

# Blackinese

*Reflections on Race and Ethnicity from a  
Biracial Millennial*

**By Patricia Bradby Moore**

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*For anyone who has ever questioned where they fit in,  
felt the pull of multiple worlds, or sought to make sense  
of their own identity. May you find peace in knowing  
that your story is a beautiful and essential part of  
the larger narrative.*



# Contents

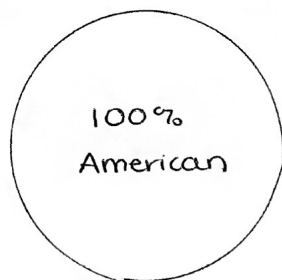
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<b>PART I: Childhood</b>	<b>9</b>
Ch. 1: The Foundations of My Cultural Identity	11
Ch. 2: Family Traditions, Food, and Religion	27
Ch. 3: Navigating Adolescence	43
<b>PART II: College Into Early Adulthood</b>	<b>67</b>
Ch. 4: Higher Education	69
Ch. 5: Cultural Heritage on Campus	79
Ch. 6: Scholars Trips and Other Global Experiences	87
<b>PART III: Love, Labor, and Legacy</b>	<b>113</b>
Ch. 7: Dating & Relationships	115
Ch. 8: Professional Identity & Workplace Dynamics	131
Ch. 9: Building a Multicultural Family	155
Ch. 10: Looking Forward	165
<i>Outro</i>	185
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	187
<i>About the Author</i>	191



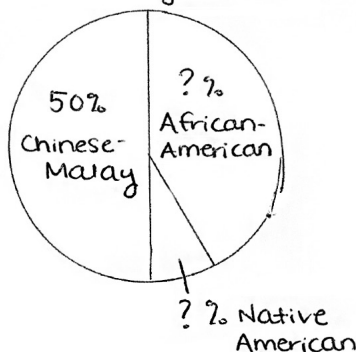
# INTRODUCTION

If you don't mind me asking,  
**WHAT ARE YOU?**

How I Feel...



What They Mean...



Standardized tests in grade school:

Racial Identity (Choose one)

- ☐ white
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

"I'd rather not choose."  
- Young Me

Additional options added since then:

- ☐ Other ← Really? Is that how you want children to self-identify?
- ☐ Biracial or Multi-racial

← ...better.





# Introduction

LIVING IN NEW YORK CITY during the early years of my adulthood was both beautifully inspiring and a true test of my survival instincts. When walking the city streets, it was typical for me to hear whistles and catcalls from male construction workers on the job. (I swear, that city will forever be under construction.) As I stepped out of my apartment, I would often slip my earbuds in beneath my bouncing black curls, slide oversized sunglasses over my almond-shaped eyes, and pretend to disappear—avoiding the need to respond to these men. It was quite fabulous. I never kept my music too loud because I felt a high volume was unsafe, especially when walking on sidewalks that run alongside speeding cars, crazy cab drivers, and cyclists with no regard for even the most standard and simple traffic laws. So, I kept my music at a level where I could still hear the city around me, but that didn't mean every person with the audacity to yell pickup lines at me needed to know it.

One day, I was in a hurry to meet some friends for brunch, and a guy passing by me on the sidewalk decided he wanted my attention. He said something to me as I briskly walked past, but I didn't bother to decipher the words coming out of his mouth—nor did I care enough to even slow down and try. It was obvious he didn't want anything but a boost to his own confidence, so I ignored him and continued on my way.

A few blocks later, I heard the same voice in the background of my music. As I turned around and tilted my sunglasses down to see exactly where this voice was coming from, I was not surprised to find the same young man following me down the street. When our eyes met, I instantly regretted tilting my sunglasses; now he knew I could hear him. Out of obligation to my guilt, I removed my earbuds. "Are you talking to me?" I asked, as if I didn't know. He then attempted to make small talk, but I quickly let him know I was in a hurry—if there wasn't anything I could help him with, I needed to be on my way. He then asked the question that almost every guy would ask after sixty seconds (or fewer) of conversation with me. "If you don't mind my asking, what are you?" My caramel complexion often conjures curiosity in people, so I gave him the same response I always gave: "I'm American." With that, I turned forward toward my destination and walked away.

The young man was persistent and kept following me. "Yes, I know that," he said. "But what *are* you?" My answer stayed the same. He obviously thought I didn't understand the question, because then he said, "Okay, I'm African American, and you are..." No thanks to a red traffic light and a long string of cars, I was forced to stop in my path and finish this inane conversation. So I asked him, "Have you ever lived in Africa?" "No," he replied. "Then you're just American, too," I said as I put my earbuds back in and walked away.

It's not that I'm ashamed of my heritage or that I don't want people to know my ethnicity. I'm just annoyed at the amount of emphasis that's put on my racial and ethnic makeup. Genetically, I'm Asian, Black, and Native American, but I was born and

raised in mainstream America. I'm American. At the time of my encounter with the young man, I had never been to any country in Asia, and I'd only spent a total of eight days in Africa on an educational trip—and at no point had I ever felt “at home.” I wanted to identify as American and leave it at that.

As an American, when someone asks, “What is your ethnicity?” most likely your first instinct is not to respond with the country in which you were born and raised. Rather, you're likely to cite the countries or continent your ancestors came from before arriving in—or being brought to—the US. Because those in America often yearn to associate themselves with “their roots,” they align themselves with countries they have probably never been to and/or cultures that they may have never truly experienced firsthand. Part of me doesn't understand this. Why not instead associate yourself with the culture you grew up in and are most familiar with, the culture that has genuinely made you who you are today?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word *ethnicity* as “the quality or fact of belonging to a population group or subgroup made up of people who share a common cultural background or descent.” Those in America, with a few exceptions, all share a common culture, even if there are many subcultures within that culture, and it's *incredibly* common to take pride in being American. So, if almost everyone in the US is so “proud to be an American,” why is American not considered an ethnicity in its own right?

These are questions I have spent decades of my life contemplating. *Who am I, really?* Although my father was born here, my mother was born and raised on the island of Penang off the coast

of Malaysia. For this reason, I believed in my childhood that I was half Malay. In my late teenage years, I had a conversation with my older sister, who reminded me that my mother's mother is actually Chinese. My mother grew up in Malaysia, but her ethnic association was Chinese Malay, in the same way a Black person in America might be referred to as African American: Her cultural heritage was named first, and her country of birth followed thereafter. I felt then that if my mom was born and raised in Malaysia, it made her ethnicity Malay. In my view, it didn't matter where my grandma was from, and my mother has never even been to China.

As I've gotten older, I've come to realize that recognizing geographic origins does, in fact, matter to many people. It's a part of how they define themselves. Yet visiting or spending time in a specific geographic location does not necessarily make you more or less connected to the culture. If your heritage is Swedish, you can travel to Sweden, but that doesn't make you any "more Swedish." Culture is about customs, and those can be experienced anywhere.

My father is of African American and Native American descent. I couldn't even begin to try to tell you what percentage he is of which—and neither could he—but I know from the mouth of my own grandfather that those are the ethnicities that make up his ancestry. However, I'm not sure my dad associates with Native American culture at all, so why do the percentages matter? To my knowledge, no one in my family has been a member of a tribe for many generations. Despite growing up in southeastern Virginia, an area with active Native American tribes, I have never once heard my dad or his siblings speak of attending

any Native American meetings or events, not even the annual Chickahominy Indian Tribe Fall Festival & Pow-Wow, which brings together many tribes from the area.

On the other hand, I have many memories of attending Union Baptist Church. Founded in 1862, Union Baptist Church was the third Black church established in my dad's home county. My dad's mother attended that church, starting at age eleven, and she was a faithful, active member until her passing at the age of ninety-one. I was always happy to accompany her to services because church was the place where she felt most at home, and I cherish the memories of us in worship together.

My dad's family extends far outside of the home he grew up in. As is typical in Black Southern culture, I had many aunts and uncles growing up that I'm sure are not related to me in any way, but who helped raise me as a family member would. Black culture is something I felt fully immersed in as a child, due in large part to the close-knit community my dad is a part of. It's his lived experience that would lead my dad to tell you he's decisively Black. I'm doubtful he would use the term *African American* unprompted, but we will get to my observations of this delineation later in the book.

Modern US culture is so obsessed with recording ethnic roots that this question of ethnic association is one I've always been constantly confronted with. When I was a kid, I must have greatly confused the Virginia Department of Education during their standardized testing. Back then, those silly Scantrons (or "bubble sheets," as I would call them) only let you mark one circle for race. I fell into three different categories, so out of fairness, I marked a different one each year. It wasn't until I reached

high school that biracial and multiracial became options. This made me happy, and I still thought it was ridiculous we had to mark anything at all.

Due to my racially ambiguous features, my ethnic association is an external conversation and debate that's recurring in my life. It has also been a long-fought internal struggle: Only recently, in my adult years, have I come to peace with *all* the parts of my heritage. This was no small feat, but today I'm confident in who I am.

This book is an exploration of who I am and some of the events that have shaped me. It's a more-informed reflection on various moments in my life—moments that I may not have recognized as pivotal at the time, but that I now understand impacted the way I see myself and the world. I started writing this book at the age of twenty-three, and I'm glad it has taken me fifteen years to pick up the pieces and finish what I started. I've lived many exciting, meaningful experiences between then and now, and I've learned a lot.

At twenty-five, I moved to Malaysia, and that experience had a tremendous effect on the way I now navigate through the world. My time in graduate school and the many professional and personal experiences that followed have taught me so much, and I hope others might learn from and/or be comforted by my stories. I hope at least a few people out there see themselves reflected in the pages that follow.

I decided to finish this book after observing the increasing number of young people in the US who are multiracial. According to the 2020 census, among those who reported identifying as "Two or More Races," 32.5% were under the age of eighteen.

Between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, the multiracial population in the 18–44 age category increased by 300%.<sup>1</sup> The world is changing!

As the percentage of the US population that identifies as more than one race is growing rapidly, the amount of literature that covers the lived experience of multiracial people is still minimal. Growing up, I often felt isolated in my mental and emotional struggles as a multiracial and multiethnic kid. I only had my older sister—who was fielding the same uncertainties—for support.

Writing this memoir brings me joy, as it will offer today's multiracial youth a resource to help them feel less alone in their journeys of self-discovery. For those who have long faced challenges with being multiracial—or are still navigating them—this book is for you, too.

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1 Rico, Brittany et al “2020 Census Shows Increase in Multiracial Population in All Age Categories,” June 1, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/06/nearly-a-third-reporting-two-or-more-races-under-18-in-2020.html>