



**MRKC**

**“What Are You?”** A Multiracial KC Stories Project

# Editors' Notes

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This project seemingly began as an idea one day on a conference call and the next it was a reality. Being a relatively new group, the MultiRacial Knowledge Community was looking for ways to empower and help build community among its members. As a KC leadership team, we wanted to undertake this project to highlight voices that are often not heard or understood in the higher education and student affairs landscape. As multi/transracial individuals, it is important to share stories that are sometimes excluded from larger racial narratives. However, as is the case with all discussions about identity, it is impossible to talk about an aspect of one's self without bringing up other elements. In this book, you will not only read about struggles with racial identity, but also how that has impacted family, religion, friendship, sexuality, work, and education.

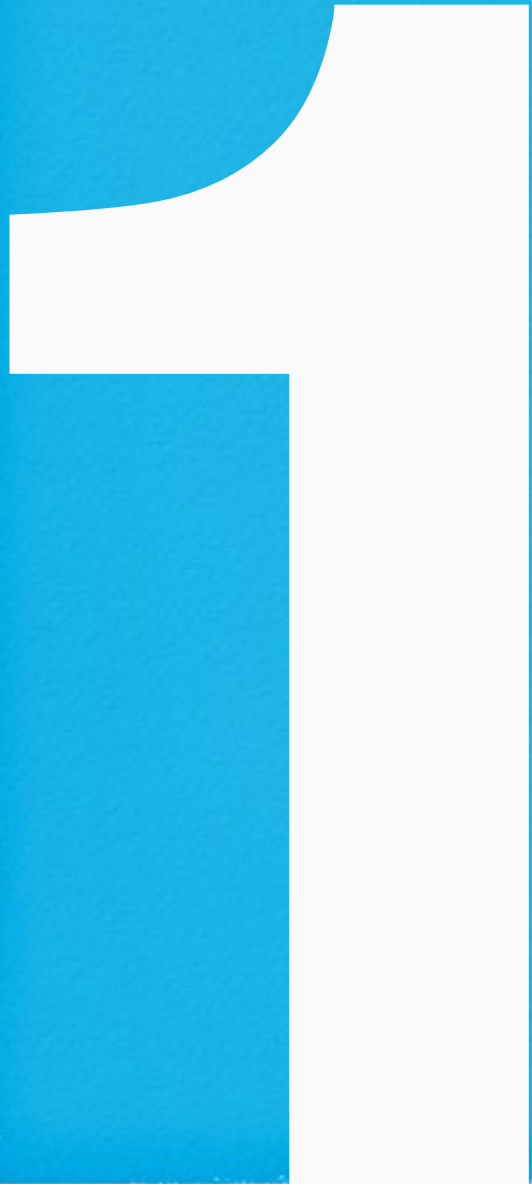
We would like to thank the contributing authors who worked hard on their stories, especially because they have shared some of the most personal things with the world so that others can better understand the multiracial experience. We hope that by reading these stories, we help give more meaning to the ever pervasive question, "What Are You?"

Matthew Jeffries, Michelle Dimmett, & Christina Wan



# Perceptions

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# Eyes (Then Authenticity)

## Alisa “Li” Carithers

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In short, I self-identify as a half Black, half Filipina (Ilocano), Hapa, biracial, non-cisgender, two time first generation college graduate, queer woman from the hood. My first memory of grappling with multiracial identity was riding the bus with my mother. If only I could recount all the times people would stare, and stare, and stare until they would ask the ubiquitous question, "What are you?" One of the most alienating, marginalizing and othering questions ever asked of me. Since I was young, people would usually query my mother, "What is she?" Many times I forget that to observe diversity and racial ambiguity is something uncommon for most, but the instant I came into the world, I saw people of different colors (my parents) and all until I started school, I never thought much of it.

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Sometimes my father would pick me up from school on Fridays. The number of stares, glooming eyes we would get has yet to cease, people wondering what we are doing together, perplexed and interested. When a staff person at my elementary school stopped us near the gate with a condescending tone, "Excuse me. Can I help you?", my father responded, well, that he was my father. In disbelief she looked over at me. I smiled and affirmed, "Daddy". While in middle school people would ask, "Is that your boyfriend?" So triggering to know folks' first assumption of a woman and a man of seemingly different racial backgrounds together must be dating (no matter the age gap). (This is one of the reasons I tell my story. If I do not, other folks will, and their narrative is usually not just untrue, but perpetuates stereotypes about people of color that support systems of oppression, which ultimately hurt our ability to rise higher). Later, I began to notice that other kids' parents "matched", though I never questioned why.

When I was in high school, it was the first time I ever felt I needed to prove I was "enough". Being a multiracial person brings some challenges, and a salient one for me was the feeling of being "a part" and "apart" at the same time. Despite popular opinion, being a mixed person does not necessarily give, as one of my friends put it, "the best of both worlds." People may not see you as "special" simply because you are different. In some ways, it is just the opposite. Many times I felt semipre-



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cious or less than. While auditioning for the school's hip hop dance team, I was met with suspicion and again glaring eyes. I had danced all my life, so I thought to some extent my audition wouldn't be so difficult. At the recreational park down the street from campus, there were at least forty other folks learning the routine, and little by little our group became smaller. "If I tap you on the shoulder, please sit down." I was in the final three (whatever that meant) and though I felt confident with my performance, I saw no smiles. There were no claps, taps of the foot or other affirmations to get excited about. For days it was a similar situation, but one day while the team deliberated, the co-captain came up to me and asked, "What's your ethnicity?" "I'm black and Asian," I replied. A quick, "Oh okay," and her immediate return to the group came next. There were a couple more days of auditioning, and ultimately I made the team! But after I was asked the question, I felt I had to try even harder to be chosen; because now that my racial identity was exposed, if they saw me as less, I believed my skills would have needed to make up for the "blackness" I was lacking.

As I developed my cultural consciousness, I began to realize that my story didn't quite match up with folks with similar identities. I used to think, "Finally, someone who will understand what I am experiencing," but this was not necessarily the case. As I listened to more and more multiracial and multiethnic stories, identifying with white ancestry became motif. Folks who could claim, in some ways, some racial privilege, found common

ground and built camaraderie because of it. This echoes research conducted by the 2010 census which states, that although, "...people who reported multiple races grew by a larger percentage than those reporting a single race", the four largest multiple-race combinations in the U.S. all include white identity (United States Department of Commerce). In short, I felt left out. Painful memories resurfaced related to alienation, marginalization, and othering in an already peripheral space. Thus, I didn't always find community in the multiracial spaces I was in, but folks were always welcoming and willing to listen. However, there were times I was told my multiracial identity, my combination, simply was not that serious. As a multiracial woman of colorS told me, people of color and another color do not have the same struggles like that of mixed white people because "minorities understand one another". Umm... Obviously, the experiences of people of colorS and those mixed with white have some significant differences, but this explanation seemed too basic. So racial hierarchies don't exist? Colorism and other systems of oppression that work to dismantle our unity are not at play? To say that folks not mixed with white somehow have it easier is simply not true. Intersectionality, the diverse narratives of the mixed community, and the stories of our specific communities are far too complex for that. It was shocking to hear that folks could think that all people of color just, and always, got along, and thus a multiracial person of colorS would not have internal or external struggles because of it. I wish that preju-



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dices and discrimination did not exist among our communities, but our stories with regard to colonialism producing colorism for one, make it clear that being a multiracial person of color still possesses many challenges.

When I was an undergraduate student studying cultural anthropology, I remember walking past the African American Student Center and the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) Student Center. I remember thinking, “Should I walk in?” I said hello to the front desk person, asked what sorts of resources were available, took the informational materials the person recommended and never returned. In relation to the API Student Center, I never even took a peek. I definitely suffered from poignant disconnect from both of my racial communities, not being “whole” or “down” enough for either. I don't believe anyone said or did anything uninviting that day, but it was my own lived experiences, my own triggerings, and painful memories that made me feel apprehensive and unwelcomed. Something about that moment later reminded me of riding the bus and auditioning for the hip hop dance team in high school. Fortunately, as a graduate student at Cal State L.A., I discovered a place on campus where I felt more comfortable engaging with my communities; that was the Cross Cultural Centers, a department that offers co-curricular opportunities that increase cross-cultural awareness.

I came into this space after seeing an advertisement for a student Program Coordinator position for the Asian Pacific Islander

Student Resource Center on the first floor of the University-Student Union. When I entered, it was a huge wave of relief! The space was inclusive with all people of color present, and I did not stand out. The diversity of the space, and why I was able to “blend in” was due to its setup. (The department is separated into four culture-specific centers, but all share a lobby, front desk and in-house library. Later I learned this was a unique arrangement for a Cross Cultural Centers, and it was the leading reason for why I decided to get involved. The introductory space was a multiracial one). Ultimately I submitted my application, and I remember the same apprehension about my Afroasian identity then as well. “If I get an interview, what will happen when they realize I’m not full Asian? What if I have to tell them who I am?” When I met my interviewers however, something told me this might just work, and maybe I would “fit in”. A self-identified African American woman and API man led me to the meeting space. But although I felt confident about my interview: wore a nice suit, had copies of my resume, cover letter, left a list of references, shook hands, remembered to explain each answer with a topic sentence, example and result, part of me really didn't expect a call back. Even if I had done everything right, the feeling my racial identity was under suspicion ran deep. How could anyone believe a halfbreed could adequately lead a culture-specific student center? Long story short and too much of my surprise, I was offered the position even before the time I was supposed to be notified. This is one, and



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likely the main, reason why my engagement in a Cross Cultural Centers and in Student Affairs marks a landmark in my story. Working and learning there was a milestone not only for my personal growth, but for my educational and professional growth as well. Moreover, it was the one space folks were open and most accepting of my full authentic self.

My identity as a multiracial woman of colors influences my position working in Academic Affairs as a Communications Coordinator. Specifically, it impacts the way I think about the production of our campus publicity. Though not part of my job description, I facilitated the creation and now supervise a student ambassador team that assists with our communications, everywhere from event planning, meetings with staff, budget allocation to presentation. I was intentional in selecting students that represented the diversity on our campus because I knew more varied voices would bring more creative choices, innovations and solutions. For the first few minutes of every meeting, the team discusses current events on campus, how this relates to their lived experiences, and how might their racial identities play a role. The result was that many voiced how important it is to be cognizant of race, despite living in a seemingly "post-racial" world. The team is still fairly new, but my goal is to continue to facilitate conversations around race and how it relates to our roles as communicators (especially with regard to the media we create), so we may be conscious about the information and images we put forth. I know my involvement in a Cross Cultural

Centers, that being intense reflection on my multiracial identity, provided the impetus for these goals, and the way we imagine, analyze and manage content for the university.

## References

United States Department of Commerce. (2010). 2010 Census Shows Multiple-Race Population Grew Faster Than Single-Race Population. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/race/cb12-182.html>



# Not Being White and Not Being a Person of Color: Paradoxes, Truths, and Ethics

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“Within, outside, and between;  
my body’s boxes—  
an inherited paradox.”

[personal journal entry]

When I began my master’s program back in the fall of 2008, an internal contradiction surfaced about my racial identity: while I readily acknowledged my White privilege, I did not identify as White to others nor did I mark White on forms requesting my

demographic information. It led me down a path of deep reflection and exploration about what my racial identity is or, more often, what it is not (but more on this later). As a result of this journey, I now often scan my environments to see what cues, if any, I can pick up about how people interpret my racial background.

There are times when I’m confident I pass as White, and, at other times, I know people want to ask me “What are you?”

“What are you?” is simultaneously an empowering and limiting question. This was particularly apparent at a session at the 2013 NASPA Western Regional Conference where two colleagues and I co-presented on multiracial student voices. During the debriefing portion of our session, a multiracial woman shared that, for her, she enjoys being asked the “What are you?” question because it provides her a space to describe exactly how and why she identifies the way she does. And there are times when I’ve appreciated people asking me this question, too, maybe because, as someone who is jokingly referred to as a “troublemaker,” I sometimes enjoy watching how my description of my racial identity challenges folks’ notions of race and Whiteness.

In response to wanting to be asked the “What are you?” question, another multiracial woman at our session offered that it is never okay to ask this question under any circumstances, at any time, and I tend to agree more with this perspective. I certainly find the question annoying at best. At worst, it is a harmful



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question that usually activates my default defensive space—a space where I shut off my emotional attachments to the topic of my racial identity in order to manage someone’s “curiosity.” But it isn’t just the person in front of me asking that dreaded question—it is the system at large reminding me that I do not fit into the “safe” scripts and constructs of race we often find ourselves tripping over.

Particularly in my case, it is a reminder I carry a great deal of responsibility each and every time I racially identify myself. I am not White, and I’m also not a person of color, and this a powerfully paradoxical identity to hold. I can, on the one hand, challenge people’s assumptions and biases when they attempt to guess or question my racial identity. I can explain how I do not identify as White, but that I pass as White, and that means I have access to White privilege. On the other hand, I often pass as White without even trying or knowing. In this way, I have access to White privilege despite the fact that I don’t identify as White, which means I must meaningfully and consciously incorporate an identity (White) into my view of myself without identifying as such.

I say I don’t racially identify as White because I have been told throughout my life that I am not White, or, at least not totally White. I remember one time, when I was about five years old, I was playing at my White great-grandmother’s house (as I often did each weekend) with the daughter of one of her Latin@

friends. She wore a bright yellow dress and a white bow or ribbon in her hair. Her skin and eyes were dark brown, and her hair was black. We had a lot of fun together, and after they left I told Grams (as everyone called my great-grandmother) that I really liked that Chocolate girl—“Chocolate,” of course, being my five-year-old way of identifying people who looked like my Latin@ dad. Grams chuckled and replied, “Well, you’re half-Chocolate.” I raced to the nearest mirror. I studied myself quickly, did not observe my skin to be half brown, and shouted back to Grams, “No I’m not!” She continued to insist I was, but I could not understand what she meant. How could someone be “half” of anything? Wouldn’t that look funny to have one side of your body be one color, and the other half a different color? When my mom confirmed I was Latin@ later that day, I relented that it must be true.

My dad also reinforced that I was not White. I remember one night when I was completing a form for a scholarship and asked my mom at the kitchen table what race I should mark. I told her I did not feel like I was “really” Latin@ and did not feel right to indicate I was. I did not have brown skin like my dad or relatives. I did not speak Spanish. I just did not feel a strong connection to the Mexican side of my family, and I did not think it was honest to identify my race in the same way they did. As my mom began telling me how she had always marked my younger sister and me as “Hispanic” on forms, my father, who had overheard this conversation from the other room, walked in and said



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rather forcefully that “my children are not White.” My father is a man of few words who rarely asserts his opinion so strongly, so his response was a meaningful one in terms of how I understood my racial identity. It was also a curious response: he confirmed we were not White, not that we were Latin@...

Even to this day, I am told I am not White and have had experiences where I have felt non-White. Two of my close friends have reminded me multiple times that they never thought I was White. I’ve had strangers and acquaintances ask if I’m part Black, or part Asian, or part Mexican, or Jewish. And now that I’ve grown out my curly hair, those questions and comments come up more frequently. It seems some people are less likely to assume I’m White because of my hair, but still don’t think I look “enough” of another race to be sure “what” I am. (People are a lot more inclined, though, to now touch my hair without my consent, which I wrote about here.

I think my longer curly hair has also somewhat changed the way I see and understand myself in the world. I recently browsed a university’s web page that showed the pictures of eight administrators who manage its division of student affairs, all of whom were White. And my immediate thought was, “No one looks like me.” I then thought about what it means when I—someone who does not identify as White but also not as a person of color because of my ability to pass—can look at a se-

ries of White faces and think they do not look like me. Really, though, what does that mean?

It is moments like those where I wonder about some of the ethical implications behind how I choose to identify. For example, by identifying as White, I would acknowledge my access to racial privilege. This is not how I identify, though, and, given the reaction I just mentioned above, is not how I see myself (at least not all of the time). However, I feel it would be both inaccurate and unethical to identify as only Latin@ because I am not visibly a person of color nor have I experienced the world in the ways my father has. He has been spat on, talked to as if he was incompetent, and been otherwise disregarded explicitly because of his brown skin. His childhood painfully differed from mine in ways I do not feel authorized to share here. Though he is not a “typical” Latin@, my father’s experiences do reinforce some assumptions people make about brown-skinned Latin@s. My experiences, in many ways, do not.

This is especially salient for me since I’m currently engaged in a national job search. While most states do not have affirmative action policies in place, some do. And even for those states that do not, there are still biases and assumptions that come up for individuals who participate in hiring committees that cannot not influence hiring decisions. So do I mark “Hispanic/Latino” knowing this will prompt, as I mention previously, a series of assumptions that will probably not be accurate about me? Or do I mark

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nothing at all, since this information is voluntary? I think the reason I see this is an ethical dilemma of sorts is because racial diversity has become so important to colleges and universities across the country (and rightly so), and I am keenly aware that, on the one hand, my contribution to this racial diversity may not meet campuses' needs or expectations. On the other hand, as one of my professors shared with me last year, perhaps I am exactly the type of racial diversity they are looking for: someone who is "technically" not White (and, therefore, might meet an institution's need to hire more racially diverse staff and faculty) but who embodies Whiteness in ways that will help maintain the status quo.

So, how do I ethically and practically negotiate the paradox of not being White and not being a person of color in systems that do not yet have the capacity to meaningfully discuss or even acknowledge this complexity? There is obviously no "right" answer to this question. For now, at least, it involves continuing to advance social justice issues, speaking my truths, actively acknowledging my racial privilege, and engaging in generous amounts of self-awareness, self-reflection, and dialogue.



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# Microaggression: It's the "little" things

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As a multiracial person of Jamaican, Indian, and Italian descent, I have been asked questions about my racial identity my entire life. Folks who ask me these questions do so in a variety of ways, ranging from analyzing my name and ambiguous brown skin in order to guess my ethnicity, to asking me where my parents are from, to trying to categorize my behaviors, style of speech, and mannerisms. However, the most common question I am asked is "What are you?" Every time I receive this question, a flood of thoughts enters my mind, as there are so many ways to answer this seemingly constant question. I am an administrator, a queer advocate, an educator, an introvert, a poet, an uncoordinated dancer, and a feminist. Yet every time I answer this question with one of these aspects of my identity, I never seem to satisfy the inquisitor.

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When I started thinking about how to put written words to my multiracial experiences, I had no idea where to begin. As an administrator on a large campus who focuses on social justice and LGBTQ education and programming, there are so many different issues about which I am passionate. Often my personal and professional passions collide into my work, including how to make social justice education accessible and relatable.

There has been one particular issue that has been on my mind as of late, and that is the insidious presence of microaggression. With recent efforts like that of Harvard students and their "I, too, am Harvard" campaign, it has become very apparent to me that microaggression is moving from the subconscious to the main stage on college campuses and communities.

Microaggression, as defined by Dr. Derald Wing Sue (2010), can be summarized as the brief and everyday slights, insults, and negative messages that often connote bias around issues of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, and other forms of social identity. While this may seem like a very big definition, the way I like to think of microaggression is the pervasive and unintentional ways bias can show up in our daily interactions. These acts of microaggression can often keep folks from feeling safe and included in their environments and communities.

Allow me to expand on "What are you?" with an example of how this seemingly innocent question keeps me, as a multira-



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cial person, from feeling like I can be my whole self around the asker. When I was an undergraduate student, one of my peers asked me this question. We were in the same feminist circle on campus, and I felt like she was genuinely asking me so that we could get to know one another more authentically. I knew she was only asking me this question so that she could more deeply understand my experiences as a Person of Color. I felt her intentions were not malicious, and while I was tired of answering this question, it was one of the rare occasions that I responded with “Black, Asian, and White.”

Her response stopped me in my tracks. “That’s such a cool mix. I knew you weren’t fully Black, you’re so articulate and your hair is not all kinky.” It brought me back. Back to high school when some of my White peers would call me an “oreo” because they felt I was “White on the inside, but Black on the outside.” Or when I received a high mark on a difficult exam, and my friends would jokingly say that my academic abilities were “my White side coming out.” It took me back to when any moment of anger or frustration was equated to my “Black side coming out.” It took me back to the numerous occasions where I was told I was “really polite and quiet for a Black girl.” In high school, I didn’t have the tools to truly understand these comments. They mostly came from my friends, who thought they were paying me a compliment, and couldn’t possibly intend to hurt me. But regardless of their intention, comments like these always left an impact.

What I have learned from the many experiences with microaggressions around my race is that many folks equate being well spoken or high achieving with being White. I learned that by defying people's expectations, I became an exception to Black stereotypes instead of a reason to question the racist reasoning behind such stereotypes. The most dangerous impact of all was that for much of my youth, I did actually internalize these comments as compliments. I learned that to be closer to whatever society deems as “White” meant to be more socially accepted, desirable and successful. It took me a very long time to fully realize that success does not have to mean the shedding of one’s identities nor the assimilation into standards that were never designed for people who look like me.

One of the most common follow-up questions in these interactions is “which do you identify with more?” I have come to realize that many people find it difficult to reconcile that a person with mixed heritage could possibly identify with all their ethnicities equally, instead of prioritizing one over the other. When I try to explain that it is incredibly difficult to conceptualize which 25% of my body and lived experiences were Black, which 25% were Asian, and which 50% were White, most people do not believe me. I cannot “pick one.” Yes, I have been raised by my White family for most of my life, but I am never read as White as I navigate the world. I am complicated, as we all are, and trying to boil down our lives into trite percentages erases the rich-



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ness of our histories. I always like to say that I am all Black, and all White, and all Asian, at all times.

So how does one deal with the seemingly endless barrage of invasive questioning and assumptions? There are a myriad of ways one who experiences a microaggression may react. Initial responses may range from silence, shock, and internal processing to leaving the space, calling the person out, and anger. And what I want to say is that all of these feelings and actions are valid. If you are caught off guard, you might not know how to respond in the moment, and it is understandable to not say anything at all. And while this may bring up feelings of guilt or regret later on, you may not always want to risk being hurt even further if the person defends the comment. You also may need the time to process. If you respond in anger, that is ok as well. The truth is it takes a lot of time, effort, and discomfort to teach a person the intricacies of your experiences or help them reflect on the experiences of different communities. It also should not always fall on the person on the receiving end of bias to educate.

What I learned above all else was that addressing these comments to a person who is unaware of their implicit stereotypes often ends with frustration, tension and “that’s not what I meant” or “I’m obviously not biased, you’re just sensitive.” We have all been raised in a world that sends conscious and subconscious messages about what is “normal.” We all have biases. We all

have work to do. Seemingly “small” acts of discrimination or stereotyping can build up to larger hurt and conflict, especially when left unexamined. Yes, we are all a part of a diverse community, but diverse is not automatically synonymous with equitable and inclusive.

How can we create safer spaces? How do we build a more just community? How can we have fruitful conversations about difference in order to move towards true equity and inclusion? I have always preferred to think of a safer community as not one where everyone is “perfect” around social justice issues, but one where people know they can take risk in order to learn. I imagine communities where there is a collective expectation that we will all mess up at one point or another. Where people are constantly working on self-education via media platforms like journals, books, films, blogs, Youtube, and Tumblr. Where we can recognize that there are larger systems in play at all times, with deeply rooted and historical implications outside of just our interpersonal interactions.

But perhaps most importantly, I hope we can build communities that allow for full authenticity, while prioritizing compassion. This does not mean letting microaggression or more overt acts of bias go unaddressed, but rather remembering that everyone has a story to share. To me, the most basic form of social justice is actively listening to one another’s story. Social justice is about who we are, not what we are. Be open-ended! I can guar-

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antee you asking someone to tell you about themselves will lead to a far richer answer than “What are you?” And of course, expect to share your own story as well. That is cultural exchange, instead of shallow cultural scrutiny and stereotyping.

If you want to learn more about the power of the words and language, how they may have an impact on those around you, and how you can be an agent of change, please check out the free online learning tool diversity administrators have been working on at Rutgers University at [bit.ly/rutgerslm](http://bit.ly/rutgerslm). This online learning tool is a great first step towards self-education, and can be completed as an individual or discussed within a group. I also encourage you to share your experiences with microaggression with trusted friends, administrators, family, and faculty. The more we begin to process with others who may have similar struggles, the more quickly we can heal.

I want to leave you with a piece of spoken word I wrote two years ago. I believe art and creative expression are one of the most accessible ways to create conversation around potentially uncomfortable dialogues, and I encourage you to explore how you too can creatively share your stories.

So like, what are you?...

People always seem to ask  
And in response I'm usually sarcastic  
Because I respond with things like

a feminist, a Capricorn, a radical bombastic

and in confusion they say  
that's not quite what I meant

Well what did you mean?

I ask with a grin, because I know all too well what's about to begin. My oh my, the questions people will ask to understand the color of my skin.

Where are you from?

The Jersey Shore

What language does your family speak?

English and sarcasm

Surprisingly, people want more.

What's your racial background?

Well I would say I'm as brown as they come, besides race is nothing more than a social construction meant to keep some in power and others oppressed

My justice banter leaves them none too impressed

Well I have a question too? Why do you want to know?



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Is it so that we can discuss histories, find commonalities, or deconstruct the misconception of the melting pot American nationality?

Or is it so that you can put me into a neat little box? So you can stereotype the way that I talk, or the clothes that I rock. If that's the case, I guess I'm what you see because when you ask "What I am?" You don't really want to know "Who I am"...

you don't really want to know me.

At this point, people have usually flipped

and there's a lot more than questions behind their

angrily quivering lips.

Fine...WHO are you then?

Well I am so glad you asked. I'm a queer, Jamaican, Indian, Italian, feminist, poet, radical, and educator--who's impossible to split in half

But that's just for starters. How much time do you have?

## **References**

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# Impossible Choices

## Precious Porras

*Associate Director  
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This past fall, a renewed fight for racial justice was brought to the light in the United States with the shooting death of Mike Brown in Ferguson and the choking death of Eric Garner. In the US, there has always been a fight for racial justice, but for the first time in my life, it was a central discussion across the globe. There were protests and discussions and media attention to the oppression that occurs on a daily basis. I was able to share my story and speak my truth and have others join in. I felt truly heard, as our collective voices came together. I am a social justice educator, who works in student affairs, so these conversations were not new to me. But for once, I wasn't the only one talking, I wasn't the only saying, these things still happen, these things still matter. It's a strange thing to be both black and white during this reawakening of a fight for racial justice. Two things happened that created a canyon of dissonance for me.

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Like many, I used social media to engage others and share my voice. Not surprisingly, I had a lot of family members disagree with the "politics" of what I was saying. Most of those family members were my white family members. As someone who grew up in a white community, with my white family, I can say that I was socialized white. However, I can't pass as white and so even though I was socialized white, I knew that I was not white and faced many instances of discrimination growing up, including a period in middle school where I was the only person of color and was called a nigger on a daily basis.

The first thing that happened as a private Facebook message from a white relative, asking me to please stop posting about Ferguson because it hurt their feelings. The best way to end racism, in their opinion, was to stop talking about it. My daily posts were just a constant reminder and only made things worse for this relative. I had no problem checking my relative on their white privilege. I explained that to ask me to stop posting was to ask me to stop being me. That I posted things that were true to my lived experience and they happened to me, and countless others, all the time; that racism is indeed to over and that we do need to talk about. I felt sad and alone, but not surprised, that my white family could not bear witness to what I was experiencing and ask how they could support me.

The second thing that happened occurred when I shared the facebook message with a black colleague. After I recounted my



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story, the colleague paraphrased Peggy McIntosh and said “you can’t trust a white person.” In that moment, I was dumbfounded. I am believer in holding multiple truths, but I could not wrap my brain around that idea. I’ve read Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack; I use it in trainings and I understand the context in which Ms. McIntosh explains that idea. Yet, I was coming from a place of raw, heightened, emotion, a place I had been for months, and all I could think was; “that’s not true”.

For that statement to be my truth, that would mean I couldn’t trust, and therefore, love, my family. I couldn’t trust the people who raised me and loved me. I couldn’t trust the world in which I was raised. My world was instantly divided, quite literally, into black and white. I didn’t know how to reconcile my lived experiences as a person of color growing up in a white family. Even as I write this blog post, I still can’t wrap my brain around how the two pieces of my identity fit together. The black and the white of me are/were so opposing that I don’t know how they ever worked together.

If I couldn’t hold the two together, I had to ask myself, “what am I giving up when I declare myself a person of color”? Does this mean that I’m only black? To declare myself a person of color erases my family, erases the life I grew up in. Yet, I know that I would never declare myself white because I do not see myself as white. To not see myself as white has/is a confusing part of growing up biracial. If I’m not white, what is my connection to

my family? To have to make a choice between my white family or my black identity feels impossible.

I have embraced my biracial identity, though my many years of turmoil and growth; because it let me hold multiple truths; to be a person of color and still feel connected to the people who loved and nurtured me. To be biracial, in a fight for racial justice, sometimes means defending whiteness, and excusing hurtful messages from family. To be biracial, in a fight for racial justice, means fighting for my right to not live in fear for my life and working to undo the system of oppression.

Yet, in this time and place, I struggle with the “and” of these statements and can only hold the “or”. For me, to be biracial, in a fight for racial justice, seems like an impossible choice; either way I lose part of my identity.



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# Beyond the Surface, Past the Reflection

## Rachel Marie McCommon

*Graduate Assistant*

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Race is only a part of a person's overall being. I have learned through my experiences and through many adverse situations that the person I am is attributed mostly to the mesh of culture between my parents and the mixture of cultures I experienced between birth and 18 years old. With that said, I would like to begin my story with the year I was born. It was 1988 and my Puerto Rican mother and Irish American father got pregnant with me and because their faith in God and their families had a strong influence on their decisions, they got married. As if that pressure was not tough enough to handle, when I was born I had not developed completely and was born with Cleft lip and Palate. The doctor who delivered me was not encouraging nor positive regarding my further physical development and told my bilingual (Spanish and English) parents not to teach me Span-

ish. The doctor's rational focused primarily on the perceived assumption that I would have enough difficulty pronouncing English words, let alone another language. I see now that the development of technology was not advanced enough in order to predict this outcome. My parents' understanding of the realistic impact of the situation did not come until I was much older. This resulted in their trust in the doctor's suggestion to teach me solely English.

Growing up was less of a challenge with regards to my development in my verbal skills than expected. My parents devoted their time and energy into advancing my development to surpass the low expectations of which I came into the world. They worked hard, they researched scholarships to pay for my ten surgeries and seven years of orthodontic treatment. They smiled at me everyday, which was followed by a simple "I love you" that encouraged me to focus on that love and support and not the physical differences I had compared to everyone else around me.

As a young child, I had blonde hair, green eyes and pale skin. This, many say, stemmed from my Irish ancestors, but this is an assumption without much knowledge of my Puerto Rican family or the Puerto Rican culture. My abuelita (maternal grandmother) was five feet tall, had blonde hair, green eyes and was 100 percent Latina. My abuelito (maternal grandfather) had very dark skin and thick black hair that he typically styled in a



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slicked back way and he was 100 percent Latino. Had I only had my mother's genes, there is a chance my outward appearance would be drastically different. My mother is a beautiful blend of her parents. She has the tan skin, long curly dark brown hair, and brown eyes. When I was young, families at the churches we would attend or individuals that would see me as a child in the grocery store with her, would question if I was adopted, because I did not look much like her. It was disheartening to know my mother who raised me dealt with these kind of reactions to her daughter. I have asked her many times about how growing up with me impacted her and she consistently reminded me that love was the most special and strongest bond between us and no matter what people thought or projected onto us, we were to stand firm and focus on the God who created us just the way we are. As a result, in my young age, I saw the people I met in school, church, at the park, at birthday parties, and at family's friends' houses to be individuals that were going to be made up of many different characteristics. Some were going to have darker skin than me, some were going to be taller than me, some were going to have more money than me, some were going to speak differently and the list can continue. People were to be treated with respect and people were to be approached openly to allow them to define who they were, rather than for me to define them.

The rest of my childhood, I approached in that way. I took each change and challenge as an opportunity to learn and embrace

something new. When individuals have discussions about race or about characteristics of one race, I question their definition of race. Society refers race as the culture and skin color that is the easiest to view. I oppose society's view on race because I do not identify based on my shade of skin, but rather the cultures that have surrounded my life. I grew up in a home where rice and beans were staple foods, which meant if there were no rice and beans in the house, there was no food in the house. I grew up in a home where bluegrass music with banjos and mandolins were family gathering traditions. I grew up in a home where dancing salsa was an expression of passion and love for Latin culture. I grew up in a house where accepting people as they were was mandatory. It was not until I was much older that I realized how different I was from my peers in my many classrooms. My dad had goals in mind for his life and we followed him wherever he led us; whether for a job, an internship, or continued education, which meant I changed school districts six times.

When I was eight years old, I remember riding in the car with my mom and dad and although they did not directly teach me Spanish, they still used the language to communicate between each other. I had been hearing this throughout my life and wondered why they had not directed the language to me specifically. In that car ride, they were discussing a surprise they wanted to put together for me and my sister. Little did they know that I understood everything they shared together. I spoke

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up and with a sassy attitude and I told them that I could understand what they were saying. They were so quick to feel bad about giving away the surprise and also shocked by my ability to understand. After a few moments like this one, my mom and dad began teaching me Spanish. I worked through workbooks and online games and programs and challenged myself to learn as much as I could.

That interest encouraged me to embrace a part of my life that I had not realized was reachable. I continued to be the student that was always new in the classroom and to the town. I learned to challenge myself to speak up and meet new people. When I was in second through fifth grade I lived in an apartment with diverse neighbors on all sides. The neighbor to the right was from Korea. The neighbor to my left was from the Ukraine. The neighbors below us were from Venezuela and diagonal from us were from a small town in Kansas. I attended sixth grade where I was the minority pale skinned half Latina student amongst many black students. The churches that we attended were primarily Baptist churches, where we were literally the only light skinned individuals that attended. I grew up singing in the gospel choir and singing Kirk Franklin in my bedroom. My world was constantly changing and my feelings about my identity development were still undetermined.

When I began High School, I asked my dad if I could attend only one high school. With my previous history of moving

around a lot, students in my classes had referred to me as the military kid, although that certainly was not the case. I felt High School was going to be amazing. I was going to have the opportunity to get to know people and make lasting friendships and experiences, which I had not experienced in a long term setting. Throughout High School my racial identity was primarily decided by those around me. People knew I had parents from different cultures, but identifying as multi-racial never crossed my mind. To everyone I knew I was strictly white with a love for rice and beans. I was made fun of for my scar on my lip, rather than my miniscule imperfections. I did not spend a lot of time around people who said offensive things or used offensive language. I was not involved in any challenging racial conversations as a child. I just knew me and I knew I was supposed to trust God and people were going to have shared differences, but they had not directly impacted me, so I thought.

I did not begin to think about myself in terms of race until I applied to college at 18 years old. I chose to aspire to learn about people and their cultures in order that I understand who they were on the inside. While I was in the process of applying, I was unaware of its true impact on my identity. I had filled out basic job applications before, but not for scholarships or colleges, where the question of race was something I had to answer. I had the opportunity to apply to scholarships where they recognized my Latin background. This was a foreign concept to me. I had known I was multi-racial, but I thought race was based on



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skin tone and they did not have a box for my identity, so I picked what people saw me as. I had the opportunity to define who I was racially for the first time.

In college, I had more opportunities to embrace all of me and developed my interest in learning more about cultures. I wanted to help others and learn from them, thus became a mentor for underrepresented populations. I joined the Harmonious Voices of Praise Gospel choir and appreciated my experiences working as a Resident Assistant in the Residential Halls. Soon after, I was asked to go on a trip with a team of doctors and church members to Guatemala. Not only was the trip a great opportunity, but the reason they wanted me to attend was to serve as a translator for the members of the team that did not have Spanish language skills. I was astounded. I did not think my language skills were near the level they needed to be in order to be an interpreter. I knew that my outward appearance was deceiving and most often individuals did not believe I represented the identities that I said I did. I had friends of every race and shade of skin. In my final years, I studied abroad in Chile after my son was born. It was the most exhilarating experience. I no longer doubted my skills in Spanish after that trip. I began dreaming in Spanish while I was there and I met so many incredible individuals that taught me more about Latin culture. But the most important aspect of the experience was my confidence in expressing who I was without thinking it was because I needed to defend myself.

People that I come across do not see me and think Latina, which made me think I had to defend my race and defend my culture and upbringing. Sharing all these moments in my life demonstrates the path that my journey has taken. These moments have defined milestones in my identity development and do not emphasize the difficulty that it includes. I remember thinking if I was going to look more Latina than I needed to change my outward appearance to match other's view of a Latin woman. I have dyed my hair dark brown, I grew it out long, I wore hoop earrings more often and lots of mascara and lipstick. It was not until I removed myself from a toxic and negative relationship that I realized changing myself for everyone else only made me feel less like me. I realized I needed to learn to love myself and not just parts of me, but all of me. I use this motivation and passion to empower my son to love himself. I hope to not only use my experience for the world, but more importantly use it to inspire Lucas Makai, my son. Each day motherhood reminds me how big our world is. It reminds me how each decision, each lesson we make and teach challenge us to be confident with what we decide. I hope to provide Lucas an environment where he does not feel he needs to change to make people love and accept who ever he becomes. I also know through my experience that this world is not perfect and no matter how I try to protect him from the hate, pain, and negative stigmas, I can only challenge him to discover who he wants to be and support him through it.

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I still explain my background in the present time, but the motive behind it is more emphasized on seizing a teaching moment. I had one of these moments occur while I was a server at a nice Italian restaurant. I was seating a group of 8 guests on our patio and they all appeared to be of Latin descent. Once I heard them speak Spanish, I had confirmed their ethnicity. I told them in English that we had arrived at their table and put down the menus for each person. While I was doing this one of the women turned to another and said in Spanish about how she wanted a different table closer to the music and she could not believe I was seating her there. I turned to her and responded in Spanish before the other woman could and shared that this was the only available table that could seat her large group and if she had any other problems she could let us know. The looks on their faces were priceless. They immediately asked me where I was from and how I knew Spanish and apologized for their unappreciative remarks. Moments like this happen often. It does not matter the culture or identities that see me, they all seem to have the same cultural concept of who I am before even getting to know me.

To my Irish American family and to my Puerto Rican family, I was the first grandchild and it was unknown territory for anyone to have undergone so many treatments and hospital visits. My dad's side of the family did not understand the culture that my mom brought to the family. They did not understand the loud conversations all the time, including at dinner. They did not un-

derstand the language barriers she often faced when trying to explain something or learn new slang. My mom's side did not understand the family dynamic differences of my dad's side. They did not understand how our immediate family could move away from our extended family and this was exemplified when we moved from Florida back to Kansas. My abuelita (grandmother) was the epitome of a Latin woman. Caring for her as she got older was expected in my Latin family. She needed a lot of assistance and with her two older daughters dealing with their own family struggles, my mother, without question, took my abuelita into our home and cared for her. My Latin family has pride, love, and compassion for people. We care for ourselves, but that always includes the aunts, the uncles, the cousins, grandparents etc. and we support each other in every way including: financially, mentally, emotionally, even hosting visits to our home for long periods of time. The family is dedicated to our immediate family and our personal well being. We may get loud or have strong opinions, but we are devoted and will be the number one defense team for each other.

My Irish American family side is built on traditions and faith in God. Not to say my Latin side does not share these qualities, they are simply defined differently. My dad's side of the family is simple, traditional and from the country. We engaged in family reunions and holiday dinners. We get together at least 4 times a year for birthday celebrations. The family is close, but not super close. We go to church regularly and have traditional white



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culture characteristics. My father was the first in the family to have had an interracial relationship. After my parents divorced, he re-married another woman who is black. This is a new concept for this family, but is not something that is unacceptable. I believe they are comfortable in their experiences and are very traditionally conservative, however are very accepting of all people. I thought for sure there would be stronger reactions to me having a child without being married, due to their strong values and faith. I had assumed incorrectly about their acceptance and love for me.

I am studying higher education administration and learning about student development in the classroom and in the world. I am realizing the need for multi-racial awareness and the need to educate others about how race does not come in a one-color fits all box. Race in our country has become a mixture of beautiful combinations. At times, I feel like I am not viewed as me in my whole person, rather a part of me is accepted or understood. I accept that the people in this world have a need to label and understand the anomalies that do not fit the mold and I am happy to teach them about me and about the multiracial community. I am a single mother who identifies as a multicultural Puerto Rican Irish American woman. Though racial obstacles will always be a part of my life journey, I know I can approach these educational moments by providing new perspectives on what race truly means.



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# “Not Just Brown”

## Ardith L. Feroglia

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When you're telling the story of yourself, where should you begin? At the beginning, when everything was fresh and new and unexplored? In the middle, when ideas and themes began to emerge?

Or the present, when everything is still changing and the weight of the world seems to mean so much more?

Twenty-nine years old. Some people joke that I'm old, approaching thirty, essentially the end of my life. By my own standards, I'm still a child, and I do think I'll remain that way in the sense that I'm still learning about the world around me and how I fit in.

Or don't fit in, in some cases.

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When I was little, I knew that I lived in a bicultural household. My mom was from the Philippines; my dad was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. Mom had brown skin and black hair; Dad always had gray hair and green eyes. My last name meant “iron rust,” a tip of the hat to the redheads on my Italian side, but I looked about as far from a redhead as one could get with my black hair and deep brown eyes. Every now and then, a rogue red hair would appear on my head, a subtle and amusing reminder of my mixed heritage. All of those things were part of me, and yet, I didn't know what it all meant.

Later on, I realized that other people didn't know what I meant or how I fit into their reality.

People mistook me as belonging to other races and ethnicities, and they acted like this somehow made me less of a person. People angered when I tried to explain who I really was, like my existence and reality offended them. It was an offense to interrupt their narrative, their reality, their story of who I was, even though they had not even the faintest clue as to my narrative, my reality, my story of who I was.

It was an offense that in turn fueled my short temper; some might attribute that temper to my Irish side or my Italian side. But that's too simple. I attribute it to a growing awareness of the world around me and the accompanying inequalities I observed. What did it matter that I looked different than someone



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else's preconceived notions of a particular race or ethnicity? "Funny, you don't look Irish," should have just as easily been followed with an acknowledgement that maybe their assumptions had just been challenged and changed--not a hanging silence in which I felt it necessary to apologize for interrupting their routine ways of interpreting the world.

For the most part, in spite of the microaggressions that are regrettably a portion of my reality, people who genuinely care surround me. To them, I am more than just brown. I am the intelligent and funny young woman with interests spanning from all things BBC to fitness to airplanes to tap-dancing. I have family from many corners of the world with their own stories. My family is full of band directors and a mayor and former race horse breeders and world travelers. They seem fantastical and larger than life, and I love that about my lineage--the entirety of it.

I am 100% Filipino, 100% Italian, 100% Irish. Some people don't think the math adds up.

Those people--the ones who questioned my command of percentages as well as my lived experiences--are not most of the people I have met along my journey; many of the naysayers were strangers, and many of them are to remain strangers. They'll need more than just me to change their minds, I think. However, most of the people I keep close to me, the people that I love, the people who love me, learned to see outside the tiny boxes humanity created. Whether or not they use the same

terms I do, the same concepts and theories I do, there was a learning process that still persists to this day.

My family accepted my narrative, enriched it, embraced it. My mother shared with me words that validated me, affirmed my mixed-heritage existence as something rooted in a complex history; to her, I was always her baby mestiza.

My friends learned from me, not by lecturing at them, but by inviting them into my life; I shared my food, the bits of language I picked up from my mom and dad, the stories of how the Fero-glias and the Caseys and the Bonzons all found themselves Stateside, one way or another. My friends learned what it was like for one particular person to exist in so many different realms, even if, at times, I did not seem rooted, but instead flitted between my identities in the blink of an eye. As we grew older, they learned what resilience can look like in the face of adversity, what an acute and growing sense of self and identity can look like, what humor and love can look like when "Shouldn't you just be angry?"

All of those things look just like me.

But I'm not "just" anything.

I'm not just brown, not even just mixed.

I will never fit in just one box.

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And that's just fine.



# Family

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# The Pied Piper of Candelaria

## Jade Hoyer

*Academic Advisor*

*University of Tennessee, College of Arts and Sciences*

I am what fitness buffs might call an enthusiastic jogger, that is, except for the enthusiastic part. But I have always wanted to be a runner. I admire a runner's dedication, her sureness of step, her lithe frame. Each morning I pack a gym bag, ever hopeful that one day a five mile jog will be easy for me.

When my family travelled from Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the United States, to Candelaria, Zambales, in the Philippines, I devoted a fair amount of space in my suitcase to my running clothes and shoes. Much to the amusement of my father, mother, and sister, I lugged these items between airports in Chicago, Honolulu, and Guam. At last we landed in Manila, and drove from the frantic and congested freeways of metro Manila up the winding coastal roads of the Zambales province. I watched the landscape change from urban to bucolic and noted

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when we crossed the river and rice paddies that indicated we had arrived in Candelaria, the village where my mother grew up. I dragged my suitcase up the front walk of my Auntie's house, where we exchanged hugs and greetings with the family, an army of smiling people my sister and I all addressed as "auntie" and "uncle."

"I'm going running!" I announced after we had settled in.

My Auntie protested on account of the heat. Wouldn't I rather sit on the porch with the family? I assured her that I was a runner. I changed into running clothes, laced up my shoes, closed the front gate, and ran. I ran up the dirt road, past candy colored cement houses and mango trees. I ran past stray dogs and roosters. I breathed in tropical air that tasted like the approaching rainy season, and congratulated myself on my discipline and my steady gait.

A mile in, I realized that my Auntie had been correct. It was hot. Very, very, hot. My measured breathing changed to that of a gasping fish. I wondered if this is what it felt like to have asthma. Then I noticed that I was attracting attention, though not for my athletic prowess.

My sleeveless running shirt and track shorts – typical attire in the United States – were glaringly immodest in Candelaria. I felt like my light skin was all but glowing. At five foot three, I'm small



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by American standards, but by Filipina standards I am what can politely be described as solidly built. People peered out from their houses and porches, and stared. They marveled at the half-naked, pale, hulking, sputtering American who was questionably exerting herself during the hottest time of the year.

I also had some company. Children from the village ran besides me, darting fish-like around my plodding steps. They kicked up a cloud of red dust in their flip-flops and bare feet. As I doggedly jogged, more and more kids ran out from their homes to join me. Soon I was leading a veritable parade. I was far from the athlete I had imagined myself to be. Instead I was a panting stereotype, a sweaty Pillsbury doughboy. A Pillsbury doughboy meets the Pied Piper, trailed by a dozen laughing children. I navigated back towards my Auntie's place with a pack of children scampering alongside me. My entire family, all sitting on the porch, howled with laughter as I approached.

I had never felt more conspicuous and unsure of how to act than on this trip. Ironically, after childhoods devoted to demanding American food and trying to get out of attending Filipino parties, my sister and I furiously tried to out-Filipina one another in Zambales. Suitcases full of shorts and tank tops were ignored in favor of t-shirts and jeans like the ones our cousins wore. We mimicked our cousins' actions, expressions, and food choices. We asked our cousins constantly, "Who looks more Filipina?" I thought it should have been a draw: I have my mother's nose

and my father's complexion, while my sister shares my mother's skin-tone and my father's hooked nose. Our cousins unanimously selected my sister. One cousin closely inspected my face, and declared that "she couldn't see it," as if her discerning eye could assess and dismiss my culture, ethnicity, and race.

My sister could pass, and for the first time, I couldn't. I felt the discomforting spotlight and resentment of being labeled as "other" on account of the color of my skin. In the United States, my sister and I had known the opposite experiences. I was used to wearing my Filipina heritage when it suited me and the cultural trappings of white privilege when it didn't, though neither persona fit me perfectly or entirely. The Western Michigan Filipino Society provided me with a scholarship to go to college. Though I was annoyed that I could only identify as a single race on my college applications, I checked the "Asian/Pacific Islander" box to describe myself because I thought this would help my chances of acceptance. I danced the traditional Filipino folk dance, the tinikling, in my college's Filipino American Club, but I also felt taken advantage of when my college wanted to photograph me for its promotional material. While I happily devoured chicken adobo and lumpia, I also as a child had begged my mother to please, please not make rice for dinner because I wanted to have friends over.

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My professional career has been devoted to addressing the inequality that corresponds to race in the United States. I currently work as an academic advisor and have been both a teacher and advisor in high-need high schools and colleges. I am painfully privy to the prejudice I would experience directly if I looked more like my mother. I have had advising appointments in which a student leans towards me, telling me a variation of, “I feel bad saying this, but my teacher is one of those foreigners, and you know how hard they are to understand.” My students assume that I share their experiences or even their disdain. They can’t know that I am struggling to maintain a neutral expression, that I remember how my mother struggled in her night school English classes, while these students articulate their dark thoughts in perfect English. I feel both relief and guilt that I don’t have to endure their prejudice directly. I worry if and how I am obligated to those who have.

There are so many people that I want to be. I want to be a Filipina, an American, an artist, a writer, an activist. I want to be a runner. A jog through a tiny village in the Philippines taught me a number of things. On this journey (the sweaty, halting, curse-filled gasping lungs, “I-might-die” kind of journey), I realized that the part of myself that is Filipina is not limited to my appearance; it is more than skin deep. I learned that I am my only constant, that I can only truly represent myself and my own experiences. I have my mom’s nose and my dad’s complexion, and I also share my mom’s ambition and my dad’s sense of hu-

mor. It took me a trip around the world and a run through a village to realize this.

I am Filipina even if I am light; I am American even if I am olive. Though nearly fainting in front of most of the population of Candelaria is among the most spectacularly embarrassing feats I have thus far accomplished, it’s also true that all forty thousand of my aunties, not to mention my mother, were ready to fuss over with me when I got back. I had run so slowly that my aunties were certain I had passed out en route. And the children I mentioned, my running companions, are all my cousins. For weeks these cousins would knock on my Auntie’s door and teasingly ask if I wanted to go running. All of this meant to me the difference between feeling alienated and feeling embraced by my extended family in the Philippines. I am also a runner even if I am slow. When I run I marvel how muscle, tendon, and bone can propel me (slowly) forward. In this aspect of my life and in others, I am impressed at the power within my own skin, regardless of my color.



# Putting Myself Out There: How Understanding My Positionality, Bias and Vulnerability Has Helped Me Become A Better Educator, Mentor and Mom

## Mandy Westfall-Senda

*Faculty Specialist*

*University of Hawaii at Manoa*

“Trauma has a way of making you forget, because forgetting is one way to cope with hurtful events. But once the process of forgetting has created enough distance, it can also create the conditions for the past to be seen with new eyes.”

(Estella Habal, San Francisco’s International Hotel)

We all possess bias against or for something. Some people have extreme political bias while others possess subtle bias, like a preference for a particular cola brand. Unfortunately, the type of bias that seems to be present within all of us, one that manifests itself implicitly, organically, and is the most dangerous is the type that relates to phenotypical expression. More specifically, the assumptions and subsequent judgments we all make based on a formal (e.g. face to face) or informal (e.g. via social media) interactions with someone as predicated by their skin color, physical appearance and/or public image. In our work as educators, advisors, supporters and confidantes to students, I confidently state that most of us are at a point developmentally where we are able to separate our professional assignments from our personal biases so we can accomplish the tasks at hand. However, we sometimes forget that although we have been successful in separating our personal biases from our



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work, our students often haven't. In addition, when we engage with our students, the biases they hold as truth about specific ethnic groups or types of people can sometimes be very much at the surface in our interactions with them, obscuring and substituting for reality based on how they perceive us. Their reticence or lack of desire to access or learn more about the services and supports we provide can be due to how they "see" us.

Although it seems like there are more and more of us who identify as being multiracial working in Student Affairs, we need to be aware of the fact that not only are there more students who are identifying in the same way that we do but there has been a steady increase of students who also identify as "mixed race" in general.

In both the 2000 and 2010 large scale data collections by the U.S. Census Bureau, respondents had the ability to provide detail about their racial and ethnic identity. No longer limited to checking just one box, Americans now had the opportunity to check off as many boxes as they wished to in order to realistically relay their ethnic identity to the Federal government. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), data collected reveals that over 2.9% of the total population of the United States at the time identified as being "two or more races." This percentage, although seemingly small at first glance, reveals an increase of this particular subgroup of about three million people in the span of ten years (from six million to nine million). Furthermore, research conducted by entities like the Pew Re-

search Center reveals that this number will continue to increase due to an upward trend of intermarriage between individuals of different races in the United States. With more and more students identifying as "mixed race" or "two or more races" it is important that we not only honor this self-reporting but that we, as mixed race practitioners ourselves, have a good sense of who we are, what our experiences have been and, if they are relevant, that we share them so they become opportunities to learn and engage. Most importantly, we have to be in a place to support our students in a way that we were not as fortunate to experience as undergraduates and graduates ourselves. What we should attempt to do is model the behavior we expect to see in others and that means telling our story, being comfortable in exposing our vulnerabilities, talking about our traumas so they are cathartic, owning our biases and revealing our authentic selves. I proudly and humbly tell my story below.

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Growing up in Hawai'i, being labeled as different or 'other' was an everyday occurrence. I can't remember it being extremely good or horribly bad but it just "was." Most of the time, I was labelled and perceived as hapa, a local term on loan from the Hawaiian language that, at its most rudimentary definition, means "part" or "half." I have also been called "biracial" or "Amerasian," terms that were the result and tangible evidence of the aftermath of U.S. involvement in wars that transpired on the Asian



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Continent or against Asian adversaries. Others, politically correct or not but hurtful nonetheless, have at times called me a mongrel, half-breed, Eurasian or hafu. My dual identity has been one that I have been hyper aware of since birth, not just because my dad and mom have physical features that are so distinctly different and unique from one another but because being hapa in Hawai'i was acceptable and highly coveted by locals. In a way, being hapa helped me socially, especially when I was younger. I "fit" the mold of what the desired offspring of an interracial marriage between an Asian and a Caucasian was supposed to look like: light brown hair, fair-but-not-too-pale skin, hazel-almost green-eyes with enough but not too much slant in their shape; I was exotic but not in a commodified way.

I was the beauty norm that everyone seemed to strive for, the physical embodiment of the Cosmopolitanism that was Honolulu in the 1960s and 1970s.

For the most part, I can safely say that I led a charmed existence through my adolescent years. Although there were times that people thought I was haole (in short, European American or Caucasian) and every (negative) stereotype attached to that identity, there were always peers, friends, and classmates who had similar ethnic backgrounds at school, danced hula with me, and played on the same soccer teams so the "othering" was rare. I saw myself around and within Hawai'i literally everywhere, in Liberty House ads, in Long's commercials on television and even in the annual Miss Hawai'i pageant. However,

when I flipped on primetime television or watched programming made for Cable channels headquartered outside of Hawai'i, the actors who were cast in the sitcoms and movies I enjoyed watching looked nothing like me. I also never found anyone who looked remotely like me in the Sears "Big Book" catalog and there were nary a professional athlete, politician or even a game show host that had even the slightest tinge of yellow to their skin or slant to their eyes that I could find or even force kinship with. Although this dearth of familiar faces from Continental media was curious to me, it didn't become as personal or problematic as it did until I left Hawai'i and attended college in California.

Before I even stepped foot on campus, I knew I was going to be treated differently due to experiences and stories shared by cousins and friends with similar ethnic identities who either grew up on the Continent or attended school there. I was fully prepared to accept the fact that my valued and coveted physical appearance in Hawai'i would confuse and confound others away from home while at the same time, these traits would extol me even more than I had been before. It was during the first few weeks of my undergraduate career that I not only had to field the "Do you live in grass shacks in Hawai'i?" line of questioning, I also got the dreaded, "What are you? No, really.

What are you?" question so many times, I stopped counting. I learned the hard way: it was going to be easier on me and those I interacted with if I picked one identity and stuck with it. I either

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had to be either Asian American or White, but I couldn't be both.

This became all too apparent to me during what I consider a traumatic experience, one of my first memories as an undergrad and one that I suppressed for many years.

I attended a small, highly selective and prestigious liberal arts college. As is the practice of other institutions of higher education, I was assigned a Peer Mentor. Those who served in this role at my college typically had sophomore class standing and their primary function was to be a resource and confidante to incoming first years; I hypothesize that my alma mater hired students whose own first year experience was still fresh in their minds and thus, the belief was that these students would be excellent peer mentors for incoming students because they could relate. Every new student was assigned a Peer Mentor, regardless of where you were from or how you identified yourself on official paperwork. However, because I checked various boxes in the demographics section on my official enrollment forms, I also was appointed a Peer Assistance Leader or PAL. PALs operated like Peer Mentors but they were assigned to those of us whom had checked the "Asian" or "Asian American" boxes.

When I was applying to colleges, it was recommended that if I had to check just one box on the forms that requested information about my identity, that I check anything but "White." Taking this advice very seriously, I would often end up checking "Other" or both the "Asian/Asian American" and "Caucasian" boxes if available. I got giddy when a written option was given,

proudly penciling in "Okinawan" as was the case with my undergraduate institution. However, as I learned during my time as a student assistant in my alma mater's Admissions Office, those on the receiving end of the information sometimes did not understand that someone like me could identify as both Asian & haole and do so with pride for the equality of my mixture. This was certainly the case when my PAL arrived on move-in day to introduce herself.

My PAL was a Filipina-American from the West Coast. Having written to me over the summer, I anticipated her arrival on my first day and was looking forward to meeting her in person. She had nice handwriting, seemed to know a lot, and also seemed like she sincerely wanted to be my friend. To put it simply: I was stoked. However, the warmth and kinship that was present in her correspondence seemed to dissipate when we came face to face. After entering my room and doing a double take between my mom and I, my PAL stated that a mistake had been made. I was both confused and a wee bit leery since I absolutely knew who she was even though she didn't "recognize" me but I let it play out, all the while trying to stem the flood of similar memories of events that occurred during my childhood that were similar and hurtful in nature. Apparently, she didn't think I looked Asian enough to have a PAL, even though my mom, who was clearly Asian, introduced herself as my biological mother. Confused by my physical appearance and the presence of my Asian mother, she mumbled a quick goodbye and



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left the room almost to never return for the rest of my first semester of college, even though she lived directly across the hall (I think she reluctantly came back a few weeks later about a Residence Hall Council event). As the weeks progressed, I was made aware of the fact that there had been numerous fun PAL-planned events, activities that I hadn't been invited to but my Chinese American neighbor and eventual roommate had.

Although it hurt not being invited to planned outings, I suspect that I wasn't invited because of my appearance and I couldn't make sense of why I was so unacceptable to my PAL until many years had passed. Mengel (2001) discusses the potential reasons as to why my PAL might have felt the way she did when she met me in that "Asian American pan-ethnicity developed in response to White oppression" (pg. 107); even though I didn't feel "white" or act "white," my PAL, I speculate, saw me first and foremost as White and that could have evoked feelings of historical oppression or hardship felt by her or her family members. Thus, she felt she, again I speculate and infer, was incapable of mentoring me because I represented something undesirable and uncomfortable to her. The concept of a "duality of hybridity," a position that was supposed to allow me to be a viable and active member of both Asian and White groups on campus, was perhaps not appreciated, at least by my PAL and probably her peers who shared similar sentiments. (pg. 105)

Due to the overwhelming feeling of rejection, and the need to prove my "Asianness," I decided that I wanted to be accepted

as a member of the Asian American community on campus and I was going to work really hard at it.

The quest for acceptance led me on different paths. I went to cultural events, joined clubs that had Asian American members and played the part of the "good" Asian girl to a hilt. In the midst of this spectacle and pseudo-persona building, my co-curricular pursuits began to influence my curricular ones. I immersed myself in anything that related to Asia and Asians in America with a special emphasis on Japan and being "Japanese American," because even though I am actually Okinawan, it was as close as I could get to my own culture; by learning to be both Japanese and Japanese American, I could be seen as authentic to the community even though I was claiming an identity that really wasn't mine. Most importantly, I assumed that because I was studying Asian cultures, languages and history, access and membership would automatically be granted because I was becoming a subject-matter expert and I could be the example for others because I was a good Asian girl, practicing all the cultural norms while also spouting essential history and facts. I forced myself to be as Japanese as possible so I could make alliances and friendships in my classes and campus community niches. Privately, in my close group of diverse friends, I got so good at being Asian and gladly played the part that I became the "token" Asian, even though the majority of people I interacted still didn't see me as Asian. In fact, throughout my time in California, people assumed I was actually Mexican or at

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least Spanish-speaking and would often times express their frustration with me that I couldn't respond in español.

Even though I tried very hard, I wasn't ever fully accepted in the Asian American community because of my hapa features and my Germanic surname. Back then, no one knew what to do with a biracial person. I was always on the fringe, trying to prove my "ethnic-ness" and that meant not acknowledging my non-ethnic half or at least relegating it to a lesser position. Far too many times, I told myself that I needed to reject my white ancestry in order to truly be a "person of color" and that meant feigning indignity when white folks ridiculed or poked fun at Asians or other ethnic groups even though my Asian American peers seemed to tell jokes and make comments regularly about white people more frequently than any other white peer had. I had gone from being a proud hapa woman, a hybrid in the truest sense of the word in Hawai'i, to being a reluctant Asian pantomime in California, going through the motions but unable to speak the truth about whom I was because I was afraid of being ridiculed and that would undermine my efforts towards gaining the acceptance of the Asian American campus community.

This fits in perfectly with what Jourdan (2006) discusses in her work with multiethnic students on college campuses. When I was in college, there weren't resources or professionals to help me even though emerging research conducted and still being conducted proves that "multiethnic college students have re-

vealed that they often struggle with their ethnic identity on the college campus." (328)

The late 1990's and the early 2000's enjoyed a boom of research and writing about biracial identity. The benefit of the broadened census options did more than offering choice, they also challenged existing ideology and revealed that

"norms surrounding diversity in the United States, Canada and Great Britain shifted towards a paradigm of multiracial multiculturalism, in which mixed race identities were acknowledged as part of -rather than problematic within -diverse societies and could be recognized as a positive attribute of the multicultural nation." (Thompson, 2012, pg. 1410)

This timeframe is personal to me as it was when I was pursuing my undergraduate studies and struggling with being biracial.

Thankfully, there were folks like me who actually had the courage and energy to write about their experiences and conduct tangible research about mixed race and hapa students. Chiong (1998) in her pursuits on the subject matter examined not only the historical events that have affected biracial individuals, she also had a personal investment in examining biracial identity as the mother of a hapa child. Chiong found that, prior to 2000, biracial Americans were "forced to acknowledge only part of their racial heritage" because of the limitations that applications, census collections, and such allowed them. (pg. 2) As a result, this often lead to the belief, held by both the biracial individual and



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society as a whole, that those who originally ascribed to a way of life that allowed for and honored duality and code-switching to occur were forced to pick one identity over another as was the case for me as an undergraduate. Chiong aptly points out that our nation's history and practices not only compartmentalize Americans who may have parents from different ethnic and racial backgrounds but this practice has been detrimental to the individual affected because it forces them to create and maintain an identity shaped by public perception rather than personal experience and growth. (pg. 13) Much of these external actors and accepted beliefs that affect biracial children and their identity development are via formal schooling, namely the educational institutions at all levels. Chiong asserts that the school, as both a physical space and the location by which knowledge is transmitted, primarily through a teacher, can also be a crucial site where identification making takes place. Because of this, mixed race educators, like myself, in engaging and working with mixed race and biracial students "must take a holistic approach toward education with them." (pg. 108) In my current work, this is something I am fortunate to test and experience on a daily basis.

As the faculty member who is tasked with providing vision and oversight for New Student Orientation (NSO) at my institution, I am constantly looking for innovations that will help incoming students and their parents have a successful transition into our campus community. A critical component of successful transi-

tion has been in the utilization of current students who are recruited and hired to serve as NSO leaders. While having a diverse staff is never the primary reason in my hiring decisions, I do try to hire qualified students whom I feel will be good leaders and role models for students; by chance or perhaps fate, the leaders I hire always, as a group, reflect the diversity on campus. One of the leaders I hired one summer challenged the biases I had retained as a result of my undergraduate trauma and helped me to reflect on how I can be a better educator, especially to the students who needed me to model for them the most. In this leader I saw both myself and the "other." However, it is through this student that I have been able to understand my positionality as a student affairs professional working in an incredibly diverse institution.

This student was everything that we could hope for in an NSO leader: intelligent, involved on campus, energetic and positive in attitude. It never really crossed my mind that this individual was mixed or biracial because of the way they looked. What I later learned was that this student was half-Native American and half Caucasian. Because of the bias I possessed towards people with blond hair and green eyes as a result of what I learned during my quest to be accepted as a member of the Asian American community during my undergraduate years, I was unable to see beyond the phenotypical expression of this particular student at first. If I hadn't created an opportunity for my leaders to share about their upbringing and background in a

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reflective space through journaling, I would have never heard myself in this leader's words. As Renn (2004) discusses in her research, students like this NSO leader "who identify with two or more of their heritages may do so because they come to college with cultural knowledge of both or because they seek out such knowledge (through classes, activities, and peer interaction) when they arrive in a supportive environment." (pg. 73) While I had created the space for this student to share in class, they had previously begun, much prior to becoming a leader, to address and rectify personal traumas experienced by writing songs and making Youtube videos in an admirable act of ablu-tion. As the summer progressed, I learned more and more about how this leader had to stick up for family members who were being discriminated against and how people would auto-matically assume negative things about them. The more I read this student's journals, the more I heard my own words and ex-periences. They brought forth a hard reflection that I hadn't re-visited since I was an undergraduate. In looking back on my career, I discovered that I might have encouraged my Asian and Asian American students more than the others. Perhaps be-cause I had more expectations of their performance in the class-room and wanted them to do "good" all the while still believing, as a result of my own biases, that they would be letting the group down if they didn't apply themselves and that would be "bad." I was living an existence, however, that did not align with what I articulated in my classes. While I ascribed to the notion

that "profound change occurs only when followers who seek change find leaders who can articulate goals that have a chance of being achieved in the context of the times," I was not paying attention to the fact that I had not been as honest as I should have been in looking at my biases and how they played out in my everyday life. (Clark, 1996, pg. 218) Although I was the instructor on record, this leader really taught me something and for that, I am forever grateful.

Perhaps the most important learning and growth I've experi-enced as a result of being a student, mentor and professional in higher education over the past twenty years is this: by acknowl-edging my bias, understanding its roots, revisiting and reflecting on my traumas, and coming to point in which I am accepting of all the aspects that make up "me," I will be a better educator in the future. The progress I have made and continue to make has been slow and steady. Returning to Hawai'i was therapeu-tic and allowed me to see that I could become the role model I never had for others like me and the aforementioned leader was the reminder that I needed and will continue to need as my career expands. Today, I am more forthcoming in my profes-sional and personal lives about the fact that I am not only Okina-wan but I am also haole and I am proud of both. I am no longer afraid of the judgmental faces and changes in behavior that I have experienced when I have shared information about my Caucasian roots. Instead of relying on stereotypes and assump-tion, I use fact and experience instead with a hope that others



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will catch on. As an educator who teaches a course on leadership, I am honestly trying my best to model the behavior I hope to see in others. This also means being my most authentic self, especially at home with my daughter who, at the time of this writing, is three going on thirteen. I try to be more playful and silly with her so that she sees that mommy isn't always so serious with her work and research. Although that means that I have had to sacrifice sleep and school time, I hope that being truly balanced in all aspects of my life it will payoff more positively in the long-run. As my daughter develops and grows, I hope that she will not have to experience the trauma and inner turmoil I experienced because she is also hapa (and cute as a button, I might add). I am hoping that by contributing to her growth and development as a human being first and foremost, the other "stuff" will align organically. That means helping her discern what is right from wrong and understanding that "good" and "bad" isn't always so easily classifiable. According to Holladay (2008), "longitudinal studies have shown that people with higher moral development have lower levels of racial prejudice." (pg. 22) It helps that my husband is also biracial with different and similar experiences. My husband growing up was bilingual and spent his formative years in Hawai'i . When he was ten, the family moved to California and at that point, he was told that he needed to speak English only because he lived in America. His experience in California was much different than in Hawai'i . Like myself during my undergraduate years, he was mistaken

for everything but hapa and perhaps that is why he ended going back to Hawai'i for his own undergraduate degree. We often talk about growing up and not having role models or at least people who looked like us in the media to look up to and admire. We both acknowledge that it was as if we, as mixed race/biracial people, did not exist until recently. As such, we try to encourage our daughter to be proud of her hybridity and to embrace her personal heritage, one that is rich, diverse and uniquely her own. One way we do this is through talking and sharing and really answering her "why" questions when they come up. She is a constant reminder that I can be proud of myself and fully embrace all the ethnicities that I claim membership. The pride and sense of accomplishment that manifests as a result of being a mom leads me believe that I can do anything in my work with students no matter their background or identity. I cannot be a successful educator if I am not a successful parent first; the support that I provide in each of my roles do not run parallel to each other. Rather, they intersect at so many points and in so many way. I also cannot be a successful educator if I am not honest with whom I am. That means that I must be proud of my background and not suppress the parts of me that professors, administrators or so-called friends told me I had to before. By revealing my comfortableness in my own skin, I hope that my students will do the same. We often erect barriers around our true self because we are afraid of being vulnerable as well as the shame and ridicule that we think will

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come with it although this couldn't be farther from the truth.

The more honest we are with who we are and understanding our place in the world, the better we can be in our work, social and personal lives. One caveat: our positionality is not to be confused as one of privilege. It should be understood as a position of awareness that comes with the ability to empathize with our students as well as our peers who hold a similar identity.

We also should not have to experience trauma to be effective or enlightened; this is why sharing our stories is so important.

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# Who Knew Being Mixed Race Was So Complicated?

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Throughout my life it was apparent that I was different. I didn't look like those in my family and more times than not many pointed it out to me. As a child my friends would ask me, "Is that really your mom?" To myself I thought, "Why wouldn't she be my mom? She does everything your mom does, so what's the difference". This followed me throughout my younger years and into high school. It was then that I really began to notice that I was not the same as many African American woman that I thought myself to be. I was constantly questioned about my hair and the fact that my skin tone was lighter. I was often times called a mutt or an oreo (black on the outside white on the inside). I didn't fit into any crowd black or white. I was too light to be black and too dark to be white. These moments in my life

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really began to shape the journey that I will spend the next few moments in this chapter to discuss.

*From Childhood to High School*

Being mixed race can be very challenging. Growing up my sister, brother and I never had to choose between being white or black in our household. My mom supported us no matter what. So I identified as black, my sister identified as mixed race, and my brother well we still don't know. But this was never a problem at home. When we would go out in public it was another story. I always had a problem with people stereotyping me and placing me into category I didn't identify with. When I would tell someone I was black they automatically looked at me and said "but really what are you actually mixed with". What does this even mean? What are you actually? This always frustrated me. Like I am somehow not enough to be part of the group that I choose to identify with.

Even within my family I would notice being treated differently. On one side of the family always being told oh well that's the white in you, and the other side of the family making comments that are microaggressive. I remember a time when a family member asked me if I wanted black cake or white cake. It didn't really seem problematic until I looked back on it and realized that she asked every other person if they wanted chocolate cake or white cake until my sister and I came. But how was I



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supposed to know if this was something I should be sensitive to or not.

When I got older I started to color my hair. In many contexts I am told that because of this I am acting like a white girl. When I act a certain way, dress a certain way, talk a certain way, do my hair a certain way, I am told by some family members that I am acting white. I'm told that I think I'm better than them. I'm questioned about everything I do and asked why I do it. Something as simple as changing the color of my hair, or having a certain conversation, can initiate a comment that is against me.

Through all of this it is impossible to get away from the fact that I am different from my family. I share the same blood but I am never seen by others as being part of the family. Many times my sister, brother, and I are seen as the other children that came from the white woman, or the other children that came from the black man. Sure we are accepted by some. But it will always be the elephant in the room when someone says something about our mother, or father, in our presence.

High School. Growing up identifying as African American was difficult especially when I went to high school. Though I sought to learn more information about my heritage my mom didn't really know a lot about the history I was seeking. Being that I hardly learned about it in school it was up to me to seek out the information I could. I was questioned a lot about my interest in learning more about African American history because I wasn't

black. I was also chastised because I didn't know the history like I was supposed to because I was perceived as black. It became a double edged sword that I didn't know how to navigate.

In high school you are just experiencing being in love and meeting new friends. For me it was about learning more about my identity but that identity was challenged and questioned daily. Then I had to choose who I hung out with very carefully because if I hung out with the wrong people I would be looked at in very different ways. Did I hang out with people who "acted black" because that's how I chose to identify, or did I hang out with everyone? If I chose to hang out with people who were perceived as nerds I was told that's the white in me, if I hung out with people who were loud and "acted black" I was told nothing. As if this was the normal place I belonged, but many times my friends would tell me to stop acting like a white girl. When I would say I'm dating this African American man I was told by other African American woman that I could only date this person because I was light skinned. I was exotic looking so everyone wanted to know more about me. This led to a lot of bad decisions and low self-esteem throughout high school.

My hair also became an issue in high school. Many people asked me if they could touch my hair or asked me if it was real. I was always accused of wearing horsehair because my hair was so long. My response was, "try to pull it out. I bet you it doesn't come out". My hair was not supposed to be curly and

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free flowing. You weren't supposed to be able to put a comb through my hair. I had "good hair". Because I'm half white I somehow have better hair than my African American counterparts. A benefit for me was that everyone wanted to do my hair. Because I had "good hair" it was much easier to work with than other types of hair, so I always had my hair done for free. The downside to this was black woman thought I thought I was better than them, which was hardly ever the case.

Trying to make and keep friends in high school was also difficult. When my friends and I would have conversations about the daily struggle of being black, I was often times pushed out of those conversations because I was not black enough. In a more entitled sense I was fed with the silver spoon. My background put me in a place that I was somehow perceived as better than my friends. Talk about an identity crisis. How are you supposed to really start to know who you are when everyone is telling you that because you look and act a certain way you feel like you are better than them.

High school definitely began the process of shaping my experience as a mixed race person. As I continued into college I was determined to learn more about African American history and becoming more black. I thought that this was the way to being seen as a legitimate black person in the eyes of my peers. Though my focus at the time was to become more black, I

never knew what challenges would be added by becoming a parent.

### *Parenting Being Multiracial*

Most students come into college trying to figure out who they are and where they belong. My first two weeks in college I had a child. All throughout my career in college I was stereotyped to be that black girl who had a child and wasn't doing anything with her life. This began a whole new learning process for me as a mixed race person. Not only was I trying to identify who I was as a person, and what my identity meant to me, but I was navigating a world where people would judge the decisions I made for my child based on my race.

As my daughter grew up there were several times where I was questioned because I didn't use a certain hair product for her, or I didn't do her hair the way it should be done as an African American child. I was told yet again that this was the white in me because being half white somehow made me incapable of being able to do my daughter's hair.

Being that I was going to school to learn more about African American history I always taught my daughter to embrace being African American. At this point I was able to teach my daughter things about her history that my mother was not able to teach me. With this came questions from my daughter about her skin color. Not only am I questioned by others about why my skin is



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so light, but my daughter also started to question how it was that she had darker skin than me. She started to ask those hard questions of how can you be my mom when you have lighter skin than me. Immediately I understood how it must have felt for my mom to be put in this situation every day, and how it still must feel now that she has an even darker grandchild.

I remember going to look at houses for rent right after my daughter was born. My mom, my daughter and I went to one house and looked around. Shouldn't have been a problem. Before we left the owner of the home looked at my mom and I, and mustered up the courage to ask this: "I am not going to have a problem with your children's father am I?" I didn't know what to say. My jaw hit the floor. I was so upset. Just because he seen a "black" child with a white woman he assumed that he would have problems with the father. Though I am not fully black, to a white person I am. It doesn't matter if my mom is white. I don't get the same privilege that she does. I am very different from her in the eyes of many people.

In other situations when we are with my mom it tends to get a little more complicated. We always get these looks like why are they all together. When my mom is with my daughter by herself people always assume that she is just babysitting. When she tells them she is her granddaughter there is this confused look on their face like they really don't understand.

My uncle (who is white) brought my daughter to the store I worked in one time, and my daughter was throwing a temper tantrum. There were two African American women that I was checking out and they both started making comments about the white man with the black child. I kindly looked up at them and said, "oh that is my uncle with my daughter", and explained to them why she was upset. They looked up at me and immediately began to apologize.

Even within the context of parenting I am constantly having to defend myself, and my family, in order to make sure that everyone else knows that we are just like any other family. We just so happen to have many different shades of people in my family. That doesn't make us any less of a family, it just makes us more diverse.

### *College Experience and Beyond*

As previously mentioned I went to school searching for an answer about who I was, so I delved into learning more about African American history. I was very fascinated by the history but the more I looked into it, the more I knew that it didn't encompass who I was as a person. I wouldn't say that I was challenged about my identity while I was in college, but I was beginning to reconsider what my racial identity meant to me.

My experience really began when I joined a black sorority on campus. This is when I began to truly understand who I was in

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the context of the black community. Through my studies I began to learn more and more about the history that hindered my parents when I was born, and why I was treated the way I was. Joining my sorority opened up my eyes to a whole new world on campus, because until then I never truly seen the campus for what it was. I came to campus and went home and that was that. It was then that I realized that there was a whole culture on campus that I didn't fit into. It wasn't only my experience outside of school but in school as well.

Being in a historically black sorority where traditionally there are only black women within the organizations, I quickly realized that I didn't fit in. My organization was not always the problem, but when I was around other fraternity and sorority members I quickly realized that I was one of few who looked like me. When I joined it was like high school happened all over again and I was being asked questions like what are you mixed with, and is your hair really yours. I was constantly questioned for the decision I made to join a black sorority as if I wasn't legitimate enough to be part of the organization.

It was this experience that began to spark my interest in knowing more about other people like myself. As my capstone research project I looked at how multiracial people self-disclose about race in their relationships. It was interesting to me that growing up, and especially in college as I began really dating, that I constantly found myself explaining to my boyfriend that he

may not be liked by half of my family. The very first conversation I had with him was that there may be things that one side of my family could say that would be offensive to him as a black man. There are also things that could be said about me by another side of my family that may make him feel uncomfortable. So I wanted to know what other people like me experienced when it came to dating.

I then moved on to learn more about the experience of others that looked like me when they attended college. I have now become fascinated by the fact that the experience that I myself have as a multiracial person is not one that stands alone. In doing this research I got very angry sometimes to know that there is nowhere for me, or others like me, to go on a college campuses to talk about these things. Sure there are groups that exist for people of color to talk, but my experience as a mixed race person in that context was very different. My experience is not the same as my African American sisters. I would share my experience in these groups, but from listening to others experiences their complaints about campus were primarily speaking about dominant groups on campus. Sometimes even speaking about not having a safe space outside of the multicultural center. For me my safe space was nowhere. I didn't feel like I fit in the multicultural center until I started to work there as a graduate student. It was then that I was able to raise conversations about inclusivity of mixed race individuals within the office. I also knew for sure I didn't fit in the dominant parts of campus,



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or within my classroom. In the classroom I experienced being singled out to give the answer about what it felt like to be black, or looked to for answers about black history. The only problem is I have no idea what it feels like to be black because I've never experienced that before. This became more isolating than it was learning. So for me it was very important to understand what the needs of mixed race students were and try to share that with not only my campus, but other campuses that were trying to start the process of being inclusive of mixed race individuals.

Moving from the Midwest. As my journey as a student began to come to a close I began to think about what it would be like to live somewhere else. Somewhere that the history of black culture was so rich that you almost become immersed in it. I thought this experience would be so fulfilling. As I began the process to seek out other institutions to work for in the south, I had to begin questioning whether or not my skin tone was going to be a problem within my position. I am passionate about serving underrepresented students and I love working in multicultural affairs, but as a mixed race person I had to think about my legitimacy within this field. I began to question myself during the job search process and asking myself would I not be accepted by my students because I'm mixed. I was told that because of my mixed race status, if I aspired to be hired at a historically black university that I would not be accepted by the students on that campus.

My fears about my job search process shortly subsided. I did find a position and was hired at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. I was excited to move to the south. When I got here I didn't know what to expect but I thought it would be an embracing culture. Over the summer 2014 I attended a sorority event. I happened to find myself in a conversation with an older African American woman discussing why I came to Tennessee. During this conversation I was told that the only reason that I got my job was because of my skin color. I was light enough to fit within my office and so they hired me. I was so taken aback by this comment and didn't really know what to say about it. It was something that I had never experienced before. Sure I have been told that I am privileged because of my skin tone but never really had anyone blatantly tell me that.

The same microaggressive patterns continued as I began to search for a church. When I first came to the church I am now a member of, I remember feeling very uncomfortable. It wasn't that I was the only person that looked like me but I was in a new environment. As weeks passed a member of the church came up to me and told me that I looked just like one of her family members. Growing up I got this all the time. Apparently everyone who is mixed looks alike. I didn't really think too much about the comment until she said that there was a place in Tennessee where there are several people who look like me. This town was just for mixed people. I just laughed it off and walked

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away as I thought to myself how insulting it was for her to say that.

The experience of being mixed race never ends. No matter where you go you will always find something new. I've only been in Tennessee for about 8 months and these experiences happened within the first 3 months I was here. I am not by any means immune to the microaggressive acts of those around me, and I can't say that because I've learned more about myself that they've ceased to exist. If anything my awareness of what is being said to me has become even more heightened as I've entered into my first professional job in the south. I am experiencing a new set of microaggressive behavior that I have never experienced before. Sure I was used to being looked at differently, but it seems that now that I am here I have been facing more challenges with individuals within minority groups. This has been a new, and sometimes challenging, experience for me to grapple with.

### *Conclusion*

I've tried my entire life to be black. I've tried to become dark like my dad's family. I tan in the summers so that I can be darker than I normally am. But in reality I will never be what some define as black. It wasn't until I got into my senior year of college that I began to embrace who I am. I'm mixed race and I can now embrace that without feeling uncomfortable about being light. I can also embrace that I identify as a black woman with-

out feeling like I have to explain myself. Being mixed race I am supposed to be privileged in this American society, but the reality is that I will never fit in to the white group or the black. No matter how much people want to say that they accept me for who I am, I know that in the back of their heads I'm somehow inferior or privileged. I am comfortable and confident about who I am today. I am a mixed race woman who identifies as African American. I teach my daughter about what it means to be black. I teach her the history just the same as any other child. Just because I am mixed race does not make me any less, or any more, of a black woman than anyone else. Just because I am light skinned doesn't mean that I am any more privileged than any other darker skinned woman. I am a human being and my life is not a testament to being privileged. So why should I have to internalize your oppression? Why should I have to want to change the way I look to impress you? I am mixed race and proud of that, and I won't let anyone take that away from me.



# Intersections

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# Hybrid

## Abby Chien

*Student Success Coach  
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As a child, I desperately wanted to be catalogued -- I craved the opportunity to pull out a long card catalog drawer at the library where I would find myself sandwiched neatly between my parents and just after my older sister. Each section, shelf, author, title and amount of time that I had been borrowed would explain who I was. In this dream, the world did not need to ask me what am I or to whom I belong. I was not half-anything, instead, a whole card.

When sharing my story in conversation, I often begin with the statement, "I used to think I was White." It might appear overly-simplistic, but for me, it's true. In many ways, my perceived physical racial ambiguity allowed me to pass, and I operated in a world naive-enough to ignore the racist comments, microaggressions and statements that would have contradicted this

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view. My childhood was scattered with moments that polarized my interfaith family and multiracial heritage. It was these moments, sometimes consequential or sometimes fleeting, that made me feel as if being part of multiple races, cultures and ethnicities was not a comprehensive whole.

I grew up in a predominantly White, Christian region of the Midwest, so it is no surprise that my friends and their families reflected this homogeneity. I spent large portions of my teenage and college years asking why I was different and why I didn't fit in. Consequently, I internalized and blamed my own personality traits.

In my childhood, what I perceived as the biggest difference among my friends was that I came from an interfaith household. As one of a handful of Jewish kids at my school, I was tokenized not for my race, but because I represented a religious minority.

Yet that statement is contradictory and troublesome. I never truly identified as being Jewish. Perhaps from the outside looking in, it appeared that way: my mother took my sister and I out of school and to services on the High Holy Days. We sometimes threw Hanukkah parties or attended bar and bat mitzvahs for our family members. Yet my father made sure we celebrated Christmas and Easter, as well as traditions which included, as example, an occasional red envelope on Chinese Lunar New Year. The fusion of religion and cultures made it difficult to ar-



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ticulate what I believed or how I showed it. Compounding this with the experience of already being a very shy kid (for most of my childhood I refused to talk to my grandparents on the phone because I thought it was scary); not only was it an unfair expectation to continually explain myself, I would have never even attempted to do so because it was too far outside of my comfort zone.

Growing up, my family did not overtly discuss race or religion. We did what we did. We celebrated what we celebrated. It was how things were. As my father would say, “What is, is.”

And so I arrive back at the moments that helped me begin to process how I define myself, which serve as my personal card catalog of critical incidents.

The moment in second grade when my friend asked me what religion I was, and I responded “both,” implying that I was Christian and Jewish.

The moments when each side of my family argues who I look more like, and uses descriptors like “more/less Asian” to do so.

The moments when someone, ranging from passers-by asking for directions or parents of my students, speaks to me in Spanish and proceeds to provide their own judgment when I respond in English.

The moments when someone tries to make sense of my hair, especially if they also know my last name (an easy clue to my Chinese heritage). Why is it curly? Is it natural? Do you dye it? Has it always been that way?

The moment when I realized I had been socialized to believe that I needed to perpetuate the model minority myth in order to please my father.

The moments when I took standardized tests and first wondered if “angry” could be an ethnicity because I despised choosing a box that didn’t accurately describe me. The moments following when I wondered if it was okay to be strategic and “pick one” that would give me an advantage in some capacity, and the moments when I realized this wasn’t progress at all.

The moment when I realized that just three people, my father and his parents, had been defining my understanding of all things Chinese.

The moment when my sister became obsessed Kip Fulbeck’s work “The Hapa Project.”

The moment when I first read Maria P.P. Root’s “Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage.”

The moments when my extended family forgets that I do not speak their native language.

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The moments when people ask me the infamous question “What are you?”

The moment I stood on a stage and told a few hundred strangers about these experiences.

The moment when I realized that I actually love all three of my names.

I could fill catalogs full of many more moments. Some are filled with shame or extreme discomfort as I realize the harm I was either doing to myself or others in perpetuating certain things. Some demonstrate the act of growing up, like when I put two and two together to realize that, by standard definition, I couldn't really be two religions. Some portray confusion or pride. Some are easily “explained away” while others are incredibly complex.

When I began to understand these moments, I began reconsidering my experiences from cultural and racial lenses. Intellectualizing them first gave me context, something that had been innate to my being, yet previously untapped. This gave me space to then process my emotional responses. As a naturally curious person, this approach fit with who I'd become in my adult life.

Recognizing these differences seemed to change how I understood my life overnight. Previous moments of not fitting in, such as feeling differently than my peers but not understanding why,

suddenly held a sort of magical clarity. It provided a new context for the struggles in my parent's sometimes tense and incredibly complicated relationship and their lack of clarity regarding what I learned from them as their daughter.

From high school through college, I was angry about not understanding my racial and religious identities. I blamed my parents for not teaching me. For a time, it actually felt good to be angry. I wanted to be White because it seemed straightforward. I wanted to be able to put myself in a box, or at least I wanted a box that represented me to exist. I wanted to meet someone who looked like me who I wasn't related to. I wanted to be able to explain myself when someone asked -- even though the questions they asked seemed fundamentally insensitive. I just wanted to know myself.

Of course, anger only felt good for so long. For a period, it morphed into a sadness that was heavy and pervasive. But it was in this emotional space that I started to answer questions which propelled me forward. Questions that included: how do I connect to cultures that I've never really understood but are part of who I am? Why don't I understand it? Or why do I think I don't understand? Why do I feel like I'm not “enough?” Who makes me feel that way? In what ways did I avoid my culture? Was it possible that the model minority myth drove my (capitalistic notion of) “success” in school? What part of my racial identity do I need to feel more connected to? Why?



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As I began to answer these questions, I started to realize that my answers will continually evolve, which in this moment feels liberating. Regardless of where I am on the spectrum of understanding myself, I often return to what I know: a sense of pride that both of my sets of grandparents immigrated to this country in search of lives filled with less oppression and greater opportunity, and a warm sense of graciousness that I knew them, learned their stories, and their traditions. A sense of calm in knowing that it is a start, and a humbling reality that my parents created a blend of traditions that represented who they were and taught me what it meant to be part of them.

However, the frustrations are never far from surfacing and are often linked to emotional life events. When my maternal grandmother passed away, I fought with myself because I did not know how to grieve for her. For my grandmother, a Holocaust survivor and ardent believer, I felt like I could not honor her history, and by extension my history, because I didn't identify as a Jewish woman. I knew in my heart I would not be reciting the Mourner's Kaddish or sitting Shiva, but I wrestled with balancing conscious choice and emotional connection. I still feel caught between feeling a sense of betrayal to one part of my family in exchange for something I believe as a result of the other.

Sometimes I feel that the statement "I used to think I was White" devalues my mother, a white woman, a woman who I

would need to invent adjectives to truly describe my love and affection. If I can only "check one box," is it a betrayal to check Asian? Is it a betrayal to check White? In an act of defiance, I often leave the race box blank, but then spend time squirming, because by not answering anything, it's as if I'm marginalizing another part of myself or not sharing my truth.

Despite the confusion, it is a rare day when I have doubted the traditions in my family. I celebrate through a fusion of family traditions such as picking apples in the fall, building gingerbread houses from scratch, hiding the afikomen at Passover instead of finding it, and eating hot pot. For me, the confusion is about balancing the expectations of the outside world. I know that it is not my responsibility, but I feel it in my person that I owe it to humanity to share who I am, and why, at the end of the day, I am wonderful and enough. Long before I discovered this vocabulary, I believed in sharing stories and sharing myself with the world.

Over time, I have started to redefine for myself what it means to have mixed heritage. To be biracial. To be multiethnic. To be Asian American and also White. To be mixed. To be me.

I have come to love my name precisely for the reasons why I used to despise it. As a teenager, I vividly remember expressing hatred toward the automatic identifier my last name provided, immediately labeling me as Chinese. It is not wrong, but it is not right, either. It doesn't include all of me and it also caused me to

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explain away my physical features. While I still struggle with how socialization dictates the recognition of my name as generally assumed to be some sort of “Asian,” I truly love the symbolism that my name represents. My first name, Abby, is a name of my own that I have been given and I can define. My last name belongs to my father’s family. My middle name, Levine, belongs to my mother’s family and is also shared in my sister’s name. My latter two names two are equal, balanced parts of my heritage. Realizing this also gave me a sense of pride that my parents created a name, in the only language that I know, that is a spectacular fusion of expression, heritage, culture, religion, race, and simply who they are.

I’m working on loving the way I look, wondering if I’ll ever truly embrace racial ambiguity: almond eyes and dark, curly hair. My sister loves her exoticism, but I’m not so comfortable with that construct. There are moments when it feels liberating to weave in and out of racial groups, but there is exhaustion in defending myself into groups where I am not perceived as enough.

I’m becoming brave enough to talk about my racial identity with people at all levels of my relationships with them because I now know that it matters for me. I’m becoming brave enough to challenge and create space.

I’m learning to embrace different parts of me and am becoming comfortable navigating spaces that used to feel foreign be-

cause I value and crave connection to the multifaceted parts of my heritage.

Heritage has always been a visceral part of me. It has been tangible in my name, in the stories of my parents and grandparents, and in my own personal card catalog that I carry with me. I can feel my heritage. It is being in solidarity with both personal and family histories. It is who I am.

These new loves and courageous acts give me optimism about how I’ll continue to understand and advocate for the world. I’ll continue to consider what it means to have come from a blend of cultural and religious identities that are blurred by racial implications, stereotypes, languages, experiences, and trends in socialization. I’ll continue to be grateful that my parents had a sense of humor and grace to call their children “hybrids” when people asked questions laced with racial and ethnic ignorance.

And, for now, I’ll continue to reclaim myself because I am the most whole I’ve ever felt.



# The Anomaly of Identity

## Noha Elmohands

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Audre Lorde states “ If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.”

It is important that we begin this journey with tradition. I do not mean tradition in the sense of what you do on the holidays. But tradition as in the inherent rooted identities of our parents and guardians.

Our journeys are connected to the identities of our ancestors. Whether we like it or not who our parents are influence who we are; whether for 20 years or a lifetime.

Audre Lorde, a black queer feminist, battled with herself and her parents well into her college years. Audre(y) Lorde avoided her blackness as much as her mother avoided blackness. Her

mother, who was described as light-skinned, displayed colorism in her views towards those whose blackness was more prominent than hers. Audre, as a result, grew up to keep the company of mostly white folks, even dating a white man.

Traditions and the “traditional” views of our parents are the foundation of our views.

Both my parents are immigrants from Egypt and both are Muslim. This is their tradition; their shared experience.

My parents raised me in the faith in Islam. Heavily so, my mother was desperate in trying to pass her values to her children, as all parents tend to be. Every Sunday, I went to the mosque for lessons and every week I dreaded it. I was not resistant because of a lack of interest or capability. I was rebellious because I was allowed a freedom to question and challenge at a very young age: a characteristic that was not valued by my often patriarchal teachers. Although my mother intended to teach me one tradition, what I learned from her fierce and firm feminism was how to develop and use a critical mind. This allowed me to challenge the culture that was embedded in the faith of my parents.

For me faith and culture are separated but for my parents they are infused. They are Muslim Egyptians. I am spiritually rooted in Islam in my action to love everyday. I am culturally a woman



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of color with Egyptian roots. I even sometimes state I am Afro-Arab. There is a huge difference there.

The fact of the matter is that the most salient identities to my parents were their ethnicity and religion. Race was never discussed in my home and therefore, growing up I was colorblind. This did not mean that I didn't experience racism. It just meant that I couldn't quite tell why comments like "You are so well spoken" felt so insulting. As I entered college, I began to realize my difference as far as race was concerned. I came to claim my identity as a person of color, a multiracial person, an Afro-Arab. With my new found identity, I realized that my parents were racially different. My father is white and my mother isn't. As I looked at my family, I realized we had very different experiences because of our racial identities. My sister sometimes couldn't understand my experiences and I realized it was because she was white-passing. There are many challenges attached to being racially ambiguous but by far the most difficult challenge is trying to be understood by my white family members.

Who I am transcends the body I occupy. Those who are closest to me often hear me state that I feel 12 and 60 at the same time. Now the point isn't to focus on the numbers but the difference that those two people exhibit. You are not the same at 12 years of age as you are at 60 years of age. My consciousness of this life is 23 years old, which is young in comparison to the

world. Yet, my soul has a consciousness that is old and I am beginning to listen to that wisdom.

I do not want to be remembered by the accomplishments I achieve because what is a title without the support of community. No matter how many times I become ash and dust, I rise because of those who are in my life. This support is something I am proud of because it is my proof that I care for the mind, heart, and soul of people I love. Maya Angelou stated "People will forget what you said/ People will forget what you did/ But people will never forget how you made them feel."

People learn souls, they do not see them. Therefore, I want people to understand that this body influences the experiences I have. As a larger-bodied queer woman of color in a heteronormative relationship, my life has its mountains and valleys. I walk the earth facing many daily forms of discrimination as well as many privileges. However so, this makes me an agile and strong warrior in the war to dismantle the patriarchal and caste-like society we live in.

Hardships are mountains that need to be climbed. One identity that is very important to me is that I am New York City woman. The importance of this identity has nothing to do with recognition or bonding with other New Yorkers. For me it is a badge of survival. I was born and raised in NYC but most importantly I was a hijab-wearing Muslim when 9/11 happened. The hate and discrimination that I faced on a daily basis for 2 years was



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painful. My safety was always at risk. My family conversations were being monitored by an unmarked vehicle at one point. We were so afraid to process the 9/11 incidents verbally for years and yet we were facing the consequences of a select few every day. What people don't know about 9/11 is that it was an event that allowed for racism and Islamophobia to live out in the open. Comments like ...

“Go back to your country”

“What are the gas prices going to look like in the future?”

“My dad told me to not talk to you because you are a terrorist”

...were normalized. I knew it was bad because I was advised to take my headscarf off for my safety in school. My teacher had discriminated against me because of my identities. Outings to the mall were practically walks of shame. There was very little warmth or kindness for anyone who looked Middle Eastern or Muslim. NYC was my personal war zone for years and I am survivor of that time and place.

As an Afro-Arab, I have experienced many forms of discrimination -- from being followed in a store to being called a nigger. However, hatred is new to me in comparison to love. Love and kindness has been with me far longer than hatred. This love has come in many forms; however, for the purpose of today, I want to talk about the aspiring allies in my life. The thing about being an ally to an oppressed group is that you don't get to call

yourself an ally. You are given that designation by the oppressed group you are trying to ally yourself with.

My first memory of an ally came soon after 9/11. My math teacher, who I looked up to for his ability to teach such a sterile topic in an entertaining way, gave a mini monologue about the racism that was happening in NYC. He stated that he found the notion that we could categorize and stereotype a whole people based on the actions of a few as beyond logical. He told us of his positive relationship with his Arab-Muslim friend and how he saw how others treated his friend. He told us to beware of what we say and do and how we treat people because of our ignorance and fear. I remember thinking “Wow”. This was the first time that someone of power in my life was taking a stance and supporting me (whether he knew it or not). He made me feel a little less isolated and a little less scared. I was a middle-school student who didn't feel welcomed until that moment. I recognized him as an ally.

When a bystander witnesses a bias, the best thing that an aspiring ally can do is ask the survivor of that bias what to do. Do not assume anything about that person and definitely do not assume that we are asking to be saved. Sometimes we just want someone to listen, hear us, and occasionally hug us. The best thing that you - an aspiring ally - can do is listen, learn, and then go back to your community and change people who look and sound like you. For example, I can name all the white peo-

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ple I trust on two hands. This is not a coincidence. You cannot stop at awareness. You must change the rhetoric of your communities.

Coming to the University of New Hampshire, presented this New Yorker with some challenges. I went from an exponential amount of visual diversity to a place occupied predominantly by white folks. Over the course of the four years I was here, I tackled racist roommates, a career change, and becoming a leader. However, the most important transformation that I went through was the exploration of my spiritual identity. As I stated before, I was born to Muslim parents. My identity as social justice activist, a feminist, and a queer person brought its challenges to my parents' religion. However, my soul could not reconcile the religion I was taught to follow with how I viewed the world. And so, for a period of time I rejected Islam as a religion.

Then I was given a book by one of my good friends called Muslims for Progressive Values. In this book were the stories of Muslims that I didn't even know existed. Stories of interfaith marriage, of queer individuals, of mosques that allowed women to lead prayers. In the traditions of my parents, these stories were supposed to be nonexistent. Yet, here they were. I began to gather reading materials in relation to the Islamic faith that supported and demonstrated these same values. What I found was a community of people existed that interpreted the faith in a nuanced way. This community challenged traditional Islam and

the cultures that have added sexism and homophobia into a faith that did not originally have those biases. I slowly began to reclaim Islam.

As I took on Islam, I knew that it would not take the form it used to in my life. It meant that I wasn't second-guessing my desires to do certain things in the world. I wasn't worrying in the same ways about my parents and what they would think. What this new Islam taught me was independence and love. That my relationship with God was customizable and without rules. I feel that once my mind merged with my soul that my life truly began. I began to acquire piercings and tattoos and socialized in unrestricted manners. I realized that my validity was not attached to others or a religion but to myself and God. It is for this reason that I reject all religions but believe that a faith base and sense of spirituality is a healthier option. Religion's original intentions were good but it has been far removed from its purpose. My ability to live life from a love perspective is because of my journey to my faith in Islam. Social justice, kindness, love, respect, feminism, and understanding lives in Islam.

Who I am is ever evolving and transitioning. This metamorphosis is not easily captured in words no matter how hard I try to explain it in my poems. As a poet, I have learned that there are certain aspects of life that cannot be put into simple terms. I have accepted that there is a larger system at work where my existence is vital and insignificant all at the same time. All that I



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can do is spend my small time of consciousness (on this earth)  
appreciating its glory and participating in its workings.



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# Mixed Leadership: Transformational Leadership

## Erin-Kate Escobar

I am a Queer Jewish Mixed Race Woman of Color. I rarely see people who look like me in traditional positions of power. I do not have many options of movie characters, books, or television icons to look up to who look like me or share my experiences.

Like many others with subordinate identities, I do not see a clear-cut path that shows me the way to success. My experiences are rooted in growing up as a racially mixed, ethnically ambiguous, middle class, Jewish girl in a predominantly white town on the west coast of the United States of America. I am made up of ancestors from around the world Germans, Hungarians, French, Spanish, Chumash, Turascan, Mexican and, Californian roots. Growing up mixed, I always told people that I was part German, part Jewish, part Mexican, and part Spanish. It took another decade to learn that I was really a complete person and not “partially” anything. My mixed race identity has built the foundation for who I am as a leader. I have grown to identify

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with the trend noted by Holvino (2001) of multiracial women in strong non-traditional leadership positions.

My path to leadership began through more traditional channels and has landed me in a nontraditional career where I can embody Grogan and Shakeshaft’s (2011) leadership styles of transformational, relational, and spiritual leadership. The traditional channels of leadership I speak of are the dominant (white, male, upper class, heteronormative, etc.) practices that continue to be modeled as “successful leadership”. As a young mixed race woman, I was determined to fit into that mold. I wanted to be at the top and I wanted to hold power over others.

I thought that the way to making change was taking charge in the form of ranked leadership positions. While I ran and attained positions of “power” in student council to fit the traditional role of “leader,” (dominant masculine leadership), I found myself drawn to student clubs and organizing around social justice causes. The realization of multiple intersecting identities would not be something I talked about until my 20s but once I did, it would change how I saw myself as a leader forever. As a teen, I hoped to hold authoritative position of power and as a young adult my thoughts shifted toward the other end of the spectrum as I gravitated to relational, community, and transformational ways of leading.

In my early undergraduate career, before I could name leadership styles and identified as mixed race, I set my sights on at-



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taining political positions of power (as in, your next senator or congress woman) with the vision that I could make overarching changes to the injustices I saw. I thought that if I could join the ranks of dominant male power I could make change from within the system to better the lives of us further outside. I thought that by joining the dominant leadership style I could “have it all.”

In college I had so many options for involvement. There were so many more options to explore beyond the obligatory student senate. I learned to feed each identity separately. I would go to a club meeting for each different part of me. I felt like I had multiple personalities and noticed my practice of “taking off” certain identities when I walked into each different space.

The plan was to play by the dominant hetero-normative masculine leadership rules. I was going to beat them at their own game and make it to the top. I could be emotionless. I could penalize other women and ostracize them for being emotional and inconsistent. I could pick and choose the identities I wanted to share and cover up or hide what I did not want the public to know. I saw my political future as one of leading a double life – one in the public sphere with a particular dominant image of success and another in my private personal life that would be locked up. Looking back on this experience I can see my eager need to feed my multiple identities, without the confidence or ability to embrace them all at once. In what positions of power could I hold these multiple intersecting identities of being a Queer Jewish Multiracial Woman?

As a Queer Mixed Race Jewish Woman of Color I grapple with what authentic self-acceptance looks like. I have internalized much of the oppression that I grew up in. In recent years I have sought out community and built relationships that have begun to help me to heal. Self-healing and community building have been integral to processing my thoughts and emotions. Both help me to navigate towards being the best version of myself. Rather than focusing solely on gaining traditional forms of power to make change –I have found what I value most is building communities around exploring power, privilege and social change. I no longer need a particular profession to make change happen. I can make changes to the language I use, the daily interactions I have, and the way I approach every situation. Social justice for me is no longer only about policies and telling other people how to live but rather a part of the everyday choices I make. My post-secondary and graduate school experiences allowed me to explore conferences, retreats, speakers, classes, guided discussions, student groups, and living/learning communities that brought my personal healing to a community level.

As I developed a consciousness around the multiple intersecting identities of being a Queer Jewish Woman of Color I gained the perspective that I no longer had to be an idealized traditional heroic leader at the top of the power structure. I could join in on what Fletcher (2003) and Eagly & Carli (2001) coin as a “post heroic” leadership style. My authentic leadership style be-

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gan to shine through as I was and am a relational, collaborative, and empowered leader. I finally could practice leading with my peers resulting in mutual growth rather than from above them. I could be relieved of reaching a certain pinnacle or position of power and realize my ability to facilitate power as infinite, which is a key component of Eagly & Carli's term, transformational leadership. I do not need a particular place of work or title to do the important identity development work that can help foster others into their authentic leadership. I can hold these intersecting multi-racial, gendered, sexuality, and religious/cultural identities throughout any of my work.

I strive to set goals and create maps to get there. I see the process as equally important to the outcome and value taking the time to empower each person to utilize their strengths and/or try something new. I hope that through this means of leadership each person feels empowered, encouraged, and invested not only in the task at hand but also in their own development. Eagly and Carli's Transformative leadership is what speaks to my Queer Jewish Mixed Woman of Color soul.

I strive to listen, synthesize, encourage, be fierce, make decisions, focus on social justice, give the why behind why we do, learn how to listen to my gut and go with it when I know that it is right (overriding that fear of upsetting other people). While it is not always easy and the struggle is real, transformational leadership is an authentic way of leading that allows me to embody

each of my identities and allow spaces for others to explore theirs.

The experience of speaking and writing about being a Multi-racial, Queer, Jewish, Woman of Color is complicated. I seek to create spaces where people holding marginalized identities may find their voice and share their stories. I agree with the Holley and Steiner (2005) who research and write about the value in creation of spaces where each of us can be our whole self.

In order to create those spaces we must continue to challenge dominant ideas in order to allow for voices outside of that to be heard and respected.

I realize that systems of oppression that exist will not go away. But I do believe that I can help people to navigate them to the best of their abilities and educate those who do not understand how they are further reinforcing an oppressive status quo. I believe that each of us can learn to hold and nurture, restore, and support what it means to hold multiple intersecting identities.

Through non traditional forms of leadership we can be empowered to take the time to understand how each person perceives the world based on their lived experiences.



# Being Seen & Seeing Me: My Multiracial Experience

## Xochilt Lamas

*Graduate Assistant*

*Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick*

It is well past sundown in the dead of December, a reasonable hour for a graduate student to head home. I am nearing the end of my first semester studying College Student Affairs, and at that moment longing for the warmth of Southern California.

There's one other student waiting with me at the bus stop, who compliments my haircut after a quiet moment. It's freezing, and I appreciate their words, so I accept the invitation to distract ourselves. For a few minutes it's a pleasant one. We happily discuss "do-it-yourself" hair styling and queer expression. And then they say this:

"It's just cheaper to do my own hair. Sometimes I miss going to the salon, I loved it when the little Hispanic ladies washed my hair."

It's not uncommon for people to say these things to me. Most people do not read me as Latin@, and thus assume I won't take offense (and will even agree) with their remarks. I look this person in the eye and take a quiet, steady breath. I ask myself, Can I make this a teachable moment? Do I have the patience and energy? How long until that bus gets here?

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My name is Xochilt Lamas. My gender pronouns are they/them. I am a student affairs practitioner, more experienced in teachable moments now, nearing the end of my Master's program. My professional passion is working with underrepresented student communities, and weaving social justice into my programs, education, and personal life. I am also a White-passing, multiracial person of Mexican and mixed-European descent.

This is just one piece of my whole self (other pieces include queer, non-binary, first-generation college graduate, activist, educator, and hair-stylist). Being multiracial is an important piece, however, and an identity I have come to embrace through navigating conflict and triumph.



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As a practitioner, my multiracial experience has impacted the education and support I strive to provide. I believe it is necessary to provide support unique to multiracial students, including programs and spaces that allot for them to explore and embrace their identities. But before I discuss my professional ambitions in the present, I must discuss my past as a student.

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When I entered my undergraduate, I brought with me years of unresolved conflict with my identity. Not every multiracial person shares this experience, but I will recognize that it was mine. As a young freshmen, I initially struggled to identify with my Mexican heritage. In reflection, I now recognize the key factors as to why.

As a child, I was aware early on that I was uncomfortable with the gender expression expected of me. I did not have the language to express it, but I was miserable in my inability to express my gender how I wished, and as a result came to detest all things I associated with “girliness” (such as dresses, pastels, and my long, curly hair).

My family, while well-meaning, were my biggest source of pressure to conform to these gendered expectations. This pressure came from parents, cousins, aunts and uncles... the majority of which were from my father’s side, as we lived closer to them in proximity.

Today, I have a different relationship with my family, and I feel empowered to express myself however I wish. But at the time it was invalidated, and I felt miserable that I could not express myself. This gender enforcement, combined with what I observed in my home and community, sent a very particular message to me; in Mexican culture, the gender binary was absolute, and in this culture my queerness and gender expression did not exist.

Of course, this message is untrue, but it is a message I internalized before knowing what I do now. Before I learned how Spanish colonization targeted and (attempted to) erase queerness from pre-colonial Latin communities. Before I found role models such as Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa or Frida Kahlo (among others). Before I joined the Queer People of Color Collective (QPOCC) in my undergraduate. While I wish I had known these things back then, I did not, and so it became easy for me to identify with White culture. As somebody who could pass as White, and had White heritage, it was that much easier to ignore and denounce my Mexican heritage. But it was not easy forever, and I always felt a sense of dissonance within myself. Thankfully, I chose to address those feelings.

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It was through my involvement in student organizations and my relationships with higher education members that I finally became aware of my internalized racism. I do not believe higher ed is the only place one can acquire this realization, but I do be-



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lieve those that work in higher ed have the power to help students explore how they see themselves.

My involvement with my undergraduate's LGBT center was one of the most impactful of my undergraduate experiences. At the center, there was a strong presence of queer and transgender Latin@s, many of which I connected with. Additionally, within my first year our institution's QPOCC was founded, of which I played multiple leadership roles. Meanwhile, because I had access to ethnic studies courses, I learned about the historical oppression that shrouded queer and transgender presence from my history. I saw myself in my culture, and realized I had always had a place within it. My friendships and co-curricular responsibilities gave me a sense of community. My academics helped me develop a new understanding of my history that included myself. And all of these experiences made me challenge myself.

I challenged why my father's culture felt inaccessible, whereas my mother's culture felt accepting. I had held my Mexican heritage in disdain for years because my perception of my culture was limited and entrenched in stereotypes. This realization was difficult, but it allowed me to start unlearning the negative beliefs I had about myself. Further, I began to examine and deconstruct how I upheld Whiteness.

I cannot imagine the kind of person I would be without the spaces and people I have had that have helped me grow. Cer-

tainly, I would not view my racial (or other identities) in the same way, and would likely be less confident and self-assured with myself. Because I had these experiences in my undergraduate, I am stronger, more socially conscious, and more compassionate. Further, I now strive to provide similar opportunities for others, and do my best to support college students who are struggling with issues like I did. Higher education research has validated the need for such opportunities for multiracial students, and has shown multiracial student organizations, programs, and learning communities can prevent students from experiencing alienation and loneliness (King, 2008, p. 36). Indeed, by providing these students a "racial home" and guiding educators, multiracial students are more likely to flourish and form more positive self-perceptions (King, 2008, p. 39).

However, It is not enough for me to just argue the necessity of multiracial student resources. There needs to be careful consideration as to what these resources look like and who is providing them. Because multiracial people navigate the world differently, not every potential program or service will be applicable to every such person. As a White-passing person, for example, I recognize that regardless of my identity I am perceived and treated as White. I further recognize this experience, along with my White heritage, has shaped the way in which I've internalized racial biases.

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The support multiracial students need varies across every individual. Our multiracial student support must be complicated, because people are complicated. I will not pretend that I have all the answers. But as I transition into becoming a full-time professional, I have ambitions for the future I hope to help create. I hope that more student affairs practitioners and institutional members engage with multiracial narratives. Advocate for your institutions to recognize multiracial students in programming, education, and the spaces they create. Work toward the development of resources such as student organizations, identity development retreats, and living-learning communities. Assess and build upon the resources your institutions already have. This work may be challenging, but it is also critical.

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# Making It In The Middle

## Joshua Moon Johnson

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When I think about my authentic self and how I have attempted to figure out where I fit, I quickly realize I have always tried to pass as a group member—a group member of something. For many pieces of my identity I have felt left in the middle to fight for and comfort myself. Much of my life was spent bouncing from one group to another hoping that I could look, act, or feel a part of something. I never felt like I was pretending to be something other than me, but I was pretending to more of something than I really was. My evolving identity has included biracial/multiracial, bisexual/pansexual/asexual/queer, trendy and sassy/feminine/metrosexual, and liberal Christian/religious feminist/conservative democrat/liberal republican.

As I bounced from group to group, I was always an outsider, which in many ways I loved. However, I would hit a place of

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struggle and strife and want someone who would just say, “Yeah, I know what you mean.” So many times I never had the backing of a group who could understand the complexity of identity—my identity. When I would launch into a group I would seek acceptance in all capacities. Because of my outgoing personality and strong efforts to be friendly, I was often included on the surface level, but eventually denial of group membership would happen in overt ways and also in subtle microaggressive manners. As I realized I lacked group membership I would seek the other side out—I say “other” side because for most of my identity it seemed to occur in my mind and in society as a binary.

Whether it was race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, or politics, I felt like the same process happened in my life. The cycles of being in the middle, attempting to be something I needed to be in order to attain group membership, and eventual rejection. The process started early and continues today. I would like to say that I have resolved all conflicts with my identity and am fully satisfied with my self-perception, self-esteem, and group membership, but at times I am not. The process flows back and forth, but most of the time I am pleased with my bicultural perspective, ambiguous looks, and sensitivity to group dynamics. These struggles for authenticity can be demonstrated through a multitude of stories that occurred in my life. It is interesting to consider why certain stories are pervasive in my mind, but there are many specifics that left me feeling in the



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middle and without a home. I will focus on three stories that show aspects of my struggles to be authentic to myself in regards to race and ethnicity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

### *The Ambiguously White Drummer*

My White-American dad and Korean mother settled in Gulfport, Mississippi where all of my siblings and I were born and raised. Race was never really talked about at home. We knew my mom ate different food and could speak another language, but never did we consider it our family's culture or identity; it was all hers. My mom told us that our birth certificate said we were white because our dad was white. My dad never really said anything about his children's race. Although race was rarely discussed, I received messages about what was better or worse or normal and abnormal. My mom would often speak about how round eyes and pronounced noses were more attractive. I also knew that our black neighbor usually waited on the porch for my brother to come play. I was not really sure if all neighborhood friends waited outside or just some. The white supremacist ideology of "lighter is better" was clear to me.

When we interacted with society we were told we were Asian. There were few Asians in the area, so we stood out. We were obviously not white, and most often assumed Chinese. At the age of fourteen I finished my home-schooling days and entered a public high school. It was odd to the other students that

I just showed up at the age of fourteen when the rest of them had been in school together since kindergarten. I was often asked where I came from. I thought they meant that I was home-schooled, but they really wanted to know what country I came from. I would respond by telling them that I was from Gulfport, but they wanted to know where I "reeeaaally" was from. During this time, I quickly realized I did not belong and also had to prove my native Mississippi heritage. I was the "other" and the "Asian" at my school and with my group of peers. I wanted to be a part of the group with my peers. I was included once again, but not accepted.

I eventually began to positively identify as an Asian American. I was happy to talk about my Korean heritage. I think I just realized I was not going to be white, so why should I hang on to that piece of me. During my college years in Alabama most of my friends were White Americans. I think the only Asians I knew were international students and never felt like I was a part of that group. They thought my Asian-ness was cute, fun, and trivial; to me it was all of my being. I wanted the best of both worlds. I wanted to be appreciated for my background, but also seen as just as much a valid member of the group. I would often make sure that I could easily survive in their world. When I moved to the University of Alabama I got rid of my Honda Accord—which people often called a rice rocket—and got a sport utility vehicle. When I made the three hour drive to Alabama for school, I kept the radio station on country music the entire way.



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I am not sure if I convinced myself of it, but I think I actually began to like it by hour two. Whether these small acts were me being unauthentic to myself or not, I felt in some way that I needed to do them in order to prove I was a part of their group. My thought was, “I may look different and have a different heritage, but I am just like you.”

My thoughts and feelings of my race and ethnicity flowed through a variety of places, where one day I just wanted to be White and one day I just wanted to get away from them and be happy for my entire heritage. I left Alabama and moved to Binghamton University in New York, where there were 16% Asian-Americans. Prior to this most of the Koreans I had been around were much older women who were my relatives or my mother’s friends. This was the first time I was around Koreans my age. I found out about a Korean traditional percussion ensemble group by seeing a flier in the union. With all my excitement and hopes I entered the room to be stared at worse than I was in Alabama. As I engaged in the group, they were inquisitive of my background and were astonished that I too was Korean. They all were nice to me, but wondered why this White boy came to their group.

All of our drum practices were conducted using Korean language only. I was embarrassed that I could barely function using the language. I knew that this was once again reinforcing the notion that I was not a group member. I asked one of the

members who I felt truly welcomed me to the group to help me with some of the speaking parts of our performance. Learning the language was something I had always tried to do, but never fully succeeded in. I was happy to be learning the language, but at the same time I felt like I had to try so hard just to feel a part of the group. I practiced my parts repeatedly for weeks before I had to show that I could do it for our performance. I stumbled and failed. My Korean language skills were inadequate and the entire 40-member group saw me as this white-looking, sort-of-Korean, drummer who always plays out-of-turn. I felt like the language would have made me seem “real” Korean. I was out of place and seen as the “other” once again.

### *The Home Schooled Family*

Family is one of the first places a person finds group membership and hopefully is a place where one could be authentic to oneself. My family was a bit non-traditional, and although I love my family and upbringing it did come with its fair (or unfair) sets of challenges. I was born at the bottom of five children to two evangelical ministers. For my entire life my mom and dad have been on staff at some type of Pentecostal church and I spent much of my time there with them. In order to closely control the socialization my siblings and I received, my parents chose to home-school my two older brothers, two older sisters, and me.

Home-school was great in many ways. We took vacations when we wanted, sleep-overs where fine on school nights, and I

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never really had to wake up early. A down side to home-school was that my core social circle revolved around my family. My two older brothers had each other as perfect playmates. My two older sisters were only a year apart and were best friends. My two older sisters were the closest in age to me, but I was born as the fifth wheel. My natural tendencies and personality were considered less than acceptable for a boy. I had fun playing dress up, playing with dolls, baking cookies, and dancing. I would follow my two older sisters around and sometimes they liked having me there with them. I could be their helper when cooking, sewing, or dancing. I could also be their butler, baby, or pet when playing house or make-believe. However, many times I was the pestering little brother who would never go away. I ruined their dolls, took their clothes, and spread their secrets.

A key moment I remember is when my 78 year old Korean grandmother called me a “gijebe,” which meant girl, when I was playing with my sisters’ dolls. The way in which she said it made it quite clear to me that being a girl was negative, and I should not be like that. As I grew older I began to try and be around my brothers, but with four year and eight year gaps between us there were many differences; an eight year old boy has little in common with a 16 year old boy. I did not have similar interests as them and did not like being around their friends. I knew sports were a big part of their lives, so it soon became a part of mine. I memorized every major league baseball team

and began to know which quarterback played with which football team.

My father’s co-worker gave him four tickets to see the New Orleans Saints and the Detroit Lions play just an hour from where we lived. My dad and two brothers were so excited to attend the NFL game, and the next step was to figure out who got the fourth ticket. Family friends, uncles, neighbors, and cousins were brought up to see if they wanted to go, as I listened quietly hoping they would ask me. I did not really want to go and sit for hours watching a game, but I did want to be included. I did want to be considered a “real boy” with “real boy” interests and be a part of a club I never felt I belonged to. Eventually I think my mom told them to bring me and they could not figure out why I would want to go. I did go to the game, but cannot really remember what even happened there.

### *Textual Orientation*

Authenticity and sexual orientation battled each other in my life for years. As a teenager I always had a girlfriend, and for some reason most people never challenged my heterosexuality—at least to my face. Although at the age of about 15 I began to also feel attracted to men, I never really felt like it was overly traumatic. At the age of 16 I decided that I was going to be single and not focus on romantic relationships until I was ready to get married. I made a commitment to practice abstinence. Dur-



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ing this time of “dating God” I underwent much change internally although others seemed to not notice.

My social life revolved around my involvement with church and religion. My family, friends, and acquaintances were mostly all Christian and I assumed were anti-gay. As I began to consider my attractions to men as a late teenager I never once mentioned it to any friend. I behaved as if it did not exist because I wanted the group membership. The one place I felt most a part of a group was in the church. On several occasions I was ridiculed because I was more feminine than they preferred, but I overlooked those due to the larger group acceptance. My parents were both ministers and I grew up in church, so this was the place that I thought I could truly belong. However, I never revealed pieces of myself because I knew that it would negatively affect my group membership.

As I exited college and began to feel more secure in my identity and religious beliefs, I began to gain more non-heterosexual friends. I still never discussed me dating women or being attracted to men with them. I think they all assumed I was gay because of my appearance, mannerisms, and interests. I enjoyed being around others who knew what it was like to not always fit what society called “normal.” I was conditioned to always express aspects of my religious and spiritual life with my closest friends, and we would take specific times to support one another. Spiritual support and friendship were synonymous in my

mind. As I grew closer to my non-heterosexual friends we never discussed religion or spirituality. If I brought it up the conversation was one-sided and quickly over or met with extremely negative opinions about religion. Many times I felt like I had to hide a piece of me or neglect important parts of my life in order to fit with this group. I had to be considered gay and non-Christian in order to attain membership.

I was trying to make sense of my sexual identity and how to respond when people asked me, “What are you;” however, recently it became about my sexual orientation and not race, although it was often hard to decide which they wanted to know. One day my a close friend from church texted me and wanted to have a deep honest conversation about my sexual orientation. The conversation flowed something like this:

**Christina:** So, I’m gonna ask u a question and u have to promise to be honest

**Me:** ok, when am I not honest?

**Christina:** so are you gay?

**Me:** hmm, well, before I answer that u answer me 1) why r u asking 2) what led u to ask this 3) what do u mean by gay?

**Christina:** well I care about u and u have lots of gay friends on facebook and u know what I mean by gay

**Me:** do u mean am I attracted to guys, then yes, but I do not identify as gay

**Christina:** just answer the question. Are you gay or straight

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**Me:** R those my only options?

**Christina:** So you are gay. Why did u pretend to date all those girls then?

**Me:** I did not pretend. I did date them

**Christina:** so you are not gay?

**Me:** No, I am not gay. But I did date ladies and I have dated men

**Christina:** I don't get it. R u bisexual?

**Me:** I guess you could say that, but I don't say that either. Maybe something more like queer

At the end of this conversation that my friend refused to have on the phone, I was once again feeling like I had no place to belong. It was easiest for her to see which box I belonged to, but when she could not find the right one she got confused. I too have been very confused on which box I belong to, and thought it would be easiest if I just picked one. At this point in my life I am not concerned with which box people put me into, but during that time in my life when I was figuring out my sexual identity I refused to fit into a box that did not feel right. It was a developmental process I had to move through in order to understand the complex, confusing, and intertwining pieces of my identity.

### *Concluding*

I purposely labeled this section as “concluding” instead of “conclusion” because it is an act that is ongoing. These brief stories show how my life has been a cycle of struggles to do what I can

to find a group, and many of my first thoughts of group identity grew out of my multiracial identity. Sometimes what I have done to attempt group membership has been a sad denial of who I should be happy to be. The constant ambiguity in my identity has led me to a place in life I enjoy. I freely move from place to place, group to group, and home to home with a sense of ease—or numbness. I no longer need a group's affirmation to tell me who I am. My identity is a series of cycles that left me in the middle. I can understand segments of many cultures, but only fully understand my own culture. I have independence and have learned to comfort, encourage, and motivate myself when a group I thought I was part of has treated me as an outsider. This process of being authentic to me has just begun, and the more I reflect and process my actions, beliefs, and behaviors, the more I see how I have lived to please others in order to give me what I thought I needed. This process of reflection and authenticity will be incorporated in my life in order to always find a place where I know I can be me and be happy being me—even if that is in the middle.



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# A Multiracial Woman's Journey: Understanding Horizontal Oppression

**Erin M. Baker**

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I think about race all the time, in fact I even dream about it. I believe race is a blessing for People of Color (POC). Blessing, because POCs carry so much strength and beauty. Our cultures and ingenuity have advanced the world as we know it. Though not everyone sees POCs as a blessing because even though the U.S. was built upon genocide and on the backs of POCs, it was also built to hold us down. Most of us do not have the privilege of turning off our race or the experiences we have because of race. So like many POCs I spend a lot of time thinking about

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how I am treated in my community, the state of Vermont, and the larger United States. How everyday micro-aggressions (though the impact is macro) impact me and how I survive the more deep seeded systems of oppression and institutionalized racism. I have daily thoughts and conversations about these systems and how I try to break them down. But, I am not going to talk about how racism impacts me. Instead, I am going to talk about how I collude to racism. How in my fight, and yes some days it is an all-out fight against racism, I have spent many years colluding to the very systems I work so hard to dismantle.

As a light skinned, educated, multiracial, Black, Mexican and White, Woman of Color (WOC) I have spent years working on myself. We have all heard the catch phrase, "it is a social justice journey" and I truly thought I was doing a good job on my own journey. I read books, mentor formally and informally POCs, I go to the conferences, I volunteer in my community, I understand the privileges I have as a light skinned WOC and understand that I am afforded certain opportunities that my darker skinned friends are not just because of my skin color and I even go to rallies for the "causes", so how could "I" collude to racism?

I even know what horizontal oppression is,



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“the result of people of target groups believing, enforcing, and acting on the agent system of discrimination. This can occur between members of the same group (e.g., a Chicano telling another Chicano to stop speaking Spanish), or between members to different target groups (e.g. Asian Americans fearing Blacks as criminals, Latinos believing stereotypes that Native Americans are alcoholics).”

—Caroline Kyungah Hong Dynamics of Oppression Handout.

I actually created and presented a presentation about horizontal oppression. I know that people in subordinated communities are given less resources and then turn on each other. I have seen this manifest in my communities and in higher education when social identify centers get less resources than athletics and they end up fighting against each other for the limited resources. I know this happens, but to other people, not me. I thought I was above holding POCs in my communities down, I knew I was a “good POC”.

The truth is, I was not even aware that I was colluding to racism until after attending the Social Justice Training Institute. During the institute I experienced it all, yelling, anger, frustration, I was micro-aggressed on multiple times, I laughed and found some amazing friendships that will last a lifetime and I also found I colluded to racism. It was in subtle ways of course, in fact, too many people, my collusion to racism went unnoticed. But, that

is the most dangerous kinds of collusion, the one that goes unnoticed but continue to impact the POC community.

I was a Residence Director at the University of Vermont at the time. I had the privilege of only supervising Women of Color, graduate students, Assistant Residence Directors, and we were the dream team. We were working with the Honors College Residential Learning Community, a predominantly White student body and we were making real change. As I was preparing to leave for SJTI, the Associate Dean of the Honors College told me they were worried that I would be gone, because they would not have anyone to turn to if they needed help supporting students. I informed them that everything would be fine because my graduate student was there to support them. But they did not believe in her ability to take care of the community while I was gone. They proceeded to email me while I was away and I responded to their needs and solved their problems over the phone. I told them that I believed in my graduate student but I did not show them I believed in her. That is how I realized horizontal oppression manifested in me and impacted others.

After SJTI I began to realize that I wanted people, in particular, White people to know that I was competent, that I was not only good at my job, I was great at my job. I would do anything they wanted or needed me to do so they would not question my work ethic or question why I was hired. I did this at the cost of



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other People of Color. As I was working hard to make sure White people knew that I was competent, I did not see how I was colluding to racism by not supporting and teaching my graduate student. For example, the staff meetings were always held at 8:00am, a time that was not good for a graduate student's schedule, and I excused their absence instead of trying to change the meeting times so they could attend. I was always at those meetings, even if I was sick. I would forget to include the graduate student on emails. I always knew what was going on with the community, and she did not, this created a dynamic where she would have to check-in with me in order to get important information for her job. I would respond to all of the needs of the Honors College without including the graduate student, even if I had no time during the day. Instead of asking the graduate student for help or even thinking about providing her opportunities for growth so she would feel prepared to enter the field of student affairs, I would go back to the office until 11pm to make sure all the work was finished. I created an environment where I looked like the competent Woman of Color. In fact, I was so unaware of how I was colluding to racism to advance myself that no one else realized what was going on, not even my graduate student. Because as neglectful as I was to her professional development, I was also extremely supportive to her growth and needs in other ways. We both saw my collusion masked as support and care for her well being. I never

thought that my own professional advancement was at the cost of another Woman of Color, but it was.

This is how horizontal oppression can manifest in higher education, and one of the ways it manifested for me. People of Color are colluding to racism because we have been taught that we have to be better than everyone else in the workforce, we need to know all there is to know about our jobs. We have learned to compartmentalize the teachings of community first, we keep that in our personal lives, and we must be the best, that is for our work and educational lives. I remember my first job in Residential Life I told my supervisor, "I am going to ask you everything I need to know about your job because I will be an Assistant Director someday." As I was learning my new job as a Resident Director, my first time in Residential Life anywhere, I was also learning how to advance. I was taught that in order for me to advance I had to be the best for my advancement, not, be the best for the advancement of other People of Color.

For me as a multicultural woman, I feel I always have to "prove" that I am a part of the racial communities I identify with, I am never just accepted with no questions asked. My racial identities are always being questioned. I am never "Black, Latina, White enough" for any of the racial communities that I love the most. Many Multiracial people spend a lifetime fighting to prove that we are enough, not halves of one race, but a whole being with the best pieces of many races and ethnicities.

I finally understand why it was so hard for me to see how I was

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colluding to racism through horizontal oppression for so long. It was hard for me to see because I spend so much time trying to prove that I am enough, that I could not see the impact that I had on other POCs. I wish I could end this piece telling you that I am reformed and stopped colluding to racism after I had my “horizontal oppression awaking” but I can’t. I still feel the need to show the people I work for that I am not only competent, but that I will work harder and smarter than everyone else, even other People of Color. But now, I talk to other POCs about the effects of horizontal oppression and how our collusion impacts each other. I work hard to lift up People of Color with me as I continue to advance in this field. So the next time I collude to racism my community of POCs are there to call me out on my impact with fierce love and compassion.



# Declined. Declined. Approved!

## Warren A. Scherer

*Director*

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM)*

My journey, this adventure, has been a circuitous one and I would not have it any other way. I am a biracial, black (father) and white (mother), queer-identified man in Wisconsin by way of Virginia. While the path has been challenging, it has been eye-opening. So much of the trajectory seems relevant; however, parentage, queerness and location are most salient. Questions encountered i.e. What are you? Who raised you? Which would you say you like more? Shielding one identity, biracial, with another, queer, because the distraction offered comfort. The assumption distance would offer new experiences, racism did not exist in the North as it did in the (near) South; little did I know.

For the longest time I thought I was also Puerto Rican based on a picture of my paternal grandmother. At thirty-one years old, I

learned my father's parents were from Minnesota and Quebec. I'm part Québécois; what does this mean? Is this new information relevant? As it happens, it was not. Jokingly, it prompted an identity crisis. More importantly, I had never questioned where my father's people were from nor had anyone suggested or asked if my father raised me. Numerous people who have come into my life have accurately surmised my mother raised me. I should add she raised me with a partner, on her own, with family in a communal household and finally with my maternal grandmother's formidable presence. People would brazenly share how they arrived at their conclusions... the way I spoke and mannerisms, speech patterns, use of vernacular and the like. From an early age I have interpreted the question, "Your mother raised you, right?" as means to racially authenticate; a racial credit check if you will. A different take on the playing of the race card, one in which I am declined. It was a vehicle to for black peers to say I am not black enough and a route for white peers to say I don't seem black. Entreating: What is (Black) enough? Who gets to define that? Is it possible to be 50% plus 50%? Will that ever be enough? Is it the "best of both worlds"? I digest these reductive questions. Can I be 100% plus 100%?

Virginia middle schools and high schools is where I internalized I did not belong. Between Petersburg, Chester, Richmond then Chester again, I was called 'Oreo', 'high yellow', 'mulatto' and 'zebra' by black and white classmates. These experiences had



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a profound impact. A lasting impression left by a single incident in a lunchroom. In a racially divided cafeteria, I was aggressively told I did not belong to either side. I felt adrift, even though I had the shelter of a multiethnic multiracial family; I was untethered as peers defined who I was and was not. This incident led me to downplay my racial identity in lieu of my queer identity. I could withstand derision linked to queerness as I had learned it from peers and my mother. I had not learned how to be resilient in the face of racial aggressions, such as: What are you? You look exotic, are you Indian? Mexican? American Indian? It was in these formative years I learned discomfort in predominantly black spaces and unease in white predominantly white spaces. Declined! Hurt lingers. To this day, a fear sweeps over me, will I be authenticated? Do I have the racial credit, credentials, to navigate this space?

I continued to use my queer identity as a shield in order to not be harmed by questions regarding my race. Four years after high school, at twenty-one years old and for the first time I felt comfortable in a people of color space. I was introduced to a community of queer people of color in Washington, D.C. none of whom cared which parent raised me or which dialects I used and I need not use being queer as a distraction, a shield. Unfortunately after this formative experience, I continued to use my queerness to gain entry especially in predominantly white spaces giving people space to deny my raced experience. In predominantly non-queer people of color spaces queerness

was scrutinized so my race would not be authenticated. It was a relief to be counted among people of color, it was community. I did not have to explain, rely on a shield or be compelled to choose.

Little did I know when I moved to Wisconsin in 2004, I would revisit the experiences of high school all over again. The coping skills I developed and the resiliency I worked so tenaciously to fortify in response to being racially credit checked was nearly useless because of a change in the modus operandi. I discovered Midwest Nice and its companion: anti-confrontation. It all seemed covert and passive-aggressive. Within two months of arriving, a community leader questioned my racial authenticity and a peer at the local LGBT community center, where I worked, suggested I resign since I was not black enough to work with youth of color. This was my introduction to the bastion of tolerance that is the North (a.k.a. Up-South) and the moment in which I learned a life lesson about Colorism and horizontal hostility.

I responded with what had worked for me before and used queerness as shield and to gain access. Frustration mounted and at twenty-five years old, I began to demand definitions of blackness and whiteness, checklists for the standards to which I was being held and compared. Reminded that when I ask for such a checklist it furthers the rigid myths of what black and/or white is and what it ain't; I stopped engaging. Again I was using



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queerness as a shield which gave people space to deny my raced experience; especially while doing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender plus (LGBT+) work. I gave them the opportunity to see me as queer and to celebrate inclusivity while avoiding the topic of my biracial identity.

When I transitioned from LGBT+ work, in 2012, to broader diversity/inclusivity work at my institution my racial identity moved to the forefront in a way it had not been before. My experiences of overt and covert exclusion, authentication and labeling are evident in any number on the initiatives on which I work, perhaps only evident to me as this contribution is the first time I have truly told all of this in one place. Informed by my experience as a biracial person and appreciative inquiry; I am strident in my efforts to challenge deficit-mindedness, center the needs of marginalized students and staff, increase opportunities for students to self-identify on forms, develop educational efforts about micro-aggressions and intervening.

I find myself vigilant with regard to the tokenization of students and colleagues. I am less vigilant of when I am being tokenized. I seek to add more ways for students to self-identify and control processes that govern their experiences on campus (e.g. assignment to an academic advisor based on identities e.g. ethnicity/race). Additionally, I seek to understand how we classify multi-ethnic/multi-racial students and the assumptions we are making according to which ethnicity/race based programs

and the offices we bring to their attention. I seek to attend to transition points, those identity development moments. If students get the sense they do not belong, how do we as practitioners, as an institution, respond?

Role modeling offers an opportunity to share my experience and growth with students. In a recent example, a colleague told student leaders I was not an appropriate fit as an advisor to a students of color organization. As I understand it, he made a direct link to my racial identity and questioned the legitimacy of me identifying as African American; a racial credit check. A student approached me to share the comment and judge my response. I informed the student I would reach out to my colleague directly for a one-on-one conversation to resolve the concern. The students and I dialogued about how one might feel in this situation, why someone might be compelled to racially authenticate and any number of possible responses. The choices I impose on myself are: retaliate, respond thoughtfully, react or perhaps a combination. I chose to respond and react, I shared thoughts and feelings. I, in turn, asked the student about their response. This was a fruitful conversation, one in which we got to know more about each other.

A week later when raised with the colleague, he deflected the topic. In that moment, I decided to weave Colorism and horizontal hostility, origins and impacts, into our next interaction. A month later the opportunity presented itself, I had to capitalize

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on the pedagogical moment. The conversation went well, although I do not know where I stand with this colleague now. It does not matter, what I learned from this encounter has informed my practice. I appreciate how these moments have persisted and have enhanced my practice. I readily incorporate colorism, horizontal hostility, who they privilege and who they harm into trainings and conversations with colleagues and students alike. Through this I am investing in me, I am also enriched. I combine the personal and professional, data and storytelling, for authentic learning moments. All of who I am, in moments of tension, authenticity and as I see myself, 100/100, is internally validated, is approved.



# Coming of Age

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# From Racial Confusion to Mixed-Race Pride

**Victoria K. Malaney**

*Special Assistant to the Deans of Students  
University of Massachusetts*

“What are you?” This perpetual question has reoccurred in social and academic situations throughout my 27 years. Growing up, I despised this question and I found it annoying to respond to because I was confused about my multiracial identity. I never felt different when I was with my parents and siblings, but my uniqueness became more apparent to me at school and in public. I never understood the language of this question because what the person really wanted to ask is, “What is your racial background?”

I remember there were days in which I would come home from school as a young girl frustrated about an ignorant assumption that was made about my physical appearance. I specifically remember a time in elementary school. My family and I had just

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returned from Winter break after visiting my grandparents in the Caribbean islands of Trinidad & Tobago. I returned to elementary school with all of my long curly brown hair braided into rows. A few of my fellow classmates approached me and said that they did not like my hair and that my braids had to be fake. I was upset by my classmates' comments because I was excited about how my hair looked and I knew that not one part of my hair was fake. When incidents regarding my physical appearance in school occurred, I would always talk to my Mom about what happened. She could always calm me down and help me process my hurt feelings. At the time, I could not see why my classmates would not think my braids were my real hair.

Even later on in middle school when the teachers would review attendance on the first day they would also confirm your race in their roster. I can remember the teachers calling out names, the student would say “present” and they would confirm--- Black, White, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian. Meanwhile, I remember when they would call my name and then they would say, “Other.” My classmates would sometimes snicker about a race being called, “Other.” I would try to block out the side comments because I knew that my parents always told me that I was unique and that racially, “Other” was the best category to represent myself and my siblings. Looking back, I never realized how much it bothered me that society and even my class-



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mates seemed to care so much about my appearance or my racial classification.

Entering college, I began to embrace my racial ambiguity by engaging in conversations about race as a freshman in 2006 at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. I decided to join Ujima, an African-American/Caribbean American diversity club because of my Trinidadian ancestry. However, I realized that in club conversations about race, I was only embracing one side of my ethnicity because we never talked about mixed-race issues. I felt as though my lived experience was always a missing part of race conversations. Little did I know that this feeling would soon change for me.

Through my student organization, I was granted the opportunity to attend the 2007 National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in San Francisco, California. This conference was particularly life changing for me because in attending sessions on multiracial identity it opened my eyes to politically complex issues facing multi-ethnic individuals. Until this conference, I never knew that there were scholars dedicated to researching the social implications of being multiracial in the U.S. Amongst my mixed-race peers, I felt whole and understood. When I left the conference, I felt empowered about my multiracial identity because I realized that there is a larger population of people out there who share my frustrations and have similar life experiences as I have had. It is funny how a single educational experience can

impact your life in multiple ways. When I reflect back on this experience, I realized that throughout the rest of my college experience that I was more aware of my racial identity and this awareness led me to become a trained facilitator in Intergroup Relations, a social justice race dialogue program.

Even as I graduated college and entered the workforce, I still sought out opportunities to learn more about multiracial issues through blogs and journal articles and by joining the American College Personnel Association's The Multiracial Network. In 2012, I began working in the Student Diversity Programs office at my alma mater. Through my Student Affairs position, I realized that I could give back to current students by bringing awareness to the mixed student population at Skidmore. In conversations with students, I helped them start a mixed race student organization called, So...What Are You Anyways? (SWAYA). In the club, we focused not only on the lived experiences students shared, but we also brought attention to political issues such as the history of the multiracial movement in the U.S., health disparities that face multi-ethnic individuals (i.e., blood cancers and leukemia), and how the U.S. Census was changed to allow multiracial individuals the opportunity to check more than one race box. My involvement in this student club led me to attend the 2012 and 2014 Critical Mixed Race Studies Conference in Chicago, where scholars from around the country and the world came together to discuss the history and impact of mixed-race people in our society. After learning about the mixed race com-

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munity, I knew I had to attend graduate school to continue working in higher education and to learn how to conduct research.

My educational and personal life experiences have helped shaped my growth and understanding of my racial identity. Currently, I am finishing my master's coursework in Higher Education Administration at the University of Massachusetts Amherst---where to no one's surprise, I am continuing my interest in multiracial students college experiences in my research project for my final paper. I feel very hopeful for the future that research on this student population is growing and becoming more nuanced.

As a I move into my career in Higher Education, I will continue to speak up and voice how this important this student population is and how these students bring unique challenges to the current monoracial based support services at our institutions. From being confused about my racial identity as a young girl, to now having pride in who I am as a multiracial woman, I am ready to take on the charge inspiring students and administrators to rethink how they view monoracial services and support systems in Higher Education.



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# Behind Chinese Eyes and a Caucasian Smile

**Amy S. Peterson**

*Student*

*University of California, Berkeley*

Have you ever been asked, “what are you?” Are you commonly described as “exotic” or “racially ambiguous?” Perhaps it was the inquiring mind of a friend of a friend, or a coworker, or even someone you don’t know at all but happened to be in the same vicinity of.

As a twenty-something year old undergraduate woman that identifies as Chinese/Italian in California, it’s not hard for me to find such people. Why do they do it? Why aren’t they bothered or distraught by the profound awkwardness and actually quite offending question of asking someone, “what are you?” Perhaps they don’t want to mistakenly identify you as that would be an even bigger faux pas than admitting they were secretly trying to stereotype you, and you don’t fit their molds.

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Take the case of me at age 19 and when a drunk male that had also been smoking marijuana—specifically just getting done with hot boxing his room—tried to start a conversation with me as I was trying to document him for breaking residence hall rules as part of my job. I will from here on out call him Fedora because he wore Fedora hats. Now, unfortunately for me, Fedora knew level 1 Spanish from high school. And he used this level 1 Spanish in an inebriated attempt to continue a conversation with me. It went a little something like this in broken Spanish and slurred English: “You’re very beautiful. Speak Spanish with me, I can understand it. [Insert Spanish sounding words that are nonsensical here.] Oh.. You don’t speak your mother tongue. Your mom didn’t teach you I guess.” Obviously, this already awkward moment grew to the nth degree as he attempted to sweet talk his way out of documentation and into my heart with his misappropriation of the Spanish language in his flirtations.

Yet there are many Fedoras in this world. And it doesn’t take someone to drink a whole bottle of wine and smoke dope to become this awkward. It has been especially frustrating and perplexing to be around such individuals when they don’t understand the deeper implication and seem legitimately curious to know “what” it is I am. Sometimes I play along (for what is this really but a game of chicken about stereotypes) and tell them answers I know they weren’t looking for. “Oh, I’m a spring ad-



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mit! I just moved in.” Or “I’m an English major. I think the only humanities major on the floor!” Responses vary after this banter. Some drop the subject and don’t try to broach the topic again. Some try to rephrase their question in a less offensive way. Some simply repeat, “NO. I meant what ARE you?”

I will admit, I wasn’t always affected by this question. In fact, I didn’t even think this was an issue until I left my hometown for UC Berkeley. Here’s a little background about myself: I lived in a little central valley community that has only one high school and is noted for being the “Cowboy Capital of the World.” Except the sign leading into town says “capitol” and not “capital.” But we can ignore that for now. With a population of about 20,000 people and Googling our name will just reaffirm that we are indeed a small town that has a love for cowboys. There are two churches for every taqueria we have, and one cannot go anywhere without someone saying hello. Welcome to Oakdale.

Growing up, I could have literally named all of the students with an Asian background like me on two hands. I could name even less people that I knew of that had a diverse ethnicity like myself. In my small hometown with a predominantly white demographic, my Asian looks and heritage made me stand out like a sore thumb. My eyes were narrower, my hair straighter and thicker, and I had a more sallow tint to my tan than the others. I became the token “smart Asian girl” that liked books and rice. I

was stereotyped because of my Chinese roots through my mother’s blood.

I believe this racism permeated into my family as well. One of the most memorable memories from my childhood was when I was out to dinner with my father’s side of the family. I was sitting next to my older cousin K. She was everything I wished I could be: she truly looked like a Peterson with her tall and skinny frame, blonde hair and golden tan. I consciously coveted her looks and commented that the bracelet she was wearing was beautiful. She told me our grandmother had given it to her. Being young, I was immediately filled with longing and mild envy over the pretty and shiny gift. But this soon developed into an even more acrid jealousy as my grandmother overheard this exchange and told me, “All my granddaughters have gotten jewelry from me. They all get either a necklace or a bracelet.” Except, I realized, for me and my sisters.

Obviously tears were shed, parents were offended, and my cousin was left confused as I was left feeling forgotten and hurt. The food was left uneaten at the restaurant. And though I love my grandmother, I still don’t know if my grandmother purposefully looked over her only grandchildren of mixed background when she categorized her grandchildren in her head. However, the point is not whether or not she did it intentionally. Love can forgive a lot of things. The point is that for years I recognized that I did not, and will never look like K.



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But this is not to say that my life was plagued with inequality and injustice. Far from it! In fact, I thought I was able to use some stereotypes to my own advantage. I too started to play the game of chicken once I hit high school. “Yes, I am smart and super dedicated to working hard. Must be my Asian genes at work. And isn’t my golden beige skin so very striking with my almond black eyes and curvy figure? My curvy figure and obviously docile nature because I am an Asian woman makes me the very best candidate to be your girlfriend too.”

Now it’s very important for you to know that I do not blame my hometown for this kind of behavior. This same phenomenon of playing chicken when it came to ethnicity came again in a surprising way when I entered UC Berkeley, a location renowned for its diversity and inclusion. Despite this infamy I somehow I became the “white girl” of the floor who could not speak her mother’s native language, nor name the rice dish I love that my mother makes by its Chinese name. It was hard explaining that I did not speak Chinese and that no one on my Chinese side did. Harder still was explaining that my mother’s side of the family spoke Vietnamese as they were Chinese people from Vietnam (and no, I was still not Vietnamese). I was not “Chinese enough” or “Vietnamese enough” to join the Asian American Theme Program, the Asian American Association, or any of the other Asian specific groups. I felt white washed and insufficiently Chinese in comparison to the Asian demographic that is now the dominant group at UC Berkeley.

At Berkeley, I had no idea how to fit into a group. I couldn’t be the token Asian girl because I wasn’t fully Asian. And when you were known to be a smart AP student with a penchant for service and a desire to be a doctor, what is unique for a freshman girl to be when everyone else in college is also smart, has 10 service projects to their name, and deciding whether or not they are pre-med or pre-law? Essentially, I had an identity crisis at age 18.

In fact, you might say that this issue came to an ugly head once I realized in my second year that the greatest challenge I could possibly learn while in undergrad was understanding who I was. It wasn’t until I was in a required class for a job that I was able to pinpoint my specific feelings of dissent while walking around the crowds of students. In this class we learned about core traits of identity and how some are inherited and others subject to change.

Specifically we talked about ethnicity being a concrete and core trait of a person’s identity that does not change, forming the foundation of other traits. The definition we learned was akin to the Webster’s Dictionary definition where it is an “identity with or membership in a particular racial, national or cultural group and observance of that group’s customs, beliefs, and language.” I reflected and decided for myself that I did not agree with the idea that one’s ethnicity could not be changed.

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I realized during my class that the group I identified with changed based on my location. I identified as Chinese in my hometown and more Caucasian in Berkeley. This epiphany freed me from my insecurities and allowed me to better visualize how I wanted to be a leader in both locations. In Oakdale I had to be advocate for inclusion and awareness as I was a minority. Whereas I became an ally for minorities in Berkeley when I identified with a privileged majority. Understanding this duality of ethnicity was one of the hardest, yet significant, experiences in my undergraduate career to date.

Fast forward to my last and fourth year at UC Berkeley. This was the year when I learned that it is far too easy to dehumanize an already marginalized population. From 2014-2015 the world watched the Ferguson trials and Berkeley marched in solidarity. Chants of “cops are pigs” echoed in the streets and were graffitied onto student housing. The smell of pepper spray and smoke bombs stung my nose as I studied for finals. Strangers tried to run into my building screaming for milk to soothe their burning eyes. For the first time in my life, the issue of race felt tangible. It was tense and dark, sometimes violent, and unbelievably sad.

Truthfully, I didn’t know how to react. Ignorant comments from some non-colored classmates from my former high school enraged me, but also reminded me that I grew up as part of the problem and didn’t realize it until I was shocked by the culture

of Berkeley. And though I felt disconnected from the Asian community in the Bay, I cannot identify with the same kind of grief and sorrow that could be felt from Black student community.

Racism is everyone’s problem. But where did I fit on the continuum? I always thought of myself as an ally. Yet what does it mean to be a multiracial ally? And when do I become the minority being oppressed?

I still don’t have all of the answers. But I eventually come to this conclusion in an attempt to placate my own worries. Everyone needs to acknowledge their racial anxiety. And that racial anxiety is not always black and white—it is complex and confusing. For me, it was hidden behind Chinese eyes and a Caucasian smile. I had to acknowledge that despite exclusively identifying as Chinese for 18 years of my life, I am undeniably reaping the benefits of being white. And yet also still healing from the negativities of being Asian. And so people can ask me, “what are you?” Because I am still coming up with new answers for that question.



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# Keep Calm, You Don't Have to Pick One

**Courtney L. Wallace**

*Leadership Programs Coordinator  
Miami University*

“So, what are you?” “Is your dad black or your mom?” The ever popular questions I get after a long quizzical look of trying to figure out my background.

Growing up, I had the same response, “My mom is Italian, Irish, and Russian. My dad is African American, Jamaican, and Native American.” Pause for the ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs’ as I wonder what else they want to ask me before moving on. Like, was I confused growing up, or what a melting pot of cultures I am. Occasionally, folks turn it into some kind of game and guess a number of ethnicities like Indian or Dominican - no, not quite. Sure, I appreciate the curiosity, but sometimes I find it to be an expectation that I am asked about my racial background, as if that defines who I am, like I have been figured out by revealing what makes up my skin color.

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Honestly, I knew I was different as I went through life, but found that that was what made me unique and kind of mysterious, if anything else. Always my fun fact since I figured people were thinking it anyway. I had accepted the fact that my mother’s family disowned her when she married my dad and that I would never know her family. What that told me about human worth was astounding as I saw my parents as survivors. I never questioned the support from my family. I never felt that I had to choose one race over the other, but embrace them as my heritage and make up my own mind. That was our life, for my siblings and I, and wasn’t really something we talked about at great length because it was understood amongst us.

There have been several occasions where I thought more critically about my multiracial identity that have challenged me and what was commonplace. A few years ago, I was in the women’s locker room on campus one afternoon during a prospective student weekend. As I was clearing out the locker and tying my shoes, a caucasian woman passed by the bank of lockers after quickly glancing, stopping, and back pedaling towards the entry to the locker alcove I was in.

I remember her asking me how I liked it at my institution. To her surprise, I announced that it was the best decision I had ever made coming there - as I was currently in grad school and chose to stay an additional 2 years for an advanced degree. She came a little closer and then asked in a quieter voice, “Well



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I noticed that you are mixed and I was wondering if you felt excluded from the school since it is predominantly white.” That was definitely not the inquiry I expected since I must have given a facial response that alerted her to clarify more. “I mean my son is also mixed, and I wanted to make sure he felt he had a place here.” She continued to mention how they stopped by the multicultural affairs office, yet he still did not feel a connection. At that point, I had not thought about how much community could be different for me if being mixed was constantly on my mind. I was not in denial, it just did not bother me or wasn't something I was intentionally paying attention to in my friend group or deciding whether or not to apply to or engage in something on campus. Once in awhile, when “white” jokes or “black” jokes were made, my peers would look directly to me to make sure it was ‘ok’ for them to share and laugh. It felt like the assumption that because I’m half of whichever one, it made it acceptable, like they (or even I) was allowed to take part in those comedic moments.

I knew what I was getting myself into coming to a PWI, but I was not afraid of it, perhaps because I had gotten those questions and curious looks numerous times before and it became customary for me to answer and then move on, get that out of the way so we can get to what really mattered (in my opinion).

To this day there has been one stand out moment that made me reflect deeper on my multiracial status. In my graduate

school diversity class, we participated in an activity revolved around racial identity. Pretty normal being in a diversity class, I thought. We were each tasked to pick up a card from one of two piles - a pile for those who identify themselves as Caucasian/White and a pile for those who identify as non-White/of Color. Without thinking critically, I went immediately to the latter. One of my classmates asked me genuinely, “So which one are you going to pick?” I recall looking at them with an expression of what other choice do I have but the non-White pile. She, along with my roommate, affirmed that I could choose whatever one I identify with, not what society says or what I have to fill out on the demographics page of every survey/application.

I grappled with this new found discovery that I could actually pick Caucasian/White if I wanted to. What seemed to me to be a habitual choice turned into a debate in my mind - reminding me of all the times when I was younger I had to pick between white and black on identifying my race before multiracial became an option. I stood staring between the two piles for 5 minutes longer than everyone else, eyes darting from pile to pile before I picked the one I was so familiar with - non-White.

Needless to say, that was only the beginning of what was in store from this activity. One by one, we were to ask someone with a different card from us (ie. different race) the question that was on our card. The questions ranging from “Why do you find



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white men attractive” to “Do you ever feel guilty about white privilege?” My roommate, knowing me pretty well, decided to ask me a question from the Caucasian/White card he picked up - later stating that the directions did not clarify whether the questions could be asked of one specific group or open to any race in the class. The question was, “Why is it hard for Whites to talk about racism?” At that moment, I realized that I was someone who found it challenging to talk about racism - as I admitted it after stumbling over what to say and getting emotional thinking about my family’s history.

I struggled from the beginning to the end of this activity because I felt so uncomfortable. It made me think about my identity and my comfort level with what I choose it to be, regardless of what I may look like to others. I knew that I still felt stuck with an either/or choice but the truth was I identified more with one than the other. However, I felt as if I was neglecting my heritage or dishonoring my ancestry. Maybe that is why I couldn't feel comfortable talking about racism – I didn't know how I felt about my own identity because it was what it was. On paper, yes I knew what/who I was. I regurgitate this information whenever I'm asked without even thinking about it, but was that what I really wanted?

Do I have it all figured out? Absolutely not. Being multiracial is something I reflect on, especially thinking about my role working with student affairs and higher education. There are most

likely students out there in similar situations who grapple with this identity, but may have been in a different environment than I was in for undergrad. I was fortunate to feel supported and not receive overwhelming amounts of negative comments and judgments, but more curiosities - which I think is great to educate others about.

In life outside of the university, I always smile whenever I see multiracial couples, thinking about how far we have come in our country and how lucky their potential children will be growing up in a place where multiracial identities are more common. Just hearing the story about my parents and their struggle during a tough time in the 1970's, I'm thankful that race relations are becoming more peaceful in terms of relationships and families. I think about when I have children and, honestly, what they will look like and what other cultures they'll own from my partner. Maybe for them, I will be able to share these stories and encourage them to reflect on who they are and what they identify as.



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# Understanding My Biracial Identity: From Ignorance to Self-Awareness

**Katalina G. Traxler**

*Assistant Director of Multicultural Student Programs & Services  
Gustavus Adolphus College*

Growing up, I never truly understood what it meant to be biracial. Lucky for me, my family members and loved ones would probably now be considered “ahead of the times” because nobody ever made a big deal out of my father being German/Austrian and my mother being Mexican. Occasionally, there would be friendly jokes about the molding of two cultures and its difficulties. For example, the first time my dad ate a tamale, he did not realize he had to take the cornhusk off in order to make said tamale edible. My mom also jokes that she turned my father into an avid spice eater, as her cooking was much spicier than what my dad was used to in his household. I was

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very privileged that there was no drama around race or ethnicity in my family. As far as I knew, my older sister looked German and I looked Mexican. My skin gets very dark under the sun, so as a kid I would say I was German in the winter and Mexican in the summer, never knowing the significance of what I was saying.

However, this grace period of naïve bliss was short lived. The earliest memory I have of racism geared towards me was at age three. I was at the local pool in the summer and I asked a little girl with blond hair and blue eyes to play with me. She said no because I was “Black” and she was White. While I felt something was off about this interaction, I was still too young to really grasp what had just happened to me. I’ll never forget my mother’s reaction; we were walking through the locker room to get back to the car and I told her what this little girl said to me. My mom jerked her head up and told me that I should have told her that I was not Black and that I could play with whomever I wanted. My mom had experienced some microaggressions shortly after having my older sister (ex: people thinking my mom was Gaby’s nanny instead of her mother), so I think her senses were heightened with me. Back then, I felt guilty or like something was wrong with me. It never occurred to me until much later in life that unfortunately for her, this little girl had received some very false information.



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As I moved through my childhood and into “tween” years, I was once again able to generally skate through everyday life without having to think about my biracial identity. People would admire my tan in the summer, and I would feel pride when I was told I looked like my mother. The biggest issue I dealt with was people assuming that I spoke Spanish. Because I “looked” Latina, people thought the Spanish language comprehension was there too. At times it was very embarrassing for me when people assumed I knew what they were saying, especially if I got flack for being too “white washed”. By the time I got to high school, I had been mistaken for every racial/ethnic identity under the Tuscan sun. People told me I looked, “exotic”, which I took as a compliment back then because I was unaware of its racial and sexualized implications.

The “white washed” or “inside out Oreo” comments became more frequent during this time in my life. These statements would make me angry regardless, but especially when they were referenced in the contexts of intelligence or my personal successes. It was infuriating to know that people thought I was successful solely because of my German/Austrian heritage; in their eyes, people who were Mexican (aka not totally white skinned) were not supposed to be excelling. Those comments also lead me down a path of intense internalized oppression. I started to resent the Latino students I saw in the hallways who would cut class or always be in the principal’s office. Back then, I did not understand systemic racism, privilege, or oppression

so my lens was very clouded. To me, these Latino students were contributing to the negativity that I was dealing with so I distanced myself from them, not even realizing that I was victim blaming. While I never experienced explicit racism or discrimination in high school, I never fully felt as though I belonged. Most of my friends were White and due to some socioeconomic status differences, I did not always feel included in various activities. Yet, I sure did not feel like I fit in with the Latino students because I was “too smart”, “too light”, “too rich”, and did not speak Spanish fluently. Thus, towards the end of high school, I burrowed into these feelings of isolation and became incredibly insecure. The light of college and getting away from suburbia was close, and I ran toward it like utopia was nearing.

However, attending college at DePaul University was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I could not ignore that part of my identity anymore. The most significant way my biracial identity came into play was my freshmen year when I was forced to switch into the Spanish class for native speakers. I was SO infuriated—I was taking the Spanish class with my college roommate. We were going to help each other out and study together. On the first day, the professor had the class do a listening exercise. I picked up on things that had been said that others had not. As a result, the professor said I was “too advanced” to be in his class and that I needed to go into the class for native speakers if I was going to be a Spanish language minor. I was so confused, especially because I had taken the entrance exam for

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Spanish and was taking the class that I scored into. I went and met with the chair of the Spanish department and got sucked into one year of frustration. I was in that awkward stage of language comprehension because I could understand Spanish fairly well and could read and write pretty well, but my speaking was atrocious. Most of the students in the native speaker class had the opposite problem, so we were on a completely different wavelength. Once again, I felt like I did not belong, but if I wanted to be a Spanish minor, I had to stick it out. I made it to my sophomore year and then had to drop the minor because I could not comprehend what was going on in the 200-level native speaker class. This class was going to be entirely speaking Spanish, and I had no clue what was going on. I felt humiliated and stupid. To this day, I still feel insecure about speaking Spanish, but hopefully one day I can get over that and really immerse myself in the language in order to progress my comprehension.

By the time I hit my junior year of college, social justice issues had popped up onto my radar. I had been a mentor for traditionally underserved students through the Office of Multicultural Student Success and started to realize that there were some unfair advantages that I received in my life. As a result, I applied to be a Diversity Peer Educator through the office of Diversity Education. The training for this position required thirty hours of diversity training, and the experience hit me like a ton of bricks, in the best way possible. My perspective was expanded on what it

meant to be biracial. There was no code of conduct that I needed to follow, nor did every person of multiple races have the same experiences. It felt refreshing to know that I carved out my own identity, but I also had to deal with a lot of what I had been suppressing for years. In my own diversity journey, it was harder for me to identify with my oppressed identities than my privileged ones. Perhaps part of it was because I always knew I was lucky and had some opportunities that other people did not. I was always taught to hold my head high and that I could overcome anything, so to examine the ways in which I could be systematically discriminated against was a rough path. Luckily, I had incredibly supportive administrators and mentors who helped me through this process so that I could understand what diversity, equity, oppression, privilege, and racial/ethnic identity really meant to me. They still help me to this day with processing and reflecting on my experiences as an Assistant Director of Multicultural Programs & Services.

As a new professional who is in her first position out of graduate school, I still have a lot to learn about what it means to be multiracial (along with needing to work on a bunch of other identities). The work around diversity, equity, and inclusion is genuinely never over. Case and point: a student came to talk with me last semester about having the Diversity Center host a multiracial mixer for students over the January term. I honestly felt embarrassed because even though I identify as biracial, I had completely forgotten about the unique problems of this popula-



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tion and that I should work to address them. Regardless of how multiracial members of the community identify themselves, someone will always assume (generally by phenotype) one's racial/ethnic identity, and may never know the negative impact that these assumptions can have on an individual's self esteem and self efficacy. Multiracial community members can feel obliged to act a certain way in various situations solely because of their ethnic/racial backgrounds. Despite the "code switching" that occurs, there is still a decent chance that multiracial community members will feel like they do not belong in the environment.

My hope for the future is that multiracial individuals are given the opportunity to carve out their own identities and figure out what said identities mean to them. Furthermore, I hope that the support for this student population continues to be a priority for Student Affairs professionals, and that inclusion efforts spread beyond the doors of multicultural centers on college campuses. Ultimately, (especially as a biracial individual), I hope my job is obsolete in ten years because that would mean that biracial/multiracial/transracial and other underrepresented populations are experiencing genuine inclusion and equity in their everyday lives.



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# Journeying Towards Understanding Who I Am

## DJ Zissen

*Area Coordinator for the Senior Year Experience  
Oberlin College*

When I thought about writing this part of my story, I grew nervous. ‘Who’d want to read about me’ and ‘I don’t have a unique story to tell’ were common doubts. I also didn’t want others to judge me for what I have experienced. Call it pride, shame, or something else but I want to be judged for my actions and behaviors and not because of what I have dealt with throughout my life. It wasn’t until I thought about my own identity process, and how important it was for me to hear from other individuals who identified as bi/multiracial, that I knew I should tell my story. I don’t think my story is unique, but I hope it helps others who might be struggling.

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I was born in San Diego CA, but I grew up in a rural town in Southern Oregon. The years between San Diego and Southern Oregon were painful. I experienced physical abuse, poverty, homelessness, and had to “grow up” very quickly to cope with these experiences. Although settling down in Southern Oregon fixed some of the issues I had experienced, it also brought new issues to light as well. Growing up in rural Southern Oregon was difficult. I was different from the people I went to school with; while many of their families had been living in the community for generations, I had just moved there at the age of six. However the greatest difference between me and the other children was the color of my skin. My mother, younger brother, and I were one of the first families of color to move into the rural town I begrudgingly call home, and nobody let us forget that. While I identify as Latino and White, most people thought that my mother and I were black; that’s how removed they were from people of color. From the moment that we settled and began living in this town, I knew that I had to get out as soon as possible. My mother knew that I was struggling and told me that the only way I would be able to leave is by going to college, and if I wanted to go to college I would have to figure out how to pay for it on my own. While this might sound a bit harsh to tell a 6th grader, it was probably one of the best things my mother could have done for me. I knew from then on that if I wanted to get out of my situation, I would have to work hard, be dedicated,



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and achieve what many people in this small town thought to be impossible.

Growing up, I knew that I was Latino, because my mother continually told me, but experienced confusion because my mother also told me she was going to raise me as if I was a “white, straight male”. This can be traced back to how my mother was raised. My mother is adopted, and raised by a white family. Although my mother is Latino, her parents distilled the importance of being “white and straight” which is why she did the same thing to me. While I can appreciate what she was trying to instill in me, I feel as though I compartmentalized my identity and did not explore what it meant for me until I was at college at Oregon State University (OSU). Although a Primarily White Institution (PWI), OSU provided me the opportunity to figure out which parts of my identity I felt the most connected to and which needed the most exploration. Although my sexual orientation was changing, which initially scared me beyond all reason, I was also wrestling with my racial identity. I knew that I identified as a person of color (POC), but I did not feel connected to my Latino heritage; rather I felt very connected to my white heritage. Even talking to others about being Latino made me uncomfortable, because I always felt like I wasn’t Latino enough and I didn’t want anyone to think that I accepted the Latino identity to try and get further in higher education or my career. Although I knew that I wasn’t using my racial identity as a way to progress in higher education, I struggled with how to connect to

my identity. I remember wanting to have conversations with friends of mine, who were primarily white identified individuals, but I didn’t know how they would respond. Instead, I opted to deal with this in silence, which was the only way I knew how to handle difficult identity based questions.

I struggled with trying to find a community to support my biracial identity throughout my undergraduate career. While attending a PWI it was difficult for me to find a place within the mono-racial communities that were actively supported on campus, and while I would find an occasional individual who empathized with my experience I felt I couldn’t find anyone who truly understood my experience. After I graduated with my undergraduate degree and began my professional career at OSU, I suddenly noted that there were a group of new professionals who were having the conversation that I was looking for my entire undergraduate career. Two close friends and colleagues approached me about a group that was forming on campus, specifically designed to support bi/multiracial individuals, which created a space/opportunity where I felt like I had been given permission to ask questions and explore my identity. I was not able to be a part of the new support group, as I was overcommitted as it was, but I had finally found two people who identified in a similar way to me and were excited to have conversations about race, identity, and their impacts on us as individuals living in a racial society. These colleagues supported my own growth and

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understanding of my multiracial identity through my time at OSU.

Before I began to understand my multiracial identity, I struggled with my sexual orientation and how to accept myself for who I was. As I became comfortable with my sexual orientation, I was able to connect my multiracial and pansexual identities. Initially I knew that both of my identities had similarities, because both were considered marginalized identities when compared to the dominant identities within society. As I continued to explore both sets of identities, I began to realize that I experienced marginalization from both the gay community and mono-racial communities that I was trying to find community within. While both communities recognized that my identity existed, neither was interested in my experiences, supporting, or validating me. Initially, I struggled with this realization. As I grew up, I had been told that I would be supported by others who experienced marginalization. But, in this situation, I had begun to realize that support isn't as cut and dry as I initially thought.

I feel confident when I say that my understanding and development of my biracial identity began because of the people around me and their perceptions of who I was. Initially, this came from my mother and her understanding of my identity. If you were to look at her parents, my mother could very easily identify as biracial yet she identifies as Mexican. In conversations about our identities, she comes back to the fact that while

she wanted me to have a connection to my Mexican heritage, it was also important for me to be able to succeed in society. I can attribute those conversations to my connection to my white identity, and my earliest memories of what my racial identity was.

The first time that I truly felt 'othered' because of my racial identity, was when I was growing up in Southern Oregon; people within the community immediately made their negative opinion of my mother and me. As I grew up, it was difficult for me to know that people felt like I was less than them because of my skin color. This initially wasn't from my peers, but the majority of the negative perception was from the adults of the community. I delved into education as a way to cope with my feelings of inadequacy. I felt that if I maintained a high achieving status within education, the negative comments that I was hearing couldn't be true. My educational efforts were even more important once I was told that education was my way out of Southern Oregon and would provide me the opportunity to explore the rest of the world.

After living in Southern Oregon for 13 years, college was eye-opening. While there were many people that I encountered who were ambivalent to racial inequality, I found many people who were not only aware that racial inequality was an issue but they were working towards deconstructing it. When I first arrived to college I did not feel like I could be a part of the work that they



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were doing, but as I learned about my own identity and made connections with other students, staff, and faculty who support my self exploration and identity development I realized that the process I was going through was normal.

After I graduated with my bachelor's degree and began my first professional position at OSU, I was approached by a colleague about becoming involved with NASPA's Multiracial Knowledge Community (MRKC). I had been heavily involved with NASPA and Region V via the NUFP Program, and was looking for a way to maintain my involvement. The MRKC was still trying to get Regional Representatives and one of the National Board Members felt like I could be a good candidate for the position. While I thought about the offer, I was excited and nervous about taking the opportunity. I knew that I wouldn't have been approached if there was any worry on whether or not I could do the job, but I felt a bit like an imposter accepting the role. I had always seen the people who take on leadership roles within NASPA as experts in what they do, and I was unsure what a 22 year old new professional could offer. I expressed my nervousness to the National Board Member who approached me, and she told me that she knew I would do well in the position because everyone was going to spend the first year or two figuring out what we were going to do together. She was confident in my ability to work with the team of individuals who was going to lead the MRKC, support multiracial individuals on college campuses, and be a leader within the Knowledge Community.

Now, I wouldn't consider myself a leader by doing what she listed off, but I know that my belief in myself increased when she said she saw me as a leader. Because of her belief in me, I accepted the Regional Representative position and spent two years as the MRKC Representative for Region V.

My current position is within Residence Life and my identity and how it pertains to my role isn't something I actively think about on a daily basis. It is something, however, that I keep at the forefront of my mind when interacting with students. As an Academic Advisor and Area Coordinator, I have had many conversations with students who are somewhere in their identity development and trying to figure out how their identity impacts their time in higher education. While I do not co-op the conversation, I am very open about my identity and experiences that I have when I am asked. I remember the importance of hearing other people's stories, and how their process has impacted my own, so I feel it is important that I am open when others want me to share my story. Throughout my life, I have been told by many people that I "do not belong" or "shouldn't be here," and I feel that it is important that I provide a counter-narrative to what others say. I understand that my narrative doesn't resonate with every person of color, but I feel like I would be doing a disservice to younger people of color by hiding who I am and what I have been through. If my story can make it simpler for another person to accept who they are, or believe that they can suc-

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ceed when society tells them otherwise; I believe that is reason enough to continue to tell it.



# About the Contributors

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## **Abby Chien**

Abby wandered into Student Affairs as an undergraduate student innocently looking for a summer job (which she found in Orientation). She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Music from Western Illinois University and a Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Affairs from the University of Connecticut. She currently works in Retention & Student Success at Saint Louis University. Abby is easily excitable, particularly in the areas of building affinity and maximizing communities, diversity and social justice education, and mixed heritage/race identity development.

## **Alisa “Li” Carithers**

Alisa "Li" Carithers was born and raised in the Inland Empire (I.E.), California as she proudly refers to as her “hood”. She received her M.A. degree in Anthropology with an option in Socio-Cultural from California State University, Los Angeles. Li’s research and lectures focus on the representation of Asian womyn in the media and the differences in cultural language. During her graduate program, she served as the Program Coordinator for the Asian Pacific Islander Student Resource Center, and currently serves as a Communications Coordinator and liaison between communications, academic advising and recruitment and pre-enrollment services.

## **Amy S. Peterson**

Amy had an epiphany as a second year RA at UC Berkeley. Now, she will graduate in May 2015 with a B.A. in English and a passion for helping students. Amy hopes to be more involved in multicultural and mental health programs as she pursues a career in Student Affairs.

## **Ardith L. Feroglia**

Ardith began advising full-time in the spring of 2012, just before graduating with her Master of Education in College Student Services Administration from Oregon State University. She was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest and has lived in Wenatchee, Bellingham, Seattle, Corvallis, Portland, and Seattle once again. In her spare time, you can find her blogging, lifting weights, and/or napping. Her favorite foods are homemade chicken adobo and homemade ravioli, not usually served together at the same time, but she's not opposed to the idea.

## **Brittany L. Hunt**

Brittany started her Student Affairs journey at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) as a graduate student in the Educational Administration program where she researched the impact micro aggressions had on multiracial student's experience. As a graduate assistant for the Jackie Gaughan Multicultural Center she began to raise awareness about multiracial student’s experiences on campus by developing programming surrounding this student population. In her current position at the University of



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Tennessee-Knoxville as an academic advisor she continues to her efforts to raise awareness about multiracial student populations in her day-to-day interactions with faculty and staff across campus.

## **Christina Wan (Editor)**

Christina Wan currently serves as Interim Area Coordinator in Residential Living and Learning at Texas A&M University – Commerce. Christina has been involved in the MRKC as Research Coordinator and as Co-Chair Elect, along with her colleague Dr CeCe Ridder. Her work with the MRKC has been an incredible opportunity to learn more about her own identity as a multiracial woman, and gives her the opportunity to learn more about how to serve students the best she can.

## **Courtney L. Wallace**

Courtney began her journey into Student Affairs as a First-Year Orientation Guide at James Madison University. From that experience, she knew assisting students transition into and throughout college was a passion as she continued serving roles in Orientation, Community Service-Learning, Admissions, and Career and Academic Planning. She completed her B.A. in Art History and Studio Art and an M.Ed in College Student Personnel Administration from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Courtney started in the Wilks Leadership Institute at Miami University in June 2014 as the Leadership Programs Coor-

dinator, providing various leadership development experiences for interested students.

## **DJ Zissen**

DJ got his start in Student Affairs through the NASPA Undergraduate Fellowship Program at Oregon State University. He immediately felt a connection to Residential Education, supporting individuals who experience marginalization based on their identities, and Academic Advising. DJ continued his involvement within NASPA by becoming the NAPSA Multiracial Knowledge Community Representative and the Co-GLBT Knowledge Community Representative for Region V. After graduating with his M.S. in College Student Services Administration from Oregon State University in 2014, DJ felt like he was ready for the new adventure and accepted a position at Oberlin College where he gets to work with Seniors in a residential setting who are preparing for graduation and the transition to life post college.

## **Erin M. Baker**

Erin has been with the University of Vermont since 2004. Her Student Affairs journey started at the Administrative Assistant level in the Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity and is now working in the Department of Residential Life. In her down time Erin enjoys spending time with her family, running and having deep conversations about social justice and how to dismantle oppressive systems in society.



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## **Erin-Kate Escobar**

Erin-Kate Escobar is a recent graduate from the University of Vermont with her M.Ed. She is available for hire in Los Angeles, California. Her focus is in student affairs, multiculturalism, diversity, identity exploration, conflict transformation, collaborative movement building, and social justice education. Please feel free to contact her [erinkate.escobare@gmail.com](mailto:erinkate.escobare@gmail.com).

## **Jade Hoyer**

Jade Hoyer is an academic professional and artist currently based out of Tennessee. She grew up in the Midwest and has roots in the Philippines and in Europe. As an advisor, Jade enjoys getting to know her students and view their education holistically.

## **Joshua Moon Johnson**

Joshua Moon Johnson serves as the Assistant Dean of Students and Director of the Multicultural student Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is an educator, author, and social justice activist. Joshua has published two books, numerous articles, and serves as a series editor for Information Age Publishing. Joshua's administrative roles, writings, and consulting focuses on creating systems to support marginalized populations in higher education. He served as the chair of the NASPA MultiRacial Knowledge Community between 2013 and 2015.

## **Katalina G. Traxler**

Katalina sparked an interest in the Student Affairs/Higher Education field while serving as a Peer Mentor for traditionally underserved populations at DePaul University. This led to participation in the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP), and eventually a master of education degree in College Student Personnel Administration from Marquette University. During her first year of graduate school, Katalina served as a NASPA Graduate Associate. Katalina is currently the Assistant Director of Multicultural Student Programs & Services at Gustavus Adolphus College.

## **Mandy Westfall-Senda**

Originally planning on becoming a Forensic Pathologist, Mandy Westfall-Senda realized that STEM classes and early morning classes were not her thing. After exploring major after major, the one thing that was a constant in her life was strong support from Student Affairs para-professionals and administrators at her alma mater. As a result, Mandy looked for ways to mentor others the way she had been and after serving as a Resident Advisor for two years, she was hooked on becoming a Student Affairs professional and she still hasn't regretted that decision. Currently, Mandy lives in Kailua, Hawaii with her husband James, daughter Reagan, and two furry beagle sons, Charger and Steeler.



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## **Matthew Jeffries (Editor)**

Matthew is an Academic Advisor and doctoral student in Cultural Studies and Social Thought in Education at Washington State University-Pullman. Prior to this role, he was a Residential Education Director at WSU-Pullman. Originally from Ohio, he is an alum of both Ohio University and The Ohio State University.

## **Michelle Dimmett (Editor)**

Michelle Dimmett currently serves as Student Success Coordinator at Ohlone College, a community college in the east San Francisco Bay Area. After receiving her M.S. in Psychology from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Michelle decided that her ultimate passion was in education. Today, she helps to promote equity by increasing access to affordable higher education, and empowers students to achieve their goals. She has been involved with the MRKC as a regional representative, and will soon be Research Co-Coordinator.

## **Nicholas Reyes Franco**

Nicholas (Nick) is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of San Diego, where his dissertation focuses on multiracial college students and racial minority status. He is also the coordinator of the Student Affairs/SOLES Collaborative, a unique collaborative program that helps higher education leadership MA students make deeper connections between theory and prac-

tice. Prior to USD, Nick earned his MA in Women's Studies at San Diego State University and his BA in Social Work and Women's Studies at California State University, Sacramento. Originally from Stockton, CA, Nick plays tennis competitively, enjoys watching scary movies and writing for his blog, and is deeply passionate about social justice, systemic equity, and the transformational impact of critical self-reflection.

## **Noha Elmohands**

Noha was born and raised in New York City. She obtained her first degree at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) in Psychology and Women Studies with a minor in Race, Culture, and Power. Noha encountered her passion for social justice education in her freshman year. She has been working for social justice ever since. Noha will be graduating in May with a M.Ed. in Higher Education in Student Affairs from Salem State University. She hopes to continue to inspire and educate college students to revolutionize and transform the oppressive institutions in place. "There are no mistakes, just chances we've taken."

--India Arie

## **Precious Porras**

Precious is a social justice educator who is committed to increasing access to and graduation from college for marginalized populations. She is a past TRIO participant and is working to pave the way for future generations. Precious is also a proud

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member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. and enjoys serving her community; in particular, serving at the Humane Shelter.

## **Rachel Marie McCommon**

Rachel began her Student Affairs experiences through becoming a Resident Assistant at Emporia State University. She continued her journey through the Leadership Minor and learned to practice her professionalism through servant leadership. She is currently completing her Master of Arts in Higher Education at the University Missouri-Kansas City. She hopes to continue her work in Student Affairs with emphasis educating and sharing with others about multiculturalism and how to empower people to become the best versions of themselves.

## **Victoria K. Malaney**

Victoria Malaney is a graduating master's student in the Higher Education Administration program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She currently works in a graduate assistant position for the Dean of Students Office. Victoria is the Scholarship and Resources Coordinator for of the American College Personnel Association's Multiracial Network (MRN). Her research interests focus on multiracial college students, intergroup dialogue, and student clubs and organizations.

## **Warren A. Scherer**

Shifting non-profit work as the Milwaukee LGBT Community Center's Program Manager for Project Q (2004-2012) guided Warren toward Student Affairs. Warren stumbled into the profession in August 2008 with the invitation to serve as the Program Coordinator/Assistant Director (LGBT2) position at the UWM LGBT Resource Center. Four years later, August 2012, Warren was offered the interim directorship of the new UWM Inclusive Excellence Center and in Spring 2014 Warren was appointed the founding director. Warren served as People of Color Constituency Co-Chair (2011-2013) and then Co-Chair (2013-2015) for the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals.

## **Xochilt Lamas**

Xochilt Lamas is the Graduate Assistant for the Rutgers Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities, finishing their final year in the institution's College Student Affairs Masters (Ed.M.) program. Originally from Southern California, they are a proud alum of Cal Poly Pomona with a B.A. in Psychology. It was at Cal Poly Pomona that they discovered their passion and commitment to education, student support and social justice. They are excitedly transitioning into the next chapter of their professional and personal life.

## **Zaneta Rago**



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Zaneta Rago holds an MA in Higher Education and Student Affairs from New York University. Originally from the Jersey shore, she graduated in 2010 from the Ramapo College of New Jersey with a BA in History and Women and Gender Studies. While at Ramapo College, she discovered her passion for student affairs while working as a Program Coordinator and Queer Peer Services Coordinator at the campus' Women's Center. She transitioned to NYU immediately after graduating where she served as the Graduate Assistant for the NYU LGBTQ Student Center and intern at the Center for Multicultural Education and Programs. Zaneta has a particular interest in facilitating conversations around the intersectionality of multiple identities and oppression, the prison industrial complex/transformativ justice models, feminism, anti-racism, LGBTQ representations in the media, and multiracial experiences in a "check one box" world.