

Rachel Donnan

Where Are You Really From?

The manager of the hostel stands on the opposite side of the elevator, twirling an elastic keychain around his index finger as the metal doors shudder shut. He gives me and my friend a casual once-over, and I can feel his eyes as they slowly travel from my bright red hair to Britney's blue fanny pack to our mismatched roller suitcases. While many college students had fled to Florida or Mexico, seeking warmer climates for spring break, we had flown to New York City in the middle of a snowstorm.

"So," he starts. He's friendly, overly conversational. I dislike him instantly. "Where are you from?"

I share a knowing glance with Britney. Growing up as Asian girls in the South has made us wary of this question. "We're from North Carolina," I say.

The manager rolls his eyes and laughs like we're old friends. My ears turn as red as my hair. "No, you know what I mean," he says, waving his hand dismissively at me. "Where are you *really* from? Like, are you Korean?"

I bite my lip to keep myself from laughing out loud. I stifle the urge to be snap at him, to say "I was born right here, in Manhattan. I'm *American*."

But I don't laugh, and I don't snap at him either. Instead, I straighten my spine and look at him in the eyes and give him the answer he wants because it's the easiest way to end the conversation. "My family is from the Philippines."

He nods, as if this makes total sense to him, as if Filipino was going to be his next guess after Korean. I wonder if he could even point out the Philippines on the map. The elevator doors open and he leads us to our room.

But that's not where I'm from.

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To be the child of an immigrant is to be a cultural conundrum.

It means tacking “-American” onto the end of your culture of origin and hoping that those two taped together words can help you find some sort of personal identity. It means being “Filipino-American”; Filipino first, American second. Filipino first, even though you were born in America and barely speak Tagalog and have never been back to the Philippines. American second because despite all of these things, as a person of color, you will always be considered a second-class citizen.

It means learning to decode questions like “where are you from?” When people ask me these questions, they don’t want to know where *I* am from. They want to know what kind of Asian I am; they want to know if I can watch anime without English subtitles or if I can pronounce their favorite take-out dishes with a proper accent or if I know all of the members of BTS. They want to fit me into a category, to file me away under M for “Misc. Asian Identity”.

I’ve heard this question so many times that it’s started to lose meaning. My answer is mechanical, well-practiced. I wonder if people understand what they are asking. I wish I had a better answer. What does *from* even mean anymore?

According to Google, to be from somewhere is to begin there.

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I began between my mother’s legs on a rainy Wednesday in October. I began in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. I began in Manhattan, and then eventually Long Island when they moved to the suburbs. I began again in North Carolina when they moved for better jobs and cheaper houses.

Most of the time, when people ask me where I'm *really* from, I say New York. Both sides of my family tree have roots there. That meant that for nearly every holiday, summer break, or long weekend, my father would pack up our things in our station wagon and we would make the eight-hour trek up the east coast. Relatives would receive us with open arms into their spare bedrooms and pull-out couches, and we would make them laugh by ordering sweet tea at restaurants and overusing the word "y'all".

Our trips became scarce after my parent's divorce, and even scarcer after my dad passed away. When Britney proposed New York City as a possible destination for spring break, I jumped at the opportunity to return.

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In February, before we depart, Britney starts sending me news articles.

"Asian Woman Pushed in Front of Moving Subway Car" the title of one read. Another article details how a young Chinese woman was followed into her own apartment before being assaulted and murdered.

These headlines remain at the forefront of my brain as me and Britney duck into the entrance of the subway for the first time. Descending into a New York subway station is a little bit like descending into hell; it's dark and damp and the stench of piss and metal clings to every fiber of your being, and the deeper you descend, the less certain you become of ever seeing the light of day again.

We huddle together on the platform. I keep my back to one of the concrete columns that line the walkway. We both watch over each other's shoulders, wary of becoming another horrifying headline in the news. It's not like we can do much of anything if we are attacked; we

were both stripped of our pepper spray before going through airport security. My only possible weapon is the heel of my platform boot.

Thankfully, we survived the subway without any major incident. But in retrospect, it feels silly to be so tense in New York City when the hate that drives people to push other people into subways exists in my own hometown too. It just looks a little different; North Carolina suburbs don't have subways, so people have to get creative.

Hate looks like the boys on the playground that taunt me when I am seven, slanting their eyes using their fingers so that they "look like me". It sounds like the word "chink", spat at me carelessly by the man who cuts me off in traffic. It becomes the man at the bus stop who singles me out amongst a group of students and tells me to "go back to my own country".

This is my country, I belong here too.

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The ugliest part of hate is when it produces shame.

Shame has me up at five o'clock in the morning every day in high school, packing on layers of makeup to make my skin look paler, like the porcelain skin of my classmates. Shame has me bleaching my dark brown hair bright yellow in an attempt to emulate the blonde beach waves of the models I see on Instagram. Shame has me declining the video calls from my Lola, trying to reach me from a different country in a different timezone. Shame turns me into something unrecognizable; something so horrifying that I begin to hate myself more than the people who call me slurs ever could.

After shame comes grief.

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On the last full day of our trip, we go to “Yu and Me Books” in Chinatown. It is the first female-owned Asian-American bookstore in New York City. Walking into the bookstore is a spiritual experience; the space is small, dimly lit, and almost too quiet, but I appreciate the sense of reverence that hangs low over the space.

The uneven bookshelves are stocked mostly with books by Asian authors about Asian stories. I recognize a few titles but most are thrillingly unfamiliar. I browse quickly, running my index finger over the spines while Britney moves slowly, pulling out certain books and opening them to read the inside of the dust jackets.

I turn a corner into the backroom and pause. The walls in the room are covered with black and white photos of people. Upon closer inspection, I discover that there are at least a hundred different photos of Chinese people, each with different subjects. There are portraits of families, multiple generations all squished into one frame, and more frequent single-subject shots. Some of the people are staring at the camera straight-on, others are smiling, a few are even caught mid-laugh.

The photos are taken from David Zheng’s collection, “Some Chinatown Portraits”. The photos focus on people from the Manhattan Chinatown community, and the project is meant to uplift the people who have been frequent victims of recent anti-Asian sentiment in New York. The room and the photos serve to both memorialize and provide hope.

Being in that room, in Chinatown, in New York is a paralyzing experience. To be so adjacent to experiencing cultural heritage, but not quite close enough, stirs an aching in my heart that I haven't felt for a long time. I am a tourist here, just like any other outsider. Britney is Chinese-Vietnamese. She could buy the little jade pendants from the shop windows and converse

with the saleswomen. She could stand in this room and see the faces of her aunts, uncles, and cousins in these photos. This was all meant for her.

It would be so easy to fold myself in, to accept “Asian” as the monolithic identity that it is so often presented as. In many ways, I already have. But by doing so, am I not also negating the separateness and individuality of my own Filipino heritage? How much of a claim could I have to a space like this when I had spent so much of my life pretending to hate it?

On a corner table of the room, there are small flowers that have been cut out of construction paper. People write little notes on them and then tape them on the wall with the photos. One of my favorite flowers is a green one with the note “POWER TO ASIAN FEMMES <3”. Other notes are more serious: “Thankful for the community that keeps me safe and loved”.

I wrestle with myself internally on whether or not it's be appropriate for me to leave a note, deciding finally yes, it was, because if anything, I was being an ally to the Chinese community for keeping Britney alive in New York City for four whole days. I choose a small purple flower to write on, so that it won't take up too much room.

“Proud of where I'm really from.”

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There is no “Chinatown” equivalent for Filipino people - at least, not one near me. There's a HiFi in Los Angeles, but I doubt flying to California will bring me any cultural satisfaction.

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The good thing about being *from* a place is that it indicates movement. To be *from* someplace is to be advancing towards something else, towards a destination. Towards a

goal. I don't think that movement has to be unilateral either. I can move forward and still reach backward. Face the future while keeping an ear to the past

The reality of reconnecting with my cultural heritage is less aspirational. Most of my relatives still live out of state, and adult life (mine and theirs) is incongruous with my recent reckoning with identity. Spending time learning how to make pancit does not qualify as a university excused absence. Still, I take what I can get in bits and pieces. I fear that if I do not start now, I will lose momentum. It is time to learn where I am really from.

To be from somewhere is to begin there.

I will simply begin *again*.