the same words used in a different tone, from different voices. The same words from a different lived experience.

Yes, it comes with a smidge of middle school shame, but every zebra has to earn its stripes.

Every zebra is a privilege.

Fact #5: For some time, scientists thought zebra stripes were to protect against large predators, "[n]ow most scientists agree that the function of a zebra's stripes is to ward off biting flies that can carry deadly diseases[1]."

Oh, what a time it is, to learn to dazzle!

May 24, 2020.

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January 25, 2021.

22 hours after I composed "Not Black, and Never White,"

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a white police officer murdered a Black man, George Floyd —
a slow suffocation
in broad daylight
with casual nonchalance
for all to witness.

A seismic socio-political shift

ensued.

*

In middle school, I found Facts in hip-hop and Lies in history texts. Privileged by the shade of my skin's "proximity to whiteness" and propelled by one parent's expectations of my performance, I spat back lies in exchange for stamps to an American Dream I never got to say if I wanted. In my head, I lived in the lines of tracks I was not permitted to cross in real life. One hood over, rappers spat bars of Truth long banned from any text permitted behind the brick bars we've branded as an "education system."

Did this syntax shift just trip you up? Or did you take a step

across this line
and hear me
for who I am?

Within those walls, schedules segregated Black and Latinx students from others in an integrated school system 66 years after Brown v. Board of Education. Because "educators" can already tell whether a child

has potential
has gift
has grit at 12 years of age,

and it is more effective to let some fall through the cracks so *others*,
like me, can rise
on their backs.

Another American Dream in which I had no say.

In my herd, the white teachers sat the 3 Black students in the back, the 2 white students up front, and all the 1st and 2nd generation immigrants — from Africa to Eastern Europe, from Latin America to East Asia — in between. From autumn to spring, we memorized ourselves out of history so we could pass the state exam and level up.

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Behind those same brick walls, the System had tracked half of the school — mostly Black and Latinx students with a sprinkle of Asians — into herds To Not Succeed. The Invisible Hand had stamped “NOT WORTH YOUR TIME” across prepubescent foreheads because education policies can tell how high a child can fly before any child is even fully grown.

DAMN.

And you wonder why *Johnny don't wanna go to school no more, no more…*

*

A gruesome murder no different than the 224 in 2017

229 in 2018

249 in 2019

Black people murdered

by the police in the United States[2].

Only trapped by a pandemic-induced quarantine does America — all sides of the track America
— face the single Truth of This American Dream.

Did your education prepare you for what you saw?
Did your education prepare you for what you see?

*

I’d been tracked to deny my stripes

to believe whiteness

not only attainable, but

the ultimate goal.

To perpetuate Whiteness or fear a certain death.

To recite Lies or be prepared to be annihilated,

but those lies annihilate too.

Those lies:
extinguish the differences across our stripes
erase our histories from memory
ostracize individuals from the herd
endanger our ability to camouflage
make us vulnerable to disease.

I am not White and I am not Black.

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No matter what
talk I walk, or
walk I talk,my truth is that:

no shade is below me
no shade is above me.

I am a zebra, how about you?
This is mine;
what is your
American Dream?

It was all a dream. R.I.P. B.I.G

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/science/zebra-stripes-flies.html
[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/

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