



I Belong Here

By [Charles Vogl](#)



I grew up in Southern California, but most of my extended family lived in Honolulu, Hawaii.

As a child, I would accompany my parents on family visits. In my 20s, I started visiting on my own.

Among other family members, I would visit my cousins Kelly and Kevin, who would introduce me to their friends, fellow artists, and church communities.

For those who don't know, my heritage is half Asian and half European. I have what is commonly called a classic Hapa look of people with my ethnic mix. Wherever I go, people ask, "Where are you from?" I tell them: California.

However true, this is not usually an acceptable answer.

From Lusaka, Zambia, to New York City, people want to hear where my 19th-century ancestors lived. When I explain, they often tell me how "interesting" my

mix is. I'm not even sure what that means, except, "You sure aren't like other people I know."

As I was born in the 1970s, many people I met assumed I was the product of military sexual promiscuity who had made it to United States. In college, one of my roommates told me that he had always thought that people of mixed race like me happened only as an "accident maybe."

Hawaii is a place that's experienced well over 100 years of immigration, profound eastern and western ethnic diversity, and countless generations of intermarriage. It is the only place I've ever been where people don't ask where I'm from.

When Kelly, Kevin, and my Oahu friends Hugh and Tim took me hiking or surfing, to church or to beach picnics, to backyard barbecues or to hula performances, I didn't have to explain myself. They knew what it is to be part of and within an ethnically diverse culture so enmeshed that it has created something wholly new and unrecognizable to the rest of the world.

Now you understand why I felt like I "belonged" when I was in Hawaii. There were the invitations, smiles, and listening. Most importantly, I didn't have to explain myself. I was accepted for who I was, no matter whether I was "interesting" or not.

Are you creating a place where people don't have to explain themselves? Are they accepted for who they are even when they just don't look the same? If you can do this, then you have created a special type of belonging indeed.

I wonder, when people visit your culture, who has to explain themselves and who doesn't?

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