



*The stories behind:
‘where are you really from?’*



In here is a collection of stories from Asians in the UK, navigating multiple cultures and recounting their experiences in many forms such as poetry, images and essays.

I reached out to the Asian people in my life, who relate to the phrase commonly heard in the UK, 'where are you really from?'. The project expanded outside of my circle when others got their families and loved ones involved.

The final outcome was initially going to be a zine however the volume of submissions with images and voice recordings, I wanted to progress and show some of these stories in a different light, moving image.

Exploring the questions,

'where are you really from?'



This sounds like such an interesting project!!!

no i'd love to

u want a file or a text message?

HEY! I'd love to help!! What kind of thing are you looking for? Like an article? How many words x I can send something for whenever you need! THANKS FOR ASKING THATS REALLY SWEET XXX

Omg I'd love to !! What should I write about 🥹 and I've got so many pictures I can send you:3 xx

I'm thinking of writing a short piece called "where are you NEARLY from?" Which is a celebration of everything and a silly art piece I did during covid - probably be about 500 words?

Hey!! Yes I am hehe, I didn't know you were too! I would 100% love to get involved and share my photos ❤️ I'm actually fully Burmese though my parents are both Burmese, would you still be able to work with that lol I just wanted to mention. Although I really am so familiar with the "where are you really from phrase" happy to add anything else too x

People were happy to share their stories and getting involved, this was extremely helpful and heart-warming, it shows how proud people are of their mixed cultures.





I'm born and bread Northen, and have lived here my whole life. I thought nothing of my ethnicity or race till people started to question me.

'Where was I really from?' 'Could I see less because my eyes were smaller' 'Why was I a girl with a moustache?'

All these comments started to have me question my self, was I not English? Why did people always ask me these things? I had no idea that everyone dad wasn't Burmese, but I was just an oblivious child. Once I grew older the comments seemed to get harsher, and sometimes from those I thought I was friends with, 'dog eater' and 'ch*nk', were pretty common. I was surrounded by white people and this was the norm, completely unaware that there was a world where these things could be fought against. I became more educated through family, friends and the media in general, and decided to stand up for my self. I am proud to be both English and Burmese but it's still a journey.

Daisy Schwarzer



Burma/Myanmar



Sandra Blackwood

In Year 9 science class, a white boy turned to me and asked, “Where are you from?” Confusion clouded my thoughts as I met his gaze, speaking in a northern accent, wondering why he posed such a question. “Sheffield,” I replied, only to be met with further puzzlement. “No, where are you really from?” he pressed.

I understood the answer he sought, torn between my love for a Sunday roast and Pad See Ew. Yet, I met his gaze and uttered, “Thailand.” This moment marked a turning point in my self-perception. I began questioning whether my perceived failure to “look” English enough for my peers rendered me insufficiently Asian in my own eyes. As a result, I started seeing myself solely as British.

The cycle of identity questioning continued into sixth form, where another white boy, echoing stereotypes, attributed my supposed math struggles to my Asian heritage.

Later, at university, encountering a white peer who boasted a deeper understanding of Thai culture than me during his gap year in Thailand further complicated my sense of self. My parents, both embodying distinct cultural backgrounds, passed down traits that fuelled my internal struggle with duality.

However, as I’ve matured, I’ve come to embrace the complexity of my cultural identity. Reconnecting with my suppressed Thai roots has become a source of solace and empowerment. Today, when asked about my origins, I confidently assert that I am both from England and Thailand.

Emma Lindley





'my mums thai and my dads english, i was born in thailand and moved to england when i was around 3, and travelled back and forth a lot for the next couple of years. all my first (and favourite) memories were living in thailand at that time. moving to england was a huge culture shock and i struggled with how to act/dress myself in a way that was socially acceptable to my peers and it took a lot of years for me to learn this. growing up in the uk i often felt like a black sheep, as i was also the only asian kid in my year in primary school, and there was only a handful of us in secondary school too. i often felt like i was too asian for the white kids and too white for the asian kids, so i never knew where i belonged. the only comfort i could ever find in this is knowing that other mixed people feel exactly the same way and that i'm not alone.'



Jasmine Townsend





Chocolate Hills - Philippines

Halle Galimba

Maria Moore



“happy new year!”
 we must have said, i’m not sure what that is in tagalog
 “happy birthday,” says jollibee
 the clock ticks over in the flip land.
 i say to the gecko on the wall,
 “i’m here age 7!
 we’ll be back when i’m 11?”

i only have snippets of what i experienced age 7
 the age 11 return remains in limbo, maybe next year
 skype calls at christmas time
 i think we use facetime now
 are they awake over there?
 standing on opposite sides of the world, they don’t know
 who i am today.

“i’m half filipino!” or filipina? i need to ask my dad.
 “yeah i’ve only visited twice, the last time was when i was 7,”
 “no i don’t know any of the language,”
 “i’ve not tried any of the food.”
 “i think we’re going back next summer.”



Halle Galimba



Maria Moore





My mother, Maria Dixon.
First generation migrant.
Born in Malasiqui, Philippines.
1981-1983, 22, teacher, Meridian school of Baguio. Meet Brie,
her husband to be.
Married 1984 in October, age 24. Mother wouldn't let leave
without marriage. Marry within a week of Brie's return to the
Philippines.

Bernadette & Maria Dixon

Upon meeting Brie for the first time in the Philippines my mother's initial reaction towards him was excitement to meet a foreigner. Growing up in the Philippines, from a very early age, individuals are socialised into always looking up to first world countries, admiring and valuing them and their seemingly better standards of living. Emphasis being on their better Government, food, education, healthcare and so on. Her generation mostly consumed media in the forms of films and movies produced in the global North, predominantly originating from North America and Europe. She went on to explain that supposedly educated people didn't watch or consume any local media, instead they would only watch and consume foreign media. This being because they would want to know and educate themselves more on life in more developed and industrialised countries. My mother and her family grew up more attracted to the world outside of their own. A leading factor for this being the belief that she would never visit these countries first hand, viewing such films would be the closest she would get to experiencing life there.

"Never in a million years did I think I would leave the Philippines".

"Different world".

My mother went on to explain that marriage was sacred. Being unmarried was not an option when discussing leaving the Philippines, especially

40 years ago. Growing up in an exceedingly rural area, hours away from the city, her household was by all accounts immensely conventional, traditional and religious.

My mother explained how it took a long time to feel part of the community. Locals were not used to seeing foreigners, especially individuals born in the Lake District. For this reason, she felt as if she couldn't relate to anyone, there was no Filipino community for her there, unlike now. She couldn't experience the beauty of cooking her countries food, speaking her own language or discussing life in her homeland. Upon her first encounters with locals, questions remained the same: "where are you from?" and "do you speak English?". Some locals even vocalised concerns regarding living alongside foreigners.

"Is Kendal turning into China town now?".

To my horror my mother explained she found these comments amusing at the time, saying she knew her transition wouldn't be easy. Her response to my shock being that there is only a recent emphasis on racism, at that time she was unaware of the concept. She obtained no concept of racism, therefore accepted the looks and intrusive questions from locals, and even prepared herself for them. She believes that diversity is a recent phenomenon, explaining how diversity in her generation was non-existent.



She told me, even after living here 30 years, she will forever be viewed as foreigner meaning she will always feel like a foreigner. No amount of time will change the way that she looks. The first things individuals see when they look at her are her hair, her skin colour, her facial features. She will always be a Filipino first and a British citizen second.

Bernadette & Maria Dixon



what a privilege it is to be you

what a privilege it is
to not have those thoughts always in the back of your mind
to just be able to get on with your life
because for you? everything has always been fine

i would like to find love here, as would anyone
but in this new place, it genuinely terrifies me
not knowing whether i'll be fetishised
or have to run in fear for my own safety

i'm very much used to the questions now
perplexed faces at the smell of foreigner food
it's so sad to think that my parents experience this
so much worse than i will ever do

sometimes i wonder why i can't just exist like you do
not having to worry whether they genuinely like me or my race
japanese, vietnamese, the cute, innocent 'kawaii' girls
either that or white, blondes are first and i'm not even placed

on the flip side, there's the whole 'where are you really from?'
or mistaking me for someone whom i look nothing alike
these things aren't intentionally malicious, i know
but i'm so incredibly sick of hearing them every goddamn night

then there's the ones who are a lot more outspoken
which at home, luckily, i rarely would meet
but i guess it's gotten a whole lot worse for us now
because we're the ones they blame for covid-19

i have the identity crisis much more now than i have done
i will never shake the feeling that they have a motive or two
hate-crimes or fetishised, it's only ever one or the other
why is there no in-between? no normal, like there is for you?

my friends ask me if i'm okay when i tell them
they seem frustrated, saying that people are dumb, way out of line
it's not their fault but they will never really ever get it
they don't think twice, i'll lie 'i'm fine' but a small part of me dies
inside

sometimes i feel bad when i complain
because some people have it far worse than i ever will
not to invalidate myself but i am indeed the model minority
and with that, i'll forever hold immense guilt

what a privilege it is
to never have that worry festering in the back of your mind
to just be able to live your completely different life
because for you? everything will always be fine

Ann-marie Tran



meeting the parents, the unfamiliar

our unfamiliar traditions
our unfamiliar food
our unfamiliar languages
our unfamiliar tunes

our unfamiliar holidays
our unfamiliar names
we're so accepting of your culture
so why can't you do the same?

the no shoes in the house
the fish sauce scent in the air
the mix and match of english and other languages
songs with their ethnic, melodic flair

the celebrations of the moon
names that are 'hard' to pronounce
we poke fun at you sometimes
but faces of disgust? not even an ounce

sorry? does it make you uncomfy?
that our world is so different from yours
we welcome your world with open arms
yet you laugh because we don't fit your mould

i understand that we're the ones who moved here
so you could say your culture's the 'norm'
but just because something is unfamiliar
doesn't make it weird at all

and maybe you might be okay with me
but what about your family, everyone else?
we know the older generations can be less welcoming
am i meant to swallow the pride i've finally felt?

and maybe you might brush it off
tell me to calm down, that it's just a joke
or tell me there was no malicious intent
as i back down from the fight and choke

or maybe you might tell them off
but it doesn't change how they think
sometimes i wonder if you only care
because the person it's affecting is me

if this were a stranger, say
would you still react as you do?
or would you not even take a second glance?
turn your nose up because it doesn't concern you

i guess i'll never really know the truth
as much as you try to reassure me
all i can do is hope and pray
that my unfamiliar isn't the 'despite' in your story

Ann-marie Tran



Where are you nearly from?: A justification of my ethnically-ambiguous face.

It was the performance of my life: I stood on stage in Bow Common Church Hall and sang in fluent Vietnamese while my brother and grandad accompanied me. A lifetime of karaoke had prepare me for this moment. The priest, some aunties and the congregation smiled. It was like I had finally gained the approval of the Vietnamese people. The minute I stepped off the stage, reality hit. I met an elder in the toilet “your Vietnamese so good!”, I beamed and thanked her. “Especially because you are not one of us, your a Westerner with a Western face, so it’s even more impressive that you know how to speak Vietnamese”.

This phenomenon is really common for mixed people : Having our faces dissected - questioned over which features are ‘Asian’ and which are ‘White’, or neither. It’s one of my biggest insecurities as I wish I looked like all the cultures I am from, and a huge theme of Natalie Morris’ book “Mixed: Other”.

As much as there is pain in having an ethnically-ambiguous face, there is also so much joy and so much privilege: I hear what white people really think about race when I’m read as White, and so am in a unique position to have impactful conversations on race. I get extra portions at Mexican, Iranian and Palestinan food stalls when the vendors think I’m from their country (I always correct them afterwards!) I have made a huge network of friends who are also from mixed and multiple cultures, and in this way have learned so much more about the world. Racial and facial features are defined differently by every person and every culture, it’s part of what defines race as a social construct. It’s taken me 28 years to learn this, and now I’m in the era of learning to celebrate and accept it.

Now, I’m my friends are the parents of the next generation, and they are turning to me about how to bring up mixed kids. And one of my first bits of advice is “don’t dissect your child’s face. They are not ‘half this’ ‘half that’ - they are both, and all, and sometimes neither in the eyes of others. But that inner is always up to them and it doesn’t always have to ‘match’ their face.

Sophia Luu



@secretsworthsharing_

*Hello!
and Xin chào*

because it represents my

mixed heritage

into thinking

that I need to be

one particular

race.

Katie-Linh Kerrison

My name is Katie-Linh Kerrison. I am 17 years old, and I am mixed Scottish, English, and Vietnamese. My parents chose a name for me that represented my mixed heritage, and I think that it demonstrates how much I celebrate it.

I've always felt immersed in all the cultures that make me, be it through eating haggis on Burn's Night, or getting excited over áo dài in Vietnam. I'm grateful to have a very strong and supportive family who have always celebrated my and my cousin's mixed heritage.

However, I've also felt a bit wobbly about my identity sometimes, and I think that it's important to share that with people. As a mixed kid, sometimes I've felt pressure, or pressured myself, into thinking that I need to be one particular race. Sometimes you think that it'll be easier to fit in with a group, or not have people question where 'exactly' you're from. Am I Asian enough? Am I English enough? Those questions used to run quite frequently round my head, and quite honestly, they still do.

But, being mixed is about being comfortable with who you are, and I realise that now. It is especially important because if you don't accept your own colourful, diverse heritage, you're losing a bit of your identity. Identity is important, and you can dive into all the wonderful things about your culture!

I'm proud of being a mixed kid. It makes me who I am, and it enhances my own personal identity. If you're a mixed kid like me, I want to assure you that it's okay to be a bit wobbly. We all have our little wobbles when thinking about who we are, but it's completely normal. You're awesome!

For those who aren't mixed, try to support those who are. The struggles of mixed-race people are similar to all people of colour, and their mix makes them no less valid. We have to support each other!



Amikā Hongo-Rodger





Critical Position is the way you view the world around you and is determined by your lived experience and the journey of your self-discovery. The feeling of wanting to belong when our Critical Position comes into play, race does not always have to be a starting point. However, this value has come from moments of uncertainty, feeling not entirely belong to one culture or the other. Growing up in the UK at a predominantly white school half-Japanese and half-British, children would tend to comment on what the hell I'd be eating when I'd bring out the beautiful bento my mum would make me for lunch, I'd be mistaken for the only other Asian girl in my year who looked nothing like me. Although these are things I take ownership of and am proud of now, I remember as

a child it left me feeling outcasted and incredibly insecure. As a kid, all you ever wanted to do was fit in, and so I felt embarrassed to embrace any part of my Japanese heritage for the longest time.

"Hafu" is a term used in Japan to describe children who are half-Japanese. This term is derived from the English "half" which basically says that a person is only half of the Japanese culture. This term originated in the 70's and is now the most likely used label for half of Japanese children today. I saw a YouTube interview a while back where Japanese were asked about what image they have of hafu, most of them answered that they wanted to be hafu as well, with a certain image of us being "small-

faced, big eyes with creased upper lids and long legs." Despite these positive connotations people have today in Japan, I've personally always felt that Japanese society exoticized our physical appearance. Those who don't fit this image also found themselves falling outside this label that was supposedly used as a helpful term to explain who we are.

"Are you half?" This question, one that I am VERY familiar with, is inevitably brought up during self-introduction scenes in the Japanese reality TV show Terrace house. It featured the lives of 6 strangers - 3 women and three men picked to be filmed and live together in a house. Having been surrounded by Japanese media my whole life, I had not realized that Terrace house, was the representation I secretly always wanted. From year 10-11, this show served as my mindless escape. It presented the lives of normal people with a slow-paced narrative from their love lives to even deeper knowledge of their work ethic and careers. At the same time, with its multiracial Asian cast, Terrace house became more than just a guilty pleasure. The show allowed me to dream of an alternate life, basically like projecting myself into a fantasy of Japan in which multiracial people seemed to be included. Their effortless way of switching between both English and Japanese, gave me such relatability in a way that was so

intimate as I had grown up doing the exact same at home. Despite it's simple premise, the show had rapidly gathered a global cult following after it's debut on Netflix in 2015. I was also accustomed to the Western styles of media that contrast with it's slow pace and it's muted colours, the drama of the show contained below the surface of everyday moments. I recommend watching it to any of my fellow hafus out there too!

In my recent years growing up and now being at university, I have met many other mixed-race individuals, and my world has grown bigger. I have realized that being able to navigate two different cultures and see the world through more than one lens is a privilege. Studying design has inevitably brought out these influences given to me through my Japanese heritage and by my parents who had also both attended art school. It has shaped my design choices through traditional principles I follow such as minimalism, attention to detail and intricacy. I've always used Art and Design as a form of not only self-expression but self-discovery as I feel more control over my identity than ever before. While my struggles with identity and belonging shaped who I am today, it is not about choosing one identity over the other; it's about embracing the experiences given to me that form the foundation of who I really am.

Amika Hongo-Rodger



‘being mixed race is a beautiful thing, but a beautiful thing that is also incredibly confusing. we look different but never feel like we fit just right, too white for some but too brown for others. I always felt like something didn’t fit, ever since I was a little girl who didn’t look like my friends, but desperately wanted to. Only with age and knowledge that something as simple as my skin can mean so much to who I am, what I represent, what matters to me, what matters to others. I am still confused & maybe always will be. but what I do know is my skin makes me who I am, it’s made up of history, culture and love. & those who love me, love my skin too - & I hope one day skin colour is universally loved and celebrated, by everyone, just as simply, just as much’

Mili Kumar

Growing up half Japanese, I have a lot for which I am extremely grateful – I never had to eat unwashed rice as a kid, for one. I can't imagine life any differently, and it is a part of me that I am really proud of. It is my culture and my heritage; it is a fundamental element of who I am, and I am always proud to wear my Japanese football shirt during the World Cup. It is something that I love to celebrate now, but it hasn't always been easy to navigate this mixed identity and what it means to belong to two cultures that often don't want to claim you. Although I've lived in the UK all my life, I have always maintained a close relationship with my Japanese side, thankfully being raised bilingual and getting to spend school holidays in my mum's hometown, Yamagata. I have really happy memories of long summers in the humid Japanese heat, soundtracked to cicadas and my grandpa's radio playing in the garden. Until I was 11, my Mum would send me to the local Japanese primary school (that she went to as a child) whilst we visited, meaning that I was fully immersed in the culture and had native Japanese friends; although I wasn't always thrilled to be going to school during my British school holidays, I look back on my time there extremely gratefully. Not only were the Japanese kids my age way advanced in subjects like maths and science (I'm ashamed to say the stereotypes did fit), but school also gave me access

to cultural phenomena that have brought me closer to my Japanese heritage. The Japanese education system is totally different to that of the UK – dedicated time to cleaning the classrooms after the school day ended sounds like a joke in the context of British schools.

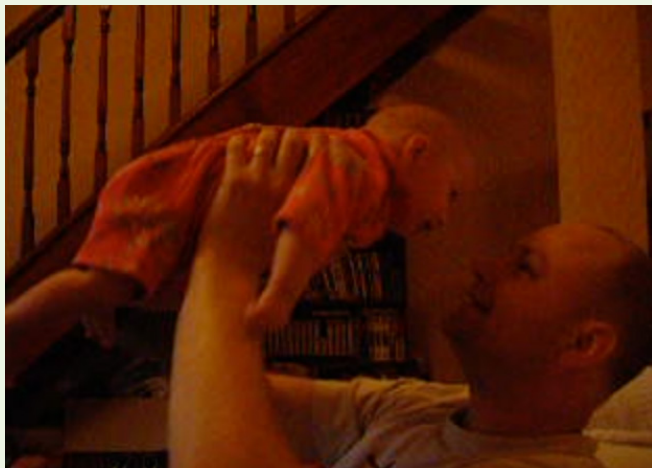
Whilst I loved understanding my culture and learning what life was like for other kids my age in Japan, attending primary school made it very clear to me that no one else saw me as truly Japanese. I was tightly intertwined with the slightly pejorative label 'ハーフ' (half) used to refer to mixed people; my Japanese was fluent and native sounding, but I was never Japanese. Of course, I lived abroad, and I couldn't expect people to see me as a native, but it often felt that there was this tall, immovable barrier that I couldn't quite climb over in order to be seen as even a little bit Japanese. I would always be foreign.

Ten years on, and this hasn't really changed. Visiting the bigger cities, I'll often be spoken to in English, solidifying that feeling that I'm not seen to belong. I don't take it personally anymore; Japan is a massively homogeneous nation, and it's not with bad intention that I am spoken to in English when I'm ordering an iced matcha at a café. It has taken a while to come to terms with this, though; it was a confusing feeling, growing up thinking that my Mum's culture wanted to keep me at

arm's length, even though I was so desperate to be a part of it. On the flip side, my experience in the UK has been much the same, and I have sometimes struggled to find my place as a proud Japanese-Brit. I was educated in a predominantly white area, being the only non-white kid in my year until Year 4; as a result, I experienced some discrimination that I found difficult to comprehend. One particular memory that stands out, is being asked, in the lunch hall in Year 2, if I 'felt bad for fighting on the wrong side of the war' by a girl in my class. Looking back now, this is both baffling and hilarious – what Year 2 knows about the Second World War, and what Year 2 was personally responsible for Japan's wrongdoings during the war? I didn't know what she meant, but I knew it definitely wasn't my fault.

Because of these experiences, having close friends in similar situations (i.e. being mixed race) is something I have come to massively appreciate, especially those who are also Japanese-British. We've spoken at length about going through the classic phases of not wanting onigiri in our packed lunches and being embarrassed to speak Japanese in public; I wanted to be 'normal' – whatever that meant. Being an early teen is difficult and confusing, and it seemed that life would be easier if I could reject the elements of myself that made me feel different. I look back on this period with shame and frustration, and it is sad to me that this is not an uncommon experience. It is shameful to me now because I am so proud to be Japanese. I love being bilingual and biracial, and I think it has really shaped who I am today.





That for a lot of my childhood I never really felt like I belonged anywhere. I know it sounds quite dramatic but having to navigate identity from such a young age has had a big impact on me.

Between the ages of 7-11 were particularly hard as that was the age when I started to become self-aware (God forbid). Things that were completely normal before started to become SO embarrassing. Where I lived had very few people from an ethnic minority background, so in school, I was one of about 4/5 other ethnic minority students. Which is saying something as someone who is only HALF Asian. I was always quite proud of how well I spoke my mother tongue, but as this self-awareness developed and probably because of the lack of representation around me, I never spoke Japanese around ANYONE. People would ask me to say something in Japanese and there was something about that question that made me want to shrivel up and die, right there, on the spot.

Hana Cox

It's a strange feeling identifying with two very different cultures. It can be confusing at times especially when you're practising the customs you grew up with without knowing the entire history and heritage behind them. Being a British Indian to me means not being Indian enough for some and British enough for others. My parents instilled beautiful Indian traditions and customs in a westernised way which can give me a

sense of belonging to neither culture entirely. However, coming to university and joining societies such as Brit Asia taught me that this feeling isn't so strange after all with most if not all the friends, I met feeling the same. It has led me to feel a strong sense of belonging with the Brit Asia community that has blossomed in the middle ground between my two cultures leading me to develop a strong sense of my identity.

Sasha Gadani

Growing up with parents that are first generation immigrants, the differences in culture were pretty clear straight away living in the UK. As a 3rd child as well you notice the culture and traditions slowly loosen and disappear down the line of siblings. For me personally I've struggled a lot culturally not relating to a lot of the culture, language barriers even fashion barriers or social barriers between my parents and myself.

Being south Asian specifically has meant it's been hard to fit into places, growing up in an all black school then into an all white sixth form has meant I've gotten good at getting used to people, different cultures and personalities. I think this is quite common for mixed people as well growing up in an environment that's unfamiliar to

your upbringing you have to learn to adapt to other people. It has felt it has come at the cost of feeling quite different and I get along (genuinely) with a minority of people who don't really feel like they belong anywhere culturally and kind of just adapt like a chameleon.

I'm somewhat envious of people who belong to a culture and community of people since I don't feel the same way growing up in a Western world disconnected from my roots. Although I try make an effort to connect with my culture it feels futile when you're so different and have been raised around different people. Overall, I'd say it is interesting and difficult as we're the first generation of westernised ethnic people, it will be a new generation of new personalities and people, I think culture will change inevitably as a result.

Jamil Munayem



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This project was created to show POC people in the UK that they are not alone in their experiences.

