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### Who am I? What am I? Why am I? How am I? Where am I?

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"It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace, and to which you owe your life and your identity, has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you."

- James Baldwin

I was reminded of James Baldwin's poignant personal revelation when I first saw Raoul Peck's 2016 great documentary on Baldwin's life and work, *I Am Not Your Negro*. Why have I often been positioned as the 'forever foreigner' in the land in which I was born and grew up? Why have I and countless other Asian Americans been seen as 'FOB's - fresh off the boat - but not other Americans whose ancestors emigrated from European countries? What Flores and Rosa (2015) have termed "the white listening subject", who again and again say to Asian Americans, "Wow, you speak English really well!" Have they ever said this to a native-born American of European descent? Uh, hell no. So why not? As Kubota et al. (in press) wrote in their recent article, "*Your English is so good*": *Linguistic experiences of racialized students and instructors of a Canadian university*, "raciolinguistic ideology resonates with reverse linguistic stereotyping in which the visual image of a speaker's race triggers listeners' positive or negative perceptions of the speaker's linguistic competence."

When white people ask her, "where are you from...where are you really from...well what country are your people from?", Helen Zia (2000) has retorted, "and what country are your people from?" (p. 9). Is anyone surprised that their "reply is invariably an indignant 'I'm from America, of course'" (ibid, p. 9)? Since the immigration of people from Asian countries starting with the Filipinx and the Chinese to the U.S. began over 230 years ago and many of their descendants have been born here and lived their whole lives in this country, when will we ever be seen by white people as being just 'plain' Americans? Or is saying "I'm an American" only mean for some people, white American?

In her book, *Minor feelings: An Asian American reckoning*, Cathy Park Hong (2020) describes how "racial self-hatred is seeing yourself the way the whites see you, which turns you into your own worst enemy. Your only defense is to be hard on yourself, which becomes compulsive, and therefore a comfort, to peck yourself to death. You don't like how you look, how you sound" (pp. 9-10). As a teenager growing up in the 1970s, I had already seen dozens and dozens of Hollywood movies and television shows with their racially standardized representations of what constituted 'handsomeness' and 'beauty' of white performers which heavily

impacted my sense of self. This included my actual pondering over whether or not to get plastic surgery to not only narrow my nose, but also to lighten my skin tone. Some of my classmates and friends also had dark hair, brown eyes, and broad noses like me but they weren't viewed as FOBs.

Living in a small suburban town on Long Island, New York that was 99% white, I had the socially understandable human urge to fit in. This included my parents speaking only English with me and my sisters. My mother, who was born and raised in the neighborhood of Chinatown, New York City, and was bilingual, had a bit of a New York accent but was very conscious in speaking with a middle-class standardized white English she mainly learned from listening to numerous radio and television shows. My father, who emigrated from the Toisan area of southern China and arrived in New York City when he was 8 years old, eventually spoke English with no 'Chinese accent'. The only accent I heard from him was a working-class New York one (yes, that's spelled correctly!). So, I grew up with a mix of working and middle-class English which gradually shifted more and more toward the racially standardized upper-class American English during high school and especially college. But despite this shift in my ways of speaking, I continued to be seen as a FOB, which added to the racial ideological hegemony of trying to look and sound like a 'white' person that shaped viewing myself in the mirror, both literally and figuratively. Indeed, "outside of Chinatown, looking Asian meant looking foreign, alien, un-American. The pressure on us was to fit in with the 'American' kids we looked so unlike, to conform and assimilate" (Zia, 2000, p. 7). So, even though I sounded like (because I am) a "native English" speaker, some whites weren't hearing it. As a Chinese American activist, journalist and photographer Corky Lee aptly put it, "I'm Asian American, so I'm a 100 percent authentic fake."

Speaking of being an "authentic fake", when I was born, my parents named me after one of their friends, who was an American of Irish descent. His name? Christian! Was he one? Yes, he was a Catholic. But, my family were not Catholics, so why did they name me after him? I only started going to church after we moved from New York City to that almost all-white suburban town on Long Island because it was the first time my mother lived so far away from her mom and siblings that she was desperate to find friends. The church is an Protestant one - Episcopalian. But obviously not all people who religiously identify as Christians are white, so why this name? It seemed my parents were "intent upon gaining white acceptance and favor, Chinese grocers strategically embraced Christianity, gave their children white names, and cultivated white social contacts through church and business" (Kim, 2023, p. 112). So, in my being named "Christian", the hope was that I would not be seen by white people as just another "heathen Chinaman" invading THEIR country. However, I actually do have a Chinese first name but it has never been listed on any official document. Nor did my parents ever call me by my Chinese name, only my maternal grandmother did. Because if I did go by my Chinese given name, "can you imagine how it must feel to be told that your name, lovingly given to you by your family, is 'too hard' or 'difficult' for someone to bother learning? Unfortunately, this happens all too often to Asian Americans" (Rodríguez et al., 2024, p. 30). Thus, my parents were trying to have me be as 'American' as any other white person in this country.

However, has it been my lifelong trying to be the "honorary white" instead of the forever foreigner (Tuan, 1998) in this land in which I was born and grew up in, or something else? When I read the following passage by Julia Lee's (2023), *Biting the hand: Growing up Asian in Black and White America*, it was an enlightening revelation for me:

The other day, I was talking to a friend of

mine. She is a Black feminist and a professor on the East Coast. A Chinese American grad student in her class came to her office hours and admitted that when she was in high school, she and her friends all 'wanted to be white'. My friend stopped her. 'No, you didn't', she said. 'No one wants to be white. You wanted to be human'. I had to steady myself. I'd always thought of my time at Princeton as a shameful pursuit of whiteness. But I did not want to be white. I wanted to be treated like white people got to be treated. I wanted to be treated like a human being. (p. 100)

I don't want to be seen as American anymore in this country. Like many others who have been oppressed, discriminated against, and killed because of the color of their skin, I just want to be as human as you are.

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