

## Where do you really come from? That's a toxic question.

By Michele L. Norris, Columnist

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*Where do you really come from?*

When Susan Hussey, an aide to the British royal family, repeatedly asked that question of a Black woman at a recent Buckingham Palace event, it kicked up a racial controversy that left one woman “traumatized” and Hussey [out of her long-held, esteemed role](#).

If that persistent line of questioning was considered gross misconduct here in America, then pink slips would be flying all over the place. Instead, this kind of regrettable exchange is so common on these shores that it does not register as controversial, even though it is a constant irritant for legions of [people](#).

How do I know about this constant offense? Because for 12 years I have been collecting short stories about race and identity through an initiative I founded called [the Race Card Project](#). The short stories submitted by people all over the United States and nearly 100 other countries are microscopic in length: just six words. And over all those years, the most common submission is some form of the very question that turned the onetime lady in waiting into the lady who handed in her resignation. That question is both innocuous and offensive. Usually, it's a clumsy attempt at hospitality. But it can be triggering for the person on the receiving end — it pokes at something raw and personal. Being an outsider. Someone who does not quite belong in a space where whiteness or the norms of White culture are dominant. For many people, *where do you really come from?* winds up sounding like *why are you here?*

To be real, the answer is often far too deep to explain in a breezy conversation. When someone says they are from India, Indonesia, New Orleans or Brazil that is often just one part of a much more complex framework of culture, class, education, intermarriage, migration, dialect, assimilation, adoption or individual anthems.

I have been asked these cascading questions about origin.

Where are you from?

*Minnesota.*

No, where is your family from?

*My mother is a fourth-generation Black woman from Minnesota, and my father was a Black man born and raised in Alabama.*

I mean ... where are your people originally from?

This is the deep sigh, eye roll, pursed-lips moment when the best course of action is to shut down the conversation or decide whether it's worth spending emotional capital on someone who doesn't even understand why they drifted into such prickly and offensive space.

Pressing on with this line of inquiry is irritating for those of us whose ancestors were snatched from their homelands and severed from their families and culture. But it also stings for people who came to the United States from distant lands for all kinds of reasons: to study, to find work, to seek a better life, to chase the American Dream as so many immigrants before them have. Let us not forget the core irony inside this question.

Unless you are a Native American, your ancestors came to the United States from somewhere else. One fellow I met through the Race Card Project said his antidote to dealing with this never-ending inquiry was to turn the tables. As a Brown man with South Asian roots raised as a second-generation American, he now regularly asks White people where they come from. The answers, unsurprisingly, are localized to the United States: Chicago; Houston; Indianapolis; Rochester, N.Y.; Portland, Ore., and the like.

And then he follows up: “No, where are you *really* from?”

Most of the time they offer up another American city or state where their grandparents perhaps lived. Then he asks: “No ... where are you *actually/originally/ancestrally* from before you could fully consider yourself American?”

This is where things get interesting. That last part speaks to the heart of the “where are you really from” inquisition.

Are you really, fully, truly, authentically, observably, undeniably, acceptably American — based not on any official standard or immigration status — but on the norms and comforts of an individual who has been shaped by the cultural defaults in a nation where whiteness was cemented as the primary portal and defining imprimatur of what it means to be fully, truly, authentically, observably, undeniably, acceptably American?

Hearing people vent about this question over so many years has been instructive for me. I have on occasion also asked that question myself, sometimes as a journalist and sometimes out of basic curiosity. I look back and hope the subject of my inquiry understood my benevolence as a Black woman who is a storyteller and story collector.

I can’t be sure, but I now know this: When you ask someone where they are from, be prepared to accept whatever answer they serve up — even if it does not satisfy your deep-seated inklings about lineage, geography, pedigree or ancestry. Swallow the instinct to press on by repeating the question with some qualifier placed before the word “from” because when you inject words like “actually” and “really” and “truly” into that sentence, the subject of the inquiry might make educated assumptions about where you are coming from in the first place.

<https://theracecardproject.com/>