

On the Outside Commentary

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When you see, or meet, someone from an unfamiliar culture, what presuppositions are at work in your imagination? For that matter, what does your imagination have to do with this interaction, and why might you want to be suspicious of your presuppositions?

Every interaction with another person – even friends and family members – occurs in the material sphere (in a home, in a classroom, on the street, in a store), of course, but the real action occurs in your mind, since that is where your preconceptions are at work to help you organize what would otherwise be chaotic sensory input. There is nothing inherently problematic about that.

Perhaps the most valuable thing you might learn in university is the value of policing your own “presuppositions.” In fact, before university, I did not fully grasp the extent to which the way I experienced a new person, a political event, or even a piece of art, was heavily (if not entirely) shaped by things I already *knew* to be true.

These already-known-things are terribly difficult not just to dislodge from our minds, but even just to acknowledge. By way of an example, they clearly shape our views of beauty. This is something one realizes as soon as one listens to music based on a different scale and sense of rhythm (many westerners find classical Chinese music challenging for this reason); one also sees the power of cultural conventions as soon as one sees how differently female beauty was understood in the 17th versus 21st centuries (compare the full-bodied women in the paintings of Reubens to the waifish supermodels we see everywhere).

After viewing these photographs, what do you imagine about the subject, and how free is your imagination? Would you expect Yun to speak with an accent? If she does, would that accent lead you to believe not just that she might find some English words difficult to pronounce like a native English-speaker, or that she might find some English linguistic idiosyncrasies difficult to master, but also that her accent might in fact reflect a more basic, less subtle intellect in any and all languages? What kinds of challenges would you imagine she faced in shifting from Korean linguistic and cultural settings to English-speaking Canadian ones? What might you imagine about the religious traditions she observes? Would you expect her to be a Buddhist? A Christian? An atheist? What if she combined – as many people do today – several of these forms of religious practice and identity?

I suspect many students will find it difficult to hear her tell the story about the impact of just one comment – “Oh stupid Asian!” In fact, the experiences of discouragement and depression she mentions are not at all uncommon for newcomers when someone says or does something that reminds them that they do not (yet) belong. The crass comment hurled at Yun reveals a great deal about the moral and intellectual shortcomings of the people in the car, but the story of the

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comment's lasting effect on Yun tells us something important about the ways individuals in relatively precarious situations can be wounded by what we might call (with a nod to Neil Bissoondath) a "casual brutality."

Several decades ago, the sociologist C. Wright Mills distinguished between "issues" and "troubles." Troubles are those difficulties we each face – with our teachers, our friends, our neighbours, our societies. These may be very traumatic, but they are usually local and personal: they happen to me, and they happen here. However, it is a common human tendency to transform these "troubles" into "issues."

That is, we might have negative experiences with a shop-owner of Chinese or Lebanese origin. These are troubles. However, it is normal to escalate these experiences into "issues," and to see the way you are treated at the store as proof of the claims (made by some people) that Canada has too many immigrants. Of course, this particular trouble may just be a function of the divorce the shop-keeper is going through, and there is actually no necessary link between his rudeness and the immigration levels and programs on which Canadian society depends so heavily and which have made Canada the envy of many western liberal democracies. Nonetheless, the leap from (usually real) troubles to (often imagined) issues is extremely common.

One of the jobs of a good education is arguably to heighten students' awareness of the ways they automatically or subconsciously draw conclusions about individuals and groups on the basis of often very limited direct experience. By telling stories through the medium of finite, fixed images, a photo essay provides us with windows into the life-experiences of other people. The intellectual as well as psychological challenge one faces with *On the Outside* is to observe and perhaps to change the ways one draws conclusions, the ways one's mind is already shaped by deeply rooted presuppositions about migration, women, Asian newcomers, and the kind of society we see emerging around us.