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## HBO, America, and Me.

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# HBO, America, and Me.

## **Abstract**

Last year, I took a trip to Philadelphia with one of my friends. I had the combined energy level of a first-year college student, an international student studying abroad and a newcomer to America. Visiting a major American city for the first time, I saw the things in real life that I had only experienced by watching HBO back home: the glassy skyscrapers with thousands of tiny people moving inside them; the green “LEAGUE ST” sign above a black and white “ONE WAY” sign; the never-ending crowd of people busily crossing the street; the man leaning against a traffic pole as his cigarette smoke bleeds into the atmosphere. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Family Feud, Gettysburg College, HBO, Philadelphia, Race, Vietnam

## **Disciplines**

Civic and Community Engagement

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](https://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com). Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

## HBO, AMERICA, AND ME

November 15, 2017



Last year, I took a trip to Philadelphia with one of my friends. I had the combined energy level of a first-year college student, an international student studying abroad and a newcomer to America. Visiting a major American city for the first time, I saw the things in real life that I had only experienced by watching HBO back home: the glassy skyscrapers with thousands of tiny people moving inside them; the green “LEAGUE ST” sign above a black and white “ONE WAY” sign; the never-ending crowd of people busily crossing the street; the man leaning against a traffic pole as his cigarette smoke bleeds into the atmosphere.

My friend’s mom was kind enough to let me stay at her house. This was the second time she and I met, but she was so easygoing that it felt like we’d known each other longer. The moment she saw me, she hugged me lovingly, the way she might have hugged her son on the day she sent him to college. I definitely felt awkward but I enjoyed the casualness.

One afternoon she was driving me to an Asian market nearby to get my favorite Vietnamese snacks.

“How would Vietnamese people react if they saw us in Vietnam? Do they like us?” she asked curiously.

“I think in general people would be really fascinated if they saw you. Because you are foreign looking to us. We have a popular saying that whenever we see foreign people, our eyes light up. Because we only have one race, so whenever we see people of other races, we tend to be a little over-excited.”

“Really?” she said in amazement.

“Yep. You should come to Vietnam sometime.”

“Oh, honey, I don’t have that kind of money. But you and your parents can come visit me, you know, when you graduate.”

She paused for a moment to make a turn, and then continued calmly:

“You know, my son has a really good Filipino friend. They are really close. But whenever I come to pick him up at the same time that her dad is picking her up, I have to stay in the car and wait until she and her dad leave. Because her dad doesn’t like black people.”

I couldn’t say anything.

For a long period of time, this conversation had me struggling. Why wasn’t she angry? How could she tell this story in such a calm manner? How did she manage to keep the anger, the frustration and the unfairness to herself and silently just stay inside the car? How would she react if the person stuck sitting in the car was not her, but her son, instead? Why did she always tell her son to be proud of who he is, of his skin color, of his heritage, and then act this way?

On HBO, the black housewives I saw in the movies always yelled loudly at their neighbors for parking their cars at the wrong place, got angry and aggressive whenever the supermarket line was disrupted, beat up their kids for breaking their bicycles. While HBO might have gotten the streetscapes right, this narrative of the loud, angry, and aggressive black woman seemed completely false, as the woman I met in Philly was anything but what they portrayed in the movies. She might be loud while watching “Family Feud,” but only because she couldn’t stop laughing and commenting. She might get upset when her son left his room messy, but she went up and cleaned his room for him anyway. I’m glad to have had the false stereotype taught to me by HBO replaced by the image of this joyful and fun woman whose self-sacrificing nature so closely mirrors that of my own mother.

After spending almost a week in her house, I have a better understanding of her decision to stay in the car. What first appeared to me as silent acceptance of the racism of the Filipino dad, I now see as an act of grace and sacrifice. She was most likely uncomfortable and understandably angry every time, but she was willing to hold that back for her son because she respects and appreciates his friendship. She held back her anger because she is a mother, not because she accepts the Filipino dad’s action.

Her apparent inaction was not really inaction; instead, it was an act of sacrificial love. I’m still waiting for HBO to show me this characteristic of the Black community.

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