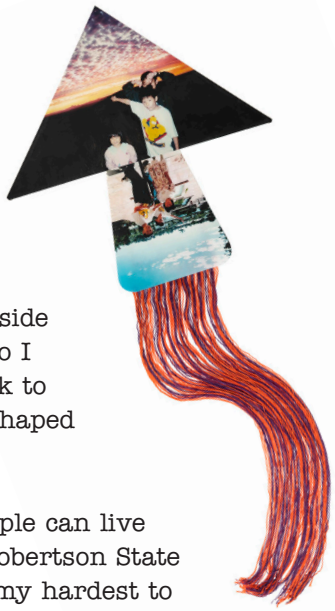
Dear Reader,



My name is Matt Hsu. I am a Taiwanese-Australian composer and anti-racism activist. My parents were both born in Taiwan and they came to Australia in ‘85. I was born in ‘86. I grew up wholly as an Australian kid, but at home, I spoke Mandarin with my parents. It was like, at home, I was Taiwanese and then I’d leave the house and it’s “Oh, we’re in Australia.” I experienced feelings of conflict between those two worlds all the time, alongside some sharp experiences of racism as a toddler. It’s shaped my identity of who I am and my personal hang-ups and the things I think about and the way I talk to shopkeepers or interact in very white spaces. A lot of my identity has been shaped by looking Asian in a white-dominant culture.

I grew up in Sunnybank. Essentially, I grew up in an Asian bubble where people can live their lives without needing to speak English, and so when I went to school, Robertson State School, as a seven, eight year old kid I had to catch up with English and try my hardest to fit in with the other kids at school, the mostly white kids. I started noticing the discrepancy that Asian adults were just kind of living their Asian lives, while the larger society I was in spoke a different language. And at the time, I was like, “Why are you speaking your Asian language when we’re in Australia?”, which is exactly the kind of rhetoric that racist people use, like “speak English!” Which leads to that “fit in or F off” flavour of racism. Only later on in my life, I was like, oh, I internalised all of that. I adopted those racist beliefs, against myself.

From six years old onwards, I started being really, really aware of instances of racism towards myself or towards my family. Like, when I’d go out to the shops or an admin person at a doctor’s place would be really testy with Mum and be like, “No, you sign here!” like, “Can’t you understand?” sort of thing. So I’d built up this kind of complex like, oh, I’ve got to translate for Mum otherwise the white people get mad. Or I have to have a flawless Australian accent to camouflage or mitigate the fact that I’m different, aka Asian.

Sunnybank back then was in that transition point - it was the early 90s. It was transforming, and there was quite a bit of tension and a few moments walking home or around the block, of cars driving by and being like, “Go back to where you came from. You don’t belong here.” Stuff like that really stuck with me as a child. And because of that, it’s like, all right, I’m going to be as white as I possibly can. When I go to school, I’m going to only speak English. I’m going to play the games that the white kids play. I don’t want to bring any Asian food to school because people say it smells funny or whatever.

Then that carried on into high school. By this point, it was just my personality. It wasn’t me trying to fit in. I loved indie music, loved listening to metal, skateboarded, shaved my head and didn’t want to wear shoes in Sunnybank Plaza. I’d walk around barefoot just to be like, “I’m so not Asian that I’m bogan,” that sort of thing. So that completely shaped the person that I was. I genuinely did love listening to metal and punk and indie music and stuff, so that was kind of the first steps into my music life.

I had quite a multicultural group of friends in primary school, different minorities all banded together. In my group of friends was a Colombian guy, a Japanese student, a Korean guy, South Asian kids and a few white kids. It was a good, nice mix and it felt very nice and natural. When I hit high school, I noticed that the Asian kids kind of clumped together and would play handball and formed their own Asian studious-kid clique, and the me that wanted to escape instances of racism, avoided being part of that group at all costs. While I loved being in a group of mixed minorities in primary school, I rejected being in a monoculture of only Asian friends. I was like, nah, I’m not going to be one of those Asian kids. So the group that I fell in with was mostly white. Not until my

twenties did I realise, oh, that was so stupid. And that was most of my life up until this point of trying to suppress my Asian-ness.

I was speaking to a colleague, we're working on a theatre production about Asian-Australian identity, and he was talking about how first and second-generation immigrants, so like myself versus my parents, there is this sort of sense of superiority you feel where it's like, oh, my parents have an accent, but I don't, I can blend right in once I start speaking and people understand that I'm an Australian-Asian. And I do remember feeling that feeling of superiority as a kid, like, oh yeah, I'm part of Australia. I'm not like my parents sort of thing. Which is a shitty thing to think in hindsight. Again, that internalised racism.

And having those same feelings towards the the other Asian kids because they came a bit later and their English wasn't as good and they dressed funny, they brought little gadgets that we don't use here, those little pocket dictionary digital translator things. It's like I don't even need that. But I was never actively like, "I hate these kids." It was just like, "I look like you, but I'm different to you." This same dynamic has played out so many times in my childhood.

It was through music, actually, that made me realise I had this internalised racism. I started playing in a band, it was a gypsy crust punk band called the Mouldy Lovers around 25. And it became my entire life, playing in this band, touring, playing shows and busking, doing all this stuff. We weren't playing the really indie rock main canon of Australian music; we were kind of on the fringes of doing this - there was a world element to it so we were playing with other bands that had some sort of cultural roots outside of white Australia.

I remember playing festivals and going to the tent where people would learn Bhangra dance and stuff like that and realising, people are so proud of their culture, and they express it through art, music, dance. And I guess at that point I was thinking, wow, I really missed something in my childhood of being proud of this difference. Instead, I was ashamed of it and trying to suppress it and trying to fit in with the dominant culture. And I missed out on celebrating the difference of being both Taiwanese and Australian. So, music, other artists playing their music, expressing their culture, seeing that happen was the turning point.

There was one particular trip to Taiwan that was a big anchor point in that as well. In 2017, I think, my partner and I went to Taiwan, and this was the first time I'd been back to Taiwan since 10 years previous, so the first time properly as a full adult, and I just appreciated everything so much more.

Prior to that I had no strong desire to visit because I'd been so encumbered by this idea that, "I'm Australian. I don't have another home." But I do, I have this ancestral home that now I realise is really important to me. When I did go back, it was like, man, everyone's so nice, bubble tea everywhere, cute stuff, so cheap, the street food, the night markets, but also the independent arts culture that's bubbling away underneath. The LGBT activism – there was just so much going on culturally that I was like, wow, these are my people and they're so cool. Seeing how cheeky and fun people were, it's like, oh yeah, of course; Taiwanese people aren't just, we grew up in Sunnybank and we all become pharmacists, kind of stereotype.

It was a really big realisation for me when I was reading about the history of recent Asian migration in Australia. I think in the 80s and 90s there was a policy where you had to be a professional to immigrate, selective immigration. My family weren't particularly wealthy. Mum cleaned at hotels and Dad was a mechanic at a bus company. But a lot of the people in their generation that immigrated over were part of that professional immigration policy, doctors, lawyers, just highly educated professionals. So there was this idea that Asian people are rich and well-to-do, a very particular type of Asian immigrant that shaped the stereotypes of Asian people in Australia.

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I sat down with my mum recently and asked her, why did you immigrate? Why did you leave everything you knew? What happened was my dad's sister, my Aunty Florence, went on this program where they sent smart kids overseas to a country of their choosing. She came to Australia. I think she was 19, uni student age. She met her future husband, a white tradie Australian guy, my uncle Des, and they fell in love, got married. She decided to stay in Australia, and a few years later she was like "Hey," to her siblings, "you want to come and have a look at this country, Australia? It's pretty nice." And I think my parents both were like, "Yeah, seems all right. Why not?" which is crazy. It's like am I going to suddenly go, "Oh, let's go to Columbia? Why not!" It's a huge thing.

The reason why I asked was because in the 80s there was a lot of political turmoil in Taiwan. A lot of uni students were pushing against a rigid governmental system, and there was these almost riots or protests going on and I thought they were part of that movement. So I was getting ready to be really impressed, like, oh, cool, you were a renegade, you were awesome and they were just like, "I don't know, that had bypassed us," or, "We weren't really part of that." So, that's why they came. All my uncles and aunties on my dad's side are right now in Australia. All their kids have grown up and been super happy and successful Asian-Australian citizens.

I've got two siblings, an older brother and younger sister. My sister Steph came up to me a few months ago – she read or heard an interview that I did a little while ago where I was talking about identity and race sort of thing, and she was like, "Matt, I listened to that thing – or read that thing. I never had any of those little crises that you had about your identity. It's like, I'm just chilling." And I cracked up because I was like, oh, wow, I'm here torturing myself forever like, "Oh, am I Australian or Taiwanese?" And she's like, "I'm just Taiwanese-Australian."

It's interesting because both my siblings have veered towards having more Asian friends. Their core groups of friends are Asian people who exclusively speak English with each other, which I always found a bit funny, like, why not have non-Asian friends if you're just speaking English? But Steph explained it as having similar cultural touchpoints and parallel family dynamics they each grew up in. So maybe there's some personality difference there, maybe I'm more sensitive to certain things or something. I think there was a core difference in them not feeling discomfort with their Asian-ness, seeking out and being comfortable with Asian friends and therefore not having an identity crisis type thing.

I feel so good about my sense of belonging now. And not a one-dimensional, "I feel good being Taiwanese," or, "I feel good being Australian." It's a, "I feel good in acknowledging the complexity and nuances of just being a person." Every person, any person beneath the surface, will have nuances and complexities, might have a person with disability in their family, queer people in their family, lots and lots of layers of complexity and nuance that makes them who they are and how they understand the world. And I think I've grown really comfortable with the fact that everyone has that level of layers.

I really like the fact that I've been able to create a sense of family, not just my genetic family, but the community around me, the community of musicians and arts workers that I work with and I just feel very comfortable in my skin as a Taiwanese-Australian person working in music, working in the arts with the community around me.

Matt