

Lawrence Hill

Black Berry, Sweet Juice

On Being Black and White in Canada

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The Question

Canadians have a favourite pastime, and they don't even realize it. They like to ask—they absolutely have to ask—where you are from if you don't look convincingly white. They want to know it, need to know it, simply must have that information. They just can't relax until they have pinpointed, to their satisfaction, your geographic and racial coordinates. They can go almost out of their minds with curiosity, as when driven by the need for food, water, or sex, but once they've finally managed to find out precisely where you were born, who your parents were, and what your racial make-up is, then, man, do they feel better. They can breathe easy and get back to the business of living.

I don't have the math background of, say, an actuary, but I can manage the following calculation. I am forty-four years old. Since about age ten, I have been asked "So what are you, anyway?" and all its variations. ("Where are you from?" "Yes, but where are you really from?" "Yes, but where were your parents born?") That's thirty-four years I've been fielding The Question.

Let's assume I have been asked The Question once a day over these past thirty-four years. $34 \times 365 = 12,410$. But

that would be an underestimation because it fails to factor in the two years I lived in Quebec. During those two years, I was most certainly asked The Question five times per day. (“*D’où viens-tu?*” “*Quelles sont tes souches?*” “*Tes parents sont de quel pays?*”) An extra four times per day for two years in Quebec City would add on another 2,920 questions. $12,410 + 2,920 = 15,330$.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the absolute minimum number of times Canadians have asked me either “Where are you from?” or “*D’où viens-tu?*” or any of the multitudinous variations.

Minelle Mahtani, whose doctoral thesis at the University of London examined identity among mixed-race Canadian women, tells a story of how she was walking alone one day in Toronto’s St. Lawrence Market area, when someone tapped on her shoulder. Minelle turned around to find a woman who seemed motivated by a particular urgency—she had obviously been watching Minelle and just had to know where she was from.

“Ah,” you may say, “but it’s just curiosity. What’s wrong with people being curious?”

I am a patient man. So patient that my children can confidently remove a chocolate chip cookie right from the edge of my fingers, or raid my dish of French vanilla ice cream and leave nothing but the cloudy bowl, and still know that I won’t lose my cool. But even this patience was exhausted some time around the 5,000 mark of the 15,330 questions I have faced.

What is wrong with The Question? Nothing at all—when it is asked at the right time, when it results from a genuine interest in you as a person, and when the person asking the question actually accepts the answer.

Let’s dissect the interrogation process. Imagine me at a party, sipping mineral water. A stranger walks up.

STRANGER: “Do you mind my asking where you are from?” [This is code for “What is your race?”]

ME: “Canada.” [This is code for “Screw off.”]

STRANGER: “Yes, but you know, where are you *really* from?” [This is code for “You know what I mean, so why are you trying to make me come out and say it?”]

ME: “I come from the foreign and distant metropolis of Newmarket. That’s Newmarket, Ontario. My place of birth. [Code for “I’m not letting you off the hook, buster.”]

STRANGER: “But your place of origin? Your parents? What are your parents?” [Code for “I want to know your race, but this is making me very uncomfortable because somehow I feel that I’m not supposed to ask that question.”]

This exchange is like the opening of a chess game. The first few moves are pretty standard: White moves Pawn to King Four, Black responds with Pawn to King Four, White answers with Knight to King Bishop Three, and Black answers with Knight to King Bishop Three. From this point on, the possibilities multiply.

I can give a teaser, such as “My parents came up from the States,” which frustrates the questioner, who really wants to know my parents’ racial background.

I can give it all up and explain that I have a black father and a white mother.

I can invent an answer, such as “My father is a White Russian and my mother is an Ethiopian Jew.”

Or I can turn the question around, as in “Why are you asking me this?”

And that is the nub of the issue. Why am I always asked that question? Why do people need to know the answer so desperately?

Have you ever noticed that black people rarely put other people of any race through the ringer like this? That's because many of them have been asked The Question more times than they care to count. They're sophisticated enough—by virtue of their own experiences—to understand that many people resent this line of interrogation.

Is it truly innocent? Can The Question be chalked up to basic curiosity? I don't think so. Children are the most innocent and curious of all human beings, yet they never hammer me with these questions. As a rule, adults aren't all that curious about other people. With me, they are generally interested in just one thing: my ancestry.

Do you suppose that—15,330 times in thirty-four years—strangers will ask an indisputably white Canadian with a traditional Anglo-Canadian accent where he is from, where he was born, or where his parents were born? Absolutely not. Strangers will assume that he is a true Canadian, and leave that part of his identity unmolested. The offence-causing kernel at the centre of this line of interrogation is its implication: "You are not white, you don't look like me, so you're clearly not Canadian." It also suggests "Since you're clearly not Canadian, and I am, I am within my rights to ask you just exactly where you're from."

We grow up learning that certain questions are off-limits in polite conversation. Any properly socialized Canadian knows, by the teenage years at the latest, that it would be considered grossly impolite to walk up to strangers and ask how much money they make, how they vote, whether they believe in God, or whether they sleep with men, women, or both. These questions are deemed intrusive. But to my way

of thinking, they are eminently preferable to "Where are you from?" After all, what is wrong with asking what people do or think? But to ask what they *are*, and to presume to know at least part of the answer—that they are not white and therefore are not Canadian—is very different.

Digging into someone's identity—especially a stranger's identity—is tricky business. Hell, people can spend top dollar on psychotherapists to figure out their own identities and still fall short of satisfaction. When I wake up in the morning, stumble to the mirror, and brush my teeth, I'm certainly not saying to myself, "Hello, black man, how are you today?" Nor am I saying, "Hello, white and black mix-up, what are you doing today?"

Obviously, the blackness and the whiteness within me are reflected back at me by society. But I don't care to have my identity boiled down to race. My identity may, at any given time, comprise a hundred elements.

I suppose the reason many of us mixed-race people find The Question offensive is not just that it makes assumptions, which are often false, about our identity, but because it attempts to hang our identity on one factor: our race.

. . .

Not everybody I interviewed had the same take on this issue. Interestingly, two of the strongest opposing views came from young men, both in their twenties, university-educated, and living in southern Ontario.

Stefan Dubowski, of Hamilton, told me The Question doesn't bother him. When he is asked about his background, he just says he is part Ukrainian, part Barbadian. "Then we get into a discussion of what they thought I was. I've had Armenian, Egyptian, Pakistani, East Indian . . . It's just a question of curiosity. I've been asked so many times.

If I got mad about it every single time, I'd just be this really angry person. I certainly don't feel any anger about it when people ask me about it, but my back does go up when I read it on an application form or on a government census."

Tyson Brown, who was raised in Burlington and now lives in Toronto, said he takes *The Question* as an opportunity to educate people about issues of mixed race and blackness. "I say, 'I'm mixed, African Canadian and white Canadian.'" Tyson emerged from a largely white high school to embrace his black identity completely as a young man. He read black literature, listened to black music, wore funky black clothes, dated black women, and chose to immerse himself completely in the black student community at York University. Later, he lived with his girlfriend for a year in Barbados, and there the constant references to his race grated on him. "They called me 'red man' the whole time I was there," he complained.

However, my brother, Dan, described *The Question* as a painful experience, especially during childhood. "I was definitely asked that question a lot. And a lot of times, when I said part black, or half black, people would then decide to argue with me and tell me that no, I wasn't, 'cause I didn't look black enough. I can remember it happening a lot when I was a boy, at summer camp. When I went up to camp for the first time, I was sitting on the bus with this kid who was probably a year or two older than I was. And this kid was saying, 'You're not. You can't be.' So there I was arguing with him about this."

Like Dan, most of the people I interviewed—and virtually all of the women—expressed impatience with constant questions about their racial background.

Karyn Hood, of Toronto, said, "People think I'm everything under the flipping sun, and it drives me insane. I get

North African, Moroccan, Italian, Sicilian, Greek, Spanish, Jewish . . . Whenever I meet someone, I know it's going to be 'What are you? What background are you?' I usually try to put it to bed with one answer: 'My father is West Indian, my mother's Irish Canadian.' It's annoying. But life's a puzzle, and they want to know how you fit into their world." Karyn resents being perceived as "exotic," cultivates friendships in the black community, and prefers to date black men. "You can't live in two worlds. You have to make a choice. Saying you're white isn't really an option. So this makes it clear to people. If there's any doubt, that's the choice I'm making."

Natalie Wall, of Toronto, concurred. "I've been asked what I am so many times. It is the rudest question in the world. It's the basest form of labelling I've ever seen. People on the street are always guessing. 'You're Spanish, right? Indian? What the hell are you?' I tell them I'm Canadian. 'But where are you from?' 'Canada.' 'What about your parents?' 'My mom is from Nova Scotia, my dad is from Trinidad.' 'So what are you?' 'Black.' I get a surprised look. 'You are?'"

Jazz Miller, of Toronto, is so sick of *The Question* that when people ask her what she is, she has taken to answering "aardvark." "It is designed to embarrass the person asking the question. There's always a little bit of nervous laughter."

Aaron Cavan, who has a white father and a black mother, was a graduate student at Dalhousie University when I interviewed him. He said people always look astonished when he says that *The Question* irritates him and he won't answer it. He described the attitude of the questioner as unconsciously aggressive, a stance that suggests the person being questioned is inferior. Underneath *The Question*, Aaron argued, is this unarticulated belief: "It's

not necessary for me to explain my origins, but it's necessary for you to tell me who you are." He told me, "The assumption behind The Question is, 'I'm just white. You are the person who answers the question because you are the one who is unknown.'"

Sara, one of my anonymous interviewees, fumed as she recalled the numerous times she had dealt with The Question.

"Sometimes I'm very rude. I don't give much information. I might just say, 'I'm from here.' Some days, if I don't feel like it, I just say, 'Africa.' And they're happy, not realizing that Africa's a continent and that there are fifty-two countries in it. It's just what they want to hear. They want to place you somewhere because it makes them feel comfortable, helps them compartmentalize you.

"Where the hell are they from? No one's from here unless they're First Nations peoples. But they're trying to make you feel strange. It's a displacement. They're just trying to let you know that you don't belong . . . They are not coming from a position of intelligence, asking those questions. White privilege doesn't operate from a level of consciousness. It operates from a position of privilege. Because they're privileged, they don't have to think about stuff. They really don't. Does it mean that they're not well intentioned? These can be people you love dearly, you know? But that's the way the world is. They're operating from a position of belligerent white privilege, and they don't have to look at stuff and think about stuff. So they ask these reckless questions."