

# **"WHAT ARE YOU?" AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A SOCIALLY INAPPROPRIATE QUESTION IN A LOW-CONTEXT CULTURE**

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In a recent Multicultural Education course with which I assisted at the University of Hawaii, two students from California—one Hispanic and one Filipino—expressed their distaste at being asked the question, “What are you?” Some of their local Hawaiian classmates had started asking them, and unaccustomed to the question, the Californian students shook their heads in disgust, chafing at its undertones. “I’m me!” one student said, defending his position. But the issue of the socially inappropriate question, “What are you?” came up more than once over the semester-long course. The culture clash between the Californian students and local Hawaiian students, who felt comfortable asking the question, highlighted the stigma associated with inquiring about ethnicity. It also pointed out the way in which this discomfort can short-circuit connections and stop people from asking basic questions about one another.

The limiting role of stigma illustrated in this scene goes against Hall’s (1981) claim that the United States is a low-context culture, a culture in which individuals tend to rely on explicit communication, rather than relying on shared understandings. Whereas high-context cultures share many tacit understandings that often go unstated, low-context cultures, such as the United States, prefer precise, direct, logical, verbal communication, and individuals often become impatient when communication does not get to the point quickly. Anglo-European Americans have been described as low-context, preferring focused and explicit verbal communication (Lynch & Hanson, 2004). American norms dictate that members stipulate our understandings to make ourselves clear. But, this view of Americans meets its limitation when discussing socially sensitive topics such as race.

In this essay, I offer an autoethnography of the socially inappropriate question “What are you?” I reflect on the question as it applies to Hall’s (1981) vision of low-context cultures, one of the dimensions of culture first outlined by Hofstede (1984), and point out the limiting role of stigma in a low-context culture. I find that the racial climate that contributes to making this question socially inappropriate not only perpetuates ethnic erasure, but can lead to confusion and misinterpretation and creates a culture in which people feel uncomfortable sharing their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, which are important to understanding any individual.

Although the two students in my Multicultural Education class were not able to articulate why the question bothered them, my guess is the students did not want to be pigeonholed according to their ethnicities. They didn’t want to bear the baggage of the assumptions that came with the labels. Perhaps they didn’t want to be aligned with others in their ethnic groups. As young adults, both assimilated into American culture. Perhaps they no longer saw themselves as part of their ethnic groups. Perhaps they wanted to be acknowledged and known as the unique individuals they are. Still, both were effectively seeking an erasure of their ethnic identities, a troubling fact worthy of some reflection. I suspect the students were doubly frustrated by the casual disregard over the stigma associated with asking someone’s race. Didn’t the students from Hawaii know it was rude to ask someone their ethnicity? The lack of attention to cultural norms constituted a secondary annoyance compounding the annoyance of the question itself.

In the context of multicultural Hawaii, where brown people and mixed raced individuals abound, people have fewer qualms about asking one another details about their ethnic make-up. The openness of asking about ethnicity in Hawaii is documented by Hawaii's Teach for America offices, who routinely warn teachers new to Hawaii that students may ask them, "What are you?" (C. Torres, personal communication, Fall 2016). Enough teachers new to Hawaii have been asked the question that the office has made it a matter of practice to warn its teachers to be ready for it. They're not trying to be rude, the offices warn. The kids just want to get to know you.

The practice of asking "What are you?" is familiar in my own experience growing up in Hawaii. During recess, while playing jacks or in the jungle gym in elementary school, classmates routinely asked one another, "What are you?" So, I learned Kristen was Japanese, Luana was Portuguese/Chinese/Hawaiian/white, and I proudly announced I was Korean/Scottish, two oddball clans, each minorities in their own right, and even stranger together. Asking the question was a way of sharing and of getting to know one another. It was a way of becoming familiar with the various ethnicities of the world.

Meanwhile, the absence of the question has sometimes led to confusion and disorientation in my life. Whereas, in the context of Hawaii, I am generally recognized as mixed race, in the continental U.S., I have been interpellated as Hispanic, Nepalese, Native American, Filipino, and once, black. My shape-shifting is nowhere near that of Justin Garcia's (2013), a light-skinned Hispanic who has been variously interpellated as "Irish, Russian, Jewish, Native American, Brazilian, Middle Eastern, Greek, Armenian, a very light-skinned biracial (mixed BlackWhite) dude, and even Asian" (p. 236). Garcia (2013) relates how, in the course of ten minutes, he went from being a "honky" to being welcomed as Puerto Rican. Just as the question "What are you?" led to frustration among my students who didn't like the question, the omission of the question and the concomitant assumptions of ethnicity have sometimes led to mistaken identities.

Hawaii is not the only place where people ask one another about ethnicity. While traveling in China one summer, I got asked the question "What are you?" so many times (a question translated by my travel partner) that I eventually learned how to say, "my mother is Korean—my father is white," in Chinese. My singsong Chinese was apparently good enough and generally appeased the curious Chinese who asked.

The absence of the question, in contrast, has led to assumptions about my identity and a little bit of confusion. In college on the East coast, students at my school's Korean American association assumed I was *not* Korean and had no compunction asking, "Why are you here?" Others who knew my name (then Kim) assumed I was full Korean. It was only in my senior year, after I realized that some of the people with whom I'd spent the last four years thought I was full Korean, that I saw the extent to which they had no idea who I was. This is not to say that I identify as being particularly Scottish, but simply that my father had been an important person in my life.

It's possible that the lack of stigma associated with talking about race is, even in Hawaii, limited to the naiveté of childhood and young adulthood. In recent interviews that I conducted in Hawaii, I was charged with asking participants their ethnicities. In a few cases, local Hawaii participants glossed over the question, skipping it. In one case, even when pressed, the participant dodged the question, and I did not press further. Asking about ethnicity suggested the study would draw conclusions about race, the first step to prejudice. Even in Hawaii, the stigma surrounding the question was evident.

In contrast to Hall's (1981) vision of America as a low-context culture, there are many stigmatized topics that go undiscussed. These topics include not only race, but also sex, death, and money, among others. Due to social stigmas associated with broaching these private matters, American culture has been described as Puritan with regards to sex and is known for its many euphemisms for death. It is considered socially inappropriate and uncouth to discuss money in most contexts, and race, as we have seen, is a topic to be avoided for a variety of reasons. It is uncomfortable to talk about race. Out of respect for that discomfort, we refrain from asking socially inappropriate questions, such as "What are you?" In doing so, however, we refrain from asking potentially important questions in getting to know a person and in sharing ourselves.

The silence around socially sensitive topics points out an exception to Hall's (1981) vision of a low-context culture. Some topics Americans feel comfortable discussing at length, while others we go out of our way to avoid. This example points out the outer limits of America's presumably low-context culture and shows the limiting role of stigma in a low-context culture.

Others have noted the dangers of avoiding the topic of race. Multicultural educators Nieto and Bode (2008) remind us,

Many teachers and schools, in an attempt to be color-blind, do not want to acknowledge cultural or racial differences. "I don't see Black or White"... "I see only *students*." This statement assumes that to be color-blind is to be fair, impartial, and objective because to see difference is to see defects or inferiority. (p. 170)

Though the idea of disregarding race sounds egalitarian, colorblindness can also result in the refusal to accept differences. It can result in "denying the very identity of our students, thereby making them invisible," (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 170). Our ethnic makeups offer insights into our cultural backgrounds. Individuals may confirm stereotypes. Others may challenge our stereotypes. I would argue both are important to getting to know the individual and the world.

In contrast to Nieto and Bode's (2008) call for understanding and acknowledging our ethnic differences, we know that many Americans avoid talking about race or ethnicity. As has been noted elsewhere, "white" itself constitutes a form of ethnic erasure, because "white" is not an ethnicity. Whereas French, Danish, Portuguese, and Scottish suggest cultures rooted in specific foods, dress, religions, values, and immigration histories, the shorthand amalgam "white" erases culture to presume a generic identity devoid of color.

Talking about race challenges illusions of colorblindness and creates discomfort all around. So, we refrain from asking socially inappropriate questions fraught with judgments about race, class, and more, such as "What are you?" Why would anyone want to know another person's ethnicity? Why would that matter? Why would anyone be so bold as to ask such a probing question?

Today, as racial violence overtakes the country under Trump (Costello, 2016), our ethnic differences have become more pronounced and are arguably more important than ever. Assumptions about ethnic identities and the even more erroneous assumptions tied to class, intelligence, educational achievement, and criminal activity threaten the safety of minorities and European-Americans alike.

This essay does not propose that readers disrupt the status quo by asking this

or other socially inappropriate questions in their personal lives. However, I do propose that educators use the classroom space to talk about race and broach these uncomfortable questions, a suggestion made recently by Richard Milner (2016) at the Literacy Research Association 2016 Conference. Specifically, I ask readers to critically examine how perceived identities of others shape the conversations we have and don't have and how our perceptions of one another create invisible walls barring communication with our colleagues and students. Why is it socially inappropriate to ask someone what they are? What stories and identities are erased when we refrain from asking this question? To what extent have we, and our students, internalized stigmas associated with race? And, how has the practice of ethnic erasure shaped American culture? Only by broaching these uncomfortable questions can we begin to understand each other and ourselves.

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