

## How Diversity Shapes the Canadian Dream

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One of the ageless questions that every single elementary school teacher asks their students to think about is the question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” And this question that every single child has been asked before is what births their first vision of their future. Now, this vision is fleeting and temporary and with young children, it’s an answer that changes by the day. First, they want to be a world-renowned scientist, and then they want to be a pop star, and then an Olympic gold medalist, but it still teaches kids to dream and to set goals for their lives. So when my fourth-grade teacher gave us the assignment to write a journal entry about what we wanted to be when we grew up, I wrote about how one day, I would be an Oscar-winning actress.

It was a seriously ambitious goal for a nine-year-old, but here in the western world the “reach for the stars” rhetoric is pushed hard enough that I was fully convinced I would be the next Angelina Jolie. I mean, I was getting straight A’s in drama class, had starred in two elementary school plays, and I found that I was concerningly good at acting completely innocent whenever teachers found me doing things that I wasn’t supposed to do. I was determined, a little bit over-confident in myself, and my Hollywood fantasy seemed written in the stars.

I should probably backtrack here and give some context of my childhood. I am a Chinese-Canadian born in Ontario, and lived in the suburbs of Mississauga for a few years before moving to the bustling city of Toronto. Although I’ve lived in Canada for the past sixteen years of my life, I spent most of my school years in prominently Asian parts of the city. Because

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of this, I had never been aware of the fact that I was technically a “minority,” nor did I have the practicality to understand that my father only meant well when he explained to me that I shouldn’t have “actress” as a career goal because as a minority, there was little to no place for me in the entertainment industry.

This was the part of my life where I actually began to understand the idea of diversity and inclusivity. Teachers would talk about it all the time at school, but if I’m being honest, I was zoned out half the time because living in such a diverse and immigrant-dominant area of the city, I didn’t understand the point. I had friends of pretty much every single race in my class, and I think I walked out of that school knowing a variety of phrases in all sorts of languages. It didn’t even occur to me that anywhere else in the country would be any different because to me, a diverse world was what was normal.

Then, with the advice of some family members, I looked to the movies I watched and the books that I read, and it was like a bad case of whiplash when I realized that short of one or two side characters who appeared in the story for a few short scenes, there was *no one* who looked the same way I did. And somehow, despite having read countless books and watched countless movies and shows, I never even noticed the lack of cultural diversity in the media and the world around me until now.

I think that every middle-school-age girl goes through a phase of insecurities regarding countless things. At the age of consuming more and more media and interacting with more and more people, it’s natural for pre-teens to start feeling self-conscious about things like their

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appearance, their personality, etc. But for me, the rise of insecurities came not as a result of crumbling self-image but from a sudden acute awareness that there was something inherently *different* about me.

The girls on the television who were perceived as beautiful were girls who looked nothing like the way I did. I spent most of these middle-school years reading about the main characters with gorgeous blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes, and the narrow image of what the hero of the story looked like grew more and more prominent. I know for a fact that this isn't an experience unique towards me either. The current call for more diversity in the media is the product of countless people who have experienced the feeling of feeling other to what they see around them and is a root influence in how people, especially young people, see themselves in relation to their community.

A lot of people claim that diversity is nothing more than a social construct, or an unnecessary attempt at political correctness that was created to push a narrative, and this is simply untrue. Diversity in the media isn't "pushing" anything, but rather it is reflecting the reality of what the western world really looks like. We live in such a multicultural society that the lack of diversity is scarily harmful to minority groups, but the abundance of it is something that will bring people together and bridge the gap between cultures.

I think something that proves how diversity and inclusion are helping Asian Canadians by the day is how we're seeing more and more Asian faces in the media, which seems like something so unimportant in the grand scheme of things, but I've seen drastic changes in how

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people view our community. In earlier years, the stereotype spun by the media of what a typical Asian girl was like was shy, quiet, good at math, not very good-looking, ridiculously immersed in academics and comically socially awkward. And I could feel that these stereotypes as a result of the lack of diversity at the time was something that really affected people's perceptions of me, especially as I grew older and social media grew more widespread.

Then, from my first year in high school all the way up until now, I could feel how something seemed to change in the way I've been perceived by non-Asian people at first glance, and the change was in a noticeably positive way. I also remember the rise in diversity in the media that people were consuming, most distinctly when the K-pop industry first began to go mainstream and I was listening to my friends name Asian artists and singers as their favorite musicians for the first time in my life. Asian cultures became a thing that more and more people were genuinely interested in, and these stereotypes that used to dominate the media not only began to disintegrate but also change for the better. I think most Asian Americans on our entire continent remember how much of a cultural reset it was when the *Crazy Rich Asians* movie came out in 2018 and became one of the highest-grossing movies of the year, and that movie was iconic not only for capturing our culture in such a captivating way but also because it was the first Hollywood movies with an entirely Asian cast that had ever been made. And throughout the past few years, there have been more and more of these break-throughs and victories for the Asian Canadian community, and there will only be more to come.

Back in the early 2010s in a much less diverse Canada, my parents found themselves immensely worried at the idea of their Asian daughter trying to break into the entertainment

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industry, but now ten years later, I don't think it's a doubt that lives in the minds of any Asian parents anymore. Now, I didn't write this essay about the economy or the political climate or any of the huge things that are the driving force of society so it feels like I just wrote an entire paper about *movies*, but this goes beyond that.

The lack of diversity in the past had been a hindrance to Asian Canadians and Asian Americans alike. At the very beginning, I talked about how a core part of western culture that most of our generation has grown up in is how we believe all dreams can be achieved as long as we put in the work and the dedication, but for a long time, this wasn't true if you were an Asian person. Ten years ago, the process of trying to name more than five Asian faces in the mainstream who had led successful careers was a scarily difficult task, but the Asian community has been able to break that barrier not only for themselves but for all future generations of our community. The people these past few years who have worked so hard to push for diversity and inclusion in the media have made sure of the fact that the next generation of Asian Americans will have countless people who look just like them to look up to, and they have ensured the fact that one's cultural identity and where their ancestry lies will never be a hindrance in their goals and their dreams.

As long as Asian Americans continue to push for diversity and for their voices to be heard, we will only continue to better shape the future of our community. Eventually, a diverse and inclusive world will no longer be something that needs to be celebrated, because with time diversity and inclusivity will be the norm that every child grows up in. That is the world slowly being created, not only for Asian Americans, but for people of all identities and cultures because

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that's what diversity does. It brings people closer together than they've ever been before. Canada is a country that has always stood for diversity, and yet we've only seen the beginning of what diversity really means. It's not just seeing different faces around us, but also about highlighting the beauty and wonder in all different cultures, backgrounds, and ancestral lands. As Asian Americans, we have spent a lot of time living in a society that's a paradox of being familiar yet so foreign at the same time, but diversity can change that. And change doesn't happen with one individual's success or contribution, but with the progression of a society united together as one community and one people standing in solidarity, working towards the dawn of a new day