

"Where Are You Really From?"

Why many Asian diaspora don't like being asked this question



K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM

JUL 30, 2025



42



49



6

Share



Photo courtesy of [Pixabay](#).

I have no idea if the little girl in the above photo is Asian American (or Asian diaspora). But if she is, I can almost guarantee that even at her young age, she has been questioned about her ethnicity and nationality (which some people can't — or won't — differentiate).

"Are you Chinese?"

"What are you?"

“Where are you from?”

“No, where are you really from?”

These are questions many of us Asian diaspora have been asked since we were tiny. In some cases, we actually are from a different country. For instance, I was born in South Korea, but I have lived in the U.S. for so long that you would never guess that I wasn't a native English speaker.

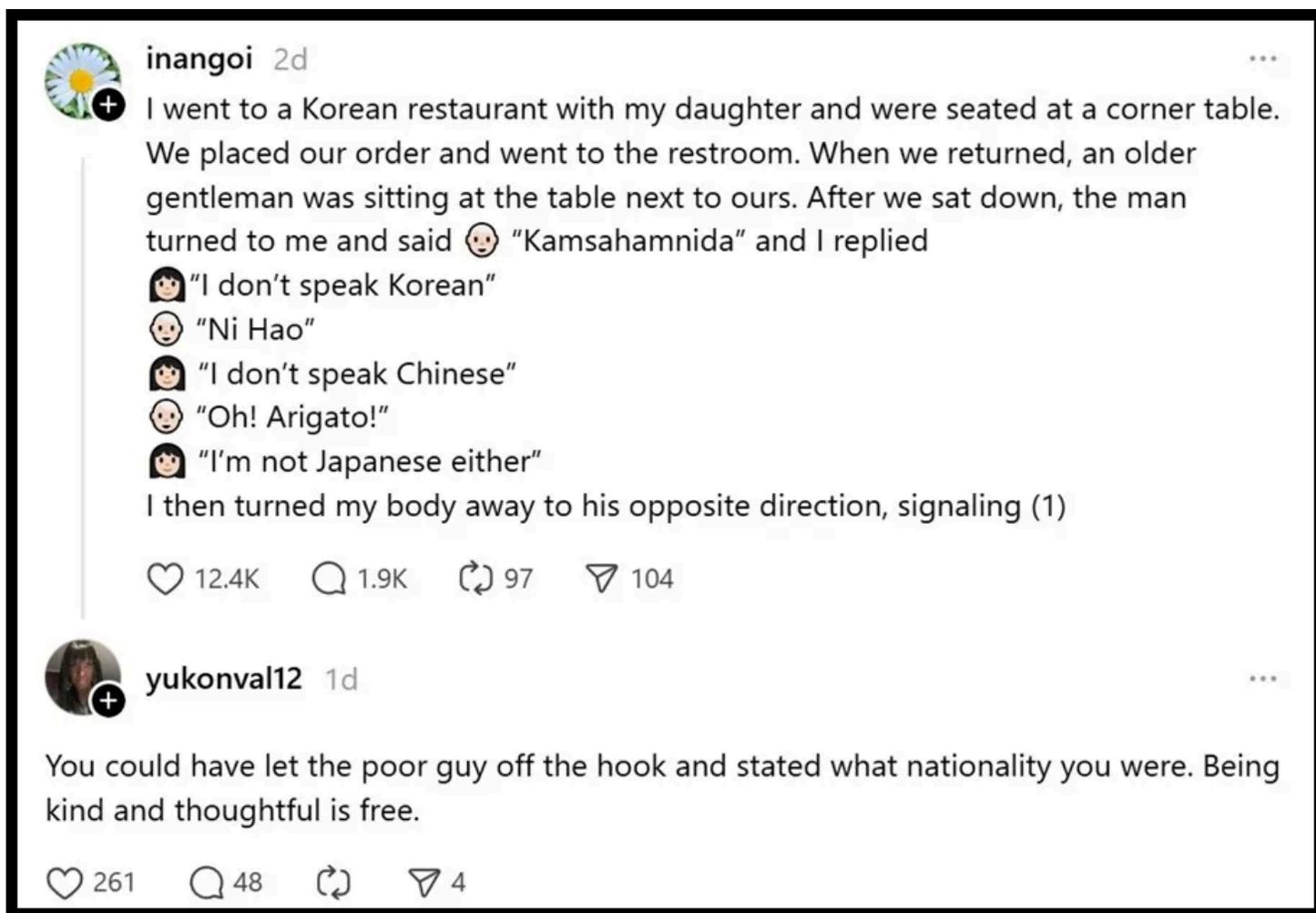
Until you saw my face. At that point, some people start hearing a non-existent *Asian* accent, and they project foreignness on me. The thing is, while I am indeed an immigrant, there are millions of people who look like me, who were born in western countries. And so were their parents. And their grandparents. But they're still treated like foreigners in their own country.

This is the *perpetual foreigner syndrome* at work, where we're not viewed as *real* Americans. According to a study by the [PEW Research Center](#), almost 80 percent of Asian Americans have experienced some kind of [xenophobia and racism](#) in their lives — ranging from assumptions that we don't speak English to being told to go back to where you came from ... even if we are already there.



Posts like this (on [Threads](#)) drive me a little mad, because I know what will come next. I want to comment, but I also don't want to deal with the *stop-being-so-sensitive* contingent, who inevitably chime in about a topic they don't understand and can't relate to. But they still want to get the last word in and tell us how we should feel.

Case in point, this post by a woman who went out to dinner with her daughter went viral.



Many of the comments were like this dude's, telling the original poster that she should've appeased the stranger who was butting into her evening out with her daughter. (FWIW, even if she was alone, she didn't owe him small talk.)

Did none of these men think it was strange that this older man was rattling off *thank you* to her in different Asian languages? What was the point of that? Did he want to be rewarded for that? Couldn't he have just been a normal human being and asked:

"Are you by any chance Japanese? Because my son-in-law is Japanese..."

"I just got back from Japan and thought it was such a beautiful country..."

She may not have wanted to engage in that conversation either, but what did he think he was accomplishing? Who does that? Was he interested in her? Did he want to show off his "awesome" language skills?



an.dy.1426 1d



Just tell him where u r from.. you were in korean restaurant



62



9



1

Top ▾

[View activity >](#)



an.dy.1426 1d



I mean its common.. if white person was in Korea people probably ask if he or she is from u.s France u.k and list goes on. Just say I am not from where you mentioned but I am from this this this. Simple. The guy just wanted to get it correct because he kept got it wrong.. that's it.



2



An.dy makes no sense. I'm not sure why the other diner's behavior is acceptable *because* they're in a *Korean* restaurant. Would it be acceptable in a French bistro? How about at a McDonald's?

In his second comment, An.dy thought he was doing something, comparing Korea with America. But what An.dy forgets (or is unaware of) is that 99 percent of the population in South Korea is ethnically Korean. If they are guessing that you are a foreigner, there's a distinct possibility that they could be correct.

That is clearly not the case in the U.S., a country literally made up of immigrants.

[I discuss this more in my second post below.]



colleen.gurney 1d



How about respect, courtesy and empathy for an older generation who are increasingly lonely in this new rapidly changing society. Rude, insensitive and an awful example to your daughter. You will be in his shoes one day. What an awful generation this is



352



11



1

Let's pretend that I'm older than Colleen and we're in Korea. What would her reaction be if I started lobbing out-of-context words to her? *Merci! Dzięk! Tack!* And then when she makes it clear she doesn't want to talk to me, I ignore her discomfort and continue. *Hey, how much do you weigh? What is your income? How old are you?* Those are all acceptable questions in Korea. (Do I approve of them? No, but when in Seoul...)

There is a contingent of people who say that Asian Americans who don't like being asked *where are you really from?* are overly sensitive, that the people questioning *who* or *what* we are mean well and we should politely reply back to them.

They will point out they have an Asian friend who *likes* being asked questions about their heritage, even when their heritage is Iowa.

Well, that's delightful for them.

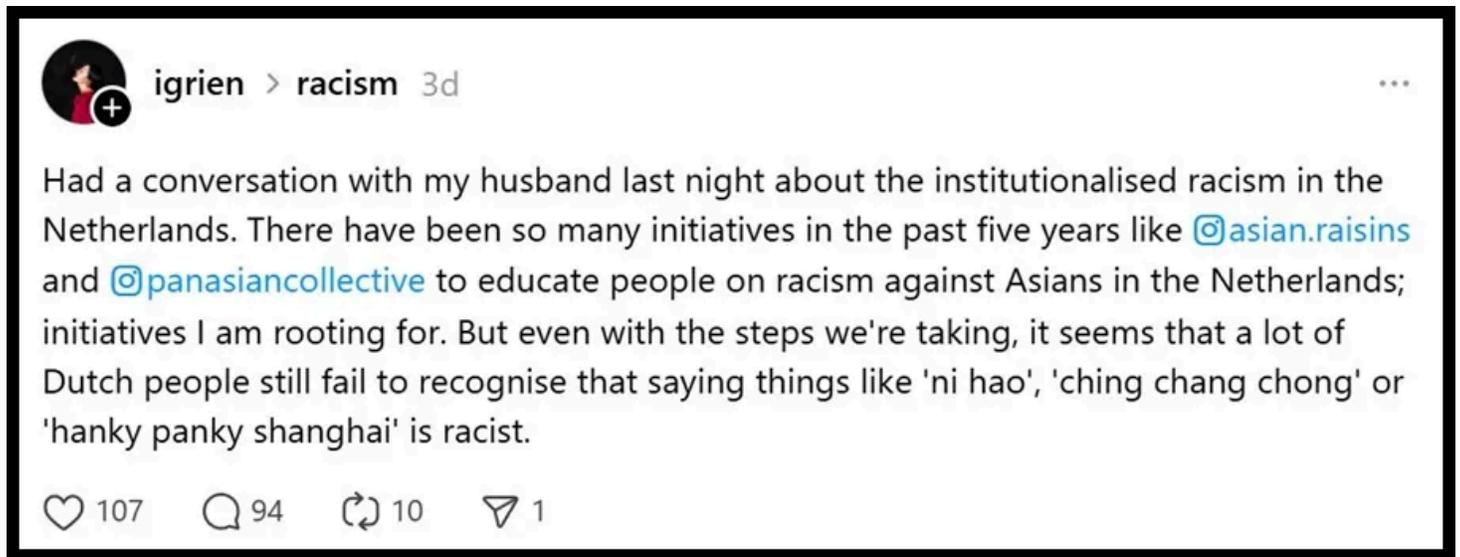
But when the majority of Asian diaspora are literally telling you that we don't like it, consider listening to us instead of telling us how we should feel.



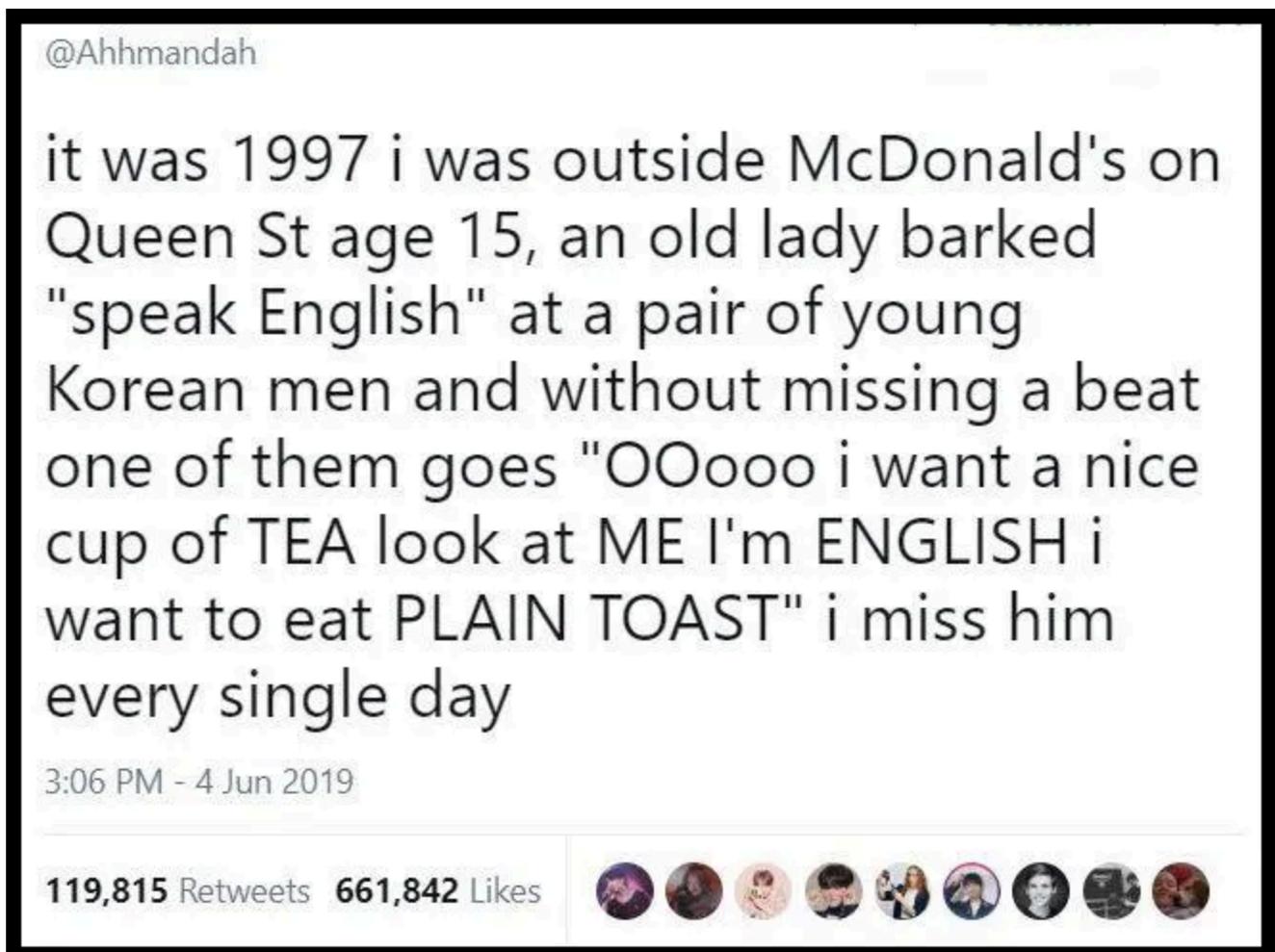
Some of my white acquaintances have gotten salty when I talked about my experiences of being othered. They said that they know exactly how I feel, because they are sometimes treated poorly because they have foreign accents.

The difference, I told them, is that strangers don't assume they are immigrants based on their appearance. If you look the way I do, that's the first thing that they assume. Which is why I get called a *chink* — even though I speak perfect English — and they don't get called called [fill in the slur for white Europeans], because white is the default for an American in the U.S.

White immigrants are accepted as Americans. Meanwhile, Asians born in the U.S. are still asked what country they're from.



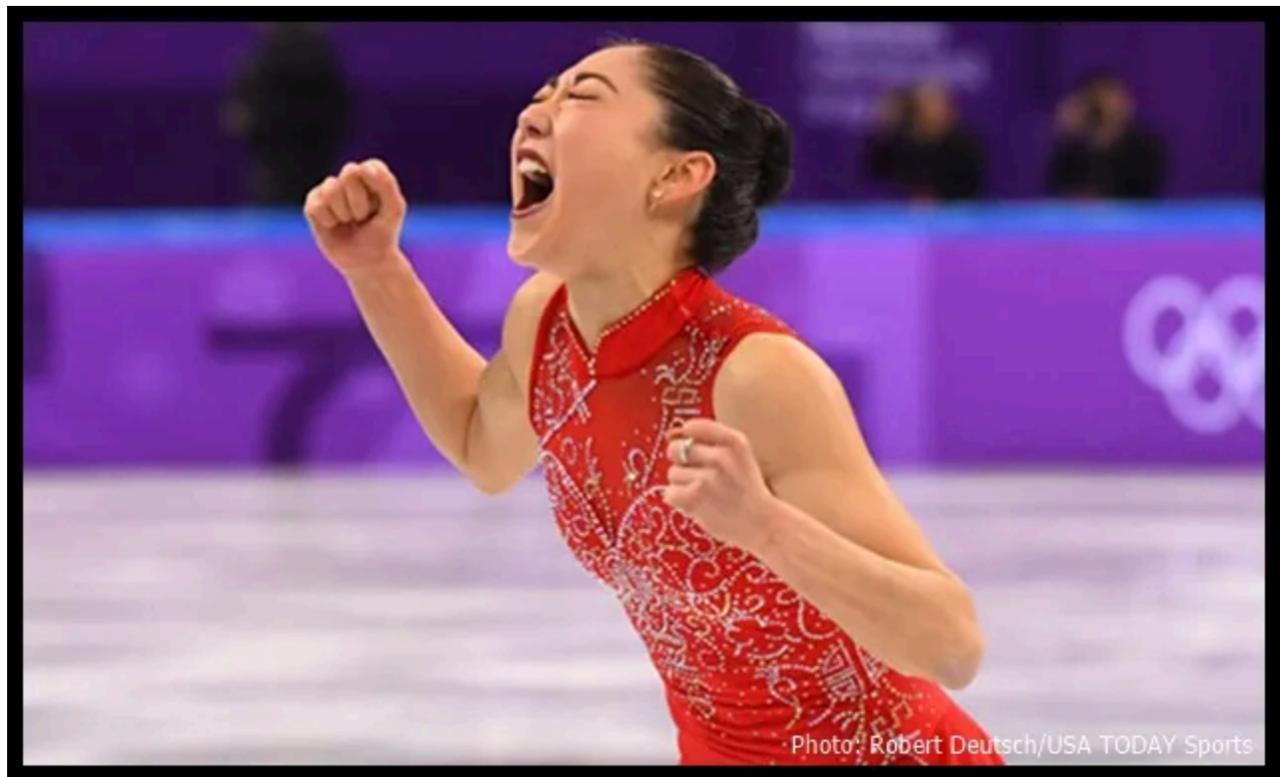
Every now and then, this post from Twitter shows up and always makes me laugh. I have no idea if this really happened. But based on my own experiences, it's close to reality for too many of us.



[If you want to read more about this topic, keep reading! Below, I'm sharing an essay I wrote in 2018. A New York Times reporter referred to a figure skater as an immigrant. Mirai Nagasu was born in the United States. It's disappointing to think that in the past seven years, so little has changed.]

© 2025 JAE-HA KIM | All Rights Reserved

Mirai Nagasu: Did You Know You're an Immigrant?



It all started with this tweet from New York Times editor and writer, Bari Weiss. Like many Americans, she was thrilled with Mirai Nagasu's performance two days ago at the Olympics. Nagasu became the first American woman to land a triple axel at the Winter Olympics. Weiss celebrated that achievement with this tweet:



Immigrants: They get the job done.



NBC Olympics @NBCOlympics
"HOLY COW!" You just witnessed a historic triple axel from Mirai Nagasu. #WinterOlympics bit.ly/2EVYKYW

3:20 PM - 12 Feb 2018

Clearly it was meant to be congratulatory, but it was an odd tweet. To many, including myself, it implied that the figure skater was an immigrant. When pointed out that her tweet was factually incorrect, because Nagasu was born right here in the United States, Weiss doubled down and said:



james hirsh @jameshirsh · Feb 12

Replying to @bariweiss

She was born in California

4 12 306



Bari Weiss ✓

@bariweiss

Follow

Replying to @jameshirsh

Yes, yes, I realize. Felt the poetic license was kosher.

3:39 PM - 12 Feb 2018

4 Likes



105 4

She's referring to a line from "Hamilton" (which I have not seen): "Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)." Those who have attended the production have told me that it's a

powerful message of inclusiveness. But referring to Nagasu and her family as *they* doesn't feel as much so. And, once again, you cannot be an immigrant if you were born in the U.S.

Chrissy Teigen added her perspective:

It's called perpetual otherism or perpetual foreigner syndrome. No one is ashamed of the word immigrant but it's tiring being treated as foreigners all the time. You made a mistake. It's okay. But people are really giving you calm, great insight. Just learn and breathe. All good. <https://t.co/DmvdvBpG9Z>— christine teigen (@chrissyteigen) February 13, 2018

But wait, there's more. Another journalist added her two cents, which stirred the pot up some more:

here's a fascinating study in contrasts: look at the ratio and response on this tweet as compared with the outrage directed at @bariweiss yesterday.
pic.twitter.com/L4rCNaIfcI

— Kat Rosenfield (@katrosenfield) February 13, 2018

She didn't understand why more people weren't expressing anger at the Women's March tweet. Quite a few people explained why:

You seem to care a lot more about her feelings about being called trash in tweets than about the feelings of people who were hurt and offended by her comments.

— Kelly Wallace (@kellyawallace) February 13, 2018

Folks bickered and bantered. Some said to just shut your yaps and racism would go away:

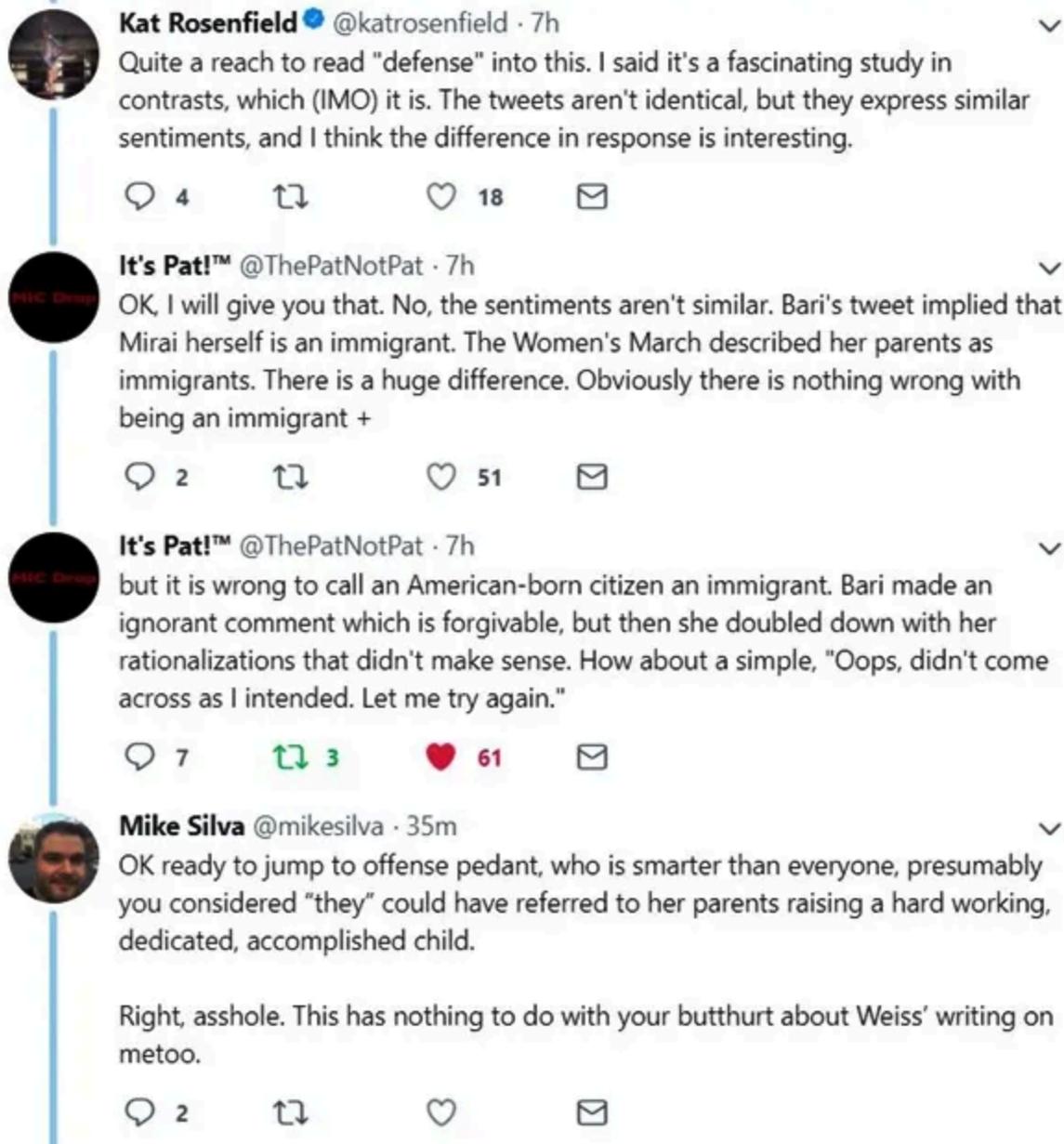
Correct. We have evolved beyond it with vaccines. It's not nearly as deadly as it was 100 years ago. You want this "otherism" problem to disappear? Stop talking about it.

— Daniele Napolitano, AIC-IMAGO (@nabuccodenazzar) February 14, 2018

Others wanted to know why Weiss' defenders were so tone deaf:

Why are all of Bari Weiss' defenders so dense and tone deaf? Do you really not see the difference?— It's Pat!™ (@ThePatNotPat) February 13, 2018

Mike wouldn't have it and called Pat an asshole:



But what it comes down to is this: Well-meaning people occasionally say things based on stereotypes. It doesn't mean they're horrible. It means we all have our own perceptions.

If you look like you might speak another language, there's a good chance you have been *othered*.

Let's put this out there: When basketball player Kyrie Irving won a gold medal, no one described him as an immigrant, even though he is one. (He was born in Australia.)

Both Weiss and Rosenfield are white women drawing from their own experiences. Maybe they *have* been asked, "Where are you *really* from?" But I doubt it. Unless you

are a part of a non-white minority, you really don't know what it's like to be perceived as a foreigner in your own country.

Why not listen when Asian Americans and other POC who share our experiences and ask that you reconsider your stance?

This Substack is reader-supported. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

A long time ago, a friend's mother died and I said, "I'm so sorry. She's in a better place." Filled with grief and most surely tired of hearing well-intentioned but idiotic tripe like that, she began crying and told me, "She's not in a better place, Jae. She's dead."

She was, of course, right. Both my parents were alive at the time. I had no idea what it was like to lose a parent. I apologized and promised her that I wouldn't say something like that to anyone else, and reiterated that I was sorry for her loss and that I was there to support her.

The problem I have with this Twitter blowup isn't the erroneous use of the word *immigrant*, as much as the fact that so many people pushed back when Asian Americans spoke up and said, "Hey, we were born in the United States. We're not immigrants."

They were repeatedly shot down by tweets sharing this sentiment: "Why are you ashamed of being perceived as an immigrant?"

No one said they were ashamed. Nagasu literally isn't an immigrant.

Everyone says something that is probably best left unsaid. But words matter. And when you're an editor at one of the most well-known publications in the world, there is an expectation that what you are tweeting is true.

What Weiss tweeted was factually untrue. Instead of doubling and tripling down and pretending she hadn't made a *faux pas*, a simple, "My tweet came from a good place,

but I can see how it was taken in a manner I didn't intend," would've gone a long way to build bridges, rather than tearing them apart.

And for those of us who get this question *ad nauseam*, let me leave you with one method of replying to the question, "Where are you *really* from?"

(The above short video stars Stella Choe, who you may recognize from her portrayal of a Korean adoptee in *Ode to My Father*.)

© 2018 JAE-HA KIM | All Rights Reserved

RELATED READING:

The microaggressions that occurred in between these incidents run together... Being told I got into my university because I was Asian. Being told I got my job because I was Asian. Being called *Kung Fu Woman* every. single. day. at my first job after graduate school. Being accused of being *secretive* and *sneaky*, because I stood up to management. Being asked if I could speak English, when I was *literally* speaking English. Being asked to do friends' laundry. Being laughed at by friends

when I used the phrase *person of color*. Being told that race doesn't matter, by people who've never faced racism. Being told that calling a white person a *cracker* is racist, by people who don't understand the difference between institutional racism and prejudice. (And, by the way, I never called anyone a *cracker*.) Being asked if my then-toothless child ate dog meat. Being asked if our cat was missing because I ate it. (My cat died of old age, *motherfuckers*. Don't make jokes about him. R.I.P, old boy.) And having to state that no, this didn't happen every day. And, no, I'm not exaggerating. I understand the power of words all too well.

K-DRAMA INDEX

K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM • JUL 1



These are some of my reviews and essays about K-Dramas (and also Korean films and other Korean-centric projects). You may also read more about my take on Korean pop culture in outlets such as Rolling Stone, Mashable, Victoria & Al...

[Read full story](#) →



42 Likes · 6 Restacks

← Previous

Next →

Discussion about this post

Comments Restacks

Write a comment...



K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim Aug 1 Edited



Pinned

[Allendra said: "Koreans are not inclusive of foreigners, are extremely racist in ways Miss Kim has never experienced in the USA."]

You know absolutely nothing about my experiences in the United States, so stop pretending that you do.

This article isn't about your experiences as a white woman living in Korea. Obviously.

You sound hateful in your numerous comments. We get it. You hate Koreans. You hate Korea. You hate that Koreans don't speak excellent English better. Did it ever occur to you that they can't understand you when you try to speak Korean? Maybe you think you are fluent, but you're not? Oh, what's that you say? You don't like me making things up? And yet it didn't occur to you that the rest of us don't enjoy you projecting your fallacies on us either?

Getting back to your hate list, yes, you hate Korean Americans (both the people and the terminology). And most of all, you hate me and my so-called privilege. And yet here you are, unable to resist squatting in the comment section of my little newsletter.

Two things can be true: you can be disrespected in Korea, while someone else can be treated poorly in the U.S. Your attitude is that because you are treated one way, you don't want anyone else to be treated more equitably.

You've clearly never considered why Korean Americans call ourselves Korean Americans. Could it possibly be because, as is pointed out in this article, we are not considered Americans so we have to remind people that Americans can look this way? Read up on Vincent Chin and see what it's like to be mistaken for a foreigner in your own country.

I know you don't like it when people tell you to have a nice day. So I hope you have the day that you deserve. In the meantime, touch some grass, eat more fiber, and unclench.

♡ LIKE (8) 💬 REPLY

📤 SHARE



Permian Extinction Permian Extinction Jul 31



♡ Liked by K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim

Thank you for your thoughtful writing. It still astonishes me how many incredibly ignorant, really stupid, clueless and entitled people there are. The irony about this is that they don't realize what they are.

What can we do?

 LIKED (6)

 REPLY

 SHARE

1 reply by K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim

47 more comments...