

Yuki Kondo-Shah **In My World 1 + 1 = 3**

A Bangladeshi engineer and a Japanese interpreter marry and move to a Republican congressional district in the middle of the Arizona desert . . . Sounds like the opening line of a joke, right? Well, if this were a joke, then I'd be the punch line.

Whenever my parents and I walk together, be it on the busy sidewalks of London, in a chaotic market in Beijing, or along narrow pathways in Tokyo, the reaction from passing pedestrians is always the same. First, they scan my father, a lean man with dark skin, a mop of curly hair, and features that place him as coming from the Asian subcontinent. Next they look over my mother's strong build, *mochi* skin, and straight black hair cropped close to her ears. She is clearly East Asian. Lastly, there is me, a mixture of my Japanese and Bangladeshi parents, looking a bit like both but not quite like the sum of the whole.

The passerby does his calculations—it takes but a couple of seconds—and

then, relishing the joy of solving an arithmetic problem, he lights up in understanding, equation solved: a mixed-race child, the sum of two parts. Except that, unlike a math equation where $1 + 1 = 2$, mixed-race children don't come out equally. Half Japanese, half Bangladeshi, but not a whole anything. Add to that mixture a move to the United States at age seven, and the result is a whole lot of confusion. I'm twenty-five years old, and if you asked me to describe my racial identity—like one-quarter Bangladeshi, three-quarters Japanese—I couldn't do it. Where would my "American-ness" fit in?

People always have labels for others, neat little imaginary stickers that they attach to other people's foreheads to make it easier to understand where they fit in the world. Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, Old, Young, Rich, Poor, Immigrant, American, Foreigner. It's an easy task when individuals appear to fit into those neat categories, like items scanned at a supermarket, but it doesn't work with multiracial people, who are hard to place in the usual categories. You can scan and then rescan, but it's hard to come up with an appropriate label. Maybe the curious few will ask "Where are you from?" or "What are you?" But what happens when the labels people stick on you don't fit your self-identity?

I've worn lots of labels in my life. Some with pride, some with discomfort, some without knowing the label was applied to me. I lived in Japan until I was seven (even though I was born in America . . . more on that later), when we moved to Arizona. When I was eighteen, I said good-bye to wide blue skies, Mars-like desert-scapes, and cacti. I traded in my T-shirts and shorts for puffy down jackets and long underwear to attend college in New Hampshire. Up to that time I had already worn lots of labels: *ha-fu*, the term for mixed-race Japanese people in Japan, and *gaijin*, which means "foreigner" in Japanese. Also new immigrant, Asian, biracial, Asian American.

This isn't a new story or an original narrative. Many people immigrate to the United States to start a new life and chase the American Dream, but my story was complicated in that my family didn't fit the usual labels. My father, an engineer by training, grew up as the oldest of eight children in a Muslim family in

Bangladesh. He fought with his fellow countrymen for Bengali independence and took part in designing the national flag. He then worked as a civil engineer, designing buildings and bridges and developing infrastructure all over the Middle East and Southeast Asia. My mother was always an independent spirit. When she graduated from the Christian University in Japan, she looked around and found that all of her fellow classmates were married. Feeling restricted by the limited roles women enjoyed in Japanese society, she purchased a one-way ticket to the United States. After working briefly as a teaching assistant in California, she began her doctoral studies in cultural anthropology at Stanford University.

When my parents met on a train in Thailand almost thirty years ago, they probably never imagined the child they would have or the kind of world I would grow up in. Japan is a homogenous society, where 98 percent of the population is ethnically Japanese, and it's notorious for being a difficult place for foreigners to integrate into or gain citizenship. I recently read an article stating that 10 percent of marriages in Tokyo are international marriages—that is, between Japanese citizens and foreigners. That figure really took me by surprise. But walking around Tokyo in 2010, my mom and I did see many multicultural families with multiracial children—Japanese mothers with Brazilian fathers, a black mom with a Japanese dad. This was not common twenty years earlier. When I was born in 1984, citizenship laws in Japan discriminated against Japanese women, and only Japanese men could pass on their citizenship to their children. My pregnant mother realized that if I couldn't be a Japanese citizen, then I would be a Bangladeshi citizen through my dad. She felt that would not be ideal and made the decision to give birth to me in the United States. That's how a Japanese woman and a Bangladeshi man gave birth to an American citizen.

I was born in California but moved to Tokyo when I was three months old. My first memories are of spending time with my grandparents in Japan, playing with my peers in Japanese day care, and learning Japanese. We moved in next

door to my mother's parents, so I was brought up with 100 percent Japanese influence. I attended Japanese day care, played with Japanese friends, and spoke only Japanese. Although I felt completely Japanese, my darker skin made me an outsider to my peers. I was called *kurokogepan*, or burnt black toast, because I did not look like the other children. Influenced by their parents, society, and the media, children learn at a young age how to categorize others. I wore the labels of "foreigner" and "outsider" but was too young to comprehend why. Since I didn't know myself as anything other than Japanese, I found those labels extremely hurtful. When I looked in the mirror, what I saw was a tan Japanese child, and I didn't understand why people would think of me as something different. Nevertheless, I had no trouble making friends and still keep in touch with friends in Japan. We played *mamagoto* (house) and *karuta* (cards), bathed at hot-spring resorts, and attended New Year ceremonies with my grandparents at the neighborhood Shinto shrine. It was a classic case of nurture over nature: I was Japanese and I didn't know anything else.

I spent most of my summers in rural Japan, camping in the mountains and playing with other biracial children at the international camp that my mom sent me to. The camp was in a small town of thirty thousand nestled in the Japan Alps in the Nagano prefecture, near the location of the 1998 Winter Olympic Games. My mother, always wanting distance from the nearest neighbors, built a lone log cabin on the side of the mountain. For one school year I walked down the mountain path and through the rice paddies to attend school. The school rules did not permit parents to give students a ride back and forth from school, and you had to be beyond a certain distance from the school to have permission to ride your bike. Through summer thunderstorms and winter blizzards, students as young as six were instructed to walk to school in order to build strength and confidence. I loved going to school in the Japanese countryside, where we'd catch cicadas and observe morning glories for science projects and participate in *Obon* summer festivals to honor our ancestors.

In 1992 my mother decided it was time I learned English, since my father

didn't speak any Japanese and I was unable to communicate with him. Although my mother was a professional interpreter, she grew tired of having to interpret between her family members. During a business trip to the Southwest, my parents decided that Arizona would be an ideal place to relocate the family. That was, by my childish standards, the end of my life as I knew it. I resented the move because I was taken away from my grandparents and friends, and I was horrified to find that I did not have the linguistic or cultural ability to fit in in America.

I was placed in English as a Second Language courses and "developmental first grade" at a public school in Arizona. My parents thought the "sink or swim" method was the best way for me to learn English, and so I was dropped without a lifejacket into American waters. The majority of my ESL classmates were Mexican American immigrants, and I felt that, with my skin color, most of my teachers and peers identified me as Mexican as well. Although I struggled to learn English, the Japanese education system had put me ahead in subjects like math and science, so by second grade I was able to join mainstream classrooms. At that point in my life I identified as strictly Japanese, and I missed Japan and resented my parents for the move to a new country where I did not have friends and couldn't understand the culture. My parents tell me that I would come home and ask questions like "Why do the American children raise their hands in class when they don't know the correct answer?" which reflected my confusion with a new education system. I had gotten used to the Confucian system in Japan, which emphasizes respect for elders, conforming to the group, and following directions. On Saturdays I attended a Japanese school in a neighboring city, where I could learn from government-approved Japanese textbooks and earn a middle school certificate—this symbolizing, at least to me, my Japanese-ness.

My U.S. teachers would ask us for "personal reflection" and how we "interpreted" reading passages. This was quite different from the Japanese form of pedagogy I was used to. Teachers and parents would comment on how polite

and respectful I was. My mother still laughs at the memory of other children's parents asking her how she raised such a polite, respectful, well-behaved child. Apparently my politeness and good behavior made us stand out as foreigners. Teachers and parents who saw my mom picking me up from school would ask if I was adopted, as my mother and I looked so different that we didn't seem to belong together. This made me feel incredibly self-conscious.

I remember being teased for making grammatical mistakes and having a foreign accent, and I was embarrassed that I couldn't pronounce words the way my classmates did. It didn't help that friends who came over would comment that our house smelled like "curry" and that my parents spoke English with an accent. I spent the first couple of years in America feeling completely like a foreigner, counting the days until the summer break, when my mom would put me on a plane to visit my grandparents and friends in Japan. For me, going to Japan was going home to the country where I belonged and where I fit in. There I could tear off the labels of "foreigner" and "immigrant." Or so I thought.

As soon as I landed in Japan, the flight attendants looked at me and asked in broken English, "Where are you going?" I took great offense at this, as I was *Japanese* and should not have been treated as a foreigner! I would reply in fluent Japanese that I knew exactly where I was going. This was met every time with a surprised look and a condescending "Wow, your Japanese is really good for a foreigner." Of course, when this happens now, I smile and just keep moving on, but for an eight-year-old who was sensitive about where she belonged in the world, these comments compounded my sense of *not* belonging.

But the worst was yet to come. At get-togethers with my friends, I quickly learned that after a year abroad, I was hopelessly behind on the newest pop music, TV dramas, and youth culture. To my horror, I would sometimes forget phrases in Japanese, and words would flow out of my mouth in English. My friends would look puzzled, sigh under their breath, and envy my English language skills. As time went on, I found that I didn't fit into Japanese society anymore because I was "too American," but I didn't fit into American culture

either because I was “too foreign.” I had become someone without a home, and that was terribly isolating. The Japanese label I longed to stick on my forehead didn’t match those being placed on me without my consent.

When I was a young child, my tan skin was a mark of difference, and I felt it was a curse. I felt anger toward my parents for depriving me of my country of origin, where I could feel a sense of unity and conformity. I felt that if I had just one background, life would be simpler, and I was obsessed with wanting a “pure” identity. I felt that if I were just American, then I wouldn’t have problems. I see now that what I meant at that time was “If only I were white.” As I came to understand my own racial identity through interactions with other groups, I wanted to learn the markers and culture of the most “successful” group. I longed to identify with the majority group wherever I was, but because of my physical characteristics, I didn’t fit into either Japanese or American society. When I was in Japan, I felt an increasing culture gap, which made it easy for others to label me as a foreigner. In America, I attempted to learn the cultural cues that would help me succeed socially—a goal that would become very important to me during middle school and the early years of high school.

In seventh grade I switched to a private prep school. This school was academically competitive and provided me with an intellectual challenge, but the demographics were high income and almost all white. At first it was easy to make friends, but I had a hard time really connecting with my peers. Even though I was involved in student government, I found that the issues I cared about weren’t necessarily what my peers considered important. In the beginning I tried to fit in by being overly materialistic and focusing on my exterior characteristics, and was frustrated that I did not meet Western standards of beauty. I also wasn’t an ideal student, as I studied only topics I was already interested in. I did join the debate team, which became a perfect outlet for me to express myself. Debate opened my mind to philosophies that changed the way I looked at my classmates and what we studied in the classroom. Foucault’s theories on normalization and Naomi Wolf’s “beauty myth” challenged the

way I perceived myself and my relationships with others. Traveling around the country to debate tournaments made me feel successful. I began to reorganize my priorities and became more interested in the pursuit of knowledge rather than consumerism or shallow relationships.

I have always been extremely close to my parents because there are only the three of us. During college, and even now that I am starting graduate school, I call my mother every day and tell her what's happening in my life. Some of my friends think it's overkill and wonder why I have so much to say to my parents. I am especially close to my mother, and maybe at first it was because she was my connection to Japan. My parents were stricter than the parents of my American friends, and they made sure that I followed the values I'd learned in Japan—politeness, respect for elders, and responsibility. Although I spent some of my childhood resenting that my parents were immigrants, I was also hyper-protective of them. For example, if a bank teller was impatient with my mother because of her accented English, I felt angry. During my senior year of high school, I was bullied by classmates who made prank calls to our house mocking my mother's accent, which really hurt.

When it came time to search for a college, I wanted a school that made diversity a priority. Coming from a high school that lacked diversity, I was looking for an environment where I could find role models and mentors. During my search I was in touch with the dean of Asian American students at the college I did ultimately attend, and was delighted to receive emails from the president of one of the student Asian American organizations. Once I arrived on campus, however, I changed my mind about participating in this organization, as I felt that joining it would put me in a narrow category, and it wasn't a label I was comfortable wearing. I felt that the numerous Asian American organizations didn't offer a community in which I could participate because they were very country specific: the Chinese Cultural Society or the Korean Students Association, for example. I felt that the East Asian students would doubt my authenticity if I showed up at one of their meetings because I didn't look fully Chinese

or Japanese; and, sadly, because my dad hadn't taught me about South Asian culture, I was afraid of being called out as a fake or a poser if I tried to associate with the South Asians. As a prospective student, I had admired the diversity of student organizations and felt it was wonderful that so many diversity clubs and organizations existed at the school, but at the end of the day, I didn't feel that as a biracial Asian American I could find a space where I fit in and felt at home.

For obvious reasons, I'm 100 percent supportive of interracial relationships. Since I am the product of an interracial relationship, it would be difficult not to be in one myself. Fortunately, I have my parents' full support in terms of whom I choose to date. My mother is generally more modern about dating than my father, and I frequently seek her advice about romantic relationships. My dad is more old-school; although he is already worried that I am too old not to be married, he thinks dating is unnecessary. Being in an interracial and intercultural relationship, however, my parents are very accepting of men from any background. Many of my friends' parents would frown upon their bringing home a partner from a different background, and it's a relief to know that the racial background of my partner will never be an issue with mine.

I have always been attracted to multiracial men. Whether they are Japanese and Caucasian, African American and Caucasian, Native American and Mexican, I find both their physical characteristics and their multicultural background incredibly alluring. When I was younger and didn't know many other people who were multiracial, my attraction stemmed from a nearly desperate need to connect with others who might have had experiences like mine. I would sometimes incorrectly impose on others the idea that because they were also mixed-race, they would understand where I was coming from or that the relationship would somehow be easier. It was as if I believed a magical chain of common experiences connected all multiracial people. Clearly this was silly, but looking back on it now, I see that it was my way of trying to find relationships with people I thought were like me. I now recognize that just because a

man and I are both multiracial, it doesn't necessarily mean that we have anything else in common.

I am especially flattered when multiracial men find me attractive. Asian American and Asian men generally do not pay attention to me. I can't really explain why, but it seems that I am simply not their target. That being said, it is difficult for me to admit, but my most serious relationships have all been with Caucasian men, and my most recent and most serious relationship is with a Caucasian man I met at Stanford. Nevertheless, I've always found myself frustrated by these men's lack of understanding about the minority experience in America. On the one hand, I think it is unfair to generalize that Caucasians can't understand the experiences of minorities, but on the other hand, I recall countless fights over a boyfriend's lack of understanding or lack of passion for the issues that I care about. I also am acutely aware of being the "different" one in a relationship and am wary of being in partnerships where my mixed background serves as fodder for an "interesting" conversation.

During my early experience working in Asian college admissions, I constantly feared being detected as a fraud; after all, I was not a *real* Asian because of my mixed background. I was afraid that my colleagues and, more important, the students and families I met in my work wouldn't be satisfied with my knowledge of Asian culture, history, and norms. I was supposed to represent Asia in the office and be the local expert on all things Asian, and I wondered if I was capable of this. So I faced my fear of being an incomplete Asian and started to learn more about the community. I began to study the history of various ethnic groups and pulled out *National Geographic* maps to test my geography. I found that I genuinely enjoyed this process and began to take real pride in identifying myself as an Asian American. While I spent most of my childhood being Japanese and my college years identifying as a mixed-race minority, I began my professional career as an Asian American. It was all part of a process of growing and feeling comfortable with my place in the world.

Growing up, I hadn't thought much about my Bangladeshi heritage. Because

I grew up in Japan and America, I identified more with those cultures. I often questioned my father's lack of interest in teaching me his language and culture, particularly given his willingness to fight in the Bangladeshi war for independence. Why fight to protect your homeland's culture and language if not for your own children? I still feel a sense of "racial melancholia" when it comes to my Bangladeshi identity, and when I visit Bangladesh or interact with South Asians in the United States, I don't know the correct cultural gestures or things to say. I have tried to talk to my father about this, but he just jokes and says that it matters only that children speak their "mother tongue"—by which he means my mother's tongue. I'm always in trouble when friends ask me about Bangladesh, because to be honest, I don't know much about the place. While traveling with my family to Bangladesh in 2008, I was surrounded by people who looked like me and expected me to be able to communicate with them, but instead found me unable to utter a single word.

In my previous role as a college admissions officer, I read around 2,500 personal statements written by high school students who revealed their innermost thoughts in an attempt to gain a place in a highly selective school. Many of these essays were well crafted but lacking in creativity, but a few were so powerful and personal that I found myself haunted by the student's words for days. One such essay was written by a multiracial woman who told about her mixed-race background. She shared her most intimate thoughts about her identity—how she had reconciled her feelings about herself and the way the outside world perceived her. Perhaps her words spoke to me because I could empathize with her lack of confidence and identify with her predicament. We were trained as admissions professionals not to have personal bias or to be swayed by emotions, but her words struck a chord with me. She described an incident when a classmate mocked her background and she found herself upset and crying. After speaking with her mother, she realized that only she has the power to define who she is. She wrote: "I realized I had no right to be ashamed of who I was. I put my energy into mourning the cultures that were

absent from my life instead of embracing the one that helped me become who I am. My other cultures are here. I see them every time I look in the mirror. But neither my ethnicity nor any other person can define me. I reserve that right for myself.”

Her words were so powerful, and her level of understanding so mature and sophisticated for someone so young. I found myself wishing I had been able to think at that level at her age, and possibly have avoided much of the confusion I had faced. Looking back, however, I can see clearly that the period of my life that caused me confusion and pain also became the foundation for who I am. I have benefited from my international background and from being exposed to many countries and cultures when I was a young child. I have also been blessed by being a mixed-race person because my experience as a minority in America has made me more able to empathize with people’s differences.

I recently began graduate school, and being in a new environment and meeting new people remind me of how my identity makes me stand out. Almost every day for the past two months I’ve gotten the comment “Your name sounds Japanese but you don’t look Japanese.” Nevertheless, for the first time in my adult life I have found a community of Japanese people who accept me and treat me like I am one of them. It’s a very new feeling, and because I am polite and my mannerisms are Japanese, they sometimes jokingly say, “You’re almost more Japanese than Japanese people!”

This new experience—being a graduate student, meeting new people who have new expectations about who they think I am, and getting oriented in a new environment—has brought up old memories of trying to fit in or carve out a space where I belong. I spent high school being acutely aware of being a minority but not knowing what to do about it. I spent college being proud of being a student of color and organizing communities around this shared experience, while also being fearful that I wasn’t Asian enough to be accepted by other Asians. I spent my initial years as an admissions officer fearing that the community would not accept my credentials as an Asian American. But here

at graduate school, I'm fully embracing my identity. I'm actually surprised by the ease with which I sign up for Asian American organizations that I would have shied away from as an undergrad. My definition of Asian American has become more sophisticated, and I know that there isn't just one common identity within this group. Most of all, I know that my experiences and my knowledge matter. I'm happy that my background and experiences give me access to many spaces and groups, and the acceptance I am now getting from others is the validation I've been seeking for so long from others and, most important, from myself.

Since graduating from Dartmouth College, Yuki has pursued intensive Mandarin training in Beijing through a Dartmouth fellowship and worked as an admissions officer at Stanford University. After completing her graduate education at Harvard, she recently joined the U.S. State Department as a Foreign Service officer and will go to Bolivia for her first post, where she will work with youth and the indigenous community on education and cultural exchanges.