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Snapchat, Anti-Asian Hate, and Meritocracy

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Snapchat, Anti-Asian Hate, and Meritocracy

When my daughter came out of her room, teary-eyed, and said she had received a message on social media that disturbed her, my first thought was that it was something sexually explicit.

It wasn't. I don't know how to compare the message she did receive: A classmate had sent her a "snap," a video of himself that tilted down to the gun he was holding, most likely a shotgun or a .22. The caption said, "Stop White Hate."

The "snapper" is white. My daughter is mixed-race, Asian and white. Apparently, the "snap" was a response to some "Stop Asian Hate" messages my daughter had recently posted on social media.

I was stunned and a little frightened.

Because we live in a small town, we knew something of the setting for this snap from other sources—the snapper and his friends were going hunting that night. This, I figured, was the larger reason why he was holding the gun and not simply to threaten my daughter.

The context both helped and deepened the darkness.

I thought about what to do for much of that night and the day following. Should I contact the authorities? Did this qualify as a terroristic threat? Did the snap in question even exist anymore since Snapchat posts are deleted from the servers after 24-hours?

Then, once again because we live in a small town, I realized there were other ways of dealing with this situation. I could call up the parents, drive over to their house, and have a conversation. I imagine that, when cornered, the snapper would have insisted that he meant nothing by it, that it was just a joke, but that was an answer I would not accept because of the threat it involved. The talk-it-over approach would be more appropriate, but then I thought of the layers upon layers of the ensuing discussion, and in the end I took the spineless route: my daughter unfriended him and we kept going about our business as though nothing had happened.

Since then, I've been thinking a lot about the wider context that precipitated this momentary yet profoundly hurtful post. Here's my best interrogation of what happened.

My daughter is biracial, half Laotian and half white. That's the simple racial breakdown, which is never so simple, as 23andMe has taught us, so let me be more precise. She's 3/8 Lao, 1/8 Chinese (I don't know what specific Chinese ethnicity), and half western European, a mix which is primarily Dutch with some French and Irish thrown in.

She's been raised primarily white American, with whatever residual Dutch-American culture has managed to resist assimilation in small town USA, and with a significant injection of Lao food culture. Other Lao traditions have largely been lost, also to assimilation and at least somewhat to Christianity, specifically Christianity's distrust of Buddhism. For example, what is happening when we light joss sticks for the ancestors? Our Protestantism makes us nervous about such things.

On the surface, however, my daughter passes for white. If I had to guess, I would bet her high school classmates, including the snapper in question, would say my daughter was just like them—except maybe for when she got to trot out her Laotian heritage in certain situations to . . . show off. That is, ethnicity and subculture often don't seem to exist in white American high schools, except in special situations, after which they slink back into the shadows, and everybody just goes back to being "regular American."

"Regular American" is the operative term here, a label that can mean a kind of blindness to culture that's probably related to the notion of color blindness, the idea that we shouldn't see race or culture because we're all just human. (One of my favorite renditions of "regular American" comes out in the video ["What kind of Asian are you?"](#) when a white jogger tries to guess the ethnicity of an Asian jogger. My favorite moment is when the Asian jogger turns the question around, asking the white jogger about his ethnicity. He replies, "I'm just regular American," and the woman deadpans, "Really. You're Native American.")

I experienced a clear example of blindness to culture this past year in a college class I taught, when this same daughter of mine read aloud her essay that mentioned various Laotian dishes and her strong feelings about them. After she read, a student in the class exclaimed, "I wish I had a culture!" We talked briefly about the fact that he most certainly *did* have a culture; he just had not been taught to see it.

Subculture among many white students—even in our community which is proud enough of its heritage to name its summer celebration the "Dutch Festival," (which these days is approximately 0.1% connected to actual Dutchness)—seems like it's harder and harder to name. There's mass culture, sure. Baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie are wonderful things, but they aren't the real nuances of a subculture. Couple generic mass culture with the bad rap Midwest culture gets for being bland and no wonder it results

in a kind of cultural crisis for certain people in the Midwest. (Among the several You Tubers doing good work to distinguish the various Midwestern cultures, I enjoy [Charlie Berens](#)—even though his Midwest subculture isn't quite my Midwest subculture). The point here is that I have no doubt that the snapper would see himself as "regular American"—and that he would see my daughter as the same—so how dare she do what she did?

What did she do? She posted on social media about anti-Asian racism. I am not on Snapchat or Instagram, but she tells me she reposted links and headlines condemning violence against Asian-Americans, broadly falling under the "Stop Asian Hate" movement. Another measure of what she posted came from a white peer of mine on Facebook, who messaged me out of the blue, applauding what she had been posting.

The deeper story on my daughter's ethnicity is that a Laotian grandmother has figured prominently in her upbringing, a Laotian grandmother who is unmistakably Asian in facial features, speech patterns, and many other cultural aspects. When the murders in Atlanta hit the news back in March, it shook my daughter, who thought, "This could have been my Grandma." And so, as many members of Gen Z do, she turned to social media as an outlet, as a way to do something.

Why would those posts elicit this threatening response from my daughter's classmate?

One answer is, perhaps due to a belief in "regular American culture," many people tend to see cultural identity as a zero-sum game: "Black Lives Matter" means white lives must not; stopping Asian hate must mean stirring up white hate.

But I think the answers to this particular snap lie deeper, in meritocracy, and that term's shifting meaning.

I don't doubt that the snapper's family feels somewhat afflicted in the current cultural and political climate. They're farmers, but not big farmers, meaning that year-to-year the goal is to break even. They're fourth generation Dutch-American. They're family values Republicans, good Christians, salt of the earth kind of people.

As such, they have lived the American dream as it was: emigrate from the closed system of Europe, work incredibly hard over multiple generations, and get ahead in America. And yet the security of the middle class is proving elusive. Except for the snapper, their kids have gone into the military as a way to pay for college. I would guess this family reads the national headlines about race as people wanting a handout. They might say

something like, “We’ve worked for everything we’ve got”—a line you’ll hear often if you live in my neck of the prairie, one that suggests people have earned some “merit.”

By comparison, my own family finds the middle class perhaps more accessible for similar—though importantly different—reasons of “merit.” My wife, a fatherless refugee, was sponsored by the church to attend the local Christian school. On the basis of that education and her own hard work, she became a medical professional. I was a first-generation college student, and today am a college professor.

Now, both my daughter and her classmate—classmates since kindergarten—find themselves in the same college, fighting to make grades and land on their feet in the professional world. Having been through the same schools together for fifteen years, they know each other’s strengths and foibles.

So back to my guess as to what happened: when my daughter tapped into a part of her life that the snapper saw only rarely and superficially, and when that part of her life dovetailed with national headlines in a way he felt was dubious, he called it out via Snapchat. (This is not to excuse the fact that he also made a racial, terroristic threat, just to interrogate where these things come from). She’d never been the victim of racism, he may have thought—if anything she and our family had played race for an advantage, an advantage which, as a white person, he didn’t have.

As such, then, this snap may have been about “merit” and a “level playing field.” Beneath the snap lies a sense of injustice.

“Meritocracy” is a term that’s getting thrown around a lot lately. Are we really a meritocracy in the US, and what does that mean, both in theory and in practice?

Specifically, “meritocracy” means government by those with ability—those who have “earned” the right to govern with their skills and achievements, typically measured in advanced degrees or wealth.

More practically, “meritocracy” is often connected to the American dream. For example, Barack Obama said that in America, “bright, motivated young people ... have the chance to go as far as their talents and their work ethic and their dreams can take them.” In this ideal sense, I would say that people in my community believe strongly in meritocracy.

But ideas about “meritocracy” have long been diverging. Americans don’t agree on exactly what makes someone “able”; many people in my community would say that advanced degrees don’t necessarily mean you should be in charge, especially if you

don't have horse sense. Yes, this line of thinking is part of a long history of anti-intellectualism, but it also reserves room for the person who is "able" but has not had the opportunity for advanced degrees or other certificates of merit. Critics like [Michael Sandel](#) and [Daniel Markovits](#) argue that meritocracy in practice is far removed from the American dream version of the term. Recently, meritocracy has been unmasked by the college entrance scandals, for example, through which the wealthy keep their kids in the schools that produce the real "meritocrats" generation after generation. The dice are loaded.

However, if the snap in question is any indication, many white working-class Americans believe that ethnic identity is destroying meritocracy. According to this logic, being born non-white bestows unfair advantages over white people. Thus, I read the snap my daughter received as a claim of reverse discrimination.

That's a strange claim to make for this snapper; the college he attends is 90% white. As Jemar Tisby notes in *How to Fight Racism*, claims of reverse discrimination are often unfounded simply because there are not enough people in power who might create structures to exclude white people. Meanwhile, the same has not been true in the United States for people of color, especially Black people.

This historical reality doesn't mean that the fears of the snapper's family aren't real, however. For middle- and lower-class families everywhere, irrespective of race or ethnicity, as doors of opportunity close, fears naturally arise. For white families, this leads to a greater likelihood that they will fall into the grooves that have been made in American history for understanding *why* those doors close.

And some of those grooves are racist.

In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Guitar, a Black character who has joined a radical group after his father was sawed in two at his mill job, declares that "if Kennedy got drunk and bored and was sitting around a potbellied stove in Mississippi, he might join a lynching party just for the hell of it." The line comes as Guitar argues that white men are "unnatural." While we aren't supposed to take Guitar seriously—even Guitar's best friend Milkman doesn't—the line stuck in my mind the night of the snap because it raises important questions about the "grooves" of history. When there is a pattern of racial violence in history, it is possible to fall back into that pattern.

We Americans, and white Americans especially, have the sense that we live free of the grooves of the past. Another way to say this is that we live free of archetypes, a type of character that occurs over and over again across time and space and culture. But historical grooves and archetypes also help us understand a lot of things, even

something like the debate about policing. Yes, the historical roots of policing are multiple, but some of those roots are in [slave patrols](#). When police act badly, it's easier to blame "one bad apple" than to think that maybe there are historical grooves that police can fall into, because historical grooves take a lot of work to get out of.

When the snap in question came across my daughter's phone, from among a group of young white men with guns, I thought of the line from Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Maybe the snapper was drunk and not thinking clearly, which would prove the point. As would the fact that these boys were hunting raccoons; they were literally "coon hunting" and using that term, with zero understanding that "coon" has another meaning—one of the most anti-black terms in American history. They would no doubt be shocked and offended at the connection; ignorance is innocence in this colorblind approach to racial history.

While I ultimately decided that my daughter was not in danger after this snap, I did feel the grooves of history, and those grooves were—are—frightening.

Somehow, all of us, the snapper included, must understand that identity is not a zero-sum game and that historical grooves are a danger.

Perhaps hope lies in deconstructing large racial definitions, in reclaiming ethnicity. The specific histories of young white men in the Midwest have little to do with the Confederate flags they sometimes put on their pickup trucks, for instance. As Ta-Nehisi Coates says, white Americans "were something else before they were white—Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish—and if all our national hopes have any fulfillment, then they will have to be something else again." Perhaps we all have to be Dutch American or Laotian American or all the colors of 23andMe before we can truly be American—affirming our own subcultures and the place of those subcultures within the laws of America that aspire to protect and value those subcultures equally, but which rarely have.

This fall, I will turn my attention toward creating more cultural self-awareness for my students, but especially for my white students. My prayer for the snapper is that he will better understand his story within America's story, that there is plenty of room for both stopping Asian hate and affirming cultural experiences everywhere. Because culture is important. In fact, in T.S. Eliot's famous definition, culture is "that which makes life worth living."

I'm tempted to end there, but I realize that would leave this debate at the mercy of culture, which can as certainly be controlled by malignant groups like the Nazis as by

anyone else. Culture, though a tremendous good and God's will for the world, can become rotten and destructive. When culture gets tied up in skin color and ancestry, as it did in Nazi Germany, it becomes a dangerous and evil thing.

Because culture get so entwined with identity, it's easy to feel like critiques of our culture are critiques of our very selves. Somehow, my daughter's posts hit close to the snapper's sense of himself.

This is where the church can help and why sermons can be so powerful, to help us somewhat disentangle the mesh of culture and genetics and hormones and stories—and spirit—that goes into identity. How do we understand the tension between the multiplicity of cultures God wants on the one hand and the one Lord that is Jesus Christ on the other? What led to the horrific ethnic cleansing performed by the men of Gilead on the Ephraimites in Judges 12? What's up with Jesus seeming ethnic insult to the Canaanite woman? What was so profound about the way Jesus crossed cultural lines in ministering to the woman at the well?

As we wrestle with just what American culture is, with racial and ethnic and cultural sins of the past and the present, with neighbor divided against neighbor, we need the balm and the woe of scripture to guide us. If two classmates like my daughter and the snapper worship the same Lord, we need to better understand and internalize how the story of culture and the story of Christ's Lordship live together, both in this world and the next.

That message is the good news that we all desperately need these days, when so much—and so little—can separate us.