

Who Am I?

in nine (9) episodes

Ruby Hoffman
Prof. Miyake
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Episode 1: Prologue

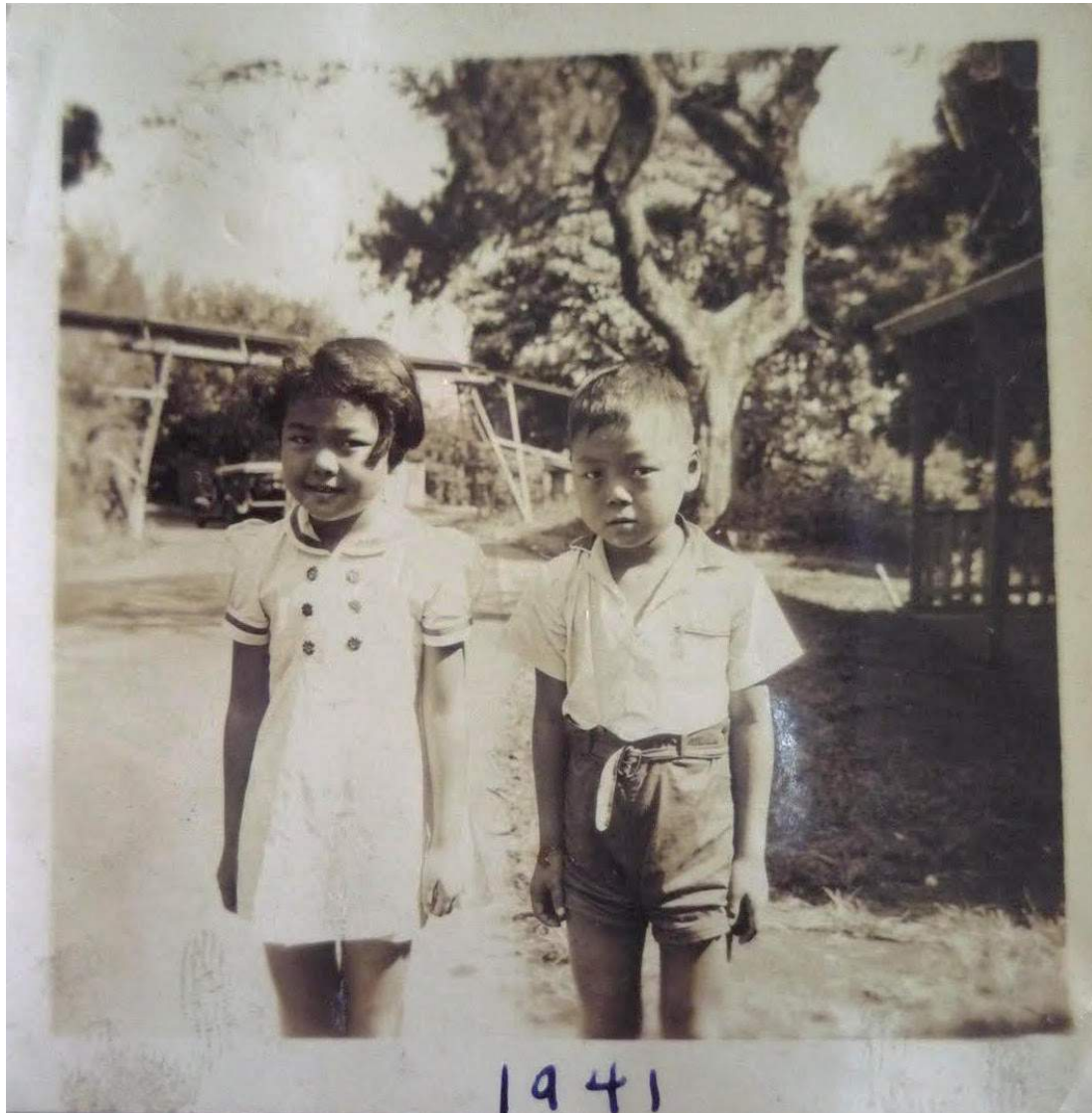


I feel that I know my family's history on my mom's side pretty well, who people are, who their siblings are, how they are related to me. I get a sense of pride and special-ness from being partly Japanese, even if nobody can tell from how I look. I grew up using the words shoyu and hashi, eating musubi for lunch and not knowing how to explain to all the other Nebraska public elementary school kids that yeah its really just rice there's nothing else in there it sticks together by itself. When I was little, I felt more "cultural" than other kids, and I felt like the other kids thought I was too.

But having grown up a bit and learned a little more about privilege, I have trouble feeling this way anymore. It feels

disingenuous for me to even claim non-white identity because I have none of the struggles that come from being a person of color. And, moving away from my family and developing a more independent identity that is just based on me instead of on my family, it seems that people don't see me the same way they used to. But that's kind of why I wanted to do this project in the first place—to get more in touch with my family's history and to maybe understand my identity more or look at it in a new way. Or maybe just put my thoughts down in the hope that it might help. We'll see.

Episode 2: Small Sachi



My grandma said that she doesn't really think of herself a *Japanese American* or part of Japanese American culture, but more as part of Hawai'ian culture. The specialness of Hawai'i still sticks with my grandma after decades on the mainland, of poi, of the foods, the water, the beaches, the family. I don't know how she managed to leave all that, but at the same time, it will always be part of her, no matter where she is. And she has given her children the same feeling for the islands, even if they don't live there. Even my generation of the family has a connection to Hawai'i, loving passion fruit and poi and flowers and butter mochi and, of course, the family that still lives there. But still I feel conflicted about this, because of colonial guilt or something, and feeling kind of fake because I've spent no more than 2 months of my 233-month life there. Am I a tourist?

Episode 3: Sachi and Doug, Newlyweds



Grandma's relationship with Grandpa was more about being able to talk, communicate as she could with no other man. To me, this seems pretty incomprehensible, probably in part because I have never felt this way about a man and cannot imagine feeling this way at all. But I admire that she was able to overlook race, and that they have a supportive, mutually beneficial, functional relationship that transcends racial "boundaries," if that even means anything. I think that for my grandma growing up in Hawaii, her experience of race was very different than it would have been on the mainland U.S. My grandma's parents were

much less welcoming to my white grandpa than his parents were to my Japanese grandma. The more significant racial part of my grandma's marriage to my grandpa though is that when they got married, she moved from Hawai'i where she had lived her entire life to North Carolina for Grandpa's graduate school education. She was most apprehensive not about moving to the mainland but moving to the South in the 50s as a person of color. As it turned out, things were not as bad as she expected, now seeming actually a bit funny. She never knew which drinking fountain to use, as neither a white person nor a black person. She, a college graduate, was given a literacy test in order to vote, and because it never occurred to her that they thought she couldn't read, she just read it silently to herself. The voting people ended up just asking my grandpa if she could read, and he confirmed that she could. When searching for housing, they were unsure if they would be allowed in "white only" housing, but the landlord said, "It's like you're French or something." While of course in the serious and often harmful context of Jim Crow, the racism my grandmother was worried about did not end up directed at her.

Episode 4: Small Amy



When my mom was little growing up in Vermillion, South Dakota, she never really felt bad about her Asian-ness. She said that she can remember other kids making fun of her doing the small eye thing, but that it never caused lasting trauma or anything. She mostly remembers feeling special for being different, and she remembers her parents both always talking about how the mixed kids are the most attractive, so she always felt pretty good about herself. And look at her! She was so cute.

Episode 5: The Hoff-Spieg Household



What I find a bit funny about my family is that the gender roles of my parents are almost embarrassingly traditional. My dad does the yard work, power tool work, grills, and is the primary breadwinner. He is in engineering, a very male-dominated field, and his hobbies involve reading old books and watching football. My mom does almost all the cooking, all of the housework, and was more involved in raising me and my sister. She is a research professor mostly in sociology, a “soft” human science and works mostly with women. She likes doing needlework, sewing, and visual arts like painting. In some ways, this feels a little bit gross: white man marries woman of Asian descent to bear and raise his children, clean his house, and cook his meals. But in reality, my family is not like that at all (thank goodness lol), and my mom has a job, my dad intentionally tried very hard to be around while we were little, and the split of house/yard work seems much more coincidental and based on what my mom and dad are respectively good at and enjoy than hegemonic gender stereotypes. Mom’s relationship with Dad seems much more about their very similar attitudes about money than about race. When I asked her about if she ever thought about how she married a white man, it seemed that she had genuinely never considered that, nor the implications. She mentioned she had dated a Korean guy in college, but that race never really factored into how or who she dated. She never felt an

obligation or responsibility to find a man with a similar racial background, and never felt that she wanted to anyway. To me, this seems kind of bizarre, and in a lot of aspects of my life, especially my love life, I feel pretty conscious of race at this time in my life. But growing up, I was honestly not aware of the race in my family, and I'm not convinced that anyone was, including my parents. This makes me feel a little weird though, because I did have the privilege of not being aware of race, and so to struggle with it now seems much more selfish than anything—but to deny the confusion that I have about it is probably not the most conducive to having a positive long-term relationship with myself.

Episode 6, part 1: Teena and Mergen take on The World



My best friend is named Maya and she is Hapa. I met her when we were 11 in middle school, and now she goes to Mudd. Her experience as a Japanese American seems much more real, I feel like, than mine. My family members weren't incarcerated because they were in Hawaii. Her grandparents were incarcerated because they were on the mainland. Her mom is 100% and mine is 50%. Despite my perception of this, Maya sees me as part Japanese in a way that I never expect because I look super white. Everyone who doesn't know about my background won't see anything Asian in me without prompting. Anyway, we both grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, where finding each other and having in common a lot of strange-for-Nebraska foods was super exciting and meaningful. We saw ourselves in each other in a way we never saw in other people. One of our first interactions was at lunchtime in sixth grade. I asked Maya what she had brought for lunch and she said, "It's Japanese breadcrumbs," and I said, "Oh, panko? We have that at home sometimes." I didn't even explicitly know that panko was Japanese,

and I never would have been able to describe it as “Japanese breadcrumbs.” I think this is a good example how Maya’s family is much more consciously “Japanese” than mine. She calls her grandparents Baba and Jiji, and her cat is named Mikko. Her mom is really involved in the Heart Mountain Foundation and Maya and her sister were much more explicitly educated about incarceration and had more explicit pride in their Japanese American-ness as small kids. This makes sense because incarceration was such a present part of their family and wasn’t in mine. Like my grandma was never singled out and punished for her race the way that Maya’s grandma, so there wasn’t the same need for education and identity in my family. And there has never really been a danger of me or my sister being singled out for our race because we are So! white-passing. But ever since Maya and I connected over panko for lunch and both playing cello, we have been a special kind of connected. We didn’t need to explain ourselves with each other. It was sort of like finding a new family member, or maybe a long lost one.

Episode 6, part 2: Teena and Mergen take on Lesbianism



When I was in 8th grade I realized I was gay. Little did I know, Maya also was gay! And then when I came out in 9th grade, Maya was like, well Ruby just came out so now I can't come out. But then she did the next year, and to this day I think it is hilarious that we both turned out to be lesbians so much later than our friendship's beginning. In a lot of ways, our common experiences as homos brought us closer. But for me, my gay identity has long overshadowed my Japanese American identity. It is much more central to how I navigate the world, and, maybe more importantly, how the world sees me. For Maya, being gay is a big

part of her identity, but not really bigger than her Japanese American part. Of course, to compare like this simplifies the issues too much, and being a Japanese American lesbian is different from being a white lesbian and being a white-passing Japanese American lesbian is different from both of those. And Maya's dad is half Mexican, so she's got a really * *Dⁱv^er^se* * identity and mine is, like, not. And she's a STEM major! Sometimes I wonder why she ever became my friend, as though my only value comes from things other than my personality. But her continuing, wholesome friendship with me is validating somehow. Not just in a "Wow I have a friend!" way but also in a "My identity is real! and I am not alone!" way. Maya's role has probably totally changed the course of my life, in terms of how I relate to the world and think of myself, and her patience with me throughout the darkness of middle school (yikes) into our coming of age through high school and even as we go to college has been irreplaceable. I don't know who I would be without her—and I doubt I would undertake an introspective project about my identity like this.

Episode 7: The Lady in the Airport



Over Thanksgiving break, during my 6+ hours in the Phoenix airport with my sister, we started talking to a young (hetero) family on our very delayed flight into Ontario. The mom asked after our schools, majors, blah blah blah. And she had a SUPER adorable baby, so it was kind of fun to talk to her because the baby was grabbing my sleeve. I started talking about my foreign languages major (German and Japanese) and she asked me why I picked those languages. German because I took it in high school and Japanese because our grandma is Japanese. I said, as I usually do when coming out as part Asian, “I know I look super white, but…” and then she looked at me. And she looked at my sister. And she looked at me. And she said, “You know I can see it more in you [me] than I can in you [my sister].” I looked at Hanna (my sister) and we kind of made “huh” faces at each other, like can you believe she actually really just said that to us did that really actually just happen faces. And we did not know what to say so we said “Huh. That’s interesting! I wonder why,” and then she went to get dinner with her husband and her cute baby so that was the end of that. But it’s kind of stuck with me… like do I really look more Asian than my sister? Should I be a little happy? Should I be weirded out that a white lady actually said that to me?

Episode 8: What a Bunch of Nerds



My grandma, grandpa, mom, and dad have Ph. Ds, which I say not as a flex but more in that I come from a well-educated family, from grandparents and great-grandparents who valued education highly. Academia is so much more familiar to me than corporate America. When I was little, I thought everybody worked at the University and everybody's parents had offices there and grant proposals to write and tests to grade and advisees to advise. Because of this very academic family perspective, I think both my grandma's identity and my mom's identity are much more conceptual and academic than emotional, in some way. This doesn't really make a ton of sense, like of course it's emotional, very personal, and not very "academic" at all, in the traditional sense of the word. But in the course of this semester, and of my life, I have come to realize that, like the example of Asian-American studies, academia needs to make space for something personal, narrative, and emotional. It isn't about putting your life in the context of psychology or analyzing . It's about telling your story and knowing that it is valid. The prestige of academia without the hegemony.

For my grandma, academia played a very important role in the form of a college education, especially in Hawai'i with other Asian-American students where issues of being "between cultures" came up for many of the students. She said that going to college gave her a language for these issues. For her, college was utterly transformative.

For my mom, college was not quite so life changing. The impression I have of my mom's college experience is that it was an academic wake-up call and she made

important lifelong friendships, but in terms of her identity, college didn't really change how she saw herself or conceptualized her race/gender. But her involvement now in academia, as a research professor working mostly with sociologists, she has come to recognize that her experiences as a person are in no small part results of her WOC status. She remembers talking to a Hapa guy, one of my dad's colleagues and friends about not knowing which box to check on census forms when there was never an "other" category or "pick all that apply."

For me, college may or may not be transformative. I would like it to be, I think, because I feel somewhat unsure of myself at this time, and I also think that I am making the most of it. I hope that starting to learn Japanese will help to connect me or make me feel more a part of my Japanese heritage. I hope that study abroad will Broaden My Horizons and give me Unforgettable Experiences. But at the same time, college was so definitely in my future for my whole life that I think *not* going to college would have been more transformative. So far, college has been cool, but not mind-boggling and eye-opening to the extent it was for my grandma, or even the academic slap-in-the-face it was for my mom. I feel that my self-discovery may not lie in academia. We shall see.

Episode 9: Epilogue?



What I still want: Who knows? I know that I couldn't have expected a cohesive and packaged answer for my very confused little brain. I think that this, like discovering my sexuality but more complex, is a pretty slow process, and at different points in my life I will feel many different ways about it. I think food and language are important steps on my journey though. Food has always been an anchor to my Japanese background and learning the language I think will change my relationship to that part of myself, but because my family doesn't really know Japanese, I don't think it will prove to be a very

fulfilling or epiphanic. That being said, I still think it's a worthwhile venture—even if all I get out of it is new language skills, that's pretty dope. It's probably unreasonable to think my identity will get sorted out in any concise way. And expecting any minute thing to make a big difference in helping me Discover Myself is foolish. Probably Self-Discovery™ is not even real, and identity is way more constructed and just believed rather than somehow innate. But maybe to realize what I want to construct about myself I still need to go on a Self-Discovery Adventure™ and bicycle North America with my best friend and our adventurous cat. Or something. All of this seems very dramatic and coming-of-age. Maybe I should keep a journal, tracking my attitudes about myself and the world so in 30 years, I can see how far I've really come. Maybe I'll never know who I actually am. But there's no rush, and I can be okay with uncertainty. I can trust the process, because the process makes no promises.

