



Richmond Times Dispatch (Virginia)

Headline: Adjustment Slow to the Changing Face of America

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So there I was at the gym on a recent weekend afternoon. I'd just finished running laps and was going through my third, painful set of ab crunches, when the guy next to me stopped exercising, turned to me and asked, "So, where are you from?"

I blinked the sweat out of my eyes. "Southern California," I said. "Near Los Angeles."

Pause. He looked puzzled.

"Oh. Where else are you from?" he asked. "I mean, what's your nationality?" I stopped crunching. Here we go again, I thought.

"I'm American," I said, with only a hint of impatience. "But," I said, cutting to the chase, "my parents are from the Philippines."

I know he meant well. And most do who ask me. Even the one who blundered, "What are you?" The question was so silly I chuckled. "I'm human," I replied, amused. "What are you?"

Some people circle around the race question, trying to figure out how to classify me. In a state where almost everyone is either black or white, I suppose a face like mine begs explanation. So most of the time when I get asked, I say what they want to hear, making me feel at times like the goodwill ambassador for all people Asian.

Talk about feeling like a stranger in your own country.

A Chinese-American friend of mine, who was born and raised here, put it this way: "When they ask me where I'm from, there's the underlying assumption that I'm foreign - that I'm not completely American."

Richmonder Jane Chang said she tries to take the high road.

"I'm happy to explain [my heritage] because I realize there are people who are ignorant. Some lump all Asians together and this gives me a chance to clear things up," she said.

But even she has her limits. Sometimes after telling people that she's a third-generation Virginian of Chinese descent, some people comment, "Oh, but you don't have an accent."

That, she says, "really gets to me."

My frustration with "The Question" doesn't mean that I shy away from my Asian roots. Far from it. I'm proud of who I am and my bicultural background. But when a stranger comes up to you and out of the blue asks what nationality you are, it's not merely politically incorrect. It borders on offensive, suggesting a sense of intimacy that we don't share. My personal history is something I discuss with friends, not with a stranger in a crowded gym or in a supermarket checkout line.

While the view that people of non-European ethnicity are foreigners may be common, it's quickly becoming outdated. America is becoming more diverse, and people of Asian, Latino and mixed-race descent will soon become the norm rather than the exception.

By 2005, Hispanics will become the largest minority group, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 2025, there will be about 60 million Hispanics, about 17 percent of the total projected population of about 353 million. By 2050, about 25 percent of the U.S. population is expected to be Hispanic.

The number of Asians is quickly growing as well -- projected to rise 110 percent from about 10 million people this year to nearly 21 million in 2025. That's still only 6 percent of the total population, but it's an indication of how the face of America is changing.

And as our country evolves, so should our concept of what an American looks like. It's no longer just someone whose ancestors came via the Mayflower or through Ellis Island. It's also the Latino who's been here 30 years or the Asian whose grandparents came here during the Depression.

But while we don't share the same genetic history, we do hold some beliefs in common: freedom, optimism and a stubborn individualistic streak a mile wide.

And by asking us where we're from, that further separates us. This is particularly alienating for us second- or third-generation Americans who know this country and no other.

We're all individuals, after all, not ethnic riddles. So let's toss the question aside for now.

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