



More Than the color of my skin

By Marina John

RVT Bsc

*A BIPOC RVT and her journey;
Navigating Adversity in the veterinary field*

1

The memory of my first encounter with overt racism remains etched in my mind. I was only six years old. My family and I were South Indian expats living in the Middle East. It was a hot and humid summer afternoon. The kind of afternoon where the relentless sun's rays beat down on you leaving you **drenched in sweat**. My father and I were walking home after a trip to the nearby bodega. Mid-way we heard a Jeep speeding up alongside us. Within moments the vehicle jumped the curb and screeched to a halt in front of us. A group of young Middle Eastern men, holding metal pipes and bats, with their faces contorted in rage emerged. They shook their fists and spat at the ground by our feet while yelling obscenities at us. The one phrase which stuck in my mind, which I have since heard many times in my life was,

“We don't want you here. Go back to your own country.”

My father dropped the bags we were carrying, stepped in front of me, and threw his arms wide in a protective gesture. He shielded me from their venomous words. As this tirade of profanity rained upon us, my father remained silent. After what felt like an eternity, the group of men presumably grew bored and drove away. Once they left, my dad mumbled something

¹ RVT: Registered Veterinary Technologist; (RVT) are highly trained professionals working as an integral part of the veterinary medical team. In common vernacular “tech”.

about “*idiots*” in our mother tongue under his breath. Then he picked up the bags of groceries, reached out for my little hand, squeezed it gently, and we silently walked home.

To better paint this picture for you, at 5 feet 2 inches and 130 lbs., my soft-spoken South Indian Catholic father is of diminutive stature and calm demeanor. He's an accountant by profession. He's an involved parent, a law-abiding taxpayer, and a proud homeowner. He's also a very **dark-skinned man**.

Supporting Children

While race as a classification is a fluid social construct with no basis in biological fact, a person's skin color is a visual reality. For individuals like me who identify as **BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or People of Color)**, our skin color is an undeniable fact that's impossible to hide. It's not surprising then that for many BIPOC parents the race conversation often starts with the color of our skin. This is how at the young age of six, I found myself seated at the kitchen table, nibbling on Parle-G Biscuits, watching the steam rise off cups of chai as my dark-skinned father and light-skinned mother talked to me about racism. From this conversation I gathered that I was “different” and that my kind of “different” was bad.

*If I reacted poorly, my being different could potentially get me **killed**.*

Fast forward some years into the future, my parents immigrated to Canada. I found myself uprooted from the close-knit expat Indian community residing in designated apartment buildings in a Middle Eastern suburb. Instead, I was shoved into a predominantly Caucasian community in a bustling metropolitan Canadian city. At my high school, out of 1300 students there were only about a dozen or so of us children of color. Like many transplanted immigrant children, I quickly learnt how to, “*make like a Borg*”, and **assimilated** so I could blend. I hid my accent; I changed the way I dressed. Practically overnight my lunches changed from homemade desi tiffin boxes to peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Despite

these changes, I didn't quite fit in with those around me and because of these changes, "I no longer fit in with those I came from".

The White Technician

My feelings of not knowing exactly where or how I fit in became magnified once I entered the veterinary profession. Our field has historically been dominated by a homogenous demographic. According to 2022 data from the Bureau of Labour Statistics (BLS), approximately 91.4% of veterinarians are white². At vet tech school none of my instructors looked like me, at most vet clinics much of the staff didn't look like me, and at conferences there were hardly any women in the upper echelons of the Veterinary management hierarchy who identified as BIPOC.

When you lack visibility of mentors and individuals who look like you, who speak like you, or who have similar cultural backgrounds in the positions you aspire to achieve, it can make those aspirations seem even more distant, far-fetched and unattainable. These were all elements that remained on the outskirts of my reality, vague occurrences unfolding in the backdrop of my life. That is until one day when these background events abruptly came crashing into my life.

It was a typical day in veterinary medicine, the clinic was buzzing and we were very short staffed. During the mid-afternoon rush, my manager pulled me aside and told me that I was not to go in for the next exam. I was quite confused by this comment as I was the only RVT available to help the vets with their appointments at that time.

The client waiting for her appointment was herself an older white woman who came in with her geriatric poodle.

2

<https://www.aaha.org/publications/trends-magazine/trends-articles/2023/may-2023/ht-it-takes-a-team/#:~:text=Price's%20situation%20isn't%20unique,0.5%25%20are%20Hispanic%20Latinx.>



My manager then let me know that the client only wanted a "white tech".

This elderly client struck up a conversation with me asking me what my role was, whether I was the only RVT working that day and where my family was originally from. I answered without questioning her motives because, like most of us techs, I had a million other things to do. So, when I was told by my manager that the client wanted a white tech instead of me, I was gobsmacked.

I spent the rest of my shift in a bit of a daze, replaying the conversation in my mind while wondering if I had said something wrong. Was it just my ethnicity? Or was it my age? Was it perhaps my gender? What was it about "me" that made this client who knew nothing of who I was as a person, or as a tech, decide that I was not to be trusted with her pet. I struggled with gaining clarity about this encounter. But, as many of us do, I took all the deep-seated insecurities and ugly feelings this experience had triggered and pushed them down.

**I pushed my feelings deep, deep, down.
Then I continued with my workday.**

Later that evening I received an email from the clinic owner that was chock a block full of managerial jargon about the company policy of workplace inclusivity. In this email, it was not so subtly hinted that I should refrain from overreacting or causing a scene as *these things just happen*. Even though the decision on how to handle this situation was *made for me* with no discussion or input *from me*, I was expected to toe the line. My bosses couldn't see that by electing to protect a racist client's 'wants' they had denigrated me. Throughout this unpleasantness, there was no real understanding of my perspective.

The Cost of Privilege

If my own experiences have taught me anything it's that there is an undeniable privilege to white skin over black or brown skin. While I was living, working, or vacationing in and around Asia, it was impossible not to recognize the glaring social value placed on light-skinned women. Television programming, magazines, billboards, and advertisements promote skin bleaching products. The marketing hooks employed by the manufacturers of these products prey on cultural biases by perpetuating the historical fear that dark skin is undesirable.

There is a visible disparity based on skin color which is particularly evident in my own native region of South India. The working class comprises maids, custodians, and day laborers and is dominated almost exclusively by dark-skinned men and women. In contrast, CEO's, doctors, and bankers are often light or as we call it "fair" skinned persons. can also freely admit that within our community it is widely known that the quickest way to gain social standing and economic stability is through marriage.

So, as a woman, if you wanted to catapult your family's status you needed to attract marriage proposals from eligible suitors. Young women are strongly encouraged to alter their skin color to the "correct" color. Skin bleaching products used to lighten skin have potentially lethal toxic effects which can include kidney, liver, and nerve damage. When used during pregnancy these products also cause fetal abnormalities. From creams to ointments, and from pills to injections skin bleaching products which often contain ingredients like Mercury work by suppressing melanin.

Despite these costly repercussions, many impoverished, young, dark-skinned women turn towards bleaching as their only means of gaining a foothold in life. This cultural exposure is but one of the facets in which I have seen the real-world consequences of not having white skin.

This year alone, the sale of skin lightening products globally is estimated to reach about...

8.9
Billion³



Colorblind

A person's skin color is a powerful motivator for who gets hired, who gets fired, who gets to move ahead and who gets held behind. Earlier on in my career, I experienced this firsthand. While employed as an RVT at a large Emergency facility, a coveted Monday to Friday, day shift only, supervisory position became available. As a tenured RVT at the practice I applied for this position. Weeks passed by with no word despite multiple inquiries on my end. Then one morning a young, recently hired, white tech who was new to the field showed up to work this coveted shift. Later when I spoke with the manager about why I had been passed over for the position, she replied,

"I didn't think someone like you would seriously be interested in a supervisory job".

I never did get a straight answer for what she meant by someone like me. People have a visceral reaction to the race conversation. For most people, "I am not a racist", is a deeply entrenched personal truth. Oftentimes this is followed by vehement denial and the statement, "I don't even see color". As a person of color when I hear someone say, "I don't see color", frankly I have no idea what they're talking about. This blasé statement is so far removed

3

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/25/world/as-equals-skin-whitening-global-market-explainer-in-tl-cmd/index.html#:~:text=The%20global%20market%20for%20skin,half%20that%20within%20six%20years.&text=Women%20account%20for%20almost%2080%25%20of%20sales%20worldwide.&text=Creams%20dominate%20the%20market%20and,reach%20%246.6%20billion%20by%202027.>

from the reality of the lives of BIPOC individuals that it's offensive.

CLAIMING NOT TO SEE A VISIBLE FACT OF OUR VERY EXISTENCE DIMINISHES US.

Moving forward

The disadvantages stemming from darker skin color and the implicit biases linked with it are for many BIPOC's like myself everyday occurrences. This daily reminder that we don't look like we belong is a shared reality, one felt by;

- The Black Veterinarian who steps into an exam room and is immediately met with shocked questioning looks.
- The brown Vet Tech who's complimented on how well she speaks English.
- The Asian Receptionist who's labelled as exotic looking.
- The Hispanic Veterinary Assistant who is asked not to bring spicy food to the clinic potluck.

So, what can you and I do about this?

I don't claim to have all the answers, far from it. What I can do is propose some ideas for all of us to use as a jump off point to aid in navigating the tricky waters of racial subtleties. These include:

1. Work together to create a DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusivity) plan and include it in your staff manual.
2. Follow groups like NABV, PrideVMC or BlendVet which help diverse veterinary professionals and students see themselves in veterinary medicine.
3. Become involved with mentorship programs that partner with BIPOC individuals and have open discussions around their challenges, triumphs and learn what works.
4. Hold an open house 'wine and cheese' mixer night at your practice and encourage the community you serve to meet your team. This gives insight into the diverse demographic of the area you

- work in and what their needs are.
5. If your clinic reception area has a TV, propose playing a video to showcase your diverse support staff and their achievements as well as the vital role they play at your practice.

My hope is that these ideas allow us to actively display how we live our inclusivity directive. To quote from the speech of the 2015 Toastmasters International World Champion Mohammed Qahtani,

“Words have power. Words are power. Words could be your power. You could change a life, inspire a nation, and make this world a beautiful place. You can spit venom, or you can mend a broken soul”.

As I look back on my pivotal experiences which I have shared with you, I am reminded of how racism is a scourge. It infects hearts and minds with a toxic ideology of supremacy based on skin color. As professionals in this industry, each of us can not only shape our day to day but we also have the power to mold our collective tomorrow.

As I look to the future, I think about what I want my **legacy** in this profession to be and I can unequivocally say that I want to leave this profession better than how I found it. So, now my dear friends and colleagues, I leave you with this question, having shared my journey,

“What do you want your legacy to be?”



Marina John, RVT, BSc., is the Vice President of the ⁴BCVTA. She graduated from the University of Guelph's Vet Tech Diploma Program in 2014. She is an avid advocate for minority representation.

“I would like to thank; Amber Gregg for motivating me to write this article and Shannon Thompson for her invaluable mentorship”.

⁴ BCVTA; British Columbia Registered Veterinary Technologist Association