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RIFFS

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BETWEEN  
CULTURES

— in —

TEN

VOICES

EDITED BY  
MITALI PERKINS

# INTRODUCTION

Conversations about race can be so *serious*, right? People get all tense or touchy. The best way to ease the situation is with humor. There's actually a lot of bizarre comedy material when it comes to growing up "between cultures," as I like to call it. It's a weird place.

Take being Indian-American, for example. Why did that lady at the grocery store feel compelled to tell me about her random bad experience with chicken tikka masala? Do I want to know? We don't even eat chicken tikka masala in my part of India. It's just as orange and soupy and strange to me as it is to her.

And did that dude *really* just ask if I know his doctor? There are over a billion of us on the planet—why should

Dr. So-and-So-ji and I be best buddies? (It's even stranger when I *do* know his Indian doctor, which happened once.)

Then there's the boring dinner party conversation during which an artsy type describes—in lengthy detail, ad nauseum—the plot of that one Bollywood movie he simply *adored*. I grew up with those “fillums,” man. There are a bunch of them. It only makes things worse when you apply a weird lilting accent, add a head waggle, and laugh hilariously at yourself. Awkward.

What works better (at least for me) is when *I* share stories about how strange it was to be squeezed between cultures. Like when I was seven and wondered why the fat guy in the red suit skipped our house completely in December. And then some stupid bunny forgot to come in April. Or later, in high school, wanting desperately to date guys, which wasn't going to happen because (a) I was the color of pastrami and they preferred provolone, and (b) my parents dated *after* they met and got married, both of which happened on the same day.

When I tell my stories, I want listeners to laugh (not *at* me, I hope, but *with* me). Humor has the power to break down barriers and draw us together across borders. Once you've shared a laugh with someone, it's almost impossible to see them as “other.” Poking fun at my marginalized life also sets readers free to see the funny in their own lives, a key to surviving the stressful experience of becoming an adult.

I do have some ground rules, however, for what I consider good humor, especially in a tension-filled arena like race. Here they are, take them or leave them:

1. *Good humor pokes fun at the powerful—not the weak.* Using the gift of wit to pummel someone less gifted physically, socially, emotionally, or intellectually may win a few initial laughs. Soon, though, audiences sense the power-flexing of a bully behind the humor, and they'll stop listening. The most powerful person of all, of course, is the storyteller (see rule #3), so no holds barred when it comes to humbling that target.

2. *Good humor builds affection for the “other.”* At the close of a story, poem, or joke about race or ethnicity, do we feel closer to people who are the subject of the humor? If not, even if the piece is hilarious, it's not *good* funny. Sometimes comedians use wit to alienate the “other” from us instead of drawing us closer to one another. Again, they may get a few laughs, but they're cheap laughs. Of course, I don't like *any* humor where someone gets hurt—I rooted for Wile E. Coyote, winced at the Marx brothers' physical (painful) humor, and stand stony-faced while my sons laugh at videos of people falling and crashing into things. So take rule #2 with a caveat: if watching someone take a hit or a blow makes you like them better, you might appreciate some humor that I don't. And that's okay.

3. *Good humor is usually self-deprecatory* (note: not self-defecatory, although it can feel like that). While I usually don't like edicts about who can write about whom, in a post-9/11 North America, where segregation, slavery, and even genocide aren't too far back in history, funny multicultural stories work best when the author shares the protagonist's race or culture. Funny is powerful, and that's why in this case it does matter who tells a story. Writing that explores issues of race and ethnicity with a touch of humor must stay closer to memoir than other kinds of fiction on the spectrum of storytelling. Some writers and comedians have succeeded in poking fun across borders, but it's challenging in today's mine-filled conversations about race. Go ahead if you want to try, I tell them, but don't say I didn't warn you.

Okay, enough with the rules. Time for some lighthearted storytelling about the between-cultures life. I'm thrilled about the authors who have contributed to this anthology. Some pieces, like Cherry Cheva's "Talent Show," Debbie Rigaud's "*Voilà!*" and David Yoo's "Becoming Henry Lee," make us chuckle; others, like Greg Neri's "Under Berlin," Francisco Stork's "Brotherly Love," my "Three-Pointer," and Varian Johnson's "Like Me," may bring a rueful, ouch-filled smile. Gene Luen Yang's "Why I Won't Be Watching the *Last Airbender* Movie," Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich's "Confessions of a Black Geek," and Naomi Shihab Nye's "Lexicon" make us feel like

we're exchanging a knowing glance of shared humor with the storyteller or poet—like viewers are supposed to feel when cast members on popular sitcoms catch the camera's eye for a moment.

When you're done reading, or if something strikes your fancy, find us on Facebook ([facebook.com/openmicanthology](https://facebook.com/openmicanthology)) to let us know what you think, and share your own weird, funny, or crazy story about growing up between cultures.

Laughing with you, not at you,  
Mitali Perkins

**Open Mic**  
**Riffs on Life Between Cultures in**  
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