

family family family family

An iBook devoted to
stories about
multiracial/transracial
families



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Did We Do You A Disservice?

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My mother is white, and my father is black. The idea of being mixed never crossed my mind when I was growing up. I was Sharon. My brother was Ray. And our parents made us do chores, just like everyone else. Plus, my parents were raising my teenage aunt and uncle who are Puerto Rican and Black, so no one looked the same in family pictures. I spent my early days just assuming everyone's family was as eclectic as mine. I had no idea how unique we were, so any racial tensions and taboos I encountered went right over my head. These racial encounters only arose when I was with my mom:

I remember being called a "lovely colored girl" by an old woman in the bread aisle at Shop Rite. The tension was palpable between all the adults, but when you are six aren't all adults tense?

I recall getting multiple comments about being adopted, and those comments always came from individuals who looked at my mother as if she was a saint for taking on the parenting of a minority. My mother would always respond that I was her biological daughter, to which people would respond, "...what a beautiful...uh...complexion she has."

Another time, while shoe shopping, I asked someone if they had seen my mom and they brought me to a Latina woman.

And I cannot even remember how many times sales associates spoke to me in Spanish and would look at me in disgust when I could not respond.

All these times, I just assumed people were confused. I mean, they were calling me lovely and saying my complexion was beautiful, whatever that was supposed to mean. I knew these encounters made the adults uneasy, but they never fazed me, because I knew my mom was my mom. She was the woman that forced me to eat salad and clean my room, but at the end of the day she was a cool lady.

My ignorant bliss about being different changed when I was twelve. My dad had the amazing opportunity to go to London for three months for an international professional development program. While my dad was gone my mom was a single parent, and everything that could possibly go wrong did. Our car broke down, I ended up with fifteen stitches, and work was just overwhelming since my parents worked together and my mom had lots of extra stuff to do. On a particularly stressful day my mom had no desire to cook, so we went to Applebee's for dinner.

While enjoying our spinach and artichoke appetizer and my brother and I recounting our days at school, my mother looked at us for a long moment, and said, "What is it like to be biracial?" My brother and I looked at each other. We both replied, "I dunno...?" This was the first moment I realized that my par-

ents had no clue what it was like to be like my brother and me. It was the first moment I realized that we were different than them.

After a few more moments of awkward silence my mom asked, “Did we do a disservice to you?”

Huh??? My twelve-year-old mind could not understand this question. How could being Sharon be a disservice? As my brain was trying to figure out this question our meals came, and my chicken tenders instantly distracted me.

Fast-forward two years. Our Applebee’s conversation had been forgotten. I was a cool high school kid now, so popularity, locker combinations, and friends were all I thought about. I was in a diverse school, and race was still not an issue I noticed. Until one day before band when I was setting up my music.

A clarinet player came over to the trumpet section and said, “Sharon! Know what I’m going to call you? Graham Cracker! Because you act like a cracker...but you’re brown! Isn’t that hilarious?” I had no response. This was the first time that I had ever been offended by something someone had said about the color of my skin. It was the first time I did not think someone was just confused about my identity. This was the moment that our Applebee’s conversation rushed back to my memory. Is this what my mom meant?

After that day, I became so much more aware of my race, and what that meant for my place in society.

We moved a year later and as a junior I started at a brand new school where everyone was blonde and blue-eyed. I stuck out. Hard. For most people, high school is a time where you struggle to find your social identity, but I was struggling to find my social AND racial identities. I had no clue what or who I was supposed to be. I would ask myself, “Am I supposed to be black? Isn’t that what I look more like? But what about my mom’s side of the family? Am I allowed to choose one over the other? Should I? Well...every form I fill out is making me pick, so I guess that means I have to? And why do people keep calling me an Oreo? What does that even mean?” I was clueless.

My last two years of high school were just one long identity crisis. I decided to go away to college, because clearly some time away from everyone I knew in New York and New Jersey would help me figure out who I was. So I packed my bags and headed to...Ohio. I knew almost no one in Ohio. I had the opportunity to take my two-year identity crisis and put it behind me without the history of being a graham cracker or Oreo or whatever snack food was my descriptor that day. I was able to be Sharon.

As I began to develop my multiracial identity in college the Applebee’s conversation often ran through my mind. What is it like to be biracial? Did we do you a disservice?

I still did not have an answer to either of my mom's questions, but I was determined to figure it out. I wanted to finally answer the questions that flung me out of my blissful state of innocence, but more importantly I wanted to figure out what being multiracial was, and reassure my mother and myself that it was not a disservice.

In my first semester of college I was put into a learning community for minority students. I was told that it was a diverse group that would help me adjust to being a college student. What it turned out to be was me, sitting in a room, where I was the only person that was not "Black", and taking remedial classes in English and Microsoft Office. I graduated from high school with honors. I knew staying in this program was not going to help me answer my mom's questions.

So after weeks of dealing with administrators that did not want to lose me because I "helped the overall GPA of the program", I got out. I suddenly had access to the entire course catalog at a large state school. This was an opportunity to engage and learn from a huge variety of professors, students, and staff; I dove in. I absorbed everything I could, every encounter. I went to visit friends' homes in areas of Ohio where I was the only person of color for miles. I explored Cleveland, Columbus, and Akron. I explored historically Black and historically White sororities, and even joined one. I took every advantage I could to understand what it meant to be black and white, in hopes that I

could figure out what it meant to be mixed. It was still not clear, but I was no longer in crisis.

After college I worked for two years and then decided that a Master's in Higher Education Administration was the path for me. The semester I took my student development theory course I was reviewing the syllabus and saw that everyone would have to present on a theory at some point in the semester. As I was perusing the list I saw "Renn's Ecological Theory of Mixed-Race Identity Development." Hold the phone! There was a development theory about me? I knew there were theories about women, non-traditional students, and larger racial groups, but there was a theory about me? Day one of that class I signed up to present on Renn's theory.

My presentation day was not until the end of the semester, and so I spent months digging into this theory. I was only supposed to present on the theory and its' implications on higher education, but my research went deeper. I discovered that it was completely normal for me to be fine with being Black, White, Mixed, or whatever. I learned that I could have pride in being mixed race, and above all, I learned that I was not the only one that had this struggle (Renn, 2000). A sense of reassurance and completion filled me with every article I read.

My journey to develop my multicultural identity started when I was 12 because two questions were asked, "What is it like to be biracial?" and "Did we do you a disservice?" Sixteen years

later, I can finally answer these questions that my mom has probably forgotten she even asked.

So mom, being biracial is great! It gives me such a unique perspective. I live a life where I can see things from the White, Black, and Mixed perspectives. Because of the way you raised me, I celebrate people's differences and get to know them as a person without judgment. Sure, there are times that it's hard, especially when I know that White privilege is a part of my heritage, but something I will never benefit from. But knowing I have a family that loves and supports me gets me through those struggles. And please know, being mixed is not, and will never be a disservice. You and dad have given me more than your heritage; you have both raised me to be independent, hard-working, inquisitive, and passionate. You two have let me figure out who I am. You have been my biggest cheerleaders, shoulders to cry on, and are never afraid to call me out when I am not doing my best. How can being a mixture of you two ever be a disservice to anyone?

Reference

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Feeling Enough: A Journey to Becoming Myself

Nicole Caridad Ralston



My mixed experience can be summarized in a few words: striving to feel enough. It's a constant journey for me, and I have made major strides. My mom is a Cuban refugee who came to Southern California in the late 1960s and my dad is White (Irish and German descent) from Philadelphia who mostly grew up in Southern California. My name is Nicole Caridad Ralston. My middle name, Caridad, comes from the popular Cuban saint; Caridad del Cobre, and is translated in English to "charity". My mom also shares this middle name, and it's a name that I carry with great pride. I will admit that there was a time when the name made me anxious and uncomfortable, especially when teachers and classmates couldn't pronounce it, and I was confused why the name seemed so different to them. I remember learning to spell my name in class and the White teacher exclaimed that I had such a unique name and asked me to pronounce it for the class. These feelings continued when we moved from our predominantly Latino Neighborhood in Homestead, Florida to the predominantly White neighborhood in Chesapeake, Virginia, and I had different words for things than the other kids. I spoke English perfectly well, but I also spoke some Spanish, and I would interchange words regularly (I still catch myself doing this, but at this point in my life I just let it happen, as it's a part of me, and I've decided to be wholeheartedly myself, all of the time).

I identify as mixed, Latina and White. I grew up in a low-middle class socioeconomic status family, and we moved around a lot.

I have lived in Los Angeles, Miami, Chesapeake, and Naples, Florida. I am a higher education professional who works in community service programs. I live in the South, more particularly in New Orleans, Louisiana. I am married to a white man from an upper-middle class upbringing, which leads to fascinating stories of our different family and youth experiences. I am white-passing, I have a younger sister with tan, olive skin, my mom has brown skin and my dad is white. I remember my sister wanting lighter skin like me at a young age, one of my first, painful, racial memories as a child because I did not know how to help her. I was 6 and this is when I first realized that somehow "white" was better.

Although I am white passing, and acknowledge my white privilege, I rarely feel like I appear "white" due to the constant guesses to my ethnicity and racial make-up. I think not feeling enough began early in my childhood when questions like, "What are you" were thrown at me, and I didn't understand how to respond. I clearly looked different to people, but I knew my face, I knew who I am, and so I couldn't process what exactly they were asking. I remember telling my mom once that I always received these questions and she said, "That question is rude, you are a person, what else do they want to know?!" The question "What are you?" felt and continues to feel like a violent affront on my being. The responses to when I do share my identity can also be hurtful and reaffirm this feeling of "not enough". When Latinos and White people alike state, "But you

don't look Latina... or ask... Wait, so, do you speak Spanish?

I'm left again feeling like I have to first, challenge them on their narrow notion of what a Latina looks like, does, speaks, etc, and second, I am left feeling like I'm explaining how I fit in. If they must know why I don't know as much Spanish as they think I should, I could explain that because my mom faced so much discrimination and trauma entering English-only American schools in the 1960s, that she was worried about teaching her children the Spanish language. But, by that time I've assessed that these folks may not be the people I want to share my story.

I suppose the "what are you?" question is better than people guessing my identity and then half-way through a conversation they tell me that I look like a Middle Eastern snake charmer and ask that if I can sing the "snake charmer song" (yes, this has actually happened at a recent party- and yes, it's an extremely racist comment), but the question still makes me feel uneasy, unwhole, and not enough.

The feeling of not "being enough" continued when I entered first grade. We had just moved from Miami, FL to Chesapeake, VA, and before the move we were living with my abuelo, tios, and tias. As I mentioned earlier, I quickly learned that the words I used for certain things, and the lunches that I brought to school were not "normal". I remember feeling immense shame at lunch time, especially. My food looked and smelled different, and everyone noticed. I remember demanding a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a Lunchable so that I could blend in

(which now makes me sad to think about that at that young I was learning how to adapt to Whiteness to feel more safe and accepted). These feelings of inadequacy and not having what others had, were compounded by the fact that we grew up as one of the "free and reduced lunch plan" kids. Again, at this point in my life I am incredibly grateful to be blessed to know the food, language, and customs of two cultures, but as a child I often felt inadequate.

Family, at various times, have played a positive and challenging role in my development as a multiracial woman. On the white side of the family, family members would constantly tell my sister and I that my Dad always dated "hispanics" so it was no surprise that he married one, or would attribute our large eyes to the "Cuban" side of the family, or would assume we knew everything about "hispanics" and Latin America. Comments about our "strange" food were also common. The Cuban and Latino side of my family is very diverse. We are made up of darker skinned indigenous Cubans, and Spanish and French colonial Cubans. The darker skinned side of the family favored my sister who had tan skin, and would make it known that she was more like them. This never felt good. Likewise, the Spanish side of the family claimed me, exclaiming that I looked more like their mimas, tias, abuelitas. This also, never felt great. All of these experiences perpetuated some feelings of not fitting in, of being an "other" even in my own family. My sister and I recently processed these memories over Christmas, remembering times

when sides of the family wanted to “claim” us, and how awkward it was as children. I want to note that my immediate family (my mom, father, and sister) always made me feel enough, and in our household we never battled over who looked more like which side of the family. My mom and dad made us feel whole, “normal” and celebrated the diverse array of experiences that we got to experience as children of two different cultures. My sister and I reveled in hearing stories about our parents’ different childhood experiences, and looking back I am so blessed to grow up in a multiracial home and wouldn’t have it any other way!

Amongst my mixed and bi-racial friends this feeling of “not enough” is common. I don’t think I actually had a word for the feeling until I began processing with more multiracial friends and colleagues, but the feeling was always present. The Social Justice Training Institute, which I attended this summer, was one of the spaces in which I processed this feeling with multiracial colleagues. It’s this insipid feeling that you’re about to be “found out” or caught for not fitting into where you’ve been assumed to fit. Or it’s the dread that you are at some point going to have to answer the “what are you?” question, and the onslaught of questions about your upbringing and culture will start to rush. There’s also a feeling of trying to fit so badly, trying to prove you are Latina or Cuban “enough” while also not ignoring your whiteness and white privilege in spaces. It’s also trying to dodge the pain that comes when white friends and family say

racist things (when they seemingly, for a moment forget that you are not fully white, and are then shocked by your anger).

It’s trying to reconcile that you are also not fully a person of color, and therefore cannot speak for the entire myriad of experiences that people of color hold, even when others want you to because you are a more “palatable” person of color to them.

It’s realizing and accepting that I will never fully fit into your expectations of a White person, and I will never fully fit into your expectations of a Latina. I am both-and, and for the longest time that never felt enough, but I’m on the path to feel and be enough.

This path to feeling enough consists of trying to be me at all times. In my attempt to be me, I allow space for others to be themselves, too. In my work with college students I see daily the pain of young adults trying to be themselves, but not knowing how to begin. I think this is a powerful space to hold: being yourself. It can be difficult and uncomfortable to allow yourself to just be, and to be vulnerable, and to accept that not everyone will like you and that is totally OK. I have come to realize that being mixed is a huge blessing and yes, maybe even a privilege! It has given me the opportunity to be raised in a multicultural family, understand racial privilege, other cultures, and other language at a young age. I think that my multiracial identity is a major factor in my ability to relate to others and have empathy.

Being enough means being open about my mixed identity, giving voice to my experiences (especially when I feel silenced), while also openly acknowledging that I cannot speak for all mixed people, I cannot speak for all people of color, and I cannot speak for all white people. I work in being an accomplice in the fight towards equity, and this especially makes me feel whole. I revel in my time with other multiracial people and I am blessed to have a close circle which includes multiracial friends and colleagues. Ultimately, feeling enough means being ok with knowing that I am not for everyone, and knowing that those who welcome me as “enough” will always be for me.

Working to Express Not Impress

Gus



Sometimes I wish answering the question “Who are you?” could be as simple as saying “I am me.” But then other times, I don’t. Everyone has their own story and struggles, if the person trusts both of these things, they can successfully answer the questions, “Who are you and how do you define yourself?” Time after time, people look at me and see a white male, dirty brown hair, hazel eyes. What comes to mind? Affluent? A heterosexual male who does not understand the privilege that he walks around with? I have heard all of this, and spoiler alert—the stereotyping prevails. I am not just a white male though I “look” it, I am not heterosexual though I “look” it, and to others I am privileged because I “look” it, not because I have worked hard for it. Spoiler alert number two, I have worked for it, and people need not to judge someone for who they are by the color of their skin.

I am a Filipino American who was born and raised in Southern California and lived there for twenty-two years of my life, I believe it bro! I have fought with the race I identify with up until recent years in college, ito ako believe? I look at my skin color and examine my experiences and see a disconnect, yo dawg I believe it. I am white but come from a continuous working middle class household, I believe it and am thankful for everything my parents have contributed and have done for me. I am a second-generation college student but feel like a first, I believe it and have surpassed this barrier. I am a gay male who has recently come out to family and friends in the summer of 2015,

yasss I believe it girl. I did not wake up one morning and decide to become this person; it took time, reflection and understanding. It took convincing myself that I did not have to worry if others did not like the person I am, because I like myself. (Talk more about how I came to define myself more here)

At a young age, I was surrounded by a dysfunctional family. A step sister that was a rebel who ditched school, turned her back on family, and disrespected my parents. A brother who did not graduate high school and stayed in school until he was awarded his high school GED. One other brother who graduated by the skin of a hair and was too, a rebel like my step sister. Then there was me-- the son that did well in school because I studied for numerous amounts of hours. The son that was not book smart but street smart, but motivated himself to keep his nose in his books to be the best he could. The son that was an all star swimming athlete. The son that could feel jealousy from my other siblings, but in turn did not feel their jealousy was his fault because of how hard he pushed himself. This son is me. In the Filipino culture, mothers enjoy competing with other parents’ opinions of their child being better than the other’s. I greatly disliked this, but my mom still did it. Anytime I would not perform better than I had previously, my mother and father would make that known, and I would feel horrible about myself. From swimming to choosing a social science major in college, I did so much to try and make them proud, yet, I still felt disappointed. Until things started to click and make more

sense. I did not have to make my parents happy, I did not have to care about what my siblings thought of me. If I was happy and I expressed myself rather than wasting time trying to impress others I knew that I was living life the way I was supposed to. My family saw me as an obedient son, one who listened to his parents and therefore, they all accepted me because I did what was right. However, nowadays, if someone were to ask my family and friends what defines me? They couldn't give you the simple answer they would have years ago, because I went against their norm and demonstrated who I was and what I was passionate about. I didn't become a doctor like my parents wanted me to, I didn't stay close to home like they wanted me to, I adventured off on my own to gain independence and self-knowledge I needed to be the person I wanted to be. Here is how it all started.

It took me 23 years to feel like I was living life right. Twelve of those years were stuck on watching Blues Clues, Franklin the Turtle and playing with toys. Six years were stuck trying to remain competitive to get into a good college. Four were stuck trying to perform as best as I could to get a job with this super expensive piece of paper we refer to as a degree. Finally, we are at the time where I get to focus on me as a person, not me as a citizen trying to live by the status quo. For the past two and a half years, I have learned how to define who I am through all of my educational and non educational experiences.

I was hiding behind an individual that wanted to pride himself on everything that he was and everything he learned in identifying through interactions with other people. Just after undergrad did I choose to remain in the field of higher education, I knew it was the right field because of the opportunities that were presenting themselves and the things that I was learning. I have had the opportunity to work at a Hispanic Serving Institution, a Historically Black College and University, a primarily Mormon institution, and a Predominantly White Institution. Off the bat, I identify as more of a minority than I do a white individual because of my experiences and because of the cultures I feel I connect to more so than others. It didn't take the past three years to realize who I wanted to be, I knew that already. What I was afraid of was that I was not strong enough, at least until August of 2014. On a summer night in August of 2014 while working in residence life at a Historically Black College and University in North Carolina, I was walking in the halls back to my apartment. I was thinking about how lucky I was to have had the opportunity to work at a HBCU as a white male who identified and appreciated the African American Culture. When all of a sudden, my life was in jeopardy, literally. There were two males pointing a gun towards me saying this was "a stick up". Thinking it was just going to be a robbery, I listened to the demands in efforts to liberate myself from the situation. This did not work, at this point, I knew they were in it for more than the materialistic viewpoint. They were in it for built up hatred, anger,

and because of the privilege I had just because of my skin color that they and their ancestors have had to bleed for, cry for, and continue to work hard for. So they kidnapped me, I know, a 24 year-old getting kidnapped, weird.

I remember being chased by a police car, the individuals getting away from the cop car, the pain and fear of having a gun pushed against my back, and the music that was playing- it was on a CD and was playing my favorite song. They drove around for a while and let me out at a random dark place off of a freeway. I was scared, I had nothing. I had my confidence, hope, and empathy. I ran out of the car, it was my car and they took it, and tried to run somewhere to try and process everything that happened. I couldn't, it was too soon. I had to get back on the freeway and walk to my exit, I was a California boy who was in North Carolina. Lost. Very lost. It took me a couple of weeks to get over not being afraid of people, but more importantly to actually realize that I can't keep living in fear. In fear of who I am, in fear of what others can do to me. I have been hurt many times, emotionally, but that is MY struggle. That is who I am. I trust this struggle. These interactions with people who hurt me, people who are like me, people who disagree with me, they push me. They push me to not be afraid to show who I am and to show what my authentic purpose is. So no, I am not a affluent, white, heterosexual male. I am a passionate, constantly hard working, biracial, gay male who trusts his struggle and identity development enough to share his story with others.

Troubling the Half

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I didn't really understand my multiracial identity until much later in life. In fact, it wasn't until 2005 when I attended the Social Justice Training Institute and we had a multiracial caucus that I was even given the opportunity to identify as Black and Irish. For the first few moments of the gathering of that small group, we just looked at each other in bewilderment. You mean - I can just say that I am multiracial? It was revolutionary. Since that time, I identify with the word "multiracial". I find that it really throws people off as well. Meaning, when I get asked the question (which I do all of the time), "what are you?", I always say "multiracial" first. It usually follows with another question about what my racial background is, but I feel strongly that the word multiracial can be an identity on its own. And frankly, I don't share that I am Black and Irish unless I feel like it. People really have a desire to know though, don't they?

Understanding my identity took a lot of therapy and reflection, my family was indeed a large part of that journey. My parents adopted me and took me to their home in Nebraska, where I grew up in a predominately white community, thinking that I was white too. That was, until a kid in elementary school called me "chocolate nose" and called me the n word. Then I figured out that perhaps my afro and brown skin actually did make me different.

My mom tells a story of having me in a stroller in a small Nebraska town in the 1970's. The community was quite fascinated

that a white couple adopted a black child, and proceeded to say so as they went on a walk downtown. People were also fascinated with my dad, who is a six foot eight white man. He and I would road trip since he drove a semi. In those days, I could ride along in the cab. The guys at the job sites were always interested in me and my dad. Stopping to go to the bathroom was an adventure. But my parents took everything in stride, they are supportive people. But I would also say that they didn't really address the issue of me being a person of color in a white community, at least not directly. It was more when something happened. I didn't have an arsenal of tools to analyze myself ahead of time or to know really who I was and what I thought about my identity.

It wasn't until after that SJTI experience that I even wrapped my head around who I was. In high school, I knew that I was a person of color, but my friends never acknowledged it. But now I wonder, was it really not an issue? Surely they recognized that I was different. Surely their families talked about it at SOME point, right? Was it because I was passing and non threatening or not thought of as black? In a sea of white kids, people had to know.

In college, early 90's, I had joined the multicultural club (my first diversity experience) and started to read about black culture. But, I didn't really see myself as fitting into that culture; I was a voyeur. I couldn't talk to my parents about it, they just didn't

really get it. I think if I had been dating more men of color, it might have been a different story. My sister is also multiracial, and she always dated black men, she brought that conversation to our family. For me, I had been dating a white guy since high school, and ended up marrying him. That conversation wasn't for me. But today, we recognize and embrace the fact that we are an interracial couple. That comes with its own set of challenges and is a story for another day. I will say, people are fascinated with my family. When my parents are in town, people love to stare at us when we go to dinner. Maybe that is the height of my dad, maybe that is my fantastic afro, maybe it's because my husband and kids are really attractive, who knows.

In graduate school, during the late 90's, at which time I was studying College Student Personnel, I advised lots of committees on the Union Programming Board. One of those committees was the Multicultural Committee. The students that I advised, and the events that we produced, taught me so much about identity. During that time I had my first braids, had friends of all backgrounds, and began to dive more into my identity. It is so true that we need to surround ourselves with diversity, to truly understand diversity.

After graduate school, I got my first job in Texas at a university, it was 1996. I was advising student committees on the programming board and experiencing southern culture for the first time. I remember people spoke Spanish to me all the time, and I

wasn't able to communicate back. The students of color that I advised taught me so much about their backgrounds, about class, about being first generation (of which I am as well, but I didn't really "get that" when I was in college). During that time, I began to explore my own identity as a woman of color, and I realized that I needed to know more about who I was and my racial background, so I began to explore my adoptee identity as well.

I was born in Iowa to an Irish woman with five children who was going through a divorce. Apparently, she met my birth father in a bar and I was the product. She decided to put me up for adoption through a private attorney. Oddly enough, none of her five children knew that I was even growing inside a five foot nine little lady (which I find extremely odd). The youngest child at that time would have been eleven. I did end up connecting with my birth mother in 2002. She didn't want to have much to do with me, but she did share with me the story above; and her speculation on my birth father's racial identity. Since then, I have taken one of those ancestry swab tests, but I have to say I didn't learn a whole lot from it to verify anything. At this moment, I am waiting for the latest and greatest DNA test to come in the mail; I am going to keep trying. They have a testimonial about an adoptee and her nephew being matched through their DNA, so why not?

I had twins in 2001, and that was the moment when I really began to build my racial identity as a multiracial person, an adoptee, my female identity as a mother and a social justice identity as well. These identities have also impacted me as a multiracial person. I realized that I needed to tell my kids their backgrounds, and it has been very important to me that they have the language to navigate the world as mixed folks. They knew as soon as they could comprehend, that Papa and I had different racial identities. When people asked them “what are you?” they get to answer however they want. If they feel a little snarky about it depending on who is asking and why they are asking, they don’t have to answer. I want them to feel empowered. I want them to know that they can change and evolve if they want.

After the 2005 SJTI experience, I am a different person. I am more vocal about who I am, and more empowered than ever. My husband experienced SJTI as well, but as a supporter from home. When I came back that first night, I know he thought that I had been through something truly impactful, but scary, and revolutionary. I wanted him to read all about white privilege, which he did. He didn’t understand it at first, but he gets it now.

Today, I lead a diversity office. I learn new things about race, class, gender, and many other aspects of identity every day. I feel very well versed on social justice issues and I am a

staunch advocate for the multiracial community. I am co-chair of the NASPA Multiracial Knowledge Community. I lead a diversity advisory board for the mayor in my town. My husband and I talk about race all the time, like all the time. He sees things in his job at an architecture firm and identifies microaggressions every day. I have researched multiracial college students and read as much as I can about our community. I also coach, mentor and talk about being multiracial. Without a supportive family, I could not do the things that I do and have the stamina to do them. Even though I have racial battle fatigue quite often, I have the support at home that I need. And, you know what, I have created that.

Coming Out as a Korean American

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Social Justice Education
Specialist



“As long as adoptees return to Korea, live here, and make ourselves known among Koreans, there will be a need for our solidarity.” ~Kim Stoker, What does it mean to ASK? (2014).

I remember hearing Kim Stoker, Representative for Adoptee Solidarity Korea, give voice to her experiences of living in her country of origin as an overseas adopted Korean on my first return visit to my motherland (Higgins & Stoker, 2010). I was stunned to learn that in a parallel universe, while I studied bell hooks and Freire in the classroom at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, my people had come together in Seoul to establish the first intercountry adult adoptee organization in the world to politicize in the country of origin from which its members were adopted away (Na, 2014). In the New York Times Magazine cover story, “Why a Generation of Adoptees is Returning to South Korea (January 2015),” Maggie Jones, white adoptive parent, recounts the formation of ASK, and goes on to report on the hundreds of adult Korean adoptees who have come out to themselves as adopted Koreans and remigrated to their country of origin to live and find connection with one another, not only their birth families (Jones, 2014). The 994 comments responding to the adult adoptees who came out in the NYT story revealed the unsavory vitriol that internationally and transracially adopted people experience as honorary white infants and children, who grow up to be targets of racism when they come out in solidarity with communities of color.

UNPACKING KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTEE IDENTITY

“This crucial stage in the adoptee journey is one marked by dis-identification in which they recognize that they fit neither the dominant monoracial constructions of America as white nor ethnocentric constructions of koreanness, whether among South Koreans or korean Americans. In this context, meeting other adoptees who are “just like me” has been articulated by many adoptees as life transforming.” (Kim, 2010)

“They called me a student of color at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Once again, I was assigned a new identity without giving my consent,” I recall thinking in my early days of undergraduate, resenting the new label that differentiated me from my white best friends (Klunder, 2014a). Over the years to follow, beginning with a book club that read Paula S. Rothenberg’s “White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism” (2004), I expanded my friendships and communities to include students of color. Together with peers of color, we shared our stories of isolation and alienation, and I began to articulate myself as a student of color first, and an Asian American who was adopted by a white family second. I joined the Multicultural Student Coalition (MCSC) and served as a diversity peer educator, where I learned how to resist racism by telling my story in terms of privilege and oppression. I enrolled in Student SEED, a social justice seminar that introduced me to

Bobbi Harro's Cycle of Socialization (1982), where I further uncovered the layers of collusion that I had engaged in order to survive. I confronted my model minority training to dissociate and say, "I don't see color", that had inhibited me from finding support as a racialized being within my school, church, and adoptive family who tried their best to celebrate my diversity, but struggled to empower themselves to examine their white privilege. I was learning to come out, not only to access intimacies on a personal level, but to act in solidarity with global communities organizing for social justice.

COMING OUT TO EFFECT CHANGE

"Moreover, the politically sensitive issues of race and ethnicity are still often ignored when discussing international and Korean adoption and international and Korean adoptees in order to avoid being caught up in the same kind of heated and unpleasant debate on transracial adoption that has since the 1970s been ravaging in North America, Australia, and Britain, where the domestic adoption of children from indigenous and minority groups to white families has been highly contested and charged and sometimes branded as ethnocide or cultural genocide." (Hubinette, 2006)

"How do you define family?" On January, 22, 2014, KoRoot--an overseas adopted Korean guest house and NGO in Seoul--invited adult adoptees, single parent and poor families fighting for family preservation, and families of origin who surrendered

their children to overseas adoption in 60 years following the Korean war ceasefire, to "come out" with their counter stories to the dominant narrative of adoption (KoRoot, 2014). Together with Korean adoptees, KoRoot, an allied organization, co-created a powerful interruption to adopterism and adoptee-phobia--new terminology which reframes adoption as a social justice issue, articulating intimate and structural power dynamics that deny adoptees and families of origin the right to define themselves outside of adopterist representations of the adoption experience (Klunder, 2014c), and aligns the active and passive exclusion of adoptees from policies, practices, and cultural productions that shape adoptee experiences with patterns of domination (Klunder, 2014a). I facilitated this organized interruption to global systems of economic and gender violence as 1 in 200,000 Korean-born infants and children who were adopted overseas from South Korea since 1954, characterized by agents of power as a humanitarian effort. Through remigration to South Korea--returning to live in my country of origin, not only visiting--I learned firsthand about the access barriers that target single parent, poor, rural, and migrant families, and families with disabilities, that coerced vulnerable families into relinquishing their children overseas into predominantly white, wealthy, married, heterosexual, and able families with access to housing, healthcare, education, and employment. When I reflect upon my journey into raising this community question, I locate my first steps as an undergraduate student leader at the

University of Wisconsin-Madison, invited by my peers and academic staff of color to re-position my intimate experiences with violence within the structural power dynamics of racism, genderism, and classism.

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Discussing My Identity at Dinner/Hablo Mi Identidad a la Cena

Sylvester Gaskin
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For most of my life, I've existed in two completely different worlds. First, my mother's family lives in Iowa and originally came to the United States from Sweden and Ireland. My father's family lives in Florida and originated from Africa and the Dominican Republic. Love and serving in the Air Force brought them together. When my parents got married, these two worlds wanted nothing to do with each other. There was animosity between the two families; it was seen as unnatural and almost disgraceful for a Black man and a White woman to be in love. However, the way they got to understand how each other lived was during dinner. My mother experienced putting sugar on her spaghetti and learned how to make grits the proper way (i.e. the way my granddaddy wanted it). My father experienced Swedish Steak and Kringla during his first holiday in Iowa. When I was born, I had to experience both of these cultures. As the first grandchild for both families, it was important to both sides of the family that I learn these cultural norms and appreciate where they came from.

Growing up in these two cultures was interesting to say the least. Each summer, I would visit both my families in Iowa and Florida and learn more about my identity during meal times. My grandmother in Iowa would make my favorite Swedish steak for dinner and we would talk about how my family emigrated through Ellis Island and made their way to the Midwest. I learned about my grandfather's childhood in Southern Iowa and how his father broke out of a convalescent house to see my

grandmother and grandfather get married. My uncles told stories about their times camping and canoeing while in the Boy Scouts and their hopes to get better jobs than the ones they had. But through this, I learned about the experience my White family had in the United States. Through hard work and perseverance, they were able to thrive. They worked on farms and in factories, were involved in the church and tithed their 10%, and saved enough money to open their own grocery store. The story was different when I was in Florida. My granny would make yellow corn grits, scrambled eggs, and hardwood bacon for breakfast, and my granddaddy would make conch peas with smoked neck bones for dinner. Their stories were about family strife and struggle; either one of my aunts would be sick, or my uncle would be in trouble with the law. There was always some kind of drama that our family was undergoing. However, that family's story was full of strength and determination. Despite the Korean War, Jim Crow laws, and run-ins with crooked cops, my father's family still managed to send my aunt to Bethune-Cookman, my father enlisted in the Air Force, and my granddaddy was able to become a shop manager for an auto company. It was a uniquely Black experience that I was immersed in, and I got a lot of that immersion during dinner.

It was important that I hear the family stories during these meal times, as it was the only way I could directly hear about where I came from and learn how my unique identity was shaped by these two cultures. My dinners at home were a unique blend of

these two cultures; baked chicken and beef wellington for Christmas, smothered pork chops for birthdays. What added complexity to this identity development was my marriage into a Mexican family almost 8 years ago. It was interesting to meet my in-laws and to engage in their customs and add another layer to my identity. What made the situation more interesting was a language barrier; my in-laws spoke very little English, and I spoke very little Spanish. In addition, my in-laws had very little experience with someone who was multiracial. It made for interesting conversation with some family members who found it odd that someone could be both Black and White. When they asked if I was “really Black”, I had to explain how my parents met and, yes, people of different races and backgrounds can get together and have kids. There were some awkward moments at first; when I first met my in-laws, they bought me fried chicken for dinner thinking it was normal for Black men to eat at a party. Another time, I wore a shirt with a picture of Richard Pryor on it, and they asked if it was my father on the shirt and if I wore it in memoriam. Each time, I was able to sit down at a dinner table and explain to them that my t-shirt had a famous comedian on it (and my father was very much alive), and while KFC was a nice gesture it wasn't a common meal in my family.

What helped smooth things over and help build a strong relationship with my in-laws was holding discussions over dinner

about cultures, customs, and experiences that brought my partner and I together. I was able to share my family history over servings of mole y ceviche, how my parents met in technical training in Mississippi, how many times the Air Force moved my family across the country, and how they came to settle in Baltimore. I learned how my partner's family moved from Mexico to Los Angeles and listened to all the wild stories about living in Michoacan over steamed shrimp covered in Old Bay. What was most interesting and where the strongest connections came come was over food. There was many conversations about the kinds of food eaten at holidays, over special occasions, and what special ingredients were used. After a short while, my partner's tia took me around the kitchen and we compared spices both our families used. Cooking and eating were important ways I was able to learn about my partner's culture and how I was welcomed as a member of her family.

It may seem cliché that food was a common bond between the cultures I have to navigate, but for me it was the important way I learned about these heritages and family customs. I've asked friends and colleagues who share a multiracial identity about food being a theme in their identity development, and I've heard stories on how they blend their cultures' unique cuisines to make events quite special. My partner commented that it has become a unique theme during New Year's Day in her family where her tia prepares posole verde and I make black eyed peas, candied yams and collard greens for everyone to share. It

has added a new dimension to my multiraciality and understanding how I navigate the world being in a multiracial marriage.

The Family You Choose

Jade Hoyer



I recently attended a lecture at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The presenter began his talk with an image of his family, showing himself as a chubby-cheeked child with his siblings and parents. As the images progressed, he showed a more recent picture of himself with his wife and child. “There’s the family you have, and then there’s the family you choose,” he said.

The family you choose. The phrase struck me.

I grew up in West Michigan’s Filipino-American community. I don’t remember how each of our families got to know one another, but my dad jokes that my mom has an uncanny knack for meeting other Filipinos. In this community, large gatherings were commonplace. My mom referred to these events as having “the families” over, and I called every adult in this group “Auntie” and “Uncle.” We would celebrate birthdays and holidays together, eating rice, pork, fish, and panzita from Styrofoam plates. The first time I visited the Philippines, I understood locations based on the FilAm community in West Michigan. Tita Grace was from the Visayas; Tita Yin was from Mindanao; Uncle Jorge was from Tarlac; Ate Sherry grew up in Batangas.

One family, and especially one individual became particularly important to me. I was eight years old when my family moved into the home where I would grow up. My mother realized in short order that the family across the street was Filipino.

Within a week, she had set up a play date for me with the kids across the street.

“You’re going to your new friend’s house,” my mom announced one day as I came home from school. I hadn’t even hung my jacket and backpack up on the hooks by the backdoor.

I protested mightily. Making friends was not my childhood forte. All of my early school pictures depict a little girl with a furrowed brow. I’m sure I was debating what I thought about the photographer, who I never found trustworthy.

The house across the street looked a lot like my parent’s suburban home. My auntie Mervy, the kind woman who opened the front door, had eyes like my mother’s. Her daughter, Celeste, the little girl who bounded down the stairs to greet us, looked like me. She was about my age and height, and had thick dark hair like my own. Like me, she wore a plaid jumper, evidence of her attending one of the local Catholic grade schools.

We didn’t like each other immediately. Our friendship might have been a contingent one, the kind halfheartedly fostered by two girls thrust together while their mothers drank coffee. And in fact, on my terms, it probably would have been. In almost all ways beyond our shared Filipina heritage, Celeste was not like me at all. While I avoided swimming, Celeste jumped off the high-dive at the pool. I was afraid of both dogs

and strangers, and she ran up to people in the neighborhood and asked to pet their dogs. Most of all, while I was a guarded child, Celeste was open. She wanted to be friends, and made every effort to make that happen. She made me a book commemorating our friendship within a few months of knowing one another. “Chapter One,” she wrote, “When Jade was sick and threw milk up her nose....”

Despite my initial efforts to the contrary, the Celeste and I became and then stayed close. Celeste’s family moved across town, but Celeste remained one of my closest friends through high school and college. She will always be the little girl who taught me to be brave. In high school, Celeste convinced me to try out for musicals when fear of auditioning was enough to deter me. After I graduated college, I worked for six years in higher education in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Celeste, meanwhile, held jobs in Ann Arbor, Michigan; Austin, Texas; Chicago, Illinois. The first terrifying time I travelled to the Philippines for a month without my parents, I thought of Celeste who had decided independently to pursue a multiyear graduate program in Manila.

All of us have families we are born with and the families that we choose. I haven’t lived in Michigan for over a decade now, and the house where Celeste’s family lived has changed owners a number of times. My parents still call it the Aquino’s

place. When my parents hosted Thanksgiving dinner this year, the people seated at the table weren’t blood relatives, but were family all the same. We have families we choose. Or in some lucky cases, those family members choose us.

A Taiwanese-Colombian Story:

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This weekend my heart felt complete. I felt happy to be in space where without talking, I knew folks “get me.” A place where being enough of one race or ethnicity was not in question. When I get together with other mixed race folks, I often feel this sense of relief that I do not feel elsewhere. This is one of the feelings I experienced at the inaugural Multiracial Aikido retreat for Oregon State University students in Corvallis, Oregon. In that space we shared stories about our families, explored the histories of our identities, watched videos about the system of racial inequity, burned papers with racial epithets to cleanse, learned skills to respond to microaggressions, and replenished with laughter, food, and art making.

It was a rare moment to cleanse, heal, and forgive myself for internalizing stereotypes, dominant culture, and misconceptions. In my fourteen years in student affairs, it was the first time I engaged in a day-long experience for students to immerse themselves in a space which centered the conversation on navigating multiracial experiences in this society from awareness to self-care. I realized at the retreat that I had come full circle. It was eighteen years earlier (exactly half the time I have been alive) when I first heard the term “multiracial.” It was the moment of my “awakening” to racial and gender disparities, and I owe this moment to starting me down this path as a multicultural affairs educator.

The past three years having lived and worked at a predominantly white institution, in a predominantly white town and state, has made the work of racial awareness and justice more imperative than ever in my life. Witnessing the students at the retreat grapple with their identities and learn from multiracial practitioners brought me back to my undergraduate years at UC Santa Barbara. Many students felt a sense of belonging and clarity about themselves, just like I did back then. Others left inspired and eager to learn more. The retreat served as a

reminder of the purpose of my life: to help others find their way with love, and hold the vision for dominant cultural paradigms to transform. It gave me a moment to pause.

The weekend left me thinking about what my daughters will experience as multiracial people in their lifetime. It left me hoping that they will understand where they come from and come to love themselves fully. It pains me to think that they will have to find their way just like I did. I write this piece to reflect and remember where I come from. So that my daughters will have insight about their mother as a person committed to changing culture for the better. I write to also help others understand one multiracial practitioner's life-long process and journey to feeling and being, enough. The series of vignettes and stories you will read throughout this piece are intended to show my process of constantly revisiting the feeling of being enough.

Where I Am From

In this context, time, and environment, I identify as a multiracial, Asian-Latina American, cisgender woman of color. I am fully mixed. Not part. Not half. My mother immigrated from Taiwan in her twenties and my father from Colombia when he was a teenager. They met and married in New York City. Starting at the age of four years old I was raised in southeast San Diego, California, yet I have remained connected to my extended family in New York City.

Both of my parents learned English as their second language, but it became the primary language in our household. When they began to teach us their native tongues, I resisted learning them. It was too late. Racism had already won the first battle. By ten years old, I longed to be what I saw as beautiful. I was embarrassed at having dark skin, big lips, hips, and often wrote in my journal about the boys who I liked and that didn't like me. They liked light skinned girls, the blonde

haired, blue-eyed ones. At a young age I learned that being lighter was better. It was reinforced by my mother, who wanted me to stay out of the sun.

I grew up knowing my heritage was uncommon, and later in my teenage years came to feel proud that my family ate patacones and frijoles negros with egg rolls and fried rice for Thanksgiving dinner. During my adolescence, I fully embraced those who found me “exotic.” I loved being called Jasmine or Pocahontas, the Disney characters, because I finally felt accepted, desired, and beautiful.

In addition to these memories, I also remember having a bounce to my walk and I wore a big smile everywhere. Maybe I was just a happy kid. But I know now there were many layers wrapped up in those smiles. The truth is that the smiles masked internalized racism, shame for my family that we weren’t like “other” more affluent families, and keeping up the pretense that I had it all together. I later in graduate school realized I used smiles as my survival gear; I just wanted to be liked. I felt compelled to be perfect. Got good grades, did obligatory family business labor, and acted like a primary caregiver for my siblings at a young age. I believe seeking external approval stemmed from not necessarily fitting in any one group. As an adolescent, I began to make friends with all sorts, from gang members to athletes and the wealthy. And this became a trend in my life.

My earliest friend groups from preschool through junior high and high school were racially and ethnically diverse. My neighborhood in southeast San Diego was the home to Southeast Asian and African refugees, veterans, and working class multiethnic families. Growing up in this environment normalized having friendships with diverse peoples who came from various socioeconomic backgrounds. San Diego High School was predominantly Latino and was also LGBTQ

friendly. This early exposure to “multiculturalism” helped to frame my appreciation for diverse spaces and people.

Shifting Paradigms

I am deeply grateful for my Taiwanese mother for making sure above all else, I got the best education she could find with the resources we had. This required that I claim that I was “Latino” to be bussed into a predominantly white neighborhood for my ninth grade year; and “white” to be eligible to attend the International Baccalaureate program at San Diego High. At Lewis Junior High nestled in Allied Gardens in San Diego, I learned that *the haves* in this society gain access to “good neighborhoods,” had nicer homes, and everyone could afford to play a sport or three, of some sort.

Me: I love my new Junior High School. It’s in a nice, safe neighborhood. There is no crime here. I bet there aren’t drugs here too.

Friend: That’s not true. My sister says there is drugs and crime there too. And just because they have more money doesn’t make them better.

I remember this being a pivotal moment where my worldview was challenged. I felt ashamed for not seeing the obvious, and it helped me to become more conscious about race and class, even at an early age. After this conversation, I remember thinking differently about who had access to what, and why.

I gravitated to my creative writing and Latin American fiction literature classes in high school. The teacher strikes, inclusive environment for LGBT youth, predominantly Latino demographic, and leadership opportunities I engaged with were the staging grounds for my identity as a social change, multiracial activist to emerge. Becoming aware about the differences of culture and people were so incredibly healthy

for me. It reminded me of the times I would go to New York City to visit family. My Colombian aunts and uncles had many progressive friends from their college years who were open minded and I loved talking to them. During the summer there would often be a cultural street fair of some sort and they would take me along. I will never forget the times I danced in the hot city streets with hundreds of other folks. I realized that all I needed was a picnic blanket, some of my relative's friends, and some good live Cuban, Dominican, or Puerto Rican music to make me feel alive. It was in those moments I felt happy, liked, and understood. I felt enough.

The New York City trips became my emotional outlet from family dynamics at home. I loved everything about these summer experiences.

I loved the stinky subway stations, people singing and dancing on the streets, and adored the hustle and bustle of everyone moving around with somewhere to be. With my aunts, uncles, and cousins on both sides of the family, I gained exposure to the food, language, and norms of my respective cultures. This was a defining moment in my young life. I felt alive learning to salsa dance with my Colombian aunts and uncles. I adored meals with my Taiwanese cousins who shared with me every kind of asian cuisine, including Taiwanese *xiao che* (little dishes).

Depending on the context, I have been mistaken for Indian, Mexican, Filipino, Native American, Middle Eastern, and Black. During these trips to New York City were the times when I felt most and least connected to my respective cultures. There were moments here and there when I didn't quite feel Taiwanese or Colombian enough. My grandparents and some Colombian relatives would ask why I didn't understand Spanish fluently. I would feel inadequate for not understanding the language and not having a good reason to tell them why I didn't know the language. Similarly, there were many awkward meal mo-

ments when my Taiwanese cousins would tease me for my dark skin, lips, and curves. I would also feel inadequate for not knowing Mandarin Chinese or Taiwanese. Being with family but not understanding the language made me feel like an outsider. There were many times when I was called "my father's daughter." I was being asked to authenticate my ethnic identities, and I couldn't. And even though I would feel hurt by some of these comments, I still cherished being with them because they are my family.

Don't get me wrong, there is a lot of love for myself and my siblings. And I came to realize that some of the ways they would express their love would come in the worst forms.

Recently, I reunited with a Colombian second cousin and great uncle while traveling to Miami for a conference. In the car ride to lunch, after updating them about family happenings and sharing with him a little bit about my identity, my cousin asked a question, laughing when he said it. "Why don't you just choose one side already?!" I don't think I had heard that question in years.

What outweighed these negative memories were the countless positive ones. Many family members did their best to understand, asked respectful questions, and actively listened to my experience. This saved me. I was able to hold near and dear two very different ways of interacting with my family. One that would enjoy being with family, eating the food, and hanging out - fully knowing that they would never accept me as both Taiwanese and Colombian. And then the other way of being, with family members who wanted to know more about my experience, and validated by listening, and accepting me.

Being multiethnic allows me to see things that others cannot. Because my family didn't "traditionally" go together, I am able to make connections between ideas that do not traditionally go together. I was al-

ways in between. I find delight in tearing down artificial boundaries, breaking the rules, and building rapport with all kinds of people. It's almost like a superpower.

Where I was Born

If I just studied about my cultures, would that be enough? Would I be enough? Since I felt some sense of belonging and proximity to my Colombian and Latino cultures, I used my undergraduate years at UC Santa Barbara to explore my Taiwanese and Asian American heritage. The first quarter of my first year I cried nearly every day. I went to Latino and Asian student organizations and I felt I wasn't quite enough to partake in their activities. I didn't speak Spanish, didn't look Taiwanese. This left me wanting to leave the university.

Political Science class. It's affirmative action debate day. I argue for affirmative action.

White student: You did great in the debate today. Are you involved on campus?

Me: No, I hate it here. I want to leave.

White student: Have you been to the Multicultural Center?

Me: No.

We walk to the Multicultural Center. He introduces me to all of the staff and we hang out in the lounge. I feel at peace. I am home.

I owe it to my mentors for paving the way. I feel so lucky to have stumbled upon faculty like Paul Spickard, Kip Fulbeck, Diane Fujino, and Reginald Daniels in Asian American Studies and Sociology at UC Santa Barbara. Their courses were the gateway to my feeling a sense of belonging in the Asian American community because they wrote

about, were about, and held space for multiracial communities and intersectional and interdisciplinary studies. Their classrooms became the laboratory for me to be birthed in my awareness of myself as a mixed individual in a racially political world. As I learned about histories of inclusion and exclusion of Asian-Americans and other racial groups in the United States, I began to understand more about the system of racial inequity.

This helped me reconcile many of the negative feelings I had for some family members who I felt didn't accept me for being either Taiwanese or Colombian. Enough was enough. These experiences became helpful to understand how there was a larger force at play that was helping to feed and code their reactions to me. This awareness allowed me to begin to love my family in a different way, as I gained an understanding for the larger systemic forces at play.

Similarly, mentors in student affairs listened deeply. Some wrote about love around the world, others taught us how to program like an expert, and some had a mean salsa dance too. My upbringing and ways of being in the world became further developed and self-actualized in my undergraduate experience. These mentors and faculty pointed the way to campus opportunities that cemented my love for multiracial spaces. The first was this group called Variations, a multiethnic organization which started as "Variasians." During our weekly meetings we would watch interracial couple movies, host guest speakers, and just got together to talk about our experiences. It was the first place where I didn't need to explain away my identity or justify my experience. I could just be. The other group which facilitated my passion for activism and student leadership was an associated students commission - the Student Commission on Racial Equality (SCORE). This group enabled me to fully express all of who I

was, and I took full advantage of every experiential learning opportunity.

What these resources, spaces, connections, teachers, and mentors offered to me was an opportunity to get and stay curious. They offered opportunities for me to trust myself, my voice, my experience, and emerge as an activist. Some of these folks encouraged art, like in my Asian American Studies Visual Arts Workshop course with Kip Fulbeck, or when our SCORE group made a pop-up “Facing Race” tunnel right in the middle of a major walkway igniting art to communicate messages about the ills of our society. And these folks believed that I had something valuable to contribute to the world. This is why I believe wholeheartedly in making sure that all students have the opportunity to explore their identities and try on new leadership opportunities. It is why I know that the curricular and co-curricular need to go hand in hand. Without mentors on “both sides of the house,” helping me to make meaning of myself and society, and try on leadership opportunities, I don’t know who or where I’d be today.

But some of the moments of exploration were harder than others.

When I reflect back to my abroad experience in Taiwan, I can’t help but feel mixed emotions. I returned to the United States with an epiphany that not only was I multiracial Asian Latina, but also incredibly American. While overseas, I immersed myself with the Taiwanese culture and loved learning more about my cultural background and family history.

Taiwan journal entry 1: Tai Zhong. Where my family lives is a very busy town. Mostly dirty, smoggy and hot, the streets are filled with motor scooters, cars, and taxis. I really enjoy being here. Just to be around my eldest auntie means more to me than anything here. She is older, overweight, and is the sweetest woman ever. She loves to talk about my mother and tell me how

beautiful my mother once was, and how she is so happy to have me near. She believes that I eat like a bird, but I swear eating is such a recreation out here, and people love to eat, eat, eat.

There were many highs and lows of the trip. The tough moments made me want to run home immediately. Like the time I went to a lingerie store to buy a bra and the sales clerk looked at me with disdain. She mumbled in Mandarin Chinese that I was fat and there was nothing that fit me there. This was a moment when I felt absolutely not enough. And that I had enough, I wanted to leave.

Taiwan journal entry 2: As I sit on this airplane flashes of zhen zhu nai cha, chou dou fu, chow mei fen, run through my head. Pearl ice drink, stinky tofu, fried noodles. I can’t seem to think straight or process my experiences in Taiwan. A second later I realize I am crying and the tears start to flow. I am home.

The way I perceive myself

Having the multiracial identity marker helps me cognitively and emotionally reconcile the way I feel about my mixed identities. I identify with this label, even while, I always follow it up to clarify that I am Asian-Latina. I do this because while the multiracial indicator helps me to understand how I perceive myself and gives me a place to feel whole. I understand that we are conditioned by a system that is much larger than individual perceptions.

I am a deeply emotional being and I have come to both be proud and be bothered by this. It may seem like I have this multiracial identity thing figured out. Truth is, I don’t. I am perfectly imperfect. I am a work in progress and continue to learn to love all of who I am. When I was in graduate school, under the tutelage of faculty, I learned that “trusting the process” is an essential component for healing and personal transformation. This phrase and way of being has stuck with me

for over a decade. I realize now that I have adopted it as a core value for leading and doing the self-reflection needed to learn and grow.

And it has also encouraged me, been a source of faith, particularly when I am feeling like I want to call it quits, to lean in, allow myself to feel all of the emotions, and know that a better version of myself is on the horizon.

In graduate school we spent a considerable amount of time in group and individual therapy processing our wounds to become more responsible and reflexive counselors. While my undergraduate experience at UC Santa Barbara prepared me for coming into awareness about multi-racial identity, graduate school in the Community-Based Block Program at San Diego State began the process for a deeper level of healing and acceptance of the inadequacies I felt as either being Asian or Latina enough at different points in my life. The grad program environment offered a space to reflect back to me how I “show up” in real time. It was an emotional and mental marathon. I gained a deeper level of empathy for my family, for myself, and for how we are all socialized in this perfectly imperfect world.

Opposing Truths

“Why don’t you just choose one side already?!” Back to the car ride conversation with second cousin. I was caught off guard and left speechless. I told him how I am both Asian and Latina and I am not more one than the other. And though my one of my current professional roles entails educating others about the importance of racial identity development on a daily basis, those moments are always challenging.

It was a moment of holding two truths: I was thrilled to reconnect, and also hold space for not being seen for who I am. We ended our time together with good conversation over a delicious Peruvian meal be-

fore they took me to the airport. I left Miami full of food and love, and laughed at the paradox of the moment. When I was younger I imagine I would have left bitter or upset, perhaps unable to respond.

This is not to suggest that I don’t have these feelings now. However, I understand better that our society has a difficult time talking about race, that we are often stuck in binaries and generally have a lot of un-learning to do. And this is a historic dilemma that is reinforced by everything around us. Our families, the media, education, and history.

Because I understand how pervasive racism is, I now have far more grace and forgive far easier now than I did in my adolescence and early twenties.

I owe this awareness to educators in my life who have helped me better understand myself and exposed me to the world of multiracial studies. This also informs my current work in supporting others in their journey with love and transformation at the core.

I have also learned over the years that sometimes less is more. Taking from Maria P. Root’s Bill of Rights for Multiracial folks, I now have the confidence to know that I really don’t have to explain my existence. I have the right to just be. In the words of my mixed sister-friend, Becky Martinez, “I am Enough.”

Between the Model Minority Myth and Whiteness

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Kobayashi Maru is a Starfleet test first featured in Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan. The test puts a crew in a simulation where a civilian ship needs rescuing from the Klingon Neutral Zone. The crew has two choices: to attempt to save the civilian ship, guaranteeing their own destruction or to stand down and watch the Klingons destroy the civilian ship. The point of the Kobayashi Maru test is not for the crew to find some magical solution to fight and overcome the Klingons to save the civilian ship. The point is to see how the crew, particularly the captain, acts in a no-win scenario.

Much like Morton's Fork and the phrase "between a rock and a hard place," I find myself between the Model Minority Myth and Whiteness. I am half White with muddled heritage and half Japanese. I have been told I am English, Irish, Jewish, German, Czech, and Slovakian - all of which I have no concrete knowledge about how accurate those statements are. After years of contending with my racial and ethnic identities, I can say with confidence I identify as Asian Pacific Islander (API) Multiracial.

I will be quite up front here: School was easy for me. Concepts and theories were easy to pick up and I found myself getting by with little studying. While my computer science curriculum was a bit more challenging, I found myself excelling without exerting my full effort. I am not sharing this to gain accolades. I am not sharing this to boast. I am sharing this because I am a picture of the model minority myth. I was successful in my academic

pursuits and those around corroborated my successes with the myth they have been hearing all their lives: Asians are smart. Asians are good at math. Asians do not try hard in school. Asians ruin the curve. Asians make it almost impossible for [White] Americans to succeed. When I look back it seems almost funny remembering some of the comments made to me. "You are SO lucky to be Asian because you don't have to study for the tests." I remember at first being confused at their correlation. Most of my closest friends growing up were Asian and a couple of them really struggled with the education system. I knew this generalization was not true but my teachers and peers could not believe an Asian student could struggle in their classroom. After the "lucky" comments came ones of jealousy. "I wish I was Asian so I didn't have to study as much." Then, finally, came comments of hate. "I hate that you got an A on that test. You probably didn't even study." Whether these comments started as sarcasm or a joke, they quickly devolved into actual hate. Hate based around my race – an identity I did not choose, forever linked with a mind and memory with which I was gifted.

I never fully realized the impact of the model minority myth until later in life. I saw the effects of the myth on me personally but I did not see the greater systemic impact. First, the myth dismisses the experiences and voices of many Asian people in the United States by silencing the stories of struggle and oppression. Second, the myth causes a separation between communities of color. Throughout my childhood, I was taught con-

sciously and unconsciously to strive for Whiteness and to do so, I would have to push other communities of color away. This causes a divide with me pushing communities of color away and those communities not seeing me as a person of color. Third and finally, the myth further oppresses other communities of color by spreading the rhetoric... “If they can be successful, why can’t you?” While all are harmful, I think the last two effects are not always thought about and discussed. Here I was, right in the middle of the model minority myth, a part of the group who creates and perpetuates the myth and a part of the myth itself.

But where am I to go? Sometimes it was and is easier for me to uphold White supremacy. That is hard for me to say and I am not proud of my actions and inactions. In a country where people of color are oppressed, I did not get dealt a terrible hand. The model minority myth, although an oppressive cultural system, has allowed me to progress in my education and career more so than many other marginalized groups. I recognize this and I recognize some days I feel stagnant, like I am upholding the status quo of Whiteness. And I know I am. I know I benefit from some systems of privilege and when I do not take action, I am submitting to White supremacy.

Am I half-privileged? I asked myself this question after a conversation I had with a student about the spectrum of oppression. My students were discussing how a certain identity could be

considered more oppressed than other identities. While I caution my students and colleagues about playing the game of “who is oppressed more” I understand the different spaces I am able to navigate through because of my identity. I am not White passing, I definitely look Asian. But there are other instances where I see the privilege shine through. One example is how I got my first job. In high school, I was not sure what I wanted to study in college. Computer science and engineering came to my mind because I knew I was talented at solving logical problems. My father, who is White, worked at Stanford Labs and had many connections. He was able to create a summer internship positions where I was able to learn more about computer programming in a real world scenario. This opportunity put me ahead of many of my peers in the computer science program at my college and ultimately, I was able to easily get a job after graduation. The job was well paying, allowing me to start a savings to achieve financial security. In reflection, I always come to the conclusion: if I did not hold White as a part of my multiracial identity, there is a potential I would not have had the connections needed in order to end up where I am now.

Maybe my racial identity is like the Kobayashi Maru test – a no win scenario. How do I actively fight White supremacy and the model minority myth at the same time? Who will accept me into their affinity groups, since I am not Asian enough or White enough? How do I celebrate my identity as a multiracial person when parts of my identity are rooted in privilege? What I have

come to learn in my identity is that the issues of privilege, oppression, and different identities are all connected. I am a part of three communities: the White community, the API community, and the multiracial community. I have membership in all three in some aspects and lose membership in others. Because of my unique experience, I can start to work in the difficult areas. I can use my memberships to bring people together and create common understandings. I can challenge the privilege I hold and use it in my social justice work. This sounds like an idealist talking and I want you to know, this space for me is not easy to be in. My journey continues with my complex fluid racial and ethnic identities. One thought keeps me going in this work: Our liberation is tied to one another. Until we start challenging and unraveling the model minority myth, we cannot fully liberate other communities of color and we cannot have racial and ethnic equity in our country. And for that, I will continue to take the Kobayashi Maru test and make progress towards a solution.

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I am More than an “Other”

10

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I am an other, an "oreo," a "zebra," a product of an interracial marriage. My story takes place in a humble and loving household in San Antonio, Texas. My mother, a White, farmer's daughter, from small town Midwest who a random adventure and a teaching job brought her to this place. My dad a Black man from the urban areas of Dallas, Texas whose military career had taken him all over the world and ended him in San Antonio. August of 1986 landed this simple couple with a beautiful baby girl, the only the child the two of them would ever share. I like to think it is because they got it right the first time, but it could be that I was just too much to handle. Full of sass and and smiles I was never taught that I would be anything less than exactly what I wanted to be.

We never really talked about race much in our household, but the fact that we were a little different was never lost on me. For a brief time I thought I was adopted, because my parents did not look like me; the truth was I was perfect blend of my dad's dark skin, flat feet and wide nose, and my mom's white skin, short legs, and perfect smile. I presented as a light brown package of joy with loads of curly jet black hair. I attended a predominantly White elementary school in a school district 45 minutes from my house where my mom worked as a high school English teacher. I think the first thing I remember being challenged with was my hair. I hated my big hair, that was very difficult to control, didn't look like everyone else's, and I was always self conscious of that. The next challenge I remember were the

questions and general looks of confusion when my mom didn't look how people expected her to look. At school events or when my mom would drop me off in the mornings I would deal with withering stares, and questions like where is your mom, she was literally standing right next to me, or your mom is White?!? By middle school I had gotten so used to these questions that I learned to make a joke about it. Actually, humor plays an important role in how I handle most things in my life.

I remember my biggest complex would come when filling out school forms and the question of race would come up. I would raise my hand and ask the teacher with true confusion, because I didn't know what to mark. Students in the class would laugh, the teacher would look at me kind of confused, and usually I was just told to mark "other." And that was always my racial identity, "other." In high school I began getting the advice to fill in "Black" because it would help more with college applications, but for the most part, I always considered myself an "other." I think that is why my race was never really remarkable to me, it was a nonspecific, underrepresented identity. I remember trying to make sense of it one day in discussion with my dad in explaining that I finally understood that because My mom was White and my Dad was Black; I was Brown. My dad looked at me and said "no, it is like the Michael Jackson song, you are either Black or White". I really don't think my dad had any idea that that conversation would stick with me, but I do think he was just saying exactly what I was always being told by society.

There was no social construct that allowed me to live in both identities in the ways that I believed they existed. I later went on to exclaim to my Dad, “you know, I believe biracial people are going to rule the world one day.” That, he was much more supportive of. Everytime we see a biracial person succeed from Miss America to our very own President, we would remind each other of that statement.

I come from a very small family, and while I didn't grow up close to extended family it was incredibly important to my parents that I had the opportunity to know both sides. We would spend Thanksgiving in Dallas, Texas with my dad's side of the family. My direct relationships to that family included my Dad's one sister, and my grandma, but in that family we are all family, and relationship was determined more by age then bloodline. If you were close in age, they were your cousins, a little older, aunt and uncle, and the oldest group great aunts and uncles. Each year we would enter a house full noise, love and food. I never felt out of place in this family. I was immediately accepted, and race never seemed to be a problem. I felt loved everywhere I turned. I was overwhelmed and impressed by the stubbornness, work ethic, and strength that you saw in each of the characters in this family, particularly the women. There were stories of seedy pasts and bad decisions made by many that were usually shared in hushed conversations and away from the judgment of others, but there was never a lack of love or support. I truly believe this is where I learned to love all people through

their flaws, through their choices, and through their identities. None of it ever mattered for this family. All that mattered was family, and if you couldn't depend on your family, who could you depend on? The matriarch of this family is my Great Aunt, my grandma's sister and best friend. I have learned so much of my identity from observing her. She approaches everything with grace, humility, and strength. She respects a socially constructed world that tells her that she may be less than due to race or gender, but she doesn't let that define her. She loves unconditionally, and perseveres through all.

I spent the summers with my mom's family in small town Iowa. I would go stay with my grandparents, and most summers my two cousins would also come up from Arizona. Because I went every summer I also started to form a good group of friends that I would hang out with throughout the break. Again, race was never really discussed here, but these summers were when I first became most aware of my race. The town that they lived in was all White, so I stood out like a sore thumb. It always seemed to bother me more than it did the friends that I made and to my family. Unfortunately, a summer at my grandparent's in Iowa was where I would first experience blatant oppression due to race. I was at the community pool with some friends, a normal pastime in this small town, I notice my friends kind of whispering and talking about something that they didn't want me to know. I swam over to them, and after much convincing they finally shared that a male classmate of theirs had made

the statement “who invited that nigger to the pool.” My friends were outraged, and something told me I should be too, because I had never had an experience like this, but I looked at my friend and said, who cares? He’s stupid, but it is not bothering me any, so let’s just keep playing. I have no idea what it was that taught me to respond in that way, but that became my approach to a lot of ignorance that would be thrown at me. I never respond in anger, mostly patience and understanding. However, this memory stuck with me, and always made me a little less comfortable in this small town. I don’t think I went to the pool much after that, and I would be nervous every time I met a new friend or their family. I remember a couple of summers I volunteered at Vacation Bible School and helped with the kids, this always made me incredibly nervous, because I knew the kids didn’t care that I looked different, but their parents might. But genuinely, this was another place that I was incredibly loved, despite that I looked different.

I tell the stories of the time I spent with both sides of my family because I think they truly define how I see my racial identity. While my race was not always an issue, I could never fully take on the privileges of my White identity while presenting as a non-White race. It did not matter what my mom or family looked like, or how many people accepted me, I was never going to feel completely a part of that group. Those things never crossed my

mind when with my dad’s family, but I felt like I didn’t fit in for other reasons, that I can’t give words too, and thus I continued to live in a world of other. I couldn’t identify in a monoracial way, because I was so much more than just my skin color. I also couldn’t deny all of the unconditional love, learning, and passion that came equally from both sides of my family. I truly am a perfect mix of two distinctly different worlds.

College was the next big piece in my racial development. I attended a Hispanic Serving Institution with 8,000 undergraduate students on the gulf coast of Texas. There were certainly not a lot of people that looked like me. Most of the Black people on campus were athletes, and there were limited resources offered for exploring racial identity. However, I would also say this is the time that I most embraced my biracial identity. I was required to pick a topic for my first year learning community that I would research throughout the semester, and I chose interracial relationships and biracial identity. This was the first time I was exposed to just how much of an issue society had with my parent’s relationship and their resulting child. I was shocked to find laws and limitations that mirrored what I knew to be the challenges that same-sex couples were going through in present day. I learned more about my family history through personal interviews, and also began to find more and more social icons that actually shared a similar story to me. This was the first time I stopped feeling like an other. I finally felt like my racial identity was important just highly under-recognized.

When I left undergrad, I purposefully chose a graduate institution that was able to offer more visual diversity for me as a woman of color. Through grad school, I think I became most aware of the intersectionality of my identities. I confidently began to identify as a woman of color. The two pieces that I felt were the most dominate parts of my identity. I found it easiest to relate to the students of color in my classes, and Black racial identity theories. I truly think this was because the students of color in my classes were the more boisterous identities. They also quickly accepted me as one of them, never questioning my background or identity. We soon had jokes and comments and shared stories of similar upbringings and family cultures. This is not to say that others in my cohort were less accepting, people of color just seemed to have more of a story to tell. I even chose to do my internship at a local Historically Black College and University (HBCU), which solidified my identification as a woman of color in some ways, but also was just a reminder that I would never fully fit in with Black as a monoracial identity.

As racial tensions continue to grow in modern day America, and the media begins to highlight more and more of these issues everyday, I have found myself re-exploring my racial identity. My natural inclination is to side with people of color, recognizing that when it comes to movements like #BlackLivesMatter, and police brutality the color of my mother's skin, or my biracial upbringing do not protect me from racial stereotypes. Therefore I am most inclined to still side with my colleagues, students, and

fellow humans of color. However, I am becoming much more aware of the need for representation of a non-monoracial identity. The first time I saw the cheerios commercial on television with an interracial couple and a biracial child, I cried. It had never occurred to me how rare it was to see my family represented in modern day media. Recently I was in the market for some children's books for an old professor who is having a biracial baby. I was inclined to see if I could find any books with a biracial main character. I found very few, but they do exist. Reading through the books, again, I had tears in my eyes. Representation matters, and this means representation of more than just the monoracial identities. I deserve to be more than an "other." I deserve to exist. I have a story beyond just the color of my skin, and while I cannot be protected from racial stereotypes, I deserve the opportunity to define race, and my identity how I choose. I am no longer an other. I am a woman of color, a product on an interracial relationship, a biracial woman. Nobody else gets to define my race, I define it.

Mi Verdad/My Truth

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“I Have The Right...To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.”

-Dr. Maria P.P Root, Bill of Rights to People of Mixed Heritage

I am a part of a transracial family: raised by a Irish Catholic mother and Russian Jewish father, and am an older sister to their biological daughter. I am adopted from Honduras. I cannot remember the first time I truly knew I was gay or adopted, but I do remember the first time I was made to feel different. I was about 6 or 7 years old. We entered a New York dinner on a weekend morning. This meant that I was going to get waffles. I was excited as the waitress approached us. She stopped, stared at me, then back at my parents and said, “Well, you must resemble your father!” I looked at him and his curly dark brown hair, thought about my own straight, thick black hair, made an awkward smile and then said, “No, I’m adopted.” The waitress turned red and quickly asked us to place our order. The truth clearly upset her and was as bitter as the orange juice I would later sip on.

Once I turned 13 years old, I admitted to myself I was gay. I knew I was different from other girls and that I often had more emotion with my friends who were girls. They were pseudo relationships, and typical baby lesbian behavior. I was mad at myself and didn’t understand how I was adopted and Latina in a

town that was 90% white, and now gay. I was already navigating how to be brown in a white world. I felt like I was being punished and would have these nightmares where I would envision coming out to my parents:

Me: Mom and Dad...I don’t know how to say this...but I am gay.

[cue telenovela dramatic music]

Dad: [Inspects birth certificate and adoption papers] No, Julia we actually did not sign up for this.

As I look back, it wasn’t hard knowing I was a lesbian--I could handle that truth. It was this feeling of knowing that If I was truly was gay, I would not only have challenges with my own family, but most likely potential issues with a biological family. For a long time, I dreamed of finding my biological mom and siblings, but just the thought of coming out to them was too much to even consider. This feeling of being unsure would increase as I would travel to Honduras.

I traveled to Honduras in 2009 and in 2013. Both times I was able to explore the entire country. I walked down the stairs from the plane and the humidity slapped me in the face. I walked in Tegucigalpa, where I was born, and everyone was my height of around 5 feet. We all had that Honduran hair, brown complexion and big brown eyes. Whether I was in the Mayan temples of Copan or the Jungles of La Ceiba, green lush mountains fol-

lowed me wherever I went. It was beautiful, it was amazing, and it was home. For the first time I was in a country where I looked like other people. It was at this time, that I knew the truth of me, I am Latina, and I am enough. I could claim my race proudly and no one would ever be able to take that away from me as they had tried before.

Now that I was home, my curiosity grew. I found a phone book for the country and looked up my biological mother's name. I remember my heart pounding. No luck. Over the years I have even looked up her name and used technology like Facebook to see if family members are out there. Some days I wish I hadn't looked. The weirdest moment was when I saw a girl younger than me, who looked just like me and even had the same name, but she said she did not know my family. I always wonder if she told me the truth.

A few months after I left Honduras, its government would experience a major upheaval. The president would be overthrown and grassroots campaigns, including LGBT groups, would finally fight to be seen and heard. Walter Tróchez, a prominent LGBT rights advocate, was shot and assassinated in Tegucigalpa on December 13, 2009. Erick Martínez, a journalist and LGBTQ activist, would be strangled to death in 2012 after leaving a gay bar in the Honduran capital. With two major activist assassinated, many wondered what their fate would be if they decided to be

be out/speak up. Over 200 LGBT people of Honduras have been killed since 2003. There are no laws that protect them.

A professor at the university I work at saw me, smiled, and called out, "Catracha!" This is another way of saying Honduran. We bonded immediately as we talked about Honduras, and when he found out I was a LGBTQ liaison for the university his face grew somber and he said in the most sincere way while holding my hand, "It is so dangerous for you at home, I hope you always take good care." That moment still makes me tear up.

Sometimes I have a hint of survivor's guilt. Being adopted from Honduras by my particular parents means I can be out and safe. I often wonder what life would have been like had I grown up in Honduras. Adoptees may not admit it, but we do wonder what an alternate life could have been like. For me, I know being a lesbian who flirts with gender queerness would not have been possible or could have risked my personal safety. Here in the States, part of my work is being a LGBTQ liaison. As a friend once told me, I am a professional gay! How would that work out in Honduras? I think often about the activists and people who rather tell the truth of being gay than being safe. I know since I found out how dangerous Honduras is for LGBT folks I have not visited and barely look for my family there.

Here's the truth. Being adopted means that sometimes we have an inner conflict on the definition of family. We are proud and

feel a deep loyalty to the family who has adopted us, yet wonder how we are supposed to search for this biological family that is blood related with an unknown emotional tie. Now adding on the political and social elements of being lesbian, it feels like a lot of pressure. I do not have to decide right now how I want to be connected to Honduras or my biological family. I have my entire life to decide that. I am allowed to feel connected or not. I am allowed to search for family or not. Most of all, my loyalty will always be to the truth and for now my truth is I am scared, but I will find a way to overcome this. It will take time for me to rediscover a country I love in this new lens of being lesbian and Catracha in a time when it is not safe.

My story is not just mine. I know so many LGBTQIA+ folks of color who know their home countries are not safe for them to visit. They have to travel and 'act straight' or say their partners are best friends. Being gay can get you killed in many places including the United States. So, let's think of our LGBTQIA+ familia out there and think how we can support them from afar. Think about where your money is going when you travel and who it supports. Stay up to date with politics, support local LGBTQIA+ grassroots campaigns and look to see if you can vote. I have dual citizenship and can vote in Honduras. These small steps make an impact and being aware of my country's struggles and triumphs is another way for me to connect.

Mixed Messages: My Journey Toward Self- Identification

12

**Benjamin
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“Mrs. Beltran, is Ben adopted?”

One of my kindergarten classmates raised his hand and asked my mother this question while she was visiting our classroom one day. Quiet giggles bubbled up all around me. His question confused me. As I grew older and reflected back on this moment, I realized that it was not so much a question as it was an assertion- the message being that children and parents are supposed to look alike. The implied exception would be adopted children and their parents, but I was not adopted and I knew that. So how come I didn't look like my mom- a white woman of mostly Irish ancestry? I would go on to encounter similar experiences. I had many other classmates throughout my life who bluntly observed that I looked nothing like my mother or expressed their confusion when they saw her. But often times the messages were much more subtle- the way a receptionist's eyes at the dentist office would dart back and forth with confusion from my mother's face to mine, or the quick glances from other shoppers when I accompanied my mother to the grocery store. It was things like this that my mother probably never noticed, but that I will never forget.

I don't recall anyone ever questioning my relation to my father when they saw us together, even though his brown skin did not match my lighter skin. I assume that people perceived us both as “non-white” even though we looked different, and maybe that is why people were less perplexed by the sight of us together. My father was the only Filipino person I knew for the first half of my life, aside from his two siblings and his parents (my aunt, uncle, and grandparents). I remember explaining to classmates, from kindergarten through high school, where the Philippines was. One of my friends insisted that Filipinos were not Asian because the Philippines were islands and

not connected to continental Asia (but somehow Japanese people were unquestionably Asian, despite meeting the same criteria). Some people said my dad looked Puerto Rican, others referred to him as Chinese. They had a difficult time conceptualizing Filipino identity, and an even more difficult time conceptualizing “half-Filipino” identity.

At school, no one ever referred to me as “mixed” or “multiracial.” My racial identity was incredibly fluid, often to my detriment. For example, when I received good grades, my peers would begrudgingly call me an “Asian nerd.” When issues of socioeconomic status came up, my friends would sneer that I knew nothing of inner-city living or hardships of any kind because I was a “white boy.” But the black-white paradigm that is prevalent throughout much of Michigan pushed me to choose a side- there was very little room in the middle. I gravitated toward my black peers, a community I found to be fairly accepting. I remember at times they referred to me as “light-skinned” and even affectionately as an “n-word” (a word I've never used, and I was very uncomfortable being called that). But I was clearly not black, and so my place within this community was tentative, sometimes questioned, and ultimately awkward for me as a teenager trying to figure out who I was.

*

Many men of color experience a sort of transformation during their adolescence, from an innocent and “race-less” child to a more threatening black or brown adult. This transformation occurs in the perceptions of others, but can be internalized. A part of my identity was cemented during high school, when the hoodies and baseball caps I wore began to make people uneasy. Teachers treated me differently. Employees would follow me around in stores. I remember

vividly one time when this happened while I was shopping with my dad. After we had left the store he said, “Well, you know why they did that to you, right?” I hesitated, and he said, “Because you’re... a teenager.” The way he said it was bursting with nuance, and I knew what he was really saying even if he could not actually say it- I was a young man of color. I don’t know if I was ever really white a single day of my life up until that point, but I certainly was never white after that.

My identity as a person of color was further solidified when I attended college. At this point, my appearance, my name, and my upbringing in a community that was predominantly people of color were enough to assure people that I was not white. But being a “person of color” and being “non-white” were both very vague and very vast. Before long, I began to learn more about what it meant for me to be a biracial Filipino. I met more Filipino Americans in college than I had ever encountered before in my life. They referred to me as a “halfie,” a term I had never heard before. I was also introduced to the term “hapa.” Many Filipina women expressed to me that they were attracted to “halfies” or “hapas.” I found this strange. I had never been fetishized in this way before. But then I reflected back on all of the times that older Filipinos had looked at me with wonder, proclaiming that I was so *guapo*. At some point during my time as an undergraduate student, I remember going home to Michigan and visiting my dad’s side of the family. One of my older Filipino relatives was introducing me and my cousins to her friends. All of my cousins are multiracial (white/Filipino) as well. When introducing us, she proclaimed, “They are improving the race!” I don’t believe that she was joking, but even if she was, the message was just as clear. Having white ancestry within the Filipino community has afforded

me strange benefits- benefits that I certainly never asked for and that reveal to me a deeply internalized racism within many Filipinos.

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The question “what are you?” is one I have received in various forms throughout my entire life. In college, the question was often worded more politely (such as, “what is your ethnic/racial background?”). However, I found that I was asked this question more frequently throughout college, and was asked to give very specific answers. If I said “I am half-Filipino” the common follow-up question was “what’s the other half?” And sometimes when I responded to this question with “white,” people wanted me to be even more specific. When I was growing up, all “white” was essentially the same. I had never known that people found so much importance in proclaiming that they were “Irish” or “German,” especially when their family had come over to the United States over a hundred years ago. Even more amusing for me was when people would try to guess the other half. Typically, people would assume that the other half was something Latino. I understood this guess from people outside of the Filipino community, who may not know what Filipinos look like or be aware that many Filipinos have Spanish surnames like “Beltran.” However, even some Filipinos guessed that I had some Latino ancestry, which signaled to me that maybe I did not look like other white/Filipino multiracial folks.

When guessing my racial/ethnic background, people typically think that I am 100% Latino. One of my earliest memories of this is from high school, when one of my classmates did not believe I was Filipino, instead arguing, “you are *luh-teen!*” (pronouncing it like “Latino” but without the “o”). More educated guesses people have come up with throughout my life have been Mexican and Puerto Ri-

can. I remember walking into a store in downtown Chicago and being greeted by one of the employees. She spoke to me completely in Spanish, and I politely nodded and tried to respond in English. Similar things have happened to me at barbershops and restaurants numerous times.

I have no issue with being perceived as Latino. In fact, most days I sort of wish that I was Latino. It's not just because I love the various Latino cultures; the real reason is that it would make my life so much easier if I actually was what people thought I was. One of the biggest burdens I have as a multiracial person is the need to explain my racial/ethnic identity during everyday social interactions. My high school Spanish classes only provide me with a limited ability to understand and speak Spanish. If a blonde-haired, blue-eyed white person walked into a Salvadoran restaurant and attempted to speak a few sentences of Spanish with messy grammar and a thick American accent, the workers in the restaurant might appreciate the effort made or at least be able to attribute their language struggles to their whiteness. If I walk into that same restaurant and do the same, I am stared at with confusion; much more is expected from me because of how I look. I have heard the phrase "*qué lástima*"- which I do know the meaning of- muttered by many Spanish-speaking people when they realize that I cannot speak the language. It is unfair for any young Latinos living in the United States to be chastised if they cannot speak Spanish; I grapple with this undeserved shame even as someone who is not actually Latino.

I struggle with the feeling that my appearance and my name lie to people- that they mislead them and ultimately disappoint them. As an undergraduate student I was a member of a senior honor society. At one of our events, the family of a student who had just been

inducted into the organization approached me. They spoke to me mostly in Spanish, and I quickly discovered why they had specifically sought me out. When I responded to them as best I could in English, I felt like I had let them down. They were probably happy to see someone like their son in the organization, only to be confused and disappointed by the reality of who I really am. I fear that I will have similar experiences with many other Latino students and their families as I embark on my career in student affairs. I want to learn Spanish so that I can better assist these students and families, but it feels like that would only add to the deception. Although some students may be able to find comfort in seeing me and realizing that I am a man of color, I am afraid that so many will want to look to me as a fellow Latino. I can do my best to serve these students, but it will always be as an outsider.

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Given all of the messages I have received from society and the people I've encountered throughout my lifetime, my journey toward self-identification has been a difficult one. When asked if I am white, my answer is "no." This has been difficult to explain to my mother, who has a noble desire for me to embrace my white ancestry and my Irish/Scottish roots. But whiteness is like an exclusive club at which the bouncer will always card me, and from which I have been turned away so many times throughout my life. At the same time, Filipino identity is a club at which I am carded but then eagerly welcomed into. Yet this club plays music I have never heard before, does not serve my favorite drinks, and everyone here seems to know one another except me. So when asked if I'm Filipino, the answer is a tentative "yes, but..." I have a *lolo* and *lola*, and I enjoyed *pancit* and *lumpia* at their house many times as a child. But it wasn't until I met

Filipino Americans in college that I came to realize I was not one of them; similar in some ways, perhaps, but an eternal visitor in their community.

I'm still deciding on the best way to self-identify racially. It's a balancing act, really- of figuring out how to identify myself in a way that feels honest and true to who I am, yet is also practical and "enough" for the people I encounter on a daily basis. Within higher education especially, I tend to simply identify as a man of color. This feels like an accurate reflection of my experiences and who I am, and it is very rarely questioned by others. But if I had lighter hair and skin, or if my last name was my mother's maiden name- Herrington- rather than Beltran, maybe people would raise an eyebrow if I called myself a man of color. Being "mixed" or "multiracial" feels like the most appropriate way for me to identify myself. Both terms suggest that I am more than just one thing; they point toward the fluidity and heterogeneity that define me. But unfortunately, these terms are misinterpreted as invitations for others to ask follow-up questions seeking specificity. I get questions like, "Oh, mixed with what?" This casts a spotlight on me, my family, my life, and my ancestors in a way that feels invasive, particularly if the question is coming from someone I do not know well. Being a mixed race man means I have to explain myself to others, which requires me to make sense of who I am for myself. It's an on-going, lifelong process of self-exploration and self-definition. But my commitment to this process will hopefully help me to aid students as they navigate their multiple, complex, and intersecting identities within the context of higher education.

My \ 'sərch\ for Meaning

13

**Sarah Gallenberg
Maloney**
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After sharing 'My Story' with classmates and colleagues in one of my M.A. classes, I decided to disclose my story with more people. Parts are still difficult for me, so please read with an open heart and mind. I do not wish to harm my family or friends, but tell my experience as openly and honestly as possible. This is the unabridged, raw and deeply emotional version.

As a little girl, my parents often told me this story in regards to my adoption. (While on my three month leave/suffering from a fit of homesickness, my dad wrote out the story and emailed it to me. I'm keeping his version for authenticity purposes.)

The Story of Sarah

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there was a little girl. And she was a pretty girl, with big, bright eyes, chubby cheeks and a smile...well, it was just about the best smile ever. And her name was Lee Hee Joo, which meant "shining jewel" and she was, about the best ever. But, Lee Hee Joo's mommy didn't have enough money to buy food and clothes for her, so talked to some people who found a family for her. She got on an airplane, flew for what seemed like forever, and ended up in a place called Minnesota. (and then it used to end, "and she lived happily ever after. The new version continues...)

As a five month old, I "hopped" (more accurate "was carried onto") a plane and sailed over the Atlantic, sent to America with dreams of a new life full of endless opportunities... Or at least

that's the American Dream version. I grew up in a White, upper-middle class, town (Rochester, MN) and sent to good private, Catholic schools. Although no one treated me differently, I knew that the composition of our family differed from others.

At the time, I never comprehended the magnitude and helpfulness of having these support systems in my life. My best friend and I used to pretend we were twin sisters when we walked around in public. I had a great childhood, filled with days playing street hockey in the cul du sac and biking around our development. Family and friends recognized the importance of teaching us about our Korean heritage; they read us stories about Korea and adoption, learned how to cook Korean food, allowing us a space to be proud of our Korean heritage. We celebrated my "airplane day" each year (some call it arrival day, others gotcha day), which I found a helpful practice. (I know not everyone finds relief in this holiday. Some see it as another marker of the relinquishing, like birthdays or Mother's day.) For me, birthdays were the hardest day of the year, but my airplane day was one day we could celebrate our family, grateful to have one another, regardless of the circumstances. I spent summers at Korean culture camps, and when the camps in northern Minnesota became popular enough to fill, forcing us to sign up for wait lists, my parents compiled resources in my hometown and started a Korean Culture Camp in Rochester, allowing hundreds of Korean adoptees the possibility of discovering more about what it means to be adopted. This was my family; I went to these

campus surrounded by other Koreans/ adoptees for a week, just playing and learning about the culture abroad with which I had absolutely little in common, other than my physical traits. I found sanctuary there.

Still, I continued to make myself fit into White society without really knowing it.

I suffered through the family tree projects, documenting my adoptive parent (AP) family heritage. Of course, I thought about my biological family during these projects. However, I respected my extended adoptive family, and I believed they deserved the preservation and study that came. I gave presentations about Korea, while making jokes about "Asians" with my friends; after all, I wasn't/aren't "really Asian." My Korean heritage could be explored for a week in the summer and in the safety of our home; the other 50+ weeks of the year, I worked hard to cover up my Asian features with make-up and wore name brand clothes. I used to thank God that I had the creases in my eye lids aka double eyelids...

Then, the summer after I finished the 7th grade, I received the chance of a lifetime; my family went on a three week vacation to South Korea. I remember being in the airport, with several other families and their adoptees not fully able to grasp the significance of this journey to our birth country. Looking back on the trip, I have select memories: waking up on the airplane at 6 a.m. smelling the weird plane food, visiting what seemed like

hundreds of boring museums and temples, shopping (Korea has amazing shopping), and eating strange foods. However, the greatest feeling of pride came from being surrounded by millions of people who I actually resembled. I looked around wondering if the passing women were my birth mother or if I had brothers and sisters in uniform at the area high schools. While on vacation, I saw the adoption agency I went through, met my foster mother and learned about my mannerisms as a bad, and we played with orphans waiting to be adopted. They allowed me to look at my adoption file, filled with pictures and my birth mothers fingerprints. While we were there, I knew that I was not ready to meet my birth family. At that point, my concerns focused on getting ready for high school and that transitional process. However, we decided that it was best to keep the search open, going behind my back with the agency to do work to find her.

About two months after we got back from Korea, my parents set me down and told me that they found my birth mother. They gave me a few pictures of her and her new family. We kept the process moving forward; I decided that since she knew I had found her, I should probably work on meeting her. Unfortunately, I discovered my birth mother did not reciprocate the feelings. As of today, I am still unsure about her life status (i.e. if she married to my birth father, if she married at all, if her husband knows about me, etc.) and experiencing this rejection, again, opened new wounds. I resented my birth mother and my

adoptive parents for a long time. I felt more alone than I had before I started searching; I wanted to be the one making the decisions.

By the time high school rolled around, I dismissed most, if not all, of my Korean heritage. I took down the pictures, dolls, fans, and hid my Hanboks in the back of my closet. Once a year, I assisted with the cultural fair that took place at our school and represented Korea. (It was the one time a year where being different was "cool.") My mom and I stayed up late and cooked food for students to sample and printed photos and the Korean alphabet to put on display.

During my time in high school, I started looking for love and positive affirmations in all the wrong places. Reflecting back on those years, I realize that my identity crisis turned me into a very attention-seeking person. I wanted people to notice me, which ended in me searching in for something in other people. I made many bad decisions; I stopped going to my extracurricular activities, skipped classes, drove recklessly, and did all sorts of other things. One thing led to another, and I ended up becoming pregnant my junior year of high school. I felt incredibly lonely and isolated, and I spent the majority of the summer before senior year in my basement. I stopped talking to my friends, dancing (which I had been doing since I was three), used my boyfriend of the time as a crutch, and sunk into depression.

My parents placed me in therapy and slowly, I put my life back in order. With my counselor, I decided to make an adoption plan for my baby. I don't know if I really understood everything that was happening, but I think deep down I knew I was still a kid myself. Somehow through the adoption plan process, I learned to grow in my own adoption story, recognizing the complexity of adoption. An adoption plan was the hardest, most life-changing, painful, confusing and sad process, but it also came with hope and love. Through my own pregnancy, I began to relate to my birth mother. I felt less angry and more a part of her than I had ever before. We shared a new common ground other than our physical features. I still did not know her circumstances, but I knew the emotions surrounding the relinquishing of a child. Somehow, I survived high school a stronger, better-developed person.

In graduate school, my adoption story evolved into a struggle with my understanding my racial identity. I spent a lot of those years very angry. I battled with what it means to be Korean-American and a woman of color and how to deal with microaggressions in my life. I began exploring social justice education and uncovering identity based injustices and inequities, culminating with my thesis researching experiences of other adoptees in higher education.

Fast forward to today... I have found a partner who is a true partner in the meaning of the word, and we were married in a beautiful ceremony on a college campus where we both met working as SA professionals. He is a part of my birth daughter, Chloe's life, and he knows the pain and struggles that bubble up for me. There were still moments where I would be thinking about my birth family far away and wishing they were involved in my life as I started this new chapter. As I get close to celebrating my 30th birthday, I still struggle with the "who am I" questions on a daily basis. As a child, the two most important questions I asked and still hear in the back of my mind, "Why me?" and "Who do you look like?" I don't think I'll ever lose this until if/when I reunite with my family. I don't know my medical history and cannot tell a doctor if a history of heart disease exists, which is unfortunate for my birth daughter as well. For Christmas, I gave my brother and I DNA kits through 23andMe. I discovered that there is a chance I have a great-grandparent who is Japanese and a great-great grandparent who is Chinese. I hope to explore the histories of both these countries and cultures and their relationship with Korea in the future. I also received some information about my genetics and who gave me certain traits. Although it's not a complete picture, it has contributed to my healing. My partner and I discuss visiting Korea to continue my search and discuss what family means to us now and in the future. In my professional role, I spend a lot of time

reflecting on my racial identity development and helping students have language to dialogue with one another.

The dictionary defines the word \sərch\ as a transitive verb meaning "to look or inquire carefully 2: to make painstaking investigation or examination." That is precisely what I am doing, and sometimes it is painstaking. My own struggles lie with my Korean-American identity as it exists within the parameters of the United States, but also how it exists within the parameters of my family and my work. I am a middle-woman, not fully Korean and not White-American, yet raised by White parents in a predominantly White community and work at a PWI. My search and my journey is ever evolving, but filled with hope, love and promise of tomorrow.

The Currency of Identity: Personifying Mixed Race in America

14

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When you look at the immigration history of Italians to America it's not particularly pretty, but growing up in 1990's Catholic school I learned about my people through the Italian Renaissance. At home, Nonno would share stories about how he forged his mother's signature in order to get on the boat to America, and spent a majority of his youth selling statues on the street. I was exposed to two completely different versions of what it meant to be Italian, and I never took the time to really think about that. I learned about being Cuban in the context of Castro terrorizing an island at school, but at home, being Cuban meant spending weekends at Abuela's house learning how to perfectly balance rum and Coke to meet Tio's standards. Both parts of my childhood involved humbly loving America and the opportunities this country brought my ancestors, but neither aspect of my youth taught me to understand how my family's story looked through the lens of race or privilege. I loved my childhood and I loved each side of my family, but I was always curious to understand how my family's identity personified race in America. I think it's important for me to write my story because I've noticed that the Cubans and Italians I've met throughout the years are very uncomfortable talking about race with me.

My understanding of race throughout my childhood was in the context of noticing what I wasn't. I wasn't Irish and I wasn't Greek (thanks Nonno). I definitely wasn't Puerto Rican or Mexican (Abuela made sure we were well aware of that). I didn't

have beautiful blonde hair and I didn't spend my summers going away to camp. I didn't celebrate St. Patrick's Day like my friends and my 5th grade teacher never called me "Biddy" like she called them. I never fit in, so I understood my ethnicity from a deficit perspective. But I didn't really realize that I looked at myself as less than until I found a mentor in undergrad who helped me understand that my ethnicity and consequently my race, was currency. You see, in my family, we never talked about race, but we constantly lived our culture.

I've noticed that people with my ethnic background don't spend a lot of time talking about race because the rest of the world tends to look at us as white. Heck- even people with my shade of skin consider themselves white. Being "white" was always a factor. My brother Dan and I would come home from family vacations in south Florida looking like black bears while Mama and my other brother Mike resembled the color of honey bears. How could people belonging to the same family have such different melanin? During the summer I would go to the public pool with my friends and watch in disgust as they slathered themselves in SPF 50. I just didn't get it- why did I get brown in shades that they didn't? Why did they rub chalky lotion on their bodies to keep themselves from turning my color? And how come I wasn't sent to the pool with that stuff? Mama was always very protective but on pool days she just packed me up with a towel and told me to behave myself. SPF smelled terrible. My friends even had special shampoo that kept their hair

from turning green from the chlorine. Meanwhile it took my dad an entire bottle of No More Tangles to get through the challenge of taming my curls. We lost a few good picks during my childhood. Babbo would grab onto a chunk of my hair at the scalp and rake the pick through my curls like he was stabbing a piece of meat. I always tried not to cry because even in my young age I could tell that the experience was as painful for Babbo as it was for me.

My skin color(s) and hair texture were things that I was always aware of, but I never thought about where they came from. When I started thinking critically about my race in college I would ask Mama over and over again what race she was- hoping she would say brown so I could run forward and embrace my newly discovered Latinidad with her approval. But instead Mama would say white and remind me that our ancestors came from Spain and therefore we were not Latino, but Hispanic. I so desperately wanted to understand who I was so I could be proud of myself, but every time I tried connecting what I was learning in school to conversations I was having at home, I felt like I took two steps back. There was a good two years where I tried to convince Mama that she was brown, but my efforts were worthless. Mama was very comfortable with her whiteness and didn't understand why I was wasting my time trying to convince her that we were otherwise. It honestly deterred me from socializing with white people for a while. I threw words at her like internalized oppression and racism and she wanted nothing

to do with it. My rebellious daughter instincts would kick in and make me reject everything she was saying. Don't you see how the world treats you like a brown person?! I would claim in exasperation while she looked at me matter of factly. In those arguments I could see her distaste at my choice of college becoming even stronger for creating the progressive person I was becoming. I became comfortable identifying myself as brown and immersed myself in the tiny microcosm of the social justice community at the University of Wisconsin-Madison because it was the only place I could talk about this stuff. It was hard to go home because my dad was a constant reminder of my whiteness, subtly reminding me that I had another part of my identity that I was conveniently ignoring. I loved them and missed them so much, but I had a really hard time feeling connected to them during that time in my life.

I feel the need to let you know that my parents are really, really great parents. I mean, they're awesome. I owe everything in life that has made me successful to them and I don't thank them half as much as I should for helping me become the person I am today. Even when I denied them my affection in college while I was discovering race and privilege they never gave up on me. They listened to me drop fancy terminology while I helped Babbo roast the chestnuts for our Thanksgiving stuffing, and separated yolks while Mama melted the sugar to make a flan for Christmas. Writing my story has made me really self-conscious, because I don't want readers walking away with the

thought that my parents had a negative impact on my understanding of race growing up. They just told me what they knew and stayed true to how they understood their own stories. I know that in my growing pains I hurt my parents because I construed their truths as inadequate. I made their stories less than the realities I was discovering in my own journey to understand my race, because I couldn't stop thinking about my race from a deficit perspective. It was always about what they weren't understanding for me. Maybe if I had focused on what they were understanding, I would be writing a different story. I'm tremendously proud of my parents and the way they raised us to value our cultural identities. I'm still in the process of meshing my life experiences and professional development and I often wonder if this is a concept that other folks struggle with. Our field is so laden with buzzwords that help justify the reason to engage with mixed race concepts that we seem to forget the tremendously emotional side of examining race. Maybe it's because our field is still learning how to think about mixed race so we are desperate to label it in a way that helps us understand it.

Today I identify as a halfie. Half-white, half-brown; Hispanic to be exact. I've noticed that for us mixed people it can be important to honor what shade of brown we are and also how brown we are. The one-drop rule is still for real. I love being a halfie and default to explaining my ethnicity when people ask about my background. I've noticed that I never say "I'm half-white, half-brown." I always say that I'm Hispanic and Italian. I'm yel-

lowish in the winter and I'm brown in the summer. I get away with a lot. And on top of that, I'm one of the whitest shades of brown people out there. So even in the Brown world I'm still walking around with a lot of privilege in the brown tendencies that I do have. This became super evident when I moved to Miami from Chicago.

Up north I wasn't looked at like I was Hispanic to begin with. You know that whole never-being-x-enough concept that we always talk about in mixed race studies? That's for real. In Miami I quickly learned that light-skinned Cubans like to think we run the town, and there's a lot of us, so being a white Cuban is a pretty good deal. People are proud to be Cuban here and they seem to try really hard to not be construed as the other countries in Miami that represent m

their immigration story with pride. We are a really, really, strange people. We spell our names with the letter Y, put Vick's vapo-rub on everything and use the term "tiki tiki" to describe the music of Miami's youth. We try so hard to fit into a world that looks at us in curiosity, while we actively deny cultures who understand our story.

It seems like the older Cuban generation in Miami seems to have a very difficult time exploring America's indoctrination of whiteness into our history. They just embrace it as a sign that their family's decision to move to the United States was the right one. But there are times that I just feel so...white. And I

think it has a lot to do with the fact that I was raised in the upper-middle class of Chicago. I was raised to go to college and instilled with an appreciation of traveling. A lot of the women who attend the university I work at are very concerned with spending their college days searching for a husband and toning their figure. I know that those qualities aren't a Cuban thing, per se. But I see those tendencies in so many of the Cuban women I advise, and sometimes it keeps me from seeing commonalities in other aspects of our Cuban identity.

I learned how to be mixed from examining stereotypes. Growing up I was really concerned about fitting in with each side of my family so I always paid close attention to Abuela's habits in the kitchen and Tanna's fierce loyalty to her family. It was pretty awesome growing up Italian in Chicago because my family was seen as pretty tough. I grew up in the same neighborhood Babbo grew up in, so our family's name carried weight. Mix generations of Lucchesi's with four ginormous uncles, an Italian bread company, and a city full of delicious Italian eateries, and you've got my Italian family. One might say I really hit the jackpot when I was born. My family came from the most privileged part of Italy, Tuscany. From Nonno's perspective this obviously meant we were the best kind of Italian, and should not be compared to our southern-Italian counterparts who lived all over our neighborhood. For as long as I can remember Babbo had a mustache like Mike Ditka and taught me everything I needed to know about Italian cold-cuts. I learned how to be Roman-

Catholic through this side of my family and along with that inherited a healthy dose of Catholic guilt. I spent my childhood and consequently my adult life trying to make my parents proud. Disappointing them will always be one of my greatest fears in life.

If these experiences are the same ones that my white friends had growing up, I never noticed. My house had a lot more gold accenting than my friends' houses did and they didn't grow up reading books about Strega Nonna. I spent my summers playing soccer and watching Nonno tend to his rose garden. Sometimes I get confused about what it means for me to be white because the white friends I had growing up were so drastically different from myself. When I went to Madison I learned about white Midwestern people and my mind was blown.

My peers drank Pabst because it was cool and listened to Styx and Yellowcard. They loooooooved football to the point where the university added a fifth quarter to continue celebrating even after the game was over. And what was this nonsense about drinking beer out of a boot? My friends' parents had hobbies that didn't include cleaning or doing housework. I'll never forget the time my college boyfriend told me his mom had turned his bedroom at home into a sewing room. I silently looked at him in disbelief- I could see that his feelings were hurt, but he wasn't surprised. Mama wouldn't dare touch my room because the goal was to get me to come home as much as possible. How could it be possible that his mother would engage in something

that would make it inconvenient for him to come home? White people dude. I just didn't get it. Other than the color of my father's skin, I just didn't understand what made me white. I think a lot of my white tendencies aren't necessarily grounded in how my family lives their life, but what the world expects of me as a white person.

Abuela used to trek me around to various grocery stores when I was little. She turned into a powerhouse of a shopper at the Hispanic grocery stores because she knew her way around an avocado and different types of Fabuloso. She would have full-blown conversations with the ladies at the check-out counters about the weather and what she was about to cook while I obediently stood in silence and collected the bags. But at the Jewel she would look at each item in the store like it was a foreign object. The labels were different and the platanos just weren't ripe enough. At the check-out I would become instinctively protective. Even though it was obvious that Abuela was the paying customer, the clerks would only speak to me while Abuela would stand as close to me as possible, waiting for me to tell her the total cost in Spanish so she could fumble in her coin purse for the correct change. She would hand the change to me to give to the cashier and wait silently for the receipt to print. I would always stand a little straighter and be very clear in my pronunciation of "thank you," and "have a good evening."

My instincts would kick in when we got to the store and I became a more assertive version of myself. I knew that in those moments my role was to serve as a liaison between one culture and the other, and that my proper English and confidence around the shelves of Hershey's candy and American gossip mags would make Abuela feel more comfortable in going to the local Jewel to purchase a can of condensed milk or some garlic instead of driving twenty minutes away to go to the Hispanic store.

At multiple points in my life I have felt guilty about my mixed-race privilege. My ability to cascade from one culture to the next is an American right that I never had to fight for. In a country where single-race women in the media are criticized for appropriating cultures with hairstyles, clothing, attitudes and fake tanners, I can get away with that stuff because people are allowed to assume that I am favoring one side of myself over the other. It's acceptable for me to act white or to act brown. I am constantly questioned in spaces dominated by race, but I am rarely excluded. I've learned how to play this game by using my hair, the way I talk and dress, and topics I bring up in casual conversations to my advantage. I've learned how to fit in, but the real privilege is that I'm usually given an opportunity to fit in in the first-place.

Lots of people know how to play the game and fit into a standard of appropriation, but they have to get inside the circle first.

I know that the racial privilege I have comes with a tremendous responsibility, and sometimes I find myself getting so caught up in finally being accepted as a Hispanic for example, that I forget I have work to do in challenging the ways in which my Cuban peers understand their racial identity. I'm in the very special position of having the street cred needed get the ball rolling, but I still need to prove myself. This work requires me to really know my people and how I understand my racial identity. That's why I'm constantly studying people. It's made me an introvert as I've gotten older. When I forget that I'm white because I'm being brown in the space that I'm in, I embarrass myself. I say ignorant things or reveal my lack of knowledge about an artist or phrase that I should already know as a Cuban person. I seem to have subconsciously developed a habit of being quiet in the hopes that people don't know to what degree I'm not x, y, or z. In white spaces I have a tendency to fall back on my education. I use my multiple degrees to guide my conversations with people- it's possible that this is the case because I tend to only interact with white people in academic settings. Most of my friends and the family I am close to embrace some level of ethnic pride and are quick to be proud of their background. I can count the number of friends I have who can't identify their genealogy and refer to themselves as mutts on one hand.

I find myself getting frustrated with white people a lot faster than I get frustrated with Hispanic white people when I talk about race. I honestly think I used to be better at those conver-

sations when I worked at Madison because I had embraced my Midwestern whiteness and the people doing justice work needed me to use my whiteness to get through to students and staff. I had better control over my attitude. In Miami it seems to be more socially acceptable to live my life with passion so I've allowed my *sabor* to run wild and free. I scare people a little bit when I go home now because my personality has become a lot stronger. The point is that people with light-skinned privilege like me need to identify spaces where we can have the highest impact and do the hard work on ourselves and with each other. It's cliché, I know. But it's true and it's so important.

I need to keep challenging people with my ethnic background to think critically about race because sometimes we are really far behind. I keep searching for Cuban and Italian faces in the Black Lives Matter Movement. My people have spent so long trying to justify their successful presence in the United States that we seem to be eager to disaffiliate ourselves with groups of people who are fighting for the same rights we fought for generations ago and are still fighting for today. Anti-racism work is a little easier with college students because in general they like to belong to movements- it's flashy and cool. The older generations that I talk to about racism are eager to blame marginalized groups for their own problems. It's difficult for them to think of a system that is set up to make a group of people unsuccessful because their ancestors were able to come out on top. I'm still learning how to have those conversations, but I'm getting better

every day. And it helps to have people in my life who are willing to take the time to have these conversations with me.

My biggest weakness in my journey for racial justice is still with my family. I love them so much and it's so hard to have conversations with them that open the door for disagreements because I still battle my desire to abide by everything they say. I just want to make them proud and I don't want to disappoint their expectations of me. Family is the center of my parent's life so the thought of me engaging in work or a relationship they don't approve of scares me into sleepless nights. But I know I'm doing good work and at the end of the day my family will at least try to understand the decisions I've made. After all, my parents just want me to be healthy and happy. And I'm happiest and healthiest when I'm having conversations about this stuff because that means I'm becoming a better person and developing a stronger understanding of myself. I'm developing more confidence in myself as a halfie every day. I just need to keep identifying how I can maximize my privilege to keep doing the good work.

I am ok

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Ty M. Krueger
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Community
Director

I am a transracial adoptee. I was born in Pusan, Korea and shipped over to Detroit Metro Airport when I was seven months old. I say shipped over as it was described to me that in that time, babies being adopted were flown over on planes like cargo. There were no or few caretakers to accompany the babies on the trip. I was supposed to arrive at 5 months old, but was kept in Korea longer because I had anemia as a baby and arrived in Michigan a little malnourished. The little I know about my time in Korea is that my birth parents were teenagers – mother was 17 and father was 19. Additionally, the first months of my life were spent in an orphanage. I was given a Korean name at birth as well.

As a transracial adoptee, the way in which I see myself has been quite fluid throughout my life. As I go day to day in my life, I try to not focus on how I identify myself and what identities I may fall into as this is something I have found to be quite challenging. At different phases and levels of heightened emotion, I have overall discovered that I do not like being categorized. I hate being placed into “boxes” that I did not choose for myself. The choice I make for myself is not to ascribe to the labels that society assigns to me, as much as possible. When forced to introduce myself with descriptors, I describe myself as a young professional from Michigan that grew up on a farm and moved around to look for new experiences. Being from the Great Lakes state is one of the most salient aspects of my identity. However, society would first identify me as some type of Asian

male with glasses that probably fits into numerous Asian stereotypes. As such, I often choose not to describe or define myself rather than share any information. It is easier to not say anything at all.

Growing up in a small town that was predominantly white, it has become normal for me to be one of the “only ones” present, if not the only one, that is specifically Asian or non-white. Prior to college, I was often the only one or one of two that was a person of color present. Also prior to college, I did not recognize any sort of impact this may have had on me.

Like most, I do not have huge impactful memories from elementary school that have shaped who I am as an adult. I do remember getting the standard questions Asian children often get such as why is your face so flat or why are your eyes so squinty. It was when I was switched to the private school of my home church that really impacted my schooling years. There are not many experiences I would ever describe as truly disliking or even hating; however, attending the private school from 3rd-8th grade would be such an experience for me. One of the most prominent experiences I can remember vividly was during a gym class while playing a simple game of kickball. The competitive nature of the activity had been amplified for the young middle schoolers by the attitude of our gym teacher. I had gotten one of my 6th grade classmates out by catching the ball, which was a rarity. Because of the competitive atmosphere, the stu-

dent that I had gotten out responded by saying “Go back to where you came from! You don’t belong here.” Not to make excuses for him, but I do believe that the other student had no idea the impact of what he was saying – regardless of where he had learned to say those words. The fact that there was no reaction and no response from the gym teacher was the first time that I remember feeling kind of alone and unwelcome. Such an aggressive comment from a child with no response from a teacher/administrator who was supposed to protect and guide students would have an effect on anyone. That was an experience that has stuck with me and while my understanding of the experience has changed over the years, it still impacts me today.

In high school, my racial identity was not something that was on the forefront of my mind at all. My closest friends in high school never made race an issue or even brought it up in discussion. The fact that I was obviously the only Asian in our class did not seem to be a big deal. In my class of 119, there were only three of us who could be easily identified as people of color and even one could pass for white if she had chosen to do so. Only a few times in high school do I recall having my race brought up. On numerous occasions, there was simple high school bullying from high school students that consisted of making “Asian eyes” at me. On another occasion, in my junior English class, my teacher had been discussing one of the books we had been reading. In trying to make a point to the class from the book,

she commented how the entire class was white. When one of my close friends pointed out that I was indeed in the room, the teacher’s recovery from her comment was ungraceful in her saying, “I don’t see you as Asian.” The class laughed at her comment and the conversation continued. Regardless of the comment, the teacher was one of my favorite teachers in high school and because of where I was with my identity development at that age, I did not know how to act or how to feel about the statement. I was just left confused and so I moved on and didn’t think about it too much.

When looking at colleges to attend, I remember being invited to a campus visit/event for one of my top choices. While I was excited to be there, through the daylong event I remember feeling that something was a little “off.” I remember thinking that it was odd that there were no white people present. Not until I took a look at the giveaways from the event did I realize that it was a “Minority Day” for accepted students. At the time, I only thought it was a little odd and did not necessarily understand why this type of event might be important for college students.

As a whole, I had only applied to four colleges in Michigan and had been accepted to all. The final decision came down to what type of financial assistance I could obtain from each. For one college in particular, I had actually received a full ride scholarship. However, I chose to turn it down as it was specifically called a “minority scholarship.” The thing I remember feeling at

the time was that I did not want to be given something specifically for the identity of being a minority – I do not think I fully understood what that meant at the time.

The college I chose to attend happened to be in what is considered to be the bible belt of Michigan and is actually located right near an area that has a Guinness World Record for the largest number of churches on one street per capita. The population and setting was not too different from what I had experienced prior to college. Upon starting, I immediately looked for organizations in which to get involved. The organizations I joined were predominantly white, even though I did not realize it at the time.

Most of the friendships I developed in my years in college were with white individuals – this is what seemed normal to me.

When I was in my second year of college, I looked for additional scholarship opportunities as financial aid often diminishes for many students after the first year. After researching online for different options, I visited the Multicultural Office on campus to inquire about opportunities. This was not a multicultural office as we might think of today that oversees multicultural organizations and programs. This specific office was connected more to enrollment services and admissions. Upon asking about scholarship opportunities, I was told quite plainly that because I had not utilized the office as a first year student that the office had nothing for me. I proceeded to ask additional questions about how to get more involved, however the response did not

change. It was this singular experience that started to develop solid negative feelings toward what it meant to identify with one specific minority group. The experience had me believing that because I had not initially chosen to identify myself as a minority, that I was not part of a multicultural community or a minority community. It created an adverse feeling toward identifying myself as a minority that lasted through the rest of my undergraduate career. One of the continuous awkward experiences was that the organization (Residence Housing Association) with which I was highly involved held an open office right next to the campus Asian council office space. This was made awkward because whenever I would be working in the RHA office, I would often get looks and questions from those in the Asian area alluding to why I was not a part of their organizations.

As aforementioned, I had grown accustomed to being the only Asian or only person of color in the groups for which I was a member. One experience that I find funny is when I attended a National Association of College & University Residence Halls (NACURH) conference at UC-Berkeley. As some may or may not know, there is a higher population of Asians on the eastern coast, but UC-Berkeley also has a high population of Asian students. Being immersed in an environment where there were lots of Asians was immediately uncomfortable. Being one of many was not a feeling I was familiar with at all. It left me pondering if I should feel more at ease in an environment where I am the only one or one of many.

In my junior year, I became an RA. My undergraduate institution also had Multicultural Assistants (MAs) that were supposed to help expose residents to and educate on topics of diversity and social justice. I remember going through the diversity trainings and feeling that the trainings were very “over the top” and aggressive as they focused on the student staff members feeling bad about themselves. Other participants may have had different perspectives on how the specific diversity training was implemented, but this was solely my observation. I also remember that the MAs were given special treatment and more prominence than the standard RAs by the Assistant Director that supervised the specialized position. This prominence unfortunately created animosity between the standard RAs and the MAs and overall added to the impression diversity had on the staff members. As I was part of the majority of standard RAs, I remember feeling that animosity. However, I remember also being asked by other staff and residents as well why I was not the MA or assuming that I was the MA simply because I was a racial minority. This further solidified my feelings of being adverse to anything that was associated with being a minority.

My motivations for deciding that I wanted to pursue a career in student affairs stemmed from my experiences of identity development related to my race. In going through the placement exchange for graduate assistantships, I had an interesting experience with an employer. You always hear about the warnings of interactions in elevators, however, my experience was slightly

different. After a long day of interviews, an employer struck up a conversation with me in the elevator as to what I thought was just casual, polite small talk. The next morning I had received an invitation to interview with the school of the employer that had spoken to me in the elevator. Yes, I should have been pleased and flattered that the person had wanted to learn more about me, but what threw me for a loop was the title of the position I was invited to interview for – Graduate Assistant for Asian Student Support. The fact that I had not received an invitation to interview until after the employee had seen me in person led me to fear that the invitation was only given after the person had seen me in person and knew that I was Asian. This is something that would not be known simply by looking at my name or my resume. As I tried to process through the situation, I even asked a friend who worked at the institution if he had passed my name on or recommended me for the position just to make sure the intent was positive. Unfortunately, it came down to the employer offering the interview simply because he found out that I was Asian. This experience impacted my job search experience and impacted how I viewed the overall process of finding a place to work.

There was a large number of international students especially from East Asian countries where I held my graduate assistantship. For the smaller rural atmosphere, this often created challenges for domestic populations because of language barriers. I was often assumed to be an international student before oth-

ers had an actual conversation with me. For instance, I recall walking through a mall during grad school and visually seeing a retailer make eye contact with me and proceed to walk away from me. I then observed that the retailer walked up to a white customer and struck up a conversation and offered immediate assistance. It was not until I went to the counter to pay and showed that I indeed spoke English did the retailer show signs of relief and openly conversed with me. One of my favorite classes in grad school was the class about student development theories. As one of the professor took us through the numerous identity development theories, I remember becoming confused and somewhat frustrated as I kept waiting for us to get to the theories that would describe my own experience, but this never happened. There were even few theories on the identity development of multiracial/ethnic individuals. It was at this point that I remember feeling more empowered and energized to see why this was. I became more keenly aware of interactions and reactions surrounding how people perceived my race and ethnicity.

In my current position, we have interviewed a few people of color each year for positions. I remember one specific candidate that happened to be Asian as well. I remember feeling worried if the individual was to get hired – not because I would not be the only one anymore, but because I was worried about people confusing the two of us. I had seen Black staff members in our department frequently get called the same name as is often

unfortunately typical. In my mind, I felt that I had worked too hard to differentiate my work from my peers that I was afraid of losing my credibility because others would confuse the two of us. Even in the division of student affairs where I work, I have more often than not been the only Asian male. In the few short years where there happened to be another Asian male in the division, fellow student affairs staff would often call us by the wrong name. There have been times when the atmosphere has been so intense as a result of inappropriate actions or comments, that I would sometimes wake up each morning thinking to myself, “What sort of offensive comment would be made to me today.”

One of the most impactful experiences I have had in recent years was having the opportunity to attend the Social Justice Training Institute. This experience was truly validating and empowering for me as it helped me learn more about myself and make sense of my experiences. Even though I happened to be the only one present that was a transracial adoptee, there were still other experiences with which I could relate especially those of multiracial individuals. While these experiences are still different, the similarities were helpful in understanding and learning how others have made sense of where they belong and how they fit into the world at large.

My family has very Midwestern small town roots in Michigan, Missouri, and Wisconsin along with strong German influences.

The area I grew up in ties me somewhat to two hometowns, both of which are small. The main town has an approximate population of 20,000 and the next door town where my elementary and high school are located has a population of almost 5,000. It is primarily a farming community. The high points of the area are that Lay-Z-Boy furniture was founded there and we are also the home of Miss America 1988. I grew up on a farm, but my parents were not farmers as we rented out our farmland to a neighbor farmer. My father was an automotive engineer and my mother was a teacher and school librarian. Aside from my parents, I have one older sister that is two years older. She also happens to be adopted, but we are not biological siblings.

Growing up, we were always around extended family as my grandfather had 11 brothers and sisters and several of them lived within a 5 mile radius of our farmhouse – it was like having numerous sets of grandparents. As a result, my immediate and extended family were very important to me growing up and played a big impact in my view of family as a whole. My identity of being adopted was not something that was ever an issue or a topic of conversation, at least for which I was present. I was simply a member of the family and treated no differently than any other member of the family.

I was also raised in a strongly Lutheran family of the Missouri synod. Those that grew up in that specific synod will understand how the strict values and traditions of that specific type of

Lutheran varies from other synods in same religion. I attended the private school of my home church where it was taught that if you were anything other than Missouri Synod Lutheran that you were going to hell. This is something that had a big impact on the choices I made growing up and contributed to a slight sense of elitism with my identity. What I didn't quite conceptualize any sort of elitism or privilege ends or is limited by my racial and ethnic identities. This religious background has greatly shaped my values regardless of if I still hold the same beliefs that I was taught as a child.

Growing up, my parents did not make strong effort to immerse me in any sort of Korean culture. To be quite clear, this is not something I feel I missed out on and not something that I hold any anger toward my parents for how they raised me and my sister. I believe they raised us no different than if we had been their biological children because to them, we were no different.

I remember when I was really young my parents took my sister and I to a gathering with other Korean adoptees that had worked with the same social worker for the adoption process. While I do not remember much about the experience, I remember that it felt odd being there and that it was not where we belonged. I have never asked my parents why, but we as a family never attended another event such as that.

I would not say that I lead a sheltered life. However, I would say that because of the environment in which I was raised, I was

not exposed to the different types of racism or even racist acts that occur until college and graduate school. I would also state that my parents being from small towns and being white had not been exposed to much of that either. For instance, it was not until I got to graduate school that I was told that referring to Asians as Orientals was derogatory. To me, it had been an endearing term as my mother had called me her little oriental while I was growing up. To me, the word was associated with love. My mother was mildly heartbroken when I shared with her that it was considered an offensive, even though I had said it was not offensive to me.

One of the most interesting aspects of my growing immediate family was when my sister began dating (and eventually marrying) a man that happened to be Haitian. It did not bother me that he was Haitian in the least as my main concern was if he would be accepted by the family as a whole and if they would make inappropriate and offensive comments about his race. Thankfully, the biggest issue was not his race and was more so the fact that he was catholic. As I now have a nephew of mixed race, I often worry about how he will be viewed, how people will categorize him, and how that will impact his view of himself.

Having multiple identities with which I feel I can associate has made it confusing at times as well as frustrating. As a result of the confusion that comes with trying to make sense of multiple identities, I live my life focusing on just being me. I do not want

to be associated with just one identity. There was a period of time where I would wake up worrying what type of offensive actions or statements I would encounter that day. Even though I do not avoid conflict, having to live life with that type of worry is not healthy. I often feel trapped when I have to pick an identity. Society will forever, at least during my lifetime, put me into boxes and categorize me taking away any opportunity for me to choose my own identity. So, I often opt to not choose any specific identity.

Going through different phases of identity development, I feel I am at a place right now where I try to not ascribe to a certain identity and just focus on being an individual. I do not go day to day with any specific identity attached to my being. For instance, I do not wake up every morning with being Asian as the first thing on my mind. The most salient identity I feel I carry is being "Asian." However, being Asian doesn't even truly have a definition for me. It is more of what I may feel at a specific moment. From several different identity activities I have participated in over the years, the question is often asked "with which identity are you most proud?" I can never answer this question as I do not feel that I am necessarily proud of any specific identity and that I necessarily need to be proud of any of them. I have grown content with just being an individual person with experiences that are my own.

We always hear especially around recruitment time that it is important for our students to physically see professionals or leaders that look like themselves while in college. This was never an ideal that I bought into, even though I understood what it meant. I had not had this experience as a student, it was not something I bought into because I had found my own way through struggles and challenges. Working in housing and residence life, we see ourselves as a homebase and focal point of the college experience. In recent years, I have observed more of my students of color seeking out people that look like them in other offices. We take for granted that there are some intrinsic needs that we cannot fulfill simply because of the way we look. On the other side, even though some of my students may look like me, it will be impossible for me to ever truly understand their experience or they mine.

One of the things I have found most interesting about being a transracial adoptee is being able to see different aspects of privilege that having a white name gives. Having a name that can be viewed as “white” and especially a German last name, others can mistake me for being white or at least definitely not Asian. This has played out in several ways over the years. When applying for jobs and by just submitting resumes and cover letters, my race is not evident in the information that is provided. On several occasions when I show up in person for the interview after making it past a paper screening or phone interview, I have received both surprised looks as well as com-

ments such as “oh, I wasn’t expecting that.” This experience forces me to then disclose more of my personal background than should be required or expected. In other situations, I have had several instances where people will ask me for my name and respond in the same fashion with surprised looks and/or comments such as “Oh, I wasn’t expecting that” because they expected an “Asian name.” The latter example is not an example of privilege. However, the first example shows how an opportunity may have been given because of my “white” name.

Some might consider that I might be reading into these situations, however when I see other individuals with more ethnic names being passed over because of their assumed experiences based on race/ethnicity, it is difficult not to make additional assumptions.

As a professional, I am always worried that others, especially white people, will assume I receive jobs or opportunities because of race or ethnicity and the need to fill quotas. This has directly impacted how I operate in my working life by motivating me to work harder in order to prove my worth as an employee. I do not want to be someone that just falls into a category or fulfills a quota. This is also a negative impact in that it can create a lot more constant pressure and stress in feeling that I always need to be working harder than everyone else. As such, my

work identity is skewed by my perceptions of how others view my identity.

I recognize that my own experiences may not be as extreme or harmful as what others may have experienced. However, for any of these kind of experiences, they can leave one damaged. For myself, I always focus on learning from each experience, especially the negative ones. I do for myself what others cannot and I provide my own self-motivation. Living in a world where you can feel that there is no place you truly belong, you have the make the choice to live for yourself and not let anything hold you back. Despite all of these experiences, I am ok.

Embracing My Identity

16

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Throughout my academic career, I have noticed that multiracial/multiethnic people are often left out of the conversations about race, or utilized as proof that society is moving away from racism. The multiracial and multiethnic identity is a complex experience that monoracial individuals cannot fully understand. Multiracial and multiethnic students are often overlooked when institutions are providing resources to minority student populations. Since the multiracial and multiethnic identity is a relatively new and rapidly growing student population, student leaders, faculty, administrators, counselors, and student affairs professionals need to learn how to navigate everyday interactions with multiracial and multiethnic students and provide effective on-campus resources. This has sparked my interest in helping bi/multi/transracial and multiethnic students find community during their time in college.

Figuring out my racial identity was always a difficult experience, and it was not until college when I started thinking about what it means to be a bi/multiracial person in our world today. I distinctly remember the day I discovered who my big sister in my sorority would be, and it was one the happiest moments I had in college. Not only did we have so much in common, but she is also biracial (part Chinese and Swedish). At the time, we had one other multiracial sister, and to this day I am so happy that we met through our sorority. As someone who struggled with be-

ing multiracial, it was comforting to be able to talk to someone who shared similar experiences.

Since I was a child, I always felt pressured to identify as one race or the other in order to fit in. My father's Welsh mother would constantly call me Michelle because it was a "normal" name. As a six year old, I became extremely upset and told her that was not my name. Certain family members on my mother's Pakistani side would judge me because I grew up in America, and did not speak Urdu or practiced every aspect of Islam. My friends would ask me if I was adopted because my father is white and my mother is brown, and sometimes they could not believe that I was their child. It got to the point where I became very upset because I felt no one believed that they were my parents. I have also experienced racism against my multiracial identity by being called a mutt and mongrol. There is still a problem with monoracial people accepting bi/multiracial identities. Many parents still do not approve of marrying outside of one's race in order for their grandchildren to stay "pure." I feel that our society does not realize that this is racism towards bi/multiracial people.

This was just the beginning of my journey of accepting my multiracial identity. I definitely went through phases of rejecting one or both identities in order to feel accepted, and it was particularly noticeable when I made friendships. Throughout my life, I have always had an extremely diverse group of friends. I recog-

nize that I am privileged for being able to live in diverse neighborhoods almost all of my life. I was born in Queens, New York and moved to the East Bay Area in California when I was six years old. When I was in elementary and middle school, I went through a phase of being immersed in my Pakistani culture and had a longing for other South Asian or Middle Eastern friends. At this time I also strongly identified as Muslim because I grew up with Islamic values. However, this was a very difficult time for me because I never felt accepted by classmates in these groups. I felt extremely uncomfortable in predominantly White social groups because I grew up with conservative Pakistani values that often conflicted. Even though I grew up watching Bollywood films and eating Pakistani food, I was most out of place within the South Asian social group because I was still considered to be the “white girl.” I also never fully fit in with Middle Eastern and Asian groups, as our cultures were similar but very different. In high school, I managed to find a unique group of friends from different backgrounds, and I had never felt so comfortable until then. For the first time, I did not feel out of place. Some of the friends I met freshman year are still dear friends of mine ten years later.

My parents were always supportive of me having a very diverse friend group, but I was often asked why I did not have more White or Pakistani/Indian friends. To this day, I still struggle to feel comfortable within these two identity groups. After years of rejection from both sides of my identity, I still feel that I may

never be fully accepted. Even until now, people that I have met assume that I am White until I disclose that I am not. Now I strongly embrace my multiracial identity, and continue to be vocal about who I am.

Thinking Outside the Box: Reflections of My Biracial Journey

17

**Shauna
Harris**

Who am I? This perplexed me over the years until I was a young adult as I searched for a place to belong, beyond the comfort of my family and immediate peer group. Fifteen years ago, I would have answered this question with an emphatic response of: “I am Black woman.” My response to this question now is: “I am a biracial woman, who identifies with the Black community.” It was not until my second year of my master’s program that I felt comfortable and confident in informing individuals of my racially mixed heritage. Let me start by telling you where my story begins.

As I reflect over my journey as a racially mixed person, I think about the feelings of isolation and not fitting in. I was born to a White woman, and a Black man; however, when I was thirteen months old, I was adopted into a Black family. I remember my mother telling me at a young age that she did not carry me under her heart, but I was always in her heart. Perceptions of adoptive families vary for many individuals. While I felt comfortable at home, society made me feel that adoption was socially unacceptable, and adoptees are not wanted by their parents and should feel ashamed of who they are. Even with my light complexion and not looking like my adoptive mother, I never viewed myself as an adoptee. All I saw was my family, my Black family; therefore growing up, I identified as Black.

From an early age, I knew I was adopted and what that meant. I knew my birth mother was White and my birth father was

Black, and I knew I had siblings from both sides; however, I grew up as an only child with my mother and maternal grandparents. While I knew the origins of my birth, I never talked about being adopted to other family members or peers because it seemed taboo to talk about. When I went to school, I was constantly questioned about who my “real” mother was because I did not look like any of my family members. I would ignore the questions or dismiss people’s perceptions about where they thought I came from, because I would hear my mother’s voice saying, “I love you and God brought you to me, and that is all that matters.” My mother was and still is my cheerleader, my confidante and best friend.

I can attest that familial and cultural influences shaped my identity into being a Black person growing up. What is interesting about my adoptive family is that my maternal grandmother’s lineage is one that includes racially mixed people as well.

Some of my relatives have a lighter complexion than I do, which made interacting with them easier. This was not the case on my adoptive maternal grandfather’s side of the family where many individuals had a darker complexion and made it readily known that I was different from them by discussing my light skin, touching my hair or calling me names. I grew up in a predominantly Black community, attended a predominantly Black church and associated with people who identified as Black.

These factors influenced my way of thinking, how I spoke and how I interacted with others. Though, I checked the box on all

my forms as Black, identifying as Black was not easy as a young child. Individuals in the Black community that I grew up in did not see me as Black, but as White. My skin complexion was light, my nose was slender and I had long dark brown hair; however, I identified as Black. My mother was a child of the 60's who surrounded me by Black culture, gave me books to read about Black history and took me museums that educated me about being Black in America. In my eyes, I was Black and I immersed myself into the Black culture.

In elementary school, my peers would often ask, "What are you?" or "Where did you come from because you do not look Black." I would get annoyed at the constant questions and the pulling of my hair because people wanted to feel its texture. I often would ask my mother why people felt the need to call me names or pull my hair just because I did not look like them.

Throughout middle school and high school, the questions continued, and I began to feel like I truly did not belong anywhere except home. Home was safe. Home was a support system.

Home was kind. Home was love; however, I felt isolated when I left home.

Throughout college, I still identified as Black and naturally gravitated to what was familiar to me; the Black culture; however, I still felt this internal struggle of wanting to know more about my White racial heritage. It was not until after college and during the first year of my graduate program that I began to research

and understand more about biracial identity. As I learned more about individuals from racially mixed backgrounds, I began to see similarities in my life of those I researched.

Over time, how I identified shifted. I began to check Black and White as my racial background. My appreciation for my racially mixed identity matured during graduate school as I shared my story with my peers and opened up more to my mother about my thoughts. Two of my friends became my sounding board as I processed how I felt as I learned more about who I was. One friend, who identified as a White, Jewish woman confided about her struggles with finding herself. She and I would meet on Tuesday's to watch our favorite shows and talk about our feelings of isolation and how that impacted who we were and how we interacted with others. She was the first person outside of my family that I told about my adoption. What a sense of freedom of not having to hide behind one racial identity and sharing my story. As I shared my experiences more, and learned more about my parents, I felt more at peace at being biracial.

I continued my exploration into my doctoral studies and focused my dissertation work on understanding women who shared similar experiences of navigating multiple identities, feeling the pressure to choose one based on cultural experiences and dealing with the impact of colorism on their identity. Through my reflection of my personal experiences and research, I have come to

embrace my biracial identity. Though I still connect more with the Black culture, I identify as biracial.

As I have interacted with various people throughout my life, I have been perceived as something else and not neatly fitting into any racial category. It has been frustrating at times filling out forms that force you to choose a box, or sit in the classroom of all White individuals and people look at you to get your opinion, because they see you as Black only while at the same time attending cultural events focused on Black heritage, yet feeling like you do not quite belong at times.

My gender identity as a woman has impacted my experience as a racially mixed person the most. I have a light skin complexion, and for years identified as Black. Identifying as a Black woman presented challenges, as my physical appearance could be deemed racially ambiguous to some, Latina to others and White to the rest. While my skin complexion is light, I cannot pass as White. I have felt the impact of colorism and micro-aggressions, especially growing up in a predominately Black community, because I did not share the physical characteristics of what society deems as Black. Throughout my life, I have been accused of thinking I was prettier than women with a darker skin complexion, having “good hair,” and not having to work as hard to achieve my academic and career goals, because I am a light-skinned woman. If one only knew the struggles of combing through long hair, having to work hard if not

harder at achieving my goals because I was told by some teachers I was not as good enough as my White counterparts or being a young girl and having to look in the mirror and wish my skin complexion was darker because I was tired of the name calling by others. With the support of my family, close friends and colleagues, I have become more confident in who I am as a biracial woman. My identity as a student affairs professional has further strengthened my awareness as a racially mixed woman. I have the opportunity to share my story with other young women who have expressed their internal struggles of being racially mixed. Often, the women I have held discussions with have expressed similar experiences that I dealt with growing up and in my early adulthood. Talking about my journey not only allows me to continue strengthening my understanding and pride about being biracial, but it has helped other racially mixed individuals to step out, share their story, educate others and demystify the stereotypes of biracial people.

So who am I? I am a biracial woman, who identifies with the Black community. I am a biracial woman who understands my place in society and not defined by a box or what other individuals perceive me to be. I am a daughter, a friend and a colleague to people of varying racial and social identities. I am a student affairs professional on a journey to continue educating society on racially mixed individuals, and so my story continues.