

Dumb Questions

by Kat Avila

I am an American because my father is one and my mother married one and assimilated; I am a Southern Californian by choice and by ancestral history; my ethnic background is Japanese and Mexican Indian (Yaqui, Tarahumara).

I consider myself a cultural worker. Depending on which writing community you ask, I am either a published English-language haiku poet or a freelance writer on Chicano theater.

Biding its time between the wings of a black binder, I have an unpublished book with a working title of *You Are My Mirror*. It is a series of monologues about one human being's translation of what the world (mainly the United States) is trying to tell her about itself.

The more I learn, the more my own voice has been able to emerge, as if the longer I live, the more easily the vocabulary and images come that can represent my experiences in a language you can understand. "Dumb Questions" is an excerpt from my book and my life; maybe it's your life, too.

DUMB QUESTIONS

"WHERE ARE YOU FROM?" They always mean country, not state. (If you're lucky, they won't turn up the volume and speak to you like they're trying to get their pet dog to do a trick.) A Latino sales clerk directed this question at me when I was shopping with my Japanese mother. Bad move. Irritated, I shot back with, "Why? Because we don't look Latino?" I wanted him to think about his visual difference since he was pointing out mine.

I'm tired of feeling like a tourist in my own country. Where am I supposed to go back to? Japan? Mexico? France? I've always hated Bruce Springsteen shouting about how he was born in the U.S.A. He doesn't need to shout about it. No one's questioning him about where he was born.

"WHAT'S YOUR NATIONALITY?" I think the blonde bank teller meant to ask about my ethnicity, because when I told her I was American I got this puzzled look, which was quickly supplanted by the realization that she might have offended me--"Oh, I have a sister who looks just like you, and she's American, too" or words to that effect.

Now it was my turn to be puzzled. "American" is so strongly identified with being European, and clearly at a glance I am mostly not with my almond eyes and big indigenous nose.

"I'm tired of feeling like a tourist in my own country."

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So, here are my ethnic labels: Japanese and Mexican Indian. With some Spanish and French. Maybe even a little Korean (but that's not something Japanese people would admit to, would they?). Can you see me now?

A person is a ghost until he or she is recognized as part of a tribe. Do you think you know me? No, I say. Not through the smudged lenses of stereotypes and misinformation. People so easily satisfied are like the blind man with the elephant's tail in his hand exclaiming, "Why, it's verily like a snake!" Labels should be a starting point for discovery, but they're actually where many people stop.

"HOW DID YOU LEARN TO SPEAK ENGLISH SO WELL?" I was asked at a job interview, and I gave the interviewer a dirty look. Needless to say, I didn't get that job. I've even been asked this question by a not particularly bright Chicano cousin after my family returned to California from Japan; I wish I had overcome my gentlewoman politeness and retorted, "Why, you're MEXICAN! Where did YOU learn?"

While European and African Americans are mostly the ones guilty of asking these dumb questions, privileging only themselves as native "born," some immigrants also ask out of their limited racial definition of an American, which they've learned from the television programs and movies exported from the United States.

Even now, I can name far more Asian and Latino stars from outside this country that are featured in American entertainment media than any homegrown talent of Asian and Latino ethnicity. Where is our historical continuity as Americans? We never seem to get beyond being cast as foreigners in the popular imagination.

When I returned to Hawaii as an adult (my family having left the islands when I was in the second grade), I was joyous because I thought I had escaped racial and cultural stereotyping and "ugly duckling" minority exile. I visually blended in. "No more stupid questions!" I crowed.

But I had forgotten one thing. The first time I opened up my mouth around the locals, they knew. I talked like a "haole" (foreigner; European American) from the mainland. Then there it was in the air, hanging like a noxious cloud of cigarette smoke: "WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

YOUR COMMENTS....

To the author,

I am not Asian. I am from Boston. When I moved from Boston to LA, I made small talk with anyone I could. Being new to the state and the city myself, I would often ask "Where are you from?". FOB Asians did not mind. Blacks did not mind. Latinos, Middle Easterners, Indians and Whites didn't mind. It was only when I asked this of Asian-Americans that I would get the evil eye and the silent treatment. I would always have to follow up with, "You know, state, city?" Personally, I think it is pretty obvious who is FOB and who is born here, regardless of race. So I didn't understand why they were assuming that I thought they were somehow less American than I was. There was nothing in the context that would indicate such. (Though I understand there are times when the context is clearly prejudicial.) Are Asian Americans so sensitive to such an innocuous question? Should I just plain not ask such questions of Asian-Americans? That would most certainly be a prejudicial step on my part. My point is this: You are assuming that I am assuming something. You are judging me based on an assumption

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that I have made an assumption. You see the hypocrisy?

-T. Smith (Posted 1/24/00)

Dear JADE:

After reading Kat Avila's article 'Dumb Questions' I just felt I had to share my own thoughts. I too am a 'mixed-Asian' American. My ethnicity is Okinawan, English, Irish, German and American Indian. As I read her article I related a lot to her own experiences. I am so used to answering 'I'm 1/2 Okinawan and 1/2 English, Irish, German and American Indian' to the question 'Where are you from? So much so that once I was in a Chinese knick-knack shop attempting to cash an American Express check and when the Chinese clerk asked me where I was from .. I blurted out .. 'My mom's from Okinawa'. The clerk gave me a strange look and said .. 'No do you live here in Texas?' I was amused and embarrassed to say the least! So many times before I had answered 'I'm originally from Southern California' only to get a blank stare in return. I would then go into the spew about my ethnic background.

I am used to getting these typed of questions from both non-Asians and Asians. The non-Asians are trying to pinpoint the roots of my exotic features and the Asians are trying to identify with my heritage. Sometimes even to the point of telling me .. 'No, you don't look Japanese.' Followed by the remark I think you look more Filipino or Thai .. or whatever. I do agree that sometimes the questions do come off as being really dumb and ignorant. But I also believe that the majority of the time the questions asked purely out of curiosity. Your outside appearance conveys to all an ethnicity that they may not be able to pinpoint and they are just inquiring. I know that I am even guilty of that .. maybe even more so because I am mixed. When I spot someone of obvious mixed Asian heritage I feel a connection. I see mixed ethnicity as exotic and the features I see on those of mixed heritage are beautiful to me. So my questions of 'Where are you from?' or 'What is your ethnicity?' are purely out of curiosity. I feel a sort of kindred spirit to those of mixed heritage - not only mixed-Asian but of all mixed ethnicities. Granted, the majority walking around is not 100% pure anything but for some of us our 'ethnic heritage' is more apparent on our outside than it is for others.

So I guess my point is this - Yes there are people who ask stupid questions. But also remember it may also be a purely innocent inquiry - one of pure curiosity. Many times after I answer the question 'Where are you from' I get usually get a response like 'Wow, what a mixture .. I think it's beautiful'. As for her experience in Hawaii - I too look forward to visiting there one day and looking around and appreciating the ethnic heritage of the people there. But I know to keep in mind that it is in our human nature to identify that aspect of us that makes us stand out as different from others .. So if labeled as a 'haole' I hope to just smile back and say proudly 'Yes I am!' Because one must realize that the same features that make us stand out as different from others are also a part of what makes us who we are. Be proud of your ethnicity and savor the entirety of the rich cultural heritage you've been blessed to be a part of. Realize that not everyone is lucky enough in life to experience such a variety of different cultures in their everyday life - for that I am truly thankful.

- asia mixed (Posted 1/24/00)

She and Yoshiko Ohmori are still trying to find a publisher for their book which integrates Japanese mythological characters, such as kappa and tengu, into the journey of a young girl to her grandmother's house. Her goal this year is to finish making the other 999 tiny golden paper cranes she needs for good luck and good health.

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