

Men Without a Country: Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, My Father and Me

By Arthur Chu – 08.12.14

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I wrote the piece below in a late-night frenzy on July 13, 2013, after receiving a notification on my phone that George Zimmerman had been acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin. I had left a party early, brooding about why I felt so strongly about something that, ostensibly, had “nothing to do with me.”

I had originally kept this as a friends-only post on Facebook, because of the justifiable fear that writing angry tearful screeds about how mad you are at America might be harmful for my career.

As it was, the tweets that I sent out about how depressed I was after the Trayvon Martin shooting got dug up several months later by some National Enquirer intern looking for dirt on the recent Jeopardy! celebrity, and I got to see a blurb in the Enquirer asking, “Does Jeopardy champ Arthur Chu hate America?”

So for a while I was paranoid about ever letting anyone see this again. But then another late-night frenzy piece I wrote in response to the Isla Vista shootings took off, and I thought maybe sharing this wouldn't be so bad an idea.

The one sticking point was, of course, that my D-list viral celebrity as a Jeopardy! champ and all that followed came a year after George Zimmerman's acquittal and the whole issue of white guys shooting minorities dead and getting away with it was, as we say in the journalism business, “stale.”

But I remember a dark, cynical voice in my mind thinking, “Don't worry. The issue may be stale now, but just give it a few months and it'll be in the headlines again. Have faith. This is America.”

What do you know, I was right.

When my father first came to this country as a graduate student, there was an incident where he and a friend were walking home and were suddenly confronted in a parking lot by a group of apparently intoxicated students in a car, driving around them in circles, shouting threats and racist catcalls.

My father's friend counseled him to ignore it, to wait for them to get their jollies and leave, that this is just the kind of thing that happens once in a while.

My father waited, and they didn't leave, and then my father picked up a rock and said, "I'm counting to thirty and if they're not gone by then this rock is going through their windshield."

Luckily, they tired of the sport and peeled off around when my dad hit fifteen. It's good for me that they did—had the rock gone through the windshield, had glass flown in a thousand bright shards across the asphalt, had the driver slumped over, bleeding, and the car doors swung open and his friends stormed out filled with anger, had police been called and charges been filed—well, I probably wouldn't be here.

If by chance one of those students had been a Zimmerman, carrying a firearm for "self-defense" against "violent criminals" armed with rocks, I very definitely would not be here.

There was a moral to this story when my father told it to me, a moral that I hated more than any of the other morals that came attached to his other anecdotes.

It was a moral that explained many things. It explained, for instance, why he never went to parent-teacher association events, never integrated himself into "the community." Why he consistently obeyed Rule #1, a rule that my friends' white suburban parents had never considered—a rule I would not hear from others until I actually met people who'd grown up urban and poor when I got older—Never Talk to the Cops. (In the Bill of Rights it's actually Rule #5.)

Why he urged me to choose a career specialization based on objective assessment of skills and achievements, one where success was quantifiable, one whose practitioners were organizationally indispensable. To take an "Asian" job like engineer, scientist, programmer. One where there was little room for subjectivity, where the personal impression of the interviewer counted less. To stay away most of all from fields where I would be judged purely based on how well people could relate to me, like direct sales, like middle management, like the performing arts.

To never, ever, ever put my livelihood in a position where I depended on white people liking me.

Because it was a lesson he learned the night that some random drunkards decided that terrorizing two pedestrians in a car, swerving toward them again and again, would be fun—would have no legal consequences because the cops wouldn't care, would have no moral consequences because the victims didn't matter.

A lesson he learned every time he was pulled over for a speeding ticket, or pulled aside by the store detective and asked to turn out his pockets, or quietly scoffed at and eyerolled at by a customer service rep for his accent.

That lesson was:

This Is Not Your Country.

You can live here. You can make friends. You can try to live by the law and be a decent citizen and even maybe make a lot of money.

But you will never, ever belong. You will never, ever be one of them. And you must never, ever trust them.

I resisted this lesson. I fought back. I worked for hours to give myself a generic Midwestern broadcaster's accent—I became a voiceover artist because the way I have trained myself to speak is a “radio voice.” I fell in love with the English language, I developed a vocabulary of nearly a hundred thousand English words, I devoured American culture both high and low, Mark Twain and Eugene O'Neill and Flannery O'Connor and Jerry Seinfeld and Tupac and Public Enemy and the Beach Boys and Buddy Holly and Madonna and Ella Fitzgerald and Weird Al and Bill Hicks and George Carlin and Martin Scorsese and John Waters and John Philip Sousa and Aaron Copland and George Lucas and Beverly Cleary and Matt Groening and on and on and on, all of it, everything I could find, every TV show, every radio station, every book in the library.

History, literature, politics. Fast food and junk food and pop culture trivia and song lyrics and idiomatic colloquialisms of the South, the Northeast, the Midwest. I binged on America, I stuffed myself so full of America I was bursting at the seams with America.

I swallowed it all. As much as I could. I swallowed things that tasted foul and struggled to keep them down, but I did the best I could, to prove I could, to prove that I could swallow anything. I stomached the Chinese Exclusion Acts and the Riots of 1871. The gold miners and the borax miners and the railroad workers. I held my nose and I ate Jack London and the Yellow Peril and the coming war with China. I swallowed H.S. Tsien's deportation and Cold War paranoia and Joe McCarthy and the Yellow Peril and the coming war with China. I choked down Wen Ho Lee's arrest and Vincent Chin's murder and Iris Chang's suicide and Andrew Breitbart and the Yellow Peril and the coming war with China.

My friends were white. The girls I dated were white. I laughed at the racist jokes and invoked hipster irony to make them myself. I steeled my muscles and kept inside all the shit I'd swallowed, told me it was another time, another place, just another one of my dad's stupid stories. I took history instead of CS or EE in college. To hell with my dad's misgivings, I set out to be an actor, a performer, to live or die by whether I could get the audience to like me.

Because none of that was real. That was all in another world.

The historical atrocities and the daily microaggressions. Kids who screamed “Chinese Pig!” and adults who asked in an exasperated tone “I mean where are you from originally?” John McCain and the gooks he could never forgive. Making it to callbacks three times in a row only to never be the “fit” they were looking for. Being complimented on my English. Being criticized on my English. The tingle of nerves bristling at standing next in line to a FOB with a thick accent and a bad haircut, the desire to scream “I'm not with him! We're not related!”

Sum Ting Wong and Ho Lee Fuk. Dick jokes. Accent jokes. Chinese restaurant jokes. The mute Chinese nerd in the background of the movie. The Chinese lead character being played by a white guy in makeup.

Waking up every day knowing that all of it—the broadcaster accent, the memorized cultural references and song lyrics—isn't fooling anybody. Your face gives you away. The way you overenunciate certain consonants. The foods that don't make you retch and the foods that do. The sound of your parents' voice on the phone.

The way it simply matters more when a pretty white girl goes missing than when an Asian man goes missing and is later found dead. The way academics still publish papers on whether you possess the necessary mental apparatus to function in a civil democracy.

The way a grad student is willing to hurl a rock through a car windshield—and throw away his entire future with it—because he knows in that moment that he has no other options, that if he is found run over and dead the next morning the cops won't really care.

The way a terrified black teenager might lunge at a racist vigilante because he knows there's no good way out of this and it's better to die fighting than to be shot in the back.

The way a crowd of people who have had their total and utter helplessness before the law rubbed into their face by the media over and over again might pick up rocks, sticks, knives and break anything they can, because while mindless vengeance is not justice—is far inferior to justice—it is still more than nothing, which, when they try to stand up and peacefully demand justice, is what they always receive.

The way a grim-faced storeowner might pick up an assault rifle and begin firing into that selfsame aggrieved, desperate crowd because he knows no one is coming, no one will help, no justice will be served—the men whose blood the crowd wants are safely ensconced in police protection in the suburbs miles away and they, like the Jewish bailiffs in feudal Russia in the time of the pogroms, will be left to soak up the rage of the masses. They fire round after round in “self-defense” without thought of justice because for them justice does not exist.

They live in a world different from your world, gentle white reader. The one you take for granted, where you can pick up the phone and someone on the other end will listen, a cop or a lawyer or a congressman. They live in Trayvon Martin's world, in my father's world, in the world that under all the assimilation and the “model minority” bullshit I live in, despite all my best efforts, despite all my father's warnings.

But even that is a facile evasion, isn't it? Calling it two worlds. It's really only one world, only one country, only one United States of America. There's one place, one culture, one system.

We all live here. We all make friends here, eat the food, watch the movies, maybe even make money.

It's just some people belong here, and others don't.

I can pretend to belong here better than Trayvon was ever given the chance to. The white racist looks at me and sees a stolen job or the slow decline of national prominence, but he doesn't see a rapist, a thug, a barbarian at the gate. I fear being snubbed and sometimes spat on but rarely shot. And that is a very important difference.

But it is still not my country. However hard I try, however well they treat me, however much we all smile at each other and however much people praise the "model minority" I am, I know it is not.

Because it's also the country whose government had to be pressured into taking an interest in the murder of a young man simply because of the color of his skin. A country that produced a jury that let that murderer walk free. And a country whose most self-proclaimedly patriotic citizens were whooping and hooting and setting off fireworks the night that man went free, right in the midst of the shock and grief and sorrow of those still mourning.

And I am done making excuses for this country, to say that "America" isn't like that despite what the American government is like, despite what American history is like, despite what even now an overwhelming number of the American people are openly and proudly like. I am dead tired of pretending that countless examples are all exceptions, that to see a pattern where a pattern clearly exists is to be a "reverse racist" and "paranoid" and all the things I have accused my father of being.

I am sick and tired of reassuring myself that if their smiling faces can rejoice at the murderer's freedom simply because the victim didn't belong here, that I have any hope of belonging here either.

I am not an American. This is not my country. I have no country other than a China I barely know and do not love. Trayvon had no country other than the vanished West African kingdoms of centuries ago, replaced by post-colonial polities that know nothing of and care nothing for their long-lost sons and daughters of the Middle Passage.

It is not a good feeling, to be homeless. I wish it were not so. I continue to live here, work here, pay the taxes and obey the law. I even intend to spend my life here fighting to the end of my days in whatever small way I can to make this benighted country less of a failure at living up to its ideals. I like the food, I love the music, and in some broken, painful, tragic way I even love America itself, the way a victim of abuse might be unwilling to surrender his love for his abuser because to do so would be to surrender the last of his illusion of dignity and agency.

But of this, no more illusions. I am sorry, father. You were right.

This is not my country.

It never was.