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When You Can't Quite Place Me

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When You Can't Quite Place Me

Abstract

I'm relatively used to being asked the question "what are you?"

It's a strange question because it can mean so many different things. I'm a human? I identify as a female. I'm a college student. I'm an American. But I never say those things, because what they're really asking is this: what race are you? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, race, categorization, ethnicity

Disciplines

Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

WHEN YOU CAN'T QUITE PLACE ME

April 8, 2015

I'm relatively used to being asked the question "what are you?"

It's a strange question because it can mean so many different things. I'm a human? I identify as a female. I'm a college student. I'm an American. But I never say those things, because what they're really asking is this: what race are you?



It happened in high school when my school nurse questioned what I "was," and when I told her, she told me she asked because I looked "exotic." It happened when I was working as a cashier at Staples and customers I rang up wanted to know; some would even take guesses. Hispanic? Middle Eastern? It happens here, from friends and from random students.

In theory, it's an innocent question. Perhaps it is a question that Americans are used to hearing and asking, because we're home to a wide array of peoples, races, and ethnicities. I could be "from" anywhere (or at least, in my case, my ancestors could). In my first year seminar last semester, my classmates and I sat around a table during a trip to Washington D.C., and went around in a circle, telling everyone what we "were." It's a human curiosity, I suppose, to constantly want to place people—we want to know the key things about them, which includes race. For the most part, when we look at people we like to think we can tell what their gender is, what their general age is, and what their race is. When we can't tell, we feel compelled to ask. I'm guilty of this as well. I've asked people what their ethnicity/race is when I couldn't tell. I'm just intrigued, after all. I've never looked at it as a rude question. But I think there's something sad about the fact that we feel we need to know someone's race even before we know their last name. I think subconsciously we adjust how we act based on the response to that question.

I arrived early on campus this past summer for my ascent trip. Before we took off for D.C., I chatted with two people on my trip, and one of them innocently asked the question *what are you?* I told her, and she responded, “Oh, I stalked your Facebook before we got here! I thought you were one of those Mexican people.”

I didn’t know how to react; I smiled uncomfortably. I don’t think she necessarily meant what she said to come out the way it did, but despite whatever her intentions were her words have stuck with me many months later. Before arriving on campus, of course I browsed the Facebook profiles of my future classmates, as I’m sure many of us did. Did I subconsciously take into account what everyone “was?” I suppose I absorbed what race and gender they were, what state they were from, what interests they listed on the Class of 2018 page. And it made me feel strange, suddenly, that people were looking at my profile, and pictures of me, making a judgment about what race I was, and then making more judgments based on the conclusions they drew.

As a person who identifies as white, I’ve been socialized into believing in the superiority of my race and have been benefiting from it. I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood where most people saw me as one of them. When I stepped out of that small circle, into a new job and school, the assumption changed. People felt the need to place me, even if they didn’t realize that’s what they were doing. Regardless of how I identify, there are people who seem to want to place themselves above or below me based on their idea of where I fit on our socially constructed racial spectrum.

I think we should question why we feel the need to ask people their race or ethnicity upon meeting them. It’s one thing, I suppose, to be curious about close friends’ cultures and backgrounds. It’s another thing to meet a person and want to know right away; I don’t think it’s necessarily “wrong” but it does require some analysis. Why do we want to maintain a racial system that divides people by the color or shade of their skin, texture of their hair, or shape of their eyes? Why are we uncomfortable when we can’t put people into a box or place ourselves within a false hierarchy? Does our perception of a person change once we find out how they identify or are we the ones who change once we discover someone’s race; do we alter what we say, how we act or even what we think about the person? Does our thinking about ourselves change?

I think most of us do change, even if we don’t do it intentionally. We have all been socialized into seeing ourselves in a certain way, and within a hierarchy. We like to think we know who we are, and what our identity is. But we are products of [history, and the changing status of “race.”](#) When we claim we are just “curious” about someone’s background, I think we need to examine those thoughts and actions more carefully—I don’t think our curiosity is as innocent as it seems on the surface, and there is a long history and complex racial dynamics that comes with the loaded question: what are you?

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