



PRASANTA VERMA

BEYOND
ETHNIC
LONELINESS

*The Pain of
Marginalization and the
Path to Belonging*



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Beyond Ethnic Loneliness* by Prasanta Verma.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

torrential downpour. We don't know when the rain will stop, when the clouds will shift, when the sun will break through. Perhaps it is a sky with brooding clouds, with ominous weather, thunder and lightning bolts; angry, moody, smoldering.

Loneliness is hunger, coming from a place of ancient and spiritual longing. Loneliness is a howl from a deep space inside of us, crying of division and disconnect from others, ourselves, or God. Loneliness is reminiscent of a hope; a dream, deep and persistent; a desire for authentic connection, community, and belonging. Perhaps it is physical pain. It could be a temporary prick, a jolt, a nonlinear pathway with a trail, somewhat marked, somewhat trod upon. Or perhaps it is a never-ending ache.

Loneliness can feel like any of these, at one time or another, or sometimes several at once. It can be relentless, especially chronic loneliness. The tight claws of chronic loneliness grasp, not letting go, its gnawing teeth biting away at our insides, chewing away our sense of place, belonging, and identity. Loneliness is a land without borders. It can affect anyone.

Loneliness is an Immigrant. Loneliness is Foreigner. Loneliness is Other, Unknown, Unseen, Forgotten, Invisible, Misunderstood, Excluded, Enslaved, Displaced, Last, Unwanted. Assimilated. Unassimilated. Segregated. Desegregated. Attacked. Hated. Lynched. Murdered.

Loneliness is a refugee, third culture kid, transracial adoptee. It is someone who is biracial, multiracial, living in the thin space between two or more cultures or ethnicities.

Maybe this ache sounds familiar and such a sense or feeling has come and gone for you, like an ebb and flow, or perhaps it feels like a constant weight. Think of the people you know. What faces come to your mind when you think of loneliness?¹

Loneliness is complicated to define. Is loneliness an emotion, a psychological condition, or a physical and emotional state? Fay Bound Alberti, in *A Biography of Loneliness*, describes it as an “emotion cluster, a blend of different emotions,” such as sorrow, grief, and anger, because no single emotion adequately sums up the condition.² We can break loneliness further into more specific types: relational loneliness, geographic loneliness, ethical loneliness, spiritual loneliness, and ethnic and racial loneliness. We could have one or some combination of these. Each possesses its own cluster of emotional and physiological responses, manifests in us differently, impacts every aspect of our being (physical, emotional, social, spiritual), and is dependent on our geographical location, our time in history, our social location, and our social connection.³

In his book *Together*, Surgeon General of the United States Vivek H. Murthy considers loneliness of utmost public health importance, describing it as “the subjective feeling that you’re lacking the social connections you need.”⁴ Loneliness affects mental health, physical health, and all dimensions of our well-being. One study reports that loneliness reduces lifespan as much as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day,⁵ and increases the risk of premature death by 26 percent.⁶ An experiment conducted at UCLA found loneliness affects the brain in a similar way as physical pain.⁷ Moreover, the Framingham Heart study documented that loneliness occurs in clusters and is, in fact, contagious.⁸ A survey in 2021 reported that Americans have fewer friends than ever before, with 12 percent saying they have no friends at all, and 40 percent saying they have no “best friend.”⁹ A Harvard report corroborates this fact, finding that 36 percent of Americans feel lonely frequently or almost all of the time.¹⁰

Murthy released an advisory report in 2023, reiterating the urgent public health matter of *social connection*. Social connection

is defined as the size and diversity of one's social network and the roles the relationships serve in our networks—and the report found we're severely lacking it. A lack of social connection is associated with an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, depression, anxiety, and dementia. In fact, social connection is a *social determinant of health*, in addition to community well-being, community resilience and safety, and economic prosperity. Social connection is, in fact, “a fundamental need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter.”¹¹ With these kinds of statistics, we can be certain that some of the people we encounter every day are lonely; in fact, it might even be us.

There are significant economic costs to loneliness, which is probably one reason the United Kingdom and Japan both have ministers of loneliness: the health and social needs of the lonely cost money, and those needs are increasing in the West as the population ages.¹² Social isolation is responsible for \$6.7 billion in Medicare costs for older adults. In fact, a Dutch grocery chain added checkout lanes specifically for the elderly, where customers can take their time and chat with cashiers—called the “chat checkout”—designed to help with loneliness. A Canadian supermarket implemented the same concept, and Americans have called on Walmart and Kroger to do the same, instead of building more self-checkout lanes.¹³

Although loneliness is an epidemic of wide proportions, no official “diagnosis” exists for loneliness: there is no test, x-ray, treatment, or diagnostic code for loneliness. We recognize and define depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions, but not loneliness—although it is a major public health concern reaching beyond other prevalent physical conditions such as diabetes or obesity.

We have no official diagnosis, nor do we have a pill to cure the pang of loneliness. But we know this much: the solution includes

tender human touches of social connection and knowing who and whose we are, and we know loneliness is connected to belonging. But specifically, how do we define ethnic loneliness?

WHAT IS ETHNIC LONELINESS?

A good friend of mine suffers from an undefined chronic illness. She has visited doctor after doctor, sharing her symptoms with specialists for years with no answers. Test after test turns up negative, but she still experiences physical symptoms that current medical technology cannot account for. Because her tests are negative, her symptoms are dismissed or ignored, or she's told it's "depression." Sometimes *depression* is used as a catchall for what cannot be explained, and it's a term often dispensed to women.

Little consideration is given to the idea that we haven't yet developed tests to adequately recognize or name each and every ailment. Our tests are simply tools available at this time in the history of medical and technological development. So, my friend slips in and out of medical offices and in the enigmatic space of having an unexplained illness, with no abatement of symptoms; a plethora of questions, tests, treatments; thousands of dollars spent, as well as tears; but distressingly no answers.

Like those with chronic illnesses attempting to explain their conditions, ethnic and racial minority groups have been explaining our situation and experiences, too. Ethnic loneliness is a condition that also has no official diagnosis and is a term not yet fully defined. The illness people of color are trying to explain is the loneliness of being disenfranchised, excluded, invisible, othered, marginalized, isolated, unseen, attacked, hated. Like the patient with the unexplained chronic illness, minority groups also encounter the roadblocks of having our experiences dismissed as nonexistent or minimized. This book seeks to define and name that experience.

Ethnic loneliness occurs when we feel disconnected or culturally isolated as a result of our racial or ethnic identity. We can experience any of the following:

- *Cultural isolation*: when we are surrounded by those who do not share our cultural background, traditions, and perspectives
- *Lack of connection*: when we are unable to relate to others around us due to cultural differences
- *Identity conflicts*: when we struggle with our sense of identity, and feel torn between our ethnic or cultural heritage and the need to conform to the dominant culture
- *Loss of cultural identity*: when we distance ourselves from our own cultures to fit with majority culture
- *Social exclusion*: when we are excluded from social activities or conversations due to cultural differences
- *Marginalization*: when we encounter social, economic, or political challenges as a result of smaller numbers or cultural norms
- *Language barriers*: when we have our own languages or ways of communication that are different from the dominant culture and seek to preserve this element of our cultural identity
- *Integration and assimilation*: when we attempt to balance preserving our cultural heritage and assimilating in broader society, which can lead to us navigating multiple identities

Cultural isolation and the above situations can have far-reaching effects on mental health. When we are disconnected from our cultural heritage and ethnic identities, it can lead to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, stress, an identity crisis, alienation, and loneliness.

Factors in our environment, our genetics, our immune systems, the geographic areas we live in, and the infrastructure of our cities all affect ethnic loneliness. Health care policies, food access, use of

technology, family structure, physical safety, present and generational trauma, and poverty all affect our sense of belonging and loneliness. Even as I share about loneliness, I recognize I share from a place of some privilege. My father was a physician, and I didn't grow up with financial or food insecurity, another dimension of privilege.

To be ethnically lonely means the scars are a result of not only racial constructs and systems in society but also various cultural differences and values that are in tension between the ethnic minority's culture and culture at-large. Such specific cultural differences include:

- varying views on success
- conflicting educational and career expectations
- clashing values regarding honoring the family and/or parents of origin or following the culture
- differences in language and worldview
- generational differences with older versus younger generations
- individualist versus collectivist values
- differentials in viewing authority figures

In addition, loneliness is compounded when the majority culture offers solutions to ethnic minorities that are insensitive to our differences. Such solutions include “Assimilate and erase your ethnic and racial identity as much as possible and conform to white normative standards.” “Be like us.” “Let go of your culture, your background.” “Ignore your family and what they want.” “Straighten your hair.” “Change your accent.” “Change your name.” “Don't listen to your family.”

On an anonymous, qualitative survey on ethnicity and belonging I conducted with over forty-five respondents, an Asian American respondent who attended a predominantly white

university explained she worked so hard to assimilate that white friends would tell her, “Wow, I really don’t see you as Asian.” She wrote that she initially internalized this as a positive thing but realized it isolated her from other minority students.

A respondent who identified as Black and of African descent wrote, “Growing up as a kid, I never saw anyone who looked like me at school, in books, or in movies, and no one had ever heard of Eritrea, where my family is from. I felt alienated at hair salons, at school, in drama club, in friend groups, at clothing stores, at the masjid.”

Meghan O’Rourke, editor of the *Yale Review*, writes of her years of living with a chronic illness in *The Invisible Kingdom*: “It took years before I realized that the illness was not just my own; the silence around suffering was our society’s pathology.”¹⁴ In the case of ethnic and racial loneliness, the silence and denial of systemic and institutional realities that perpetuate loneliness and “othering” is also our society’s pathology. When the process of ethnic identity formation is disrupted or denigrated, the result is disillusionment, fear, confusion, grief, alienation, frustration, anger, and loneliness. Brown, Black, Asian, Latin American, Indigenous, Mixed race, and other minority ethnic and racial groups long for recognition of this reality.

DEFINING TERMS

In understanding ethnic loneliness, it’s helpful to first start with a few definitions: *POC*, *BIPOC*, *Brown*, *whiteness*, *ethnicity*, and *race*, as well as *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Latin American*; *AAPI* and *Asian American*; and *Black*, *African American*, and *African descent*.

Globally, three-quarters of the world’s population live in Asia or Africa and is likely categorized as a *person of color*.¹⁵ With the global majority of humans as people of color, this term *person of color* (*POC*) arises from the perspective of the white majority, or rather, from the perspective of who is in power and who defines it

as such. If people of color had been in charge of the defining, we must wonder if that term would be in our current lexicon.

The term *people of color* first appeared in the United States in the 1700s and was meant as a category for nonwhites, and then re-emerged in the 1970s. The term now encompasses Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and Black people. Some feel, however, the term *POC* doesn't adequately address the fact "that certain effects of racism—mass incarceration, police violence, inability to access good health care—disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous people."¹⁶ A friend of mine of African descent objects to the term because it has its roots in enslavement and centers the perspective of the white oppressor, though she acknowledges she is in the minority opinion among other Black folks on this. I've come across Asians and Indian Americans who do not consider themselves a "person of color." And while a panethnic term like *BIPOC* (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) serves as a term of collective organization and generalizes the experiences of ethnic minorities, it also flattens identities and differences among our various ethnic and racial groups.¹⁷ For the purposes of this book, we use the term *BIPOC* to address the common experiences of marginalization of minority groups, while acknowledging that our terms have limitations, and all experiences cannot be distilled into a single one that speaks for all.

Brown, also, is more than just an adjective for many cultural and ethnic groups. Dr. Robert Chao Romero, professor of Chicana/o and Asian American studies at UCLA, explains *Brown* is also a process, as certain ethnic groups have transitioned from Brown to whiteness, such as Italians, Greeks, Ashkenazi Jews, and other groups who used to occupy the space of Brown. For example, he explains Brown as a "liminal, social, legal, political, and cultural space" the Latin American community has inhabited since the US-Mexico War and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848. And

even though during the era of Jim Crow Latin Americans were legally considered white, they were still segregated and treated unequally through legal loopholes and social conventions.¹⁸

In addition, *whiteness* is not a person of European descent but “a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and affectional structures able to seduce people into its habitation and meaning making” according to Dr. Willie James Jennings, associate professor of systematic theology and Africana studies at Yale.¹⁹ The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture defines whiteness this way:

Whiteness and white racialized identity refer to the way that white people and their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared. Whiteness is also at the core of understanding race in America. Whiteness and the normalization of white racial identity throughout America’s history have created a culture where nonwhite persons are seen as inferior or abnormal.

This white-dominant culture also operates as a social mechanism that grants advantages to white people, since they can navigate society both by feeling normal and being viewed as normal. Persons who identify as white rarely have to think about their racial identity because they live within a culture where whiteness has been normalized.²⁰

Race is a classification of people according to their physical traits and ancestry. It is a social construct. One’s race is not always obvious or evident, yet it is a construct with tangible consequences. Some constructs can actually help us understand human experiences and build bridges, whereas others divide and damage. The construction of race falls in the latter category, as it has been used as a means of power and subjugation.

Ethnicity, as adapted from *Beyond Colorblind* by Sarah Shin, speaker and trainer in ethnicity, is more distinct and specific than race, referring to a common ancestry, tribe, nationality, background, and typically with shared customs, language, values, traditions, religious practices, and history.²¹ While we can see food, language, clothing, and traditions, we cannot see under the surface to deeper values such as one's relationship with authority; values regarding family, marriage, and children; notions of justice and fairness; roles regarding age and gender; rules and expectations; communication styles; power dynamics; how conflict is handled; and customs and beliefs about hospitality.

Hispanic generally refers to people who speak Spanish or are descended from Spanish speakers. The term came into use during Nixon's presidency (1968–1974) and appeared on the census in 1980. Since *Hispanic* refers to language, it is an element of culture and more closely associated with ethnicity than race. Moreover, people of all races identify as Hispanic, and today, people can select other racial categories along with Hispanic, such as white, Black, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander, or some other race, on census forms.²² Yet, there is also a sense of colonialization and loss attached with the term *Hispanic*, so some Latinos avoid that term.²³

Latino is a term that refers to geography, generally meaning people who are from Latin America. *Latino* does not technically refer to race either. Anyone from Central or South America and the Caribbean can be described as Latino. Within this group, there are varieties of races. Latinos can be white, Black, Mixed, Indigenous, or even of Asian descent.²⁴ In this book, I use the terms *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Latin American* according to how a particular survey or original source categorized the term. But it's important to recognize the heterogeneity of this group, representing twenty different countries and territories.

The term *Asian American* was conceived in the 1960s by activists to bring together the Asian community.²⁵ The term is everywhere now, but it's a sweeping term that also has its limitations. It erases the unique heritages and cultural differences among Asians and minimizes specific cultural and community needs. While it has been helpful politically, individual ethnicities and marginalized Asian American groups are not all recognized equally. In the 1980s and 1990s, the term was broadened to *AAPI* (Asian American and Pacific Islander), which has helped to unify the experiences of Asians, but the term is still quite broad and erases groups.²⁶ The term *Asian American* (or *AAPI*) is used in this book, while recognizing its limits.

The term *African American* was promoted in 1988 by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, and it gained popularity.²⁷ But some feel that the term *Black* actually is better, because it celebrates race and culture from all over the world.²⁸ Both terms *Black* and *African American* are commonly used today, but these also have limitations and are not, in fact, interchangeable. While many African Americans do have African ancestry, the term does not include those from the Caribbean or Europe.²⁹ A Gallup poll conducted in 2019 asked which term was preferred, *Black* or *African American*, and the dominant response was “it does not matter.” Other polls conducted without the “it does not matter option” found Black Americans split, with a slight edge of 42 percent preferring *Black*, 35 percent preferring *African American*, 7 percent saying they preferred another term, and 13 percent saying it doesn't make a difference.³⁰

In 2020, the Associated Press (and other news organizations), began capitalizing *Black*, which caused some debate. The choice to capitalize *Black* refers to the fact that being Black shapes the core identity of a Black person in the United States. Not all African Americans agree with the capitalization, however, because it lumps

all of the African diaspora into a monolithic group and erases the diversity of all the different groups.³¹ I follow the news reporting conventions of capitalizing Black, and I utilize both *Black* and *African American* as terms in these pages.

One thing is clear with the labels: they are imperfect. There isn't a clear consensus on how to identify our unique differences but it's important we recognize the nuances, strengths, and weaknesses of each term. Within each of these labels of *Latino* or *Hispanic*, *Asian American*, *Black* or *African American* are hundreds of ethnic groups with distinct cultures and languages and differences, coupled with histories and meanings and multiple perspectives. Our terms are inadequate, and our language usage is still evolving.

SO, WHAT ARE YOU?

If you ask me what I am, I could tell you I was born in India, grew up in the southern United States, and then moved to the upper Midwest in my twenties. But even that wouldn't tell you who I *really* am. That basic information doesn't inform you that I am *Punjabi*. Folks from India identify ourselves according to which Indian state we're from (Punjab in my case) and what language we speak (or our family speaks). To tell you I'm "Indian" isn't truly adequate for you to know "what I am." Punjabis are known for the Bhangra dance, which is a traditional folk dance that originated with Sikh and Muslim farmers in villages and rural areas. It was performed while farmers were doing their agricultural chores, with some of the dance moves having roots in farming activities.³² Today, Bhangra is also a form of music and song. To know Punjabis is to know and understand Bhangra and its importance in culture.

But to tell you I'm Punjabi isn't adequate either, because in modern India, the state of Punjab is largely composed of two major religions: Hindu and Sikh. Among other Indians, I often have to

distinguish myself as from a Punjabi Hindu family, because that is my family's identity. Each state in India has its own unique customs, language, food, and traditions. To be from a particular state in India means something; India is not a monolith—just as someone born and raised in the Bronx has had a completely different upbringing from someone raised in Iowa or in Southern California.

It's also important to know that my family has our own stories of experiencing the Partition of India in 1947, which was the largest mass migration at that time in history, with at least fourteen million displaced people moving between Pakistan and India, when the country was suddenly divided. Many families from India have their own Partition stories to tell. My father, who grew up in a village not far from the border of Pakistan, was a young boy during Partition. He remembers carrying stacks of hot *rotis* (flatbread) and *sabzis* (vegetable curries) to those fleeing from Pakistan and migrating to India. Families spent days cooking and making meals for refugees, taking them to the border, to the train station, and handing out food to fatigued travelers who left in a hurry, walking on foot, with only what they could carry on their backs.

My mother grew up in that same village. Her grandparents and family crossed the border from Pakistan to India along with my mother's aunt Prem, who was a teenager at the time, and who became seriously ill during the journey. The journey took several months. It was horrific. People were kidnapped, slaughtered, raped—and some of them by their own friends and neighbors. The entire history of the Partition is itself its own complex book. Yet, you wouldn't necessarily know that this is part of my story, just by the question of "So what are you?" You wouldn't know the history and generational trauma I carry in my experience and body.

You also wouldn't know I attended a church in a small town in Alabama, and how strange that must have been for my parents.

There was no other option. While my counterparts (Indian teens) who lived in places heavily populated by Indians, such as New York or Fremont, California, were going to the Hindu temple on Sundays for language and culture studies, I was attending church in rural Alabama. Of course, my parents were the ones who first took us to church, but it was even stranger to them, I suppose, that eventually I asked to keep going.

To be asked these questions, “So what are you? Where are you from? No, where are you *really* from?” automatically sets a line between people of color and white folks about how we are different, suggesting an attempt to distance us from them and keep us labeled as “other.” There are occasions when a person is genuinely interested and cares, and there are also instances when these questions actually mean, “I’m not sure if I can trust you,” and, “You look different, and different isn’t good.” The questions are asking us to define ourselves at that instant, so others can make a quick judgment on our answers. In the context of friendship, we share our values, beliefs, and ideas over time and shared conversation. But without the context of relationship, these types of questions can be used to make assumptions and conclusions, and are a shortcut to comfort. I have people judging me continuously as a woman and based on the color of my skin. Whatever narratives others have, I’m lumped in there without having a chance, without them getting to know me. It’s lonely in here.

A PECULIAR ALONENESS

In the biblical story of creation when Adam is naming the animals and creatures all around him, he realizes that he is the only one of his particular *kind*—that is, human. He doesn’t have a counterpart to share and delight in the beauty of the world around him. No one else to banter with, to discuss the naming of the creatures. Though

he walks with God, it is a peculiar kind of aloneness, and God says it is not good for him to be alone, so God makes a companion, a friend, one of his “kind.” God creates Eve.

When Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and are banished from the Garden, they experience separation and the loneliness of being apart from God. There is no way to return to that idyllic paradise. Angels keep guard over Eden, not allowing passage back inside. We can imagine the profound grief and loneliness Adam and Eve experienced at that separation. In a sense, we continue to experience that peculiar aloneness today because we, too, are banished from the Garden, as humankind longs for spiritual reconciliation with our Creator. History is replete with stories and legends of the human desire for a fountain of youth, an ancient longing for the immortality and mystery of Eden and reconciliation with God.

Just as we live in exile from Eden, we find ourselves also living in degrees of exile, or separation, from one another. Feelings of disbelonging exist on a continuum, and we all experience them in some capacity. For the ethnic and racial minority in white-majority spaces, though, these feelings are an everyday experience.

I never heard my parents speak ill of those people who harassed us. It is now part of family lore and legend. It’s a story of courage and resilience because it was frightening to receive such a hateful message and still resolve to stay. I wonder, *Would I be so bold myself if it happened to me today? Would such an occurrence be considered a hate crime today and result in an additional charge for cruelty to animals?* People didn’t know my family, or other Indian American folks, when we first showed up in our small Alabama town. We tend to fear what we don’t know. Fear leads to hatred, and hatred leads to violence, which leads to things like dead cats flung on porches.

There is an ancient Jewish story of a rabbi and his disciple that goes something like this:

Disciple to Rabbi: “I love you.”

Rabbi: “Do you know what hurts me?”

Disciple: “You’re confusing me with irrelevant questions. I don’t understand.”

Rabbi: “Do you know what hurts me? My question is not strange or irrelevant. It is the soul of understanding love and compassion. For if you do not know what hurts, how can you truly love me?”³³

Do we know what hurts the people around us, especially those who do not look like us? Are we asking, yearning to know this from each other? It’s a deep question. Might we ask one another, “What brings you joy?” or “What hurts you?” instead of “What are you?”? We would learn “what” we truly are more quickly by speaking of matters of the heart and soul.

People of color are doing what we must to survive. In many cases, assimilating and letting go of their own culture was the only option for our parents and relatives—but is it the same for us? As increased mobility and demographics change the composition of the United States, it is urgent that we help the ethnic minority find a sense of belonging and live wholly and fully amid the wilds of loneliness.

The country we are imagining is one in which we all belong. As we embark on this journey to a better country, we’ll talk about how to find belonging to ourselves, to others, to our communities, and to God. We’ll find that our lands of loneliness are pathways to beauty and wholeness. Our desire for a new country can be a doorway to light, a passageway to a Spacious and Beautiful Land we didn’t know existed.

SO, WHAT ARE YOU?

You belong
In your skin
Your ethnicity
Your culture
And your “kind”
Is good
And wanted
And needed
What hurts you
Hurts me, hurts us all
On the island of disbelonging
You are rich in love
By others
Who want to love you
The universe
Opens its arms to you

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION
AND DISCUSSION**

1. What is your ethnic, racial, and cultural background? How do you identify yourself? Be as detailed as possible.
2. Writing prompts:
 - “Something I appreciate about my ethnic background is . . .”
 - “Something I appreciate about my family’s culture is . . .”
3. What is your experience of ethnic loneliness? What else would you add to the definition?

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