



Video Story Transcript

Racism on the Road and Into the Next Generation

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbbZGDh0zXw>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

I'm Brenda Wong Aoki, and I'm the first nationally recognized Asian Pacific storyteller in the United States. I've been doing this for a living for the last 40 years. So, I wanted to share with you some stories about being on the road. Uh, one of the stories is about being called a witch. I was doing this song for a bunch of children in a school. It goes like this. It's about a big fish and a little fish.

Okina sakana, suiei, suiei

Chisana sakana, suiei, suiei, suiei

Okina sakana, chisana sakana

You get the idea, right. So, I'm doing this story. And, um, the person around me says, "Don't do that."

And why... I'm, like, "Why?"

And he said, "Well, because the mothers think you're doing a demonic incantation on their children. Please don't do that."

I said, "Okay."

So, then I did my public concert and there were women in the audience with signs that said, "Witch, go home!"

I think they're talking to me but I'm a professional storyteller so I go on. And I start telling my story and they start chanting, "Witch, go home! Witch, go home!" And they start pulling their kids out of the assembly and the kids are crying and everybody's... There's chaos and they're chanting, "Witch, go home! Witch, go home! Witch, go home!"

And I just freak out, run into the dressing room and I'm so shocked. And I look in the mirror. And I think, "Huuuh! Maybe I am a witch because nobody out there looks like me."

So, I called my friend Eric, who is a priest, and I say, "Eric, you gotta come out here because people think I'm a witch out here." Now Eric is a circuit rider in Nevada. This happened in Nevada. So, he has lots of churches, and he usually wears a Hawaiian shirt and he's in a big open jeep. And I said, "But don't come like that. Come in your cossack. Come with your cross; you know, come looking churchy."

So, Father Eric puts... comes. And he looks like Jesus Christ on the back of a jeep. And he's got his black Cossack, he's got his cross, his blond hair was flying in the breeze and he screeches up to where I'm performing. And all these people with placards go, "Oh, my goodness, the witch has the anti-Christ with her."

So, all Eric said, "Let's just go get a beer."

But that was one of my experiences. It happened several times to me throughout the country being called a witch, but it was a very innocent song. Another time I was at a reception in my honor, which was before the show, which is awkward because usually a performer likes to be preparing, warming up their voice. Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah! That kinda stuff, right. But if you're at a reception before your performance, you can't be doing that. So, I'm trying to be polite and thank everybody for having me. And one of the society ladies comes up to me. You know the kind, starved to perfection.

She says, "Goodness, Brenda! It has been a delight working with you because, let's face it, you speak such good English."

And I said, "Well, thank you. I was born here."

And she goes, "Uuuuh! Oh! No, no, no, no, no. I thought we bought a real one!"

And then she took me to the guy who paid the big bucks and he kind of looks like a great, big toad. He says to me, "What part Japan you from?"

I said, "I'm not from Japan. Actually, my name is Brenda Jean. I'm Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, and Scotch, and I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah."

And he goes, "What part of Japan is Salt Lake City, Utah?"

I said, "It's not in Japan; it's in the United States."

He goes, "Oh, that's why your eyes aren't as slanty as the rest."

And I'm thinking, "Am I supposed to say thank you?"

Now I have to tell you another story. I'd just finished performing in New Orleans at the New Orleans Contemporary Art Center. Wonderful, standing ovation! I was doing Japanese ghost stories. And after the performance, this woman comes up to me and says, "You know, we're having so much problems between Vietnamese and blacks that could you come to East New Orleans and tell some Japanese ghost stories?"

"Okay."

So, I go to the high school and it's, like, one of those high schools, you know, with, like, like, guards everywhere. And they got German Shepherds sniffin lockers to look for drugs and things. And I go to the auditorium, and there's hundreds and hundreds of kids and I look at them. They're all wearing baseball caps and baggy clothes and they're just kinda... uh, un. And they're all Vietnamese and I'm thinking, "Well, where's all the African-American kids?" But anyway, I start my Japanese ghost stories.

And you couldn't... there's just silence, absolute silence. And when I'm finished there's, like, one applause (clap, clap) and they can't wait to get out of there.

And I'm thinking, "Wow! Great! I do a free performance and I bomb." And I'm sitting there. I think, "What a waste of effort!"

And this girl comes up to me and she's typical f.o.b., fresh off the boat. Immigrant young girl with glasses and books. And, you know, over... her clothes are too big. And I think, "Great! Not only did I have to do a free gig, but now some bookworm's gonna ask me for a dissertation on Japanese theater. Uuh, huh!"

And she goes, "Miss Aoki? We don't means to be dissing you but this is East Nawlins. Here we don't gots to be Vietnamese. We gots to be black."

And that was like, bam, slap, slap, slap, slap, enlightenment! I should not have been sittin up there tryin to tell these kids Japanese ghost stories. I should have been tellin 'em what it was like for me growin up in my mom and dad's store. Bein the eldest kid, havin no money and bein' poor. And knowin what it felt like not to have money, and havin' people look at you. And it woulda been so much better. Sometimes the personal is so perfect.

The last story I want to tell you is about MaK.K. I have a son Kai Kane. Well, he grew up in an all African-American neighborhood. Very ghetto, crack house next door, arms dealer across the street. We all get along. It's just that K.K. was the only non-black kid on the block. So, all of his friends didn't want to call him by his real name, which is Kai Kane. And they said, "We're just gonna call you K.K. So. K.K. grew up playing basketball and, you know, everything with African-American kids. Then he gets a scholarship to this fancy, white school on the other side of the bridge. Suddenly, there's only two, uh, boys of color in his entire school. It's Masashi, who's from Japan, who's very, very tall with straight hair and glasses. And K.K. who's, uh, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and Scotch, and looks like a cherub with all these curls. And he's very, very short and kinda chubby. And the school cannot tell 'em apart. They can't tell the difference between Masashi and K.K. So, they just decide to call him MaK.K. So, from kindergarten to eighth grade, he's MaK.K. along with Masashi. MaK.K. So fast forward.

My son is a dancer, and he's dyslexic and he's got ADHD. So, he gets a scholarship to Stanford because they're looking for another Steve Jobs and they thought that, you know, with all these learning things, he might be the new Steve Jobs.

And he just graduated with a Master's in Cultural Psychology. And he tells me, at the celebration, there's only four kids who graduated with a Master's in Cultural Psychology at Stanford. This just happened a couple of weeks ago. The four kids: one's an African-American girl, one's a Filipino girl, two Asian boys - one's from China, and one's my son K.K. Okay, the boy from China is very, very short. K.K. is now very, very tall. And K.K. tells me, the whole time they're in the Psych Department getting their Master's, the secretary of the department, who controls everything, you have to be on her good side, could not tell him and Larry apart the whole time. And this is Stanford University, the best Psych Department in the country and this is Cultural Psychology. So, isn't it funny and sad how some things never change.

