

“You and All Your Pieces”: Poetry for the Mixed Kids in American Higher Education

Kylan Denney

Artist Statement

In this poem, I transcribe my experiences as a mixed-race student into simple language. The shift in the middle of the poem on experiences that have etched “into my skin” parallels the abstraction of mixed-race identity and the concrete reality of being mixed race. Specifically, abstraction in the description of “time, effort and memories” (line 5) is used to explore the vagueness and inherent untethering effect that arbitrary racial identities have on mixed race individuals. This poem draws inspiration from the field of psychology through Banaji & Greenwald (2013), who explain that people consistently try to categorize things into groups to compartmentalize information and simplify complexities. Without categories, our perception of realities and complexities becomes too dense for understanding, leading to confusion and chaos. Faced with nuanced complexity, most people tend to write off multifaceted concepts as one thing or the sum of their largest parts instead of understanding how poorly the concepts fit into any single category.

Given race’s construction as something quantifiable and categorizable in the foundation and organizational processes of the United States, being part of more than one racial category has historically been too intangible for systems and individuals to conceptualize. The result is too often reducing a multiracial person to a category without any explicit distinction. Frequently, after hearing of my African, American, Mexican, Apache and White mixedness, my friends, teachers, and others conclude: *oh, so you’re everything*. There is no room for nuance in this perception; I’ve struggled to minimize my experiences for others, even when it’s easier for them to reduce the facets of my identity down to nothing.

“You and All Your Pieces” is the preface to a longer research project that seeks to (1) investigate how American higher education landscapes fail to meaningfully support multiracial people on campus and (2) propose a policy solution informed by the experiences of mixed-race students at Stanford University. Stevens & Roksa (2011) demonstrate that the social environments of current American universities support racially diverse undergraduate populations through monoracial representations of diversity that exclude mixed race students. Gonzalez-Sobrino & Gross (2019) further establishes that such racialized practices require that individuals categorize themselves according to the behaviors of subgroups through processes such as identity-affiliated groups and spaces. My work suggests that diverse spaces advance monoracial understandings and displays of multiracial communities on campus, thereby increasing the struggles mixed race students experiencing in navigating categorical spaces that ask them to render one part of their racialized background more salient than others. This poem offers one interpretation of resisting the monoracial demands of higher education by exploring lived experience through imagery and centering a self as the foundation for knowledge.

References

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