

Sonia
HOLLIMON

Don't make me get ethnic, fool

Wanna relate to me? Be who you're supposed to be

I was cruising in the Escort with a girlfriend of mine when two guys in a low-rider (the Nebraska version, the tractor-tire type) pulled up at the stop light next to us. Rap music blaring, Starter gear on backwards, they gave us a nod. Not a "Hello, young ladies, how are you?" nod, but one of those Beavis-and-Butthead type once-overs. As if! And if



being checked out by two teen-age wannabes wasn't bad enough, they were blaring the treble in their car instead of the bass. It wasn't necessary to peer too closely through the tinted windows to know they were white boys.

If one more hat-to-the-back boy from Waverly tries to talk to me, I'm going to call the people at the cable company and plead with them to take BET off the air. What I find irritating about white people who try to "act black" is not just that they are not very good at it, but that when they do it, it's "hip" and "down" — their sagging jeans a testament to latest trends. But let some poor brother wear the same outfit and talk the same way, and mall security is on the prowl.

I told one such wannabe not to take "In Living Color" so seriously. And do you know what this fool said? He said he was just "trying to

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relate." Relate to whom? To what? Is my name Wanda? I am an educated African-American woman who knows where all the forks and knives go in the place settings and I happen to LIKE "Gone With the Wind."

Frankly, I was insulted that this guy felt the only level on which he could relate to a black girl was with some wack-mack line he'd heard on "The Wayans Brothers." I am not some ghetto hoochie. Don't work my last nerve. To top it all off, he was trying to look like he was packing. For those of you who aren't down with the black vernacular, let me drop some science for you (translation: Miss Hollimon will now define terms used in this article). "Packing" refers to carrying an illegal firearm. "Ghetto hoochie" is similar to a slut, but not as naive.

Instead of the V-chip, I propose the "E" (as in ethnic) chip — just a tiny mechanism slipped into the televisions of those morons idiotic enough to think that it's possible to relate to people of other cultures by mimicking how they are portrayed in

the media. It isn't just white males who do this — unh uh. White girls have their own special formula for "acting black." These are the girls with their hair all cut to hell, spit curls gelled to death, deep forest lipstick outlined in black, with a couple of gold chains and acrylic nails that would scare Flo Jo. When they say things like "Whuz up, homegirl?" it sounds like they've been practicing in their mirror at home.

I've been told by many white people over the years that sometimes they feel like they don't have a real ethnic identity, or that they're sorry about that whole slavery thing. Unless you've got some shackles in your book bag you haven't told me about, get over it. Forget ethnic identity, have you tried finding your own personal identity yet? Ethnicity is only a small part of what makes a person who they are. I am not first and foremost a black girl — for one thing, my name is Sonia.

Some white folks do come from areas where they were exposed to a

lot of ethnic minorities, and they just dress that way or naturally speak slang. The difference between these people and the wannabes is — well, remember Vanilla Ice? OK, it's the opposite of him.

There are black people afflicted with the wannabe disease as well — you didn't think I was going to let them slide, did you? For example, let's remember where we are as far as regional geography. This is Nebraska, not New York, not Oaktown, not Cabrini Green. Trying to act hard here is like trying to put thugs on "Sesame Street." It's a joke.

Watching "Martin" and "Living Single" is not a substitute for actually knowing a black person, nor is "In Living Color" some type of introductory course. So please, use a little common sense. I don't assume that all white people are like those puffed-up Barbie dolls on "Friends," so please don't assume that I smoke chronic and cornrow my friends' hair while listening to Tupac. In fact, I have reservations for English tea on Sunday, and I like to country swing. Plus, I have a thing for men who let their educations and manners fight for them. Just because I enjoy these things doesn't mean I'm trying to "be white." Speaking in an educated tone of voice and having an extensive vocabulary makes me just that: educated. And I don't "wannabe" anyone but myself.

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Anthony
NGUYEN

At a cultural crossroads

Vietnamese past, American future present problems

Ethnically I'm Vietnamese. Nationality-wise I'm American. But culturally I'm a hodgepodge of traditional Asian and Western values. And at times this can be a real headache.



Not a headache in the sense that I have to pick and choose which values to ascribe to, but a headache in that sometimes I feel as if I don't belong. Belonging, or rather, the need to feel a sense of belonging is a trait of being human — and I must confess I sometimes don't feel that I truly belong in either circle.

Call it a character flaw, but I've never been truly comfortable with myself in the sense of my cultural identity.

Whether this arose from interactions with others or just from the way I see the world, I haven't come to a comfortable existence of being.

And at this point in life, I've reached a crossroads of sorts — a crossroads that doesn't want to let me blend my two cultural paths together. Well, truthfully, I can merge the two, but external and internal forces are not giving me this opportunity. It seems just when I think I've gotten to the point where I'm "American," something flies in my face that suggests I'm not.

Now if you've read this far, you're probably wondering, "What's he talking about?"

Well, my question is, "Who am I?" I look into a mirror and see a face staring back — not a "stand-outish" face, but certainly one I can live

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with. But when I go to school and out into the world, generally I just see white or black faces. You might see me as a guy walking down the street, but when you pay attention to me, am I "the Oriental" or just a guy? OK, so you might not really care. But I'm aware of it. And unfortunately, I can't pinpoint completely why.

You might think there is no difference between an Asian growing up in American and, let's say, a black person growing up in a white neighborhood, or a white person growing up in a black neighborhood. But there is a difference.

In those situations there is still a common "American-ess" those individuals might possess. You might be black, but far enough removed from your roots to be American. You might be white, but far enough removed to be American. But in the case of Asians, there isn't an "American-ess."

I always equate the Asian identity with passiveness and the American identity with aggressiveness. Western thought and Eastern thought are different. And this difference makes me feel less American.

It's odd. I don't feel racially isolated here in the Midwest, but culturally I do. I don't mean to imply that I'd prefer to go "Asiatic" and screw my American identity, but I want to be comfortable with both —

and not have to look at it as an all-or-nothing proposition.

Yes, this question of identity is one we all have, depending on particular aspects of our lives. But it's one I haven't been able to answer affirmatively in the cultural sense.

I wasn't born in the United States, but I've lived here for almost my entire 22 years. But being first-born in the family, I have been held up as the one in my family slated for certain achievements and expectations.

The hierarchical order of importance in Asian lives, or at least in my family and in the families of many Asians I know, has always been school, family, then individual. Individuality comes last.

Individuality is a Western and, arguably, purely American trait. But individuality does not work in my circles. It isn't proper to stand out in areas other than achievement. To be an "individual" is not to be desired. I wasn't taught this, but gradually introduced to it through anecdotes, traditional sayings, and the like; To embarrass the family was the ultimate social shame — to be avoided at all costs.

The avoidance of individuality and shame has been something I've dealt with my entire life — and I'm not entirely sure why. Perhaps to please my parents, or perhaps it's

some honor-bound sense of duty I have.

I grew up in suburbia America. In primary school, I was usually the only Asian kid in my classes — my younger brothers and sisters likewise. And I really never thought about my ethnicity, because all of my friends happened to be white. But in the sixth grade, I was asked innocently by another classmate if I "knew" karate. Then in high school during discussions of China or Japan, people would ask me for my thoughts — as though I could act as the collective voice of Asian cultures. I know of the similarities, but I don't profess to be the "voice."

Maybe it's something you take for granted, but wherever I look, I see Americans as being white or black. Maybe it's because there aren't any visible Asians. Sports? None, really. Entertainment? None, really (unless they know martial arts). Science? None, really — maybe in a few generations, but not now.

I hope one day to persuade myself to "belong."

Until then, I will have to find my place one step at a time. I had one experience this semester that I'll certainly remember for a long time.

In a small lab class of mine, a student remarked that the prospect of American students getting into graduate school in a science discipline was high. She spoke of all four of us in the lab as Americans. Maybe she didn't think about it, and I know she didn't realize it, but it was one of the nicest things I'd ever heard about myself. Thanks, Carolyn.

Nguyen is a senior biochemistry and philosophy major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.