

**‘Nobody’ as an Official Identity:
Biblical Gentilics, the life of ‘FNU,’ and Asian America**

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The Politics of Labeling

In 1930, the United States Census Bureau created a category of “Mexican” for the first time as a separate racial label on the census form. The creation of the new race category coincided with the emergence and implementation of the Immigration Act of 1924, which officially restricted immigration to the U.S. based on national origins, racial identification, and visa requirements. Although the “Mexican” category was exempted from the 1790 racial ineligibility provision, which limited naturalization to “free white person(s),” its legal visibility rendered Mexicans the single largest population associated with the “illegal aliens” label.¹

A decade prior to that, a category of “Hindu” emerged on the U.S. census form for the first time in 1920 and lasted for three decades. Adopted as a racial designation for Asian Indians despite any religious associations, Hindus were considered as part of “unassimilable Asians” in accordance with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which initially targeted Chinese laborers but expanded to include all Asians at the turn of the twentieth century. Consequently, those labelled as “Hindus” were excluded from being lawful U.S. citizens.²

This essay reflects on the practices of labeling and being labeled in the elusive quest for identity that includes an “unknown” body. Labels matter as every identity is coupled with labels, whether assigned by others or oneself. Today, being designated with an ethnic or racial label has become one of the official practices for shaping a social, cultural, and legal persona, especially in the modern bureaucratic practice of census-taking. In this practice, the parameters of race and ethnicity, although their sub-entities vary across different countries, have become officially agreed-upon indices, serving as legitimate means and substantial bases for classifying people discreetly.³ The perceived ideas of race and ethnicity, in turn, constitute and normalize public

¹ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7-8, 54. The “Mexican” category remained as a separate race only in the 1920 census. For the historical development of racial and ethnic categories in the U.S. decennial census from 1790 to 2020, see “What Census Calls Us,” *Pew Research Center*, 6 February, 2020. <http://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/what-census-calls-us>. For the 1790 Naturalization Bill, see “ArtI.S8.C4.1.2.3 Early U.S. Naturalization Laws,” *Constitution Annotated*, http://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/artI-S8-C4-1-2-3/ALDE_00013163.

² Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 49. See, “Chinese Exclusion Act (1882),” *National Archives*, <http://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act>. See also “Thind v. United States (1923),” *Immigration History*, <http://immigrationhistory.org/item/thind-v-united-states%E2%80%8B>, which features a critical court case that declined an Asian Indian’s eligibility for U.S. citizenship based on a popular belief on racial knowledge.

³ The race question, under which labels like “White,” “Black or African American,” “American Indian or Alaska Native,” “Asian,” and “Native Hawaiian or Other” are available to be chosen, is currently operational only in the U.S. context (United States Census Bureau, “Questions Planned for the 2020 Census and American Community Survey,” <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/2020/operations/planned-questions-2020-acs.pdf>). For the question that asks for a similar set of answers categorized as “race” as per the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.K. Office for National Statistics instead opts for the wording, “ethnic group” (Office of National Statistics, “2011 England Household Questionnaire,” https://census.ukdataservice.ac.uk/media/50966/2011_england_household.pdf).

knowledge about these concepts and the legal persona built upon them. Consequently, people are prone to seeing and organizing themselves and others to fit the governmentally defined categories that play a highly operative role in the state's policymaking.

While both race and ethnicity are far from static taxonomies, once they serve as mechanisms for determining civic status, there should be no room for ambiguities as legal identity means to determine who is eligible or ineligible to become a member of a given society. Ethnicity as a product of modern governing practices is an argument also put forward by postcolonial historians. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, delves into a historical circumstance of colonial India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which the British instituted a standardized governing system that enumerated and measured collective identities through official statistics—a practice that we now call the census.⁴ While the administrative practice of counting itself is not particularly modern, the systemic collection and regular updating of classified identity data of governed people distinguished the census as embodying “modern ideas of government,” which the post-Enlightenment British brought to India in the context of colonialism.⁵ Chakrabarty points out, “the social assumptions on which the classification and organization of census figures rested were fundamentally modern: they showed India to be a collection of ‘communities’ whose ‘progress’ or ‘backwardness’ could be measured by the application of some supposedly ‘universal’ indices.”⁶ The new categorical mechanisms, informed by this modern governmental technique, reconstituted the public representation of ethnicity. No matter how diverse and overlapping identities people carried in their everyday lives, the homogeneously defined ethnic labels created and authorized by the census became people's official persona.⁷

Intriguingly, the governmentally-defined “ethnic” categories in colonial India could be based on religious concepts (e.g., “Muslim” and “Hindu”) or social classes (e.g., the “untouchables”). Regardless of what constitutes “ethnic” identities, the logic of demography is reified as a representation of ethnic constructs through the censuses. Through this bureaucratic mechanism, conflicts between Muslims and Hindus or between castes are legitimately framed as “ethnic” strife or “ethnic” jealousies over their share of benefits that the British offered to its colony. Such a government-sponsored mechanism effectively shapes what Chakrabarty calls “constructions of competitive blocs of ethnicity in the public sphere”⁸ that officialize an individual's public belonging. The bureaucratic persona that modern individuals bear in their everyday life is considered a part of modernity's human “kinds,” entangled with a standardized classification system. The philosopher Ian Hacking cogently points out that the notion of humankind itself is a product of the modern social sciences in the making of “profiles” or “personal inventories” of established humankinds through categories like “race, gender, native language, nationality, type of employment, and age cohort.”⁹

However, the category of “ethnic group” is only reserved for a separate question about a “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish” origin in accordance with the 1997 Office of Management and Budget standards that consider that people of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin could be of any race(s) in the U.S.

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Modernity and Ethnicity in India: A History of the Present,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30/52 (1995): 3373-80.

⁵ Chakrabarty, “Modernity and Ethnicity in India,” 3375.

⁶ Chakrabarty, “Modernity and Ethnicity in India,” 3377.

⁷ Chakrabarty, “Modernity and Ethnicity in India,” 3377.

⁸ Chakrabarty, “Modernity and Ethnicity in India,” 3377.

⁹ Ian Hacking, “The Looping Effects of Human Kinds,” *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate*, ed. Dan Sperber *et al.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 354-56.

Labeling Practice Before Race and Ethnicity

While the phenomena of demarcating a hierarchy of human differences to establish power structures had long existed before modernity, the practice of labeling by means of theorization of the idioms of race and ethnicity, which amalgamate hereditary physical characteristics with national origins, cultural features, and legal eligibilities, has been a hallmark of the modern mechanism of identification. Before the systemization of the idioms of race and ethnicity, various conventions existed to label individuals and groups for differentiation.

In the Hebrew Bible, such a practice is commonly known as ‘gentilics’ in scholarship. As a grammatical convention defined by the morphological construction of the final -y ending attached to nouns, it is a common linguistic feature found across ancient Near Eastern languages from Akkadian to Aramaic to Hebrew to Ugaritic. For example, the Biblical Hebrew gentilic term *kena’ani* (“Canaanite,” “related to Canaan”) derives from the proper noun *kena’an* (“Canaan”). Far from being confined to the modern notions of race and ethnicity, the biblical representation of identity manifested by the gentilics reflects a diverse range of affiliations and belongings—including clan, territory, occupation, polity, religion, and mode of life, among others.¹⁰ What is unique about the labeling mechanism operated by the Hebrew gentilic is that it can also mark an identity of non-belonging rendered “unknown” or “nobody” through the labels *peloni* and *’almoni*.

In Ruth 4:1, Boaz encounters an unnamed man, addressed as an unknown person—that is, *peloni ’almoni* (“so-and-so”). In the list featuring the name and regional or tribal affiliations of David’s warriors in 1 Chr 11, a soldier named Helez was labeled as “the unknown” (*ha-peloni*) amid other individuals with identifiable affiliations, such as Shammoth, the Harodite and Ira ben Ikkesh, the Tekoaite (v. 27).¹¹ In the same list, we find another soldier named Ahijah, identified with the same gentilic marker as “nobody” (*ha-peloni*) (v. 36). In another list that organizes military leaders with more detailed information about who oversees each division, Helez’s affiliation is clarified as “of the Ephraimites” (1 Chr 27:10). Still, his formerly attributed identity marker as “the unknown” (*ha-peloni*) remains a part of his official name.

The labels *peloni* and *’almoni* function both as indefinite pronouns and relational adjectives, expressing an identity of nobody that does not specify any affiliation or identification. The etymological basis of *’almoni* appears to be *’elem*, which means “dumb” and by extension “unknown.”¹² The etymological root of *peloni* is somewhat dubious, as the suggested root *pele’* (“something unusual” or “miracle”) does not explicitly match the meaning that the label *peloni* denotes.¹³ If there is any semantic link between the two words, it may be the notion of non-specificity that the meaning “something unusual” conveys for the word *peloni*, just as the root *’elem* denotes a sense of “unknown.” In both Helez and Ahijah’s cases, the definite article *ha* is attached to the gentilic label *peloni*, thereby rendering the notion of an indefinite/unknown

¹⁰ A comprehensive analysis of the gentilic data is available in my forthcoming book, *Contesting Labeled Identities: The Sociology of ‘Gentilics’ in Biblical and Northwest Semitic Literature*.

¹¹ Since the list in 1 Chr 11 duplicates the one in 2 Sam 23, which names Helez the Paltite (*ha-palti*), many commentators consider *ha-peloni* as a textual error (Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary* [London: SCM Press, 1993], 249). However, given that the label *ha-peloni* is also applied to a different individual named Ahijah in the same list and that the gentilic Paltite appears only in 2 Sam 23:26, there is no compelling reason to prefer the *ha-palti* reading to the *ha-peloni* reading.

¹² L. Koehler and W. Baumgarten, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition*, II (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 58 (hereafter, *HALOT*).

¹³ *HALOT*, 58, 928, 934.

identity applied to a specific individual.¹⁴ In other words, the label *ha-peloni* creates a persona precisely defined by a sense of non-belonging. Ironically, this non-belonging identity becomes a visible tag, as if it is part of the official name once it is carried by individuals.

“First Name Unknown” and Asian America

The assignment of an “unknown” identity label is not just a practice from the distant past. Today, many migrants from Asian countries coming to the United States are involuntarily given the enigmatic name “FNU” on their U.S. visa. As an acronym, “FNU” means “First Name Unknown” and is assigned to U.S. visa applicants whose countries of origin follow the mononym practice—meaning they don’t have a separate surname or a first name. These countries predominantly include those in South and Central Asia, such as Bhutan, Indonesia, Tibet, Afghanistan, and India.

When Adibah first visited the U.S. in 2006 as part of an exchange program, she had no idea what “FNU” meant on her U.S. visa attached to her Indonesian passport.¹⁵ Initially, she was confused about the name but did not make a big deal out of it as long as she could enter the U.S. safely. Soon after learning that “FNU” was a standard naming system coined by the U.S. government to comply with the two-word name system, she added her father’s name, Murthado as her last name on other required U.S. documents. The struggle over everyday identities became a source of anxiety since then: “It was really difficulty to fly, even domestically within the U.S. U.S. customs and border officials usually had to scrutinize my passport for a long time because the first page only had ‘Adibah,’ while my U.S. visa page had ‘FNU Adibah.’ And I used ‘Adibah Murthado’ for other U.S. documents... I was always on edge, unsure whether or not they would stop me from flying.”

When she visited the U.S. again from 2020 to 2022 to pursue her master’s degree in New York, she found herself sticking with “FNU Adibah” once more: “I was worried about the name on my diploma. It had to be exactly the same name I use in Indonesia. So, I only used a one-word name again. It was a hassle when preparing documents, like opening bank accounts, etc.” Her time in the U.S. during 2020-2022 coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, many of her classes were conducted online: “My professors took our attendance list and called my name, FNU. I did not bother at all because it was not even my real name.” Traveling remained a significant challenge with only a one-word name. Each time she booked plane tickets, she had to decide whether to use “FNU Adibah” as on the U.S. visa or “Adibah Adibah,” like what many people usually do when they only have a one-word name.

One day, Adibah called her American friend, who hadn’t saved her number yet. Later, she learned that her name appeared as “FNU” on her friend’s phone: “There were so many times when I had no idea what name to write on the form. Should I use my real name or the one given by the U.S. government? Generally, people in the U.S. cannot fathom a person without a last name. But here I am with one name, which I am proud of. So, I usually try to educate people: my classmates, professors, bankers, officials in social security, IRS, and NY card officials about this system.”

¹⁴ Alternatively, the word is treated as a proper name, “the Pelonite” according to the translation of the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). However, given that there is no attested name derived from the root *plh/pl’*, whether personal or geographical, the proper name-based identity is not to be assumed automatically. The description of *HALOT* for *peloni*, namely that this word is “used when the proper name cannot or should not be used” (p. 934) rather highlights the nature of non-properness attached to this label.

¹⁵ Adibah’s story is based on the email interview conducted between October 3 and 12, 2023. I am grateful to her for sharing her lived experiences for this essay.

It appears that her struggle over names is still ongoing even after departing from the U.S. In the email she used to correspond with me for the interview questions, she signed as “Adibah Murthado,” whereas the email signature she made at the bottom of her message had a one-word name as “Adibah.” She included a hyperlink to her LinkedIn profile page in the email signature. Once I clicked it, I saw her name listed as “Adibah Adibah.” Still, FNU never became a name of her choice.

Many who involuntarily carry the “unknown” name in their everyday lives are considered a minority. When people see their first name spelled as FNU on the official identification card, their names will be awkwardly called out as *fe-noo* by a nurse, a banker, a professor, or an airport customs officer.¹⁶ Some of them might choose to be accustomed to living a life in America with an FNU name to avoid complications, as seen in the stories of Asian migrant Uber drivers’ stories who prefer to keep their FNU name.¹⁷ Like Adibah, others might resist the FNU name and do everything to correct the official documents in vain, while still thinking about giving their children two-word names so that they no longer have to hassle with the FNU name to live a “legal” American life. Having to carry an identity of “nobody” to be a legal persona takes emotional burdens, or what Cathy Park Hong called, “minor feelings.” Hong wrote, “We keep our heads down and work hard, believing that our diligence will reward us with our dignity, but our diligence will only make us disappear.”¹⁸

Like Helez and Ahijah in the book of Chronicles, who were officially remembered as “nobody,” being identified as “FNU” does not bestow individuals with an “illegal” persona. Quite the contrary, their “unknown” identity tag secures their legal presence in the U.S. Simultaneously, their bureaucratic persona attached to the FNU name is caught between the two worlds—Asia and America. For Asian Americans, the ideas of home carry multitude of meanings. Homes can be found in “family, history, food, love, place, body, memory, song, and religion.”¹⁹ The language of home is also evoked when Asian Americans are told to “go home”—a remark that leaves them with the affect of “never belonging.”²⁰ As long as the FNU name are carried, they are neither fully accepted into their Asian culture nor their new American home. If homes are to be found in name, homes of the “First Name Unknown” are places of official alienation.

¹⁶ See also a story in Huatse Gyal, “XXX or FNU? Musings on Tibetan Names Abroad,” *Yeshe: A Journal of Tibetan Literature, Arts and Humanities*. <http://yeshe.org/xxx-or-fnu-musings-on-tibetan-names-abroad>.

¹⁷ See a story in George Joseph, “What the fnu?” <http://uxdesign.cc/what-the-fnu-fa72cf4ad5bd>. As of November 14, 2023, about 4,000 LinkedIn profiles that feature “FNU” or “Fnu” as their first name are found in the New York Metropolitan area.

¹⁸ Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 78.

¹⁹ Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Foreword,” in *Go Home!*, ed. Rowan Hisayo Buchanan (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York), xvii.

²⁰ Nguyen, “Foreword,” xvi.