

Who am I?

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I am defined just as much by what I am not than by what I am.
I am not white. I am not Japanese.

But I am white and I am Japanese.

Growing up in Hawaii during the 70s & 80s, I was identified as a fraction. At that time, the ethnic category "hapa haole" was used regularly to define mixed race people like me. "Hapa" is Hawaiian for half, "haole" is white. What your other, darker, half was seemed a less important identity marker than your lighter half. For instance, you would never say, "hapa Japanese" or "hapa Hawaiian". I think this was because until very recently, Caucasians were a distinct minority in Hawaii. White people were "other" in every way possible.

I spent a good deal of my childhood being called "dirty haole" by my classmates in my hometown, which was dominated by ethnic (Hawaii) Japanese. The bullying and taunting were ceaseless, probably because I have always looked less Asian than other hapas. For me this was very frustrating because at home I went by my Japanese middle name (Keiko), ate Japanese food, maintained Japanese traditions and observed Japanese holidays. What more did they want from me?

This ostracization led me, in a fit of rebellion, to turn my back on my Japanese heritage, learn Mandarin and move to mainland China after college. All told I've spent four plus years in China and feel more affinity to Chinese people than to (Japan) Japanese. Language has a lot to do with this. I don't speak any Japanese and will therefore always be an outsider in the land of my ancestors. When I visit Japan I feel completely foreign and lack any kinship to the people. This is different from when I am home in Hawaii, where I do feel like I fit in (somewhat) with Hawaii Japanese culture, especially when it comes to food and holidays, like Bon Dances.

I live on the mainland USA now and am mostly surrounded by non-Japanese (both sorts - Hawaii Japanese & Japan Japanese),

There is one mainland ^{Full} Japanese at my office and we laugh at how clueless he is about his culture. ("What's ozoni"? he asked me when I asked him if he had any on New Years.) Oddly, he sees me as being more Japanese than him.

When people look at me, they don't see a Caucasian. "What are you a mix of?" or "I'm not really sure what you are" or "I can tell you are something else." are fairly common phrases thrown at me when I first meet someone. I get spoken to in Spanish. Occasionally, I am spoken to in Chinese OR Korean. No one has ever spoken to me in Japanese, even when I have been in Japan.

After a recent three-year stint in Seoul, I eat more kimchi than tsukemono. In my lifetime, I have gone from calling pan-fried meat dumplings gyoza, to jiaozi, to mandoo. I actually don't know what to call them anymore. I have long internal monologue about the fine line between just living my normal life and being guilty of cultural appropriation.

I am closing in on 50 and I am still not sure what I am. The only thing I know for sure is that I am not white.

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