

PERSONAL FILE

Are You Dealing the Race Card?

Because Ella Mei Yon Biggadike's not playing. She explores the personal, and the legal, of being a multiracial person in an interracial relationship.

Recently, in the elevator on my way to my new internship (here at *Tango* magazine), I experienced something that occurs regularly, but I still can't seem to get used to it. I call it the "what are you?" conversation, because that's how it comes out of most people's mouths. The elevator guy had a different approach.

Him: "You look Chinese."

Me: "Yeah, I am..." (What does one say to that, really?)

Him: "What's the rest of you, Puerto Rican or something?"

Me: "My mom is Chinese and Nicaraguan, and my dad is English."

Him: "Ooh, wow (laughter). How did that happen?"

Me: "Well, when a man and a woman..." (No, I didn't really say that but maybe I should have.)

Him: "That's beautiful. You must be married. Are you married?"

Me: "Um, no."

Him: "But you have a boyfriend, right?"

Me: "Yes." (How is this any of his business?)

Saved by the elevator ding, fifteenth floor.

I am used to being stared at. I am used to people asking, "What are you?" I am used to understanding that when people say that, they actually mean, "What race are you?" Then they either interrupt me with, "Oh, let me guess," and throw out a couple of choices (Eskimo and Hawaiian are the most common), or they let me answer and respond with a variety of comments: "How on earth did your parents meet?" "That's so exotic" "Hmm, interesting..." this list continues in more horrifying ways, but I will spare you.

I'm not sure if the elevator guy was trying to figure out why I look the way I do or just trying to pick me up. Maybe he was trying to kill two birds with one stone, satisfy his curiosity and get a date out of it, too.

Here is my plea to men: if you try to pick up a multiracial woman (or woman of color, for that matter) by asking what she is, she will assume you fall into that category of “men with a fetish” and shoot you down. (The stereotypes that feed your fetish are probably not true.) Try asking what her name is.

And here is my response to all of the people who stare at me when I am with my (Jamaican and Irish) boyfriend, Joshua. (While I hate mentioning his races as an appendage to his name, their relevance here is obvious.) ...

And to all the people who tell him he likes me because of the Asian “submissive and obedient in daily life, exotic and freakish in bed” stereotype or that I like him only because of another stereotype: a particular endowment of the African American body...

And to all the people who tell us our kids will be hot (you may think it’s a compliment, but it really just perpetuates the “multiracial as exotic” fetish) ...

We’ve heard it all before. You’re not being original.

Society has had 38 years to come to terms with interracial relationships. After fighting courts for eight years, Mr. and Mrs. Loving (a name oh so appropriate) won a Supreme Court case that reversed anti-miscegenation laws on June 12th, 1967. If my parents had gotten married and moved to Virginia just three years earlier than they did (1970), they would have been jailed and exiled from the state, just like the Lovings. I find it a bit difficult to swallow that it took so long for interracial relationships to become legal, but I find it even more appalling that after being legal for 38 years, America is still wrestling with the issue. And now, even after their parents fought so hard, multi-racial children in (inevitably) interracial relationships still have to deal with the fallout. It’s not necessarily the kind of intolerance our parents faced, but something more like confusion about who we are, what races we are, and why we would choose each other.

A friend of mine, Ken Tanabe, and the founder of www.lovingday.org, a Web site and campaign dedicated to celebrating June 12th as Loving Day, explains society’s reaction to multiracial people in interracial relationships best when he says, “Interracial relationships are legal but far from wholly accepted. We still lack the vocabulary to properly discuss interracial relationships, let alone relationships between multiracial people.” This, he says, is also the reason his Loving Day ad campaigns do not feature multiracial people in relationships. He needs the images he uses “to provide a visual representation of what the laws were actually preventing.”

I have to admit that this surprised me at first, especially since Ken is multiracial, too. I felt excluded in commemorating a day that was so important to me. After all, multiracial children were often used as hard evidence in court cases that miscegenation actually occurred. But then I recalled my own experiences similar to the one with the elevator guy, and I thought that Ken was right—America is not ready to consider as normal relationships involving two races, so we are definitely not ready to accept relationships with three or more races (or, in my case, five).

And when I recalled the length at which I have discussed these issues with people—including my own family—I *know* that Ken is right. This weekend alone, while writing this article, my mother and I logged about four hours examining the differences between interracial relationships like hers, in which each person is from a different country, and

mine, in which we were both raised in America.

Before they even walked down the aisle, my parents struggled with their families' disapproval. My mother's father didn't speak to her for three months prior the wedding. My father's father insisted that no grandson of his would be Catholic. When my parents moved to the States, they had trouble renting an apartment. After they had my brothers and me, my mother was often confused for the nanny. I can remember a handful of times when people assumed I was adopted.

Joshua and I won't have the same cultural and religious struggles as my parents because while our races are different, our culture (American) is the same. We grew up without the rigidities of some cultures and without the prejudices of 40 years ago. Plus, we are both the multiracial children of interracial relationships; we've dealt with race our whole lives. Who then is better prepared to challenge racial politics in America?

But while there is acceptance enough to allow Joshua and I to choose to date interracially, people still make comments to us—both alone and together. And those comments make us feel like the odd couple at first, and then remind us how unique we are.

The problem for couples in interracial relationships is people—specifically other people, who exert an external pressure. But as long as both parties in a relationship can accept each other's differences, cultural or otherwise, all other complexity is externally enforced. And what I have come to see is that if I am in a relationship worth keeping, the focus is on each other—not the external. Isn't one of the greatest challenges in *all* relationships to let each person be who they are and to compromise when necessary? Whether that compromise is about something cultural, like religion or expression of love, or something totally run of the mill, like making time for each other, it's still the act of working together that makes it work.

I like to think that as couples—like the Lovings, like my parents, like Joshua and me—work together to make it work, we are in some way contributing to the positive and acceptable image of interracial relationships, without making it the reason we are together.

Just as with any other relationship, the reason we are together is love. And when we don't have to explain our relationship to those people like the elevator guy, the cause that began on June 12th, 1967, though always remembered, can be put to rest. Until then, I reserve the right to respond to comments about my race or my relationship in any way that opens people's minds in hopes that some day the "what are you?" conversation will fade away.

Ella Mei Yon Biggadike is Tango's editorial intern.

Let's Talk! Tell us what you think about this story, email us at letters@tangomag.com.

Copyright ©2005 by Tango Publishing Corp