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What It Means to Be Brown

Wendy Thompson Taiwo, MULTIRACIAL
CHINESE/BLACK AMERICAN, 36

When I was a little girl, I wanted to look just like my mother. Her brown laughing eyes were always in a partial squint—the kind of eyes my white classmates would mock my Asian classmates for having, their dirty pink fingers pulling down their eyelids—and her skin was the color of aged bone. I thought she was the most beautiful person in the world. She had arrived to the United States in 1974, a Chinese immigrant whose baby face hardly needed the rough scratch of red she drew across her lips or powdery dabs of blue and green shadow that she layered above her eyes to “make herself look pretty.” Yet she would continue the practice, teaching me through each application that a woman must always make herself attractive to her husband or else he would leave. It was a private ritual between us: me sitting on the bed watching her apply makeup, and her gazing at her face in the mirror. And I would go on believing that a woman’s appearance could keep her house intact until the day my father left her.

Growing up, it didn’t matter to me that I didn’t look like my mother until other people pointed it out. Then I was forced to explain myself and our relationship to those who were often demanding and rude in their inquiry. “Who is that woman?” they would ask me. “That’s your mom? You’re lying,” classmates would accuse. On shopping trips to Oakland Chinatown, men and women behind counters and cash registers would force my mother to respond to their curiosity—“Is this your daughter?”—before extending her service or allowing her to collect her purchase. Constantly, strangers would question us—*How? How?*—searching for answers about

our biological connection until I realized that their questions were less about understanding how we were related and more about policing racial boundaries and sexual transgressions—specifically, the interracial relationship of my Chinese mother and my black American father. This also meant that of all their questions asked, there was one unuttered question that troubled them the most: *Why would your mother choose to be with a black man?*

This particular question would trail me into adulthood, arising whenever I was with my mother. It was my body—visibly mixed-race and black—that revealed her sexual history and led others to assume my father’s sexual dominance and my mother’s physical ruin. It was my body that made Chinese people uncomfortable, disrupting their beliefs that Chinese people should only choose each other as intimate partners or, if they crossed racial lines, should do so only with white people, whom a history of racist state policies had disproportionately granted excess social authority, political autonomy, the highest property values, and the best financial credit. It continues to be my body, and reactions to it, that reveal the pervasiveness of anti-blackness within Asian America and among Asian immigrants who see blackness as undesirable; many would do anything to avoid black adjacency in the same country that treats blackness as a liability and black people as disposable. After all, anti-blackness remains at the core of American citizenship and requires that all immigrants assume what writer Toni Morrison refers to as a “hostile posture” against black people “at the Americanizing door before it will open.”¹

Finding myself routinely dismissed by Chinese people who told me that I wasn’t *really* Chinese or who implied that my mother’s desires and choices were shameful would convince me that immigrants of color who had been allowed through the “Americanizing door” would not hesitate to repay their hosts for entry, and that this repayment would be made through their complicity in the (re)production of social exclusion and state violence against me and other vulnerable black, brown, and indigenous people. At the same time, the evidence of my body and the anti-black harm it has experienced would convince me that there is nothing that my mother

or anyone else could offer to settle the material and symbolic debt black people have had to pay and continue to pay for our blackness in a white-supremacist settler-colonial nation.

Like me, so many black women are forced to accept their lack of social power and diminished sexual desirability rather than recognize that powerlessness and devaluation are consequences of living in a racist, capitalist system that places black women at the center of under- and uncompensated servile labor, bodily and environmental degradation, systemic violence, and targeted disposal. Through European colonial expansion, New World slavery, and the creation of a racial regime in which whiteness equated with freedom and positive value, blackness became synonymous with generational enslavement and social death. This was followed by numerous local and legal attempts to police and defend racial boundaries, including the violent exclusion of black people from white neighborhoods and the criminalization of interracial sex in order to preserve the purity, integrity, and market value of whiteness. All of this would make clear that nonwhiteness, but especially blackness, was considered inherently threatening due to its potential to contaminate and degrade.

Thus, to be black and a woman in America is not only to carry the burden of history but to contend with a long litany of stereotypes: black women are inherently nurturing and therefore naturally suited for the care of others whose needs they put before their own, even at the expense of their own well-being; black women are less desirable and therefore desperate for the validation and companionship of men from whom they are willing to tolerate mistreatment, betrayal, and abuse; black women are masculine, aggressive, and loud, and must be put back “in their place,” with force if necessary; black women are generally incompetent and therefore inadvisable to hire, retain, or promote, and if they happen to be in professional settings, it is solely because there was a need to fill a diversity quota; black women are disposable, and when they disappear, you will not even notice that they are missing, unlike the white girl abducted in Aruba more than a decade ago whose name and face you can still easily recall.

As a mixed-race black and Asian woman whose light brown complexion, ethnically ambiguous appearance (Asian-appearing eyes and long, dark, wavy hair), performance of middle-class whiteness, and academic credentials allow me to evade some of the more vile and pervasive public mistreatment and institutional abuses experienced by my black female counterparts, I am forced to consider the symbolic and material ways in which I benefit from colorism. With the ability to enter more easily into spaces that are predominantly white and exclusive, it becomes clear that my acceptance is conditional and dependent upon my ability to be unthreatening and assessable to white people: playing audience to their moral outrage and simultaneous lack of action regarding educational inequality or mass incarceration, listening earnestly when they explain why institutional racism isn't really institutional racism, being expected to acknowledge them for being less racist than other white people, and keeping a straight face when they allude to me making them feel comfortable because they perceive me as nonthreatening. But then again, given the history of this nation, how could I, a brown-skinned woman, expected to validate, reassure, forgive, teach, and love my oppressor, not have been in service to them?

Since moving into my thirties, I have felt increasingly weighed down by both the mundane (the ease at which a racist comment is slipped into conversation) and the sensational (witnessing second-hand the police murder of another black person). On days when it feels impossible to carry any more, I call my mother and tell her about the latest incident: a comment at work, a gaze at the grocery store, a body on the news, a phone call from my daughter's school. And while she tries to soothe me, she tells me repeatedly, "It's a white man's country anyway. What did you expect?" Perhaps I expected to be the unique individual I was told I was throughout grade school by my white "color-blind" teachers who supposedly saw my character but not my race. Perhaps I expected to be free from the afterlife of slavery that continues to shorten and degrade black life, barring me and my children from the same degree of personal freedom and material comfort that my white middle-class neighbors are

afforded. Or perhaps it was simply the expectation of being affirmed in the arms of my parents: black, Chinese, emancipated, immigrant, hard-working, American-dreaming, house-proud people.

But because the reality of racism precludes my individuality, because the afterlife of slavery is all around us, because my parents continue to carry the weight of generational trauma and internalized shame, I find myself facing the world alone without my parents' arms able to hold the whole of me.

My mother, now a senior citizen, has been joined by an influx of affluent Chinese women who have moved into her suburban East Bay neighborhood and refuse to leave their near-million-dollar homes without their protective sun visors or parasols. I see them everywhere: getting in and out of cars in the 99 Ranch Market parking lot, jostling each other in line at the Taiwanese bakery, dropping off children at the local library. Like them, my mother has begun donning visors and applying sunscreen while giving me porous answers as to why: because she doesn't want to get sunburned, because she doesn't want any more wrinkles, because she doesn't want to get skin cancer. Beneath it all, though, what she doesn't say is that despite being my mother, she never wanted to look like me. No longer the child, I watch as a new ritual plays out between my mother and my youngest sister, whose complexion is lighter than mine. The objective has changed. It is no longer makeup, but hats to shield the sun from their faces and the application of sunscreen to prevent cancer and wrinkles, and perhaps most importantly, to prevent the slow creep of brown from spreading across the skin.

To be beautiful. To be desired. To be chosen. To be protected from predatory practices and racist policies. To safeguard one's children from structural harm and deliver them into elite private schools that promise increased social capital and high-paying futures. To be visible. To be treated courteously in the supermarket checkout line. To never answer to people's assumptions that you are the help. To have value. To be included in society's understanding of who is human and has a life that matters. Locked in their ritual, my mother and my sister won't tell me that these, too, are the reasons they protect their skin.

In learning how to value and hold myself, I have begun prioritizing my need to be abundant and loving towards myself and others, especially to my two young children, who will spend their lifetimes grappling with what it means to be brown-skinned black people in this country. I tell my children that the people whose ancestors created a racial system that elevated their own humanity while denying ours will see our skin and all that has been mapped onto it. They will judge us despite our punctuality and consumption of fair trade coffee and grass-fed meat. No matter how perfect our diction, advanced our degrees, and good our financial habits, none of these will save us from institutional harm or structural erasure. But against all of this, my children should never forget that they are valuable and that their value is quantified outside of existing capitalist measurements like work status, income level, and property ownership; their value exists beyond the racial measurement of whiteness.

As a people, we have been subjected to the cataclysmic destruction of our worlds, and yet we can point to the constellation of traditions that still live within us. As people, we have been pressed into all the corners of the earth as human tools of colonial and capitalist expansion, and yet we have found ways to continue shaping our children's dreams. We are music. We are bone—solid, fragile, living—one day to return to the earth. We are the length of our origin stories, unraveling. Exposed to sunlight, the cells in our bodies produce melanin, causing our skin to radiate with the rays of the star at the center of our solar system. Through this, we become heat, we become light, we become energy. I tell my children, *This is what it means to exist in this century, on this earth, in this skin.* To be at once the entirety of and more than the struggle of our people. To inherit life in a nation that was never designed to sustain us, in which we grow wild and unapologetic in the face of brutality and social death. *This, I tell them, from the collective to the cellular level, is what it means to be brown.*