Tangled streets and shaded avenues lined with mom and pop restaurants from around the world fill the layout of Fremont, the heart of Silicon Valley. In the buzz of the night, teens roam around, looking for unfamiliar cuisine to try out. Strolling down the street in the heat of summer, dozens of languages can be heard, as people make lines outside of ice cream shops and sleep under trees in Central Park. During the winter, threads of lights wind around trees and storefronts. Families fill churches and temples to celebrate the holidays and later come together to watch the annual winter parade, their breath coming out in icy puffs.

This is a community where diversity is not only accepted, but also embraced and encouraged. I always took pride in the belief that I grew up in a safe and secure community that raised me on the principle that the color of your skin doesn’t define who you are or who you are going to be. However, whether intentionally or unintentionally, my community also raised me to believe the myth that racism only exists among the most sinister of people. For a long time, I held a very clear-cut, narrow idea of racism and what it looks like. The white man accusing an African American of a crime because of the color of his skin was racist. A family refusing to sit near a Middle Eastern man on an airplane was racist. Essentially, racism existed only if it was coming from a privileged white man or woman. The Indian kid calling me a bad Indian for not knowing how to solve a difficult math equation isn’t racist, right?

Racism can’t possibly exist here, in Fremont, the heart of the Bay Area and the home of such a diverse community. However, looking around I can’t help but notice that in our schools and on our streets, our diverse population is becoming more and more separate—a subtle kind of segregation that seems based on ethnicity. We like to believe that America is past racism. But does such an idealistic attitude allow racism to flourish in a different form? Do we excuse or simply not see certain acts of bias when they don’t fit so neatly into our traditional definitions? Is it possible that the myth of diversity actually makes us blind to other, more subtle acts of racism?
Watching the elegant movements of the dancers, I am mesmerized by the poise and grace of the traditional Indian Bhangra dance. Their feet bounce with the strong beat, and their dresses fly to keep up with their fast-paced movements. The dancers’ energy fills up the whole room as they move in sync, like one big heartbeat. I’m jostled out of my trance as the Bhangra dance team’s captain approaches me. Unable to contain my excitement, I declare that my friend Dela and I are here to join their Bhangra team and perform at our school’s annual multicultural assembly, one of the grandest events of the year. My brain is already racing ahead, trying to memorize the other dancers’ steps and thinking about which traditional dress I will be given to perform in; abruptly, I am pulled back when I hear the captain’s response: “What are you even doing here? I thought you were too ‘whitewashed’ to do Bhangra. Look, you even brought your white friend.” I am stunned, baffled, at a loss for words. Is this what people think? Am I considered “whitewashed” just because I don’t hang out explicitly with Indian people? Looking over at my friend Dela (who is not white, but a beautiful Latina girl, a girl who has been one of my closest friends since we were little), it occurs to me that by hanging out with her I am somehow defying the norms of my school and the implicit expectations to act in a certain way due solely to my ethnicity.

Maybe this pressure to conform is what Rebecca Solnit escaped all those years when she chose not to attend high school. In her essay “Abolish High School,” Solnit discusses her decision not to go to traditional high school and even explains why she feels that traditional high schools should be abolished: “High school in America is too often a place where one learns to conform or take punishment,” a place where picking on people who don’t fit into the traditional molds (the gay kid, the overweight girl, the boy with acne and too-big glasses) becomes the standard (3). Solnit argues, in fact, that we have become so used to the social tyranny of high school that we have begun to accept it as normal. Even programs that aim to help teens, such as Dan Savage’s It Gets Better Project, which promises students that someday “they’ll be able to be who they are without persecution,” comes at this philosophy from a self-defeatist stance, as if bullying were a rite of passage, as if it were inevitable and perhaps even necessary for “non-straight kids [to] spend their formative years passing through a homophobic gauntlet” (Solnit 2).
Solnit shows us that the social pressure to conform is at its strongest when we can no longer see it, when it’s so ingrained in the system that it becomes the system. She argues that by herding students into same age-group cohorts, the school system surrounds students with peers that encourage conformity and potentially obstruct our learning because people “going through the same life experiences at the same time often have little to teach one another about life” (3). This sameness creates a sense of competition and the need to be better than one’s peers, which often leads to students conforming to a supposed ideal. Solnit recalls her own diverse group of friends and suggests that getting rid of this age segregation would allow kids to learn more from each other and grow, as a seven-year-old has little to learn from other seven-year-olds, but much to learn from a fourteen-year-old.

But as of now, the school system remains an enforcer of unrealistic social ideals and conformity. As can be seen in the case of Jamie Nabozny, a man who successfully sued a Wisconsin school district for “doing nothing to stop—and sometimes even blaming him for—the years of persecution he had suffered” (Solnit 2). This case shows the public school’s role as a “historic power [and] enforcer of expected norms” (Solnit 2). I can trace a similar dynamic back to my high school. Although it’s made up of and proudly boasts a diverse student body, there is an analogous pressure to play an expected role. It’s as if the standard of diversity created an unhealthy competition among cultures to perform their own ethnicity. The Asian students must do swimming or badminton and be obsessed with K-POP, the white girls must play water polo and walk around in their lululemon leggings and rainbow flip flops, and the Indian kids must dance Bhangra and be focused on creating a future around STEM careers. Despite most of us knowing that it is impossible to contort an entire student body (many already struggling with identity issues) into these generic, stereotypical categorizations, deviation from such norms still raises hushed whispers and curious eyes. And so, to avoid the judgmental eyes of our peers, we reduce ourselves to fit into these easy categories, surrounding ourselves explicitly with people that look like us and supposedly act like us, people that we often have little to learn from or grow with. In the name of diversity, we allow ourselves to be pigeonholed into making sure we act in the ways that people expect a certain culture to behave. But perhaps we should take a page from Solnit’s book and realize that by surrounding ourselves
only with people of the same race, we lose the opportunity to learn from other cultures.

My childhood friend Dela, in an attempt to learn something new from an unexplored culture, decided to join the Bhangra team. However, she was immediately questioned, just as I was, because as a Latina she didn’t fit into this ideal of what a Bhangra dancer should be. And by simply affiliating myself with her, I was seen as an outcast, an alien to my culture because I wasn’t conforming to what a supposedly diverse culture thought I should be. But isn’t this in itself a form of racism? Agreed, it’s not the traditional, villainous form of racism we often hear about, but racism is defined as “the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race” (Merriam-Webster). By this definition, could my diverse, democratic, and liberal society actually be a racist one?

As Ta-Nehisi Coates asserts in his essay “The Good, Racist People,” we like to believe that racism only exists “in the heart[s] of particularly evil individuals, as opposed to a democratic society” (2). Clearly, this narrow definition of racism proved inaccurate when, in 2013, actor and Oscar winner Forest Whitaker was stopped, frisked, and accused of shoplifting by an employee at a deli in Manhattan. “Whitaker had stolen nothing,” Coates reminds us; “on the contrary, he’d been robbed” (1). Coates goes on to explain that the owner of the deli justified this behavior by explaining that his employee made an “honest mistake” and was a “good man.” But what defines a “good man,” Coates asks? And can’t a good man also be a racist? Coates tells us that in 1957 the people of Levittown, PA came together under the flag of segregation and claimed, “as moral, religious, and law-abiding citizens, we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our community a closed community” (Coates 2). Would these people be considered “good people” since they claim to be “moral, religious, and law-abiding citizens,” despite their clearly discriminative and counterintuitive statement?

Even today, don’t we often hide our biases behind a facade of being good people? “I’m a liberal; I can’t be racist,” we say, as we unconsciously hold our bag just a little bit tighter when we pass a man of color, or ask a random Indian person to take a look at our computer when it’s broken. Comedian Michael Richards once yelled at an African American heckler from stage, “He’s a n**ger! He’s a n**ger!,” later explaining that he wasn’t being racist by saying these things, and “called the claim ‘insane’” (Coates 2). Whether we want to admit it or not, our
culture not only harbors racism, but also allows it to go unnoticed and unchecked, as “good people” brush off their blatantly racist remarks as simple misunderstandings.

And yet, even after all of this, I still want to believe that the students at my school are “good students” who couldn’t possibly hold racist beliefs. After all, we were raised in a community that taught us that racism only exists in the hearts of the most villainous people. At the same time, I am astonished to see my peers’ implicit racial biases shine through when they question my beliefs and assume that I am “too white” to do things associated with my culture, just because I don’t fit into their traditional ideal of what an Indian person should be like. Even worse, the act isn’t seen as racist because it’s coming from good kids that go to a good school and live in a good, diverse community. But maybe that’s the problem: maybe we are so focused on creating communities that can be seen as good and diverse that we don’t realize that we are unconsciously forcing people into categories that they don’t easily fit into.

Lavanya Ramanathan, a writer for The Washington Post, experienced a similar double standard while growing up. In her opinion piece, “I am Indian American, and it’s 2017. But I still get asked ‘What are you?,’” Ramanathan explains how in her suburban neighborhood she was often forced to identify with a category that didn’t really define who she was. Despite being Indian, Ramanathan recalls regularly finding herself torn between the only two common molds of the time, black or white. Struggling to exist in the limbo between these two extremes, she realized that there was “no easy categorization even then. Instead, I spent much of my life awkwardly knocking around the middle, dancing to Bell Biv DeVoe’s ‘Poison’ with the black girls in middle school, banging my body into white boys in the mosh pit at Lollapalooza” (1). This need to categorize ourselves into certain groups often raises the fundamental question: Who am I in the eyes of others? “It sounds delusional: choosing blackness or whiteness,” Ramanathan reflects, “But for those of us who are neither, a mercenary sort of angling to be viewed as more like one or the other has been the norm for generations” (1).

In that sense, my experience with the Bhangra team could be seen as part of an ongoing trend. This new trend might be called liberal racism. It’s subtle and hard to define, but can be felt clearly and painfully when one experiences it. It’s not blatant, perhaps not even conscious. It doesn’t come from a place of hate, but
rather fear. The Bhangra team at my school believed that only people who conform to the idea of the ideal Indian can perform Bhangra. It’s as if, in order to hold on to our culture in this ever diversifying world, we must to ensure that no outsiders are let in. Many of us from liberal communities are taught that if we don’t explicitly partake in all aspects of our culture, we will lose it; our culture will be forgotten. And so, in an attempt to rid ourselves of this fear, we often end up pigeonholing ourselves into who we think we need to be in order to preserve our culture. And we do the same for other cultures. If I’m not dancing Bhangra and surrounding myself solely with people of similar backgrounds, then I am allowing my culture to be forgotten. And within this fear of losing culture is where our implicit biases thrive.

How can we even begin to live in a “post-racial” America when we have a fear of learning about different cultures because we are terrified of losing our own? Perhaps before we can truly embrace all aspects of diversity, we need to rid ourselves of that fear, and question if, in an attempt to become more diverse, we are actually allowing racism to take on a new form that hides behind liberal idealism.

WORKS CITED