Lundi 12 mai 2025, 16h-18h Salle du Conseil, UFR LSH, Bâtiment A

# « For Here or to Go? » : Rencontre avec l'écrivain Curtis Chin

**Extrait 1**

« I couldn't wait to see what life was like for my friend, but I started off on the wrong foot–or rather, shoe. When I stopped in his foyer and slipped off my shoes, he gave me the oddest look, which made me check my socks for holes. Thank God I'd remembered to wear my good pair. "You can leave those on," he said.

I was confused. Like most people in Asian households, as a sign of respect and cleanliness, I had been raised to take off my footwear before I entered someone's house. "Isn't it dirty?"

Scott said, "It's fine," so I put my shoes back on, still worrying they might have doggy doo.

As we headed down the hall, I observed another difference: Scott's house was quiet. There were no squabbling siblings or multiple TVs clashing or grandparents scolding in Cantonese. I could hear myself think. As my friend shut the door to his own room, his *own* room, I wondered how awesome it would be to have so much privacy and a door that locked. Scott and I finished studying in thirty minutes and moved on to a few games of Risk. After I decisively won another battle campaign, my stomach growled. Usually, my after-school routine included a smorgasbord of snacks at the restaurant: egg rolls, wonton soup, pork fried rice. By now, I was so hungry, I was dizzy, but I didn't want to come off as a demanding guest. Besides, this might have been part of Scott's strategy to win.

Thankfully, he was famished too. "Want something to eat?"

I played it cool. "If you want."

Scott's kitchen was super-clean. There were no bags of Chinese roots or animal parts left on the counter, no stacks of bills and invoices. Everything was tucked behind closed cupboards. His kitchen even smelled nice, a hint of potpourri.

As we snacked on a bag of chips, his parents walked in. I don't remember what they did for work, maybe something in the car industry like everyone else, but they were older and dressed for white-collar jobs. I tensed up, hoping to make a good impression. I wanted them to like me. Our exchange ended up being brief but pleasant. They asked if I enjoyed school; I complimented them on their home. Scott said he had other homework to do so we had to wrap up. He drove me back to the house with the crazy Chinese family.

The next day at school, Scott and I had lunch at our usual table–a long orange one to the right of the vending machines–and told our friends from the science club about our afternoon. Citing my back-to-back Risk victories, I engaged in a little smack talk: "Scott kept giving up Siam. I was getting two extra armies every turn."

A demoralized Scott tried to change the subject: "My parents said they liked meeting you. I don't know why."

I chuckled at his joke: "Yeah, especially after I beat their son at Risk."

"They said you were the first minority they'd ever had in their home."

I stopped chomping on my turkey sandwich. Scott's words, quoting his parents, made things feel awkward. Suddenly, I felt different, like an outsider. I looked around to see if anyone thought it was odd. None of our friends, all of whom were white, said anything. My mind began to churn. I got frustrated. If Scott's parents had said something clearly racist, I could have called them out on it. But it was these borderline comments that left me tongue-tied. I don't recall how I responded, but I'm sure it was along the lines of "Oh, well, tell them I said thanks."

This wasn't the first time I'd found myself confused about race, not knowing how to bring it up or discuss it. Was I overreacting? Was it really just harmless? I guess it was the fact that I heard these types of comments so often. Initially, I was able to ignore them or respond with a witty quip, but after all these years of living in Troy, as well as the death of Vincent, I found it hard to just let these things go. Every minor incident–which I would later learn were called "microaggressions"–felt like the ancient Chinese torture technique of death by a thousand cuts. » (pp. 127-129)

**Extrait 2**

« The diversity at camp was limited: two Black counsellors, an Irishman, and one other East Asian, James, a twenty-something English bloke who'd recently quit his job at the BBC to sightsee across America. When the fit Brit introduced himself on day one, I was excited. He was attractive with a sexy accent, and I thought, *Cool, another Asian who wants to travel*.

But James and I had little in common. We came from different worlds. While I was trapped in the dingy art cabin with the nerds and misfits, the hunky midfielder frolicked outside with his fellow jocks. The white guys from Texas and Kansas were amused by the fact that an Asian guy knew how to kick a ball. They liked him so much, they nicknamed him "Charlie." Every time the guys used that slur, it triggered my PTSD from elementary school. Those stereotypes were already fifty or sixty years old when they'd been used on me. If they were going to be racist, they should at least try to stay in this decade.

While I felt like a hypocrite since I never spoked up to defend myself, I wanted the slightly older James to be braver like me. I wanted him to stand up and fight for all the smaller kids who had ever been bullied on the playground. Instead, he laughed along, the same way I'd laughed at fag jokes in the dorm. After another catcall during lunch, I had had enough. I cornered James at the drinks station. "You know that's racist, right?"

He stopped pouring the cherry bug juice. "Excuse me?"

"They're making fun of you," I said. "It's from those Charlie Chan movies from the twenties and thirties, the one where the fat white dude puts on offensive makeup and plays the wise Asian detective. It's like calling you Bruce Lee or Long Duk Dong."

James surveyed the packed room of boys and men, all jamming their mouths with hot dogs and chips, before nodding to me with an ever proper "Thank you." As he walked over to his junior campers, he looked back and shook his head at me. "Why is everything about race with you Americans?"

My shoulders jerked back. What was his problem? I was trying to help a brother out. Did they not have racism in England? Or was he afraid of being relegated to the kids' table,

like me? Either way, I guess the guy didn't want a little thing like racism to ruin his American summer.

Over the next few weeks, James and I rarely spoke. I stayed in the art cabin messing with the pile of clay while he played the beautiful game with his friends. We had each made a bargain with ourselves and learned to live with the consequences. If I'm being honest, maybe a small part of me was jealous that James had been given this opportunity at friendship. Would I have taken the same deal if it had been offered to me? Could I have been happy playing Charlie?

As the summer wound down, I figured it would still be nice to stay in touch with James. When I saw him outside his cabin cleaning his cleats, I asked him for his address in London. It wasn't a sexual thing. It was just to be friends. He hesitated before telling me that it wasn't necessary, that the camp would be sending out a directory of all the staff. I was surprised but excited. The camp hadn't said anything about those plans. At least, I hadn't heard about them. A week or two later, I returned home. I looked forward to receiving his information so we could become pen pals, but no packet ever arrived in the mail. It turns out that James should've been called Dick. » (pp.196-197)

**Extrait 3**

« As time went on and I got to know the staff at Drake's better, they became my new chosen family. Connie, who was only a few years older than me, played mother hen, making sure the students on staff finished their homework and got to class on time. A few older diners acted like aunties and uncles, expecting us to remember their orders and serve them first. Like siblings, the coworkers had rivalries for the best shifts, the longest breaks, and the lion's share of the tips.

The lone holdout was the clerk from the art fair, Marsha. Since we were the only two minorities–I mean, people of color–on staff, I'd assume we would click, but she had no interest in forming a rainbow coalition. She barely acknowledged my existence. Her rejection only pushed me to try harder. To paraphrase Miss Diana Ross, I was going to make her love me.

As my dad showed me at Chung's, a connection could always be made. I just had to find it. Every time we shared a shift, I complimented Marsha on her skirts, her tennis shoes, the consistent angle of her sneer. I jumped up to help any customer so she could stay on her cigarette break. Nada. I wondered if she would ever warm up to me. Just like my dad's efforts to woo my grandma, nothing I did worked. Maybe some people just aren't meant to be friends. One day, sensing my growing frustration, Connie pulled me aside and explained that ever since Marsha had dropped out of school due to finances, she had been extra-grumpy. I wasn't sure that was the only reason she acted the way she did, but I was happy for the additional context. Money issues challenged me too. I didn't feel comfortable bringing up my tight finances with my old friends from high school or my new friends at Michigan, but with Marsha, I figured we could at least joke about thrift shops and instant ramen recipes. And when Connie provided me with more intel on Marsha, including the fact that she and her family hailed from Detroit, I got even more excited. This was my opening to make our connection. On our next shared shift, I raised my hand. "Fellow Detroiter in the house!"

Marsha lifted her eyes from her doodling. “You from Detroit?”

“I grew up in the Corridor. My family owns Chung’s.”

According to Connie, Marsha had gone to Cass Tech, the elite public school five blocks from the restaurant that accepted only the brightest kids from across the city. The school’s alumni included such luminaries as Lily Tomlin, Della Reese, Ellen Burstyn, John DeLorean, and one Diana Ernestine Earle Ross. Marsha lifted her chin. “So which high school you go to?”

“I didn’t go to high school in the city.”

“Why not? Where’d you live?”

“In Troy. But we were downtown all the time. It’s where my siblings and I grew up.”

Marsha flicked the toothpick in her mouth. “Freakin’ Troy.”

I sensed a little resistance. I brought up my stint at Burton–complete with complaints about the soggy mac and cheese and unsafe water fountains–but she wasn’t sold. Thanks to the rise of hip-hop artists like Public Enemy and Run-DMC and basketball stars like Michael Jordan, a growing number of middle-class kids from the suburbs, mostly white, were adopting “urban” (that is, Black) culture. To her, I was just another poseur trying to gain some street cred from an association with the inner city. She sneered while walking off. “You ain’t from Detroit.”

Marsha’s smackdown reminded me of the old question I grew up being asked by customers, friends, and even teachers: “No, where are you *really* from?”

Once again, questions about my homeland arose. I’d been born and raised in Detroit, same as my dad. My family worked at the restaurant all the time. I played on the streets of Chinatown more than the ones in the suburbs. I knew the shops that were safe and the ones to avoid. The city might not have been where I slept, but it was where I lived. Who was she to define my place of origin? » (pp. 220-222)