

Lynn Noh

My hometown, South Korea, is a collectivist society. People are expected to abandon individualism and strictly conform to societal values. Up until I was eight, the women I looked up to were thin, obedient, feminine, and defined by who their husbands were. In popular media, the female celebrities I was supposed to model myself after were always pleasant, their words empty and devoid of opinion. Because I happened to be born a South Korean girl, I carried these burdens, of beauty and of manner, from an early age.

After I came to the US at age eight, I realized I was turning into something different than the women I had always admired. By then, it had been two years since I came to the U.S. and I had taken small doses of American ethos: independent, rebellious, carefree. I was neither an obedient South Korean nor an entirely carefree American, caught somewhere in between.

It took me a long time to realize who I am, outside of the labels I have been given. I am a girl, but I am second to none. I am an immigrant, but America is wholly mine. America has given me the incredible gift to cultivate and discover my true self.

I learned that to labelling people forces them to adhere to set standards, before they have a chance to discover their identity. When individuals are labelled, they are implicitly told what they can and cannot achieve ahead of time. Societal and cultural labels essentially limit what we can achieve and be, particularly for minority groups such as women, people of color, and immigrants. By encouraging discussion of the various labels individuals have experienced, we are able to understand that this is a universal and collective experience. There is power in a shared experience, and I believe that it would encourage greater empathy and understanding. While not all empathy leads to action, all action stems from empathy.

South Korean suicide rates have been slowly increasing since the 2000's, and in 2016, it was the number one cause of death for Korean teens. In my hometown of South Korea, the

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pressure to be ranked high in academics is overwhelming for teens, and the pressure to fit beauty standards pervade the lives of young women. I hope the day will come when my peers, South Korean and American, can experience the freedom of existing, as they are.