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Mixed Blood Mixed Emotions: Interpreting a Biracial Experience in America

The Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. - Gloria Anzaldúa

From that intimacy, between class lines and within the same territory, I was born, the result of new borderlands. I am a bi-racial individual living in America; my mother is Chinese, my father is Caucasian. In knowing this, *Borderlands* author Gloria Anzaldúa would say that I possess the mestiza consciousness, a product “from this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, [in which] an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making... It is the consciousness of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa 99). And though in many ways she would be correct – that my mind is different in perception as a member of the borderlands – I cannot claim to be the product of two cultures. Two races, certainly, but my tongue is muted to all besides English and these eyes have yet to see beyond the society of American Suburbia. I was born with mixed blood, yet I live without mixed cultures.

Identity is meant to be more than one’s face, blood and features, yet living within a society that accepts, judges and sees mostly these three first, makes the connection of my identity to my biracial status. Anzaldúa’s texts make it clear that it is more challenging to be multi-racial/cultural than it is to be monoracial as the mestiza is residing in a hazy limbo between defined worlds. The true mestiza is torn between

ancestral cultures, family and homelands, but what does it mean to be biracial and *not* bicultural? What does it mean for the one who is torn between a severed heritage and social expectations – to have the looks, the features, but not the knowledge to verify, exemplify or symbolize the history and cultural exposure to represent her blood? I need to know what being uniquely bi-racial means to identity, since society has placed my identity within a dark zone – a district within the already gloomy grey of the borderlands. Through the examination of my bi-racial circumstances, experiences and the questions they create, I search for answers to my own social orientation.

As much as for myself, this search is in part for my mother who, like me, was raised outside of the cultural context of our blood. Having been adopted as an infant from China by an American couple, my mother was removed from her cultural origins and languages, transplanted directly into white American society. My mother was deprived of the chance and advantages of learning the Chinese language or traditions of Hong Kong society. Lessons handed down by Chinese mothers to Chinese daughters, and the arts of traditional cuisines and tales of family history, never reached my mother, or me. Through no fault of our own, my mother and I aged in ignorance of the personal, cultural background behind our shared blood. Both reared in America in white communities, schools, surrounded by American-born siblings and children, we share the plight of holding a race and yet not the culture.

The enigma of my Chinese biological grandparents is the foundation of this racial and ethnic confusion. The history families carry of their origins and people shape the

ways in which newer generations orientate themselves within the world. Knowledge is handed down, in honor of the bloodline shared between elder and child. So what becomes of those who do not know their past? Left in mystery, my mother is missing her past, and I am missing half of my history, the other end of “un choque, [the] cultural collision” which would define me as a true mestiza (Anzaldúa 100). So what am I, if not a mestiza? What does it mean to be bi-racial yet ignorant of one half of your blood identity?

Living with questions, answering in riddles, leading to more confusion: this has been my bi-racial experience. “Do you speak Chinese?” “Can you cook Chinese food?”... “Why not?” Since the time when I was old enough to share that I was half Chinese and half white, I’ve been fielding questions, first those of society and then my own. In a society that directly ties one’s race – one’s face - to a culture, an expectation, these questions were never offensive, merely tiring in a lifetime of repetition. Soon enough, I gained the notion that Chinese, for me, was nothing but a name. Reinforced by these questions and their disparaging answers, my one bragging right, my one uniqueness seemed paper thin, too insubstantial to be relevant in society. Through my life, I’ve never lacked the pride in my parents’ unique union nor my blood, only the understanding in what it was I needed to be proud of. Outside of Chinese culture, within general American public schools, living in white majority communities, there wasn’t much opportunity to learn.

Since I was living out of context, of half my cultural background, America only provided me with Chinese stereotypes, but made them seem all the more confusing as most were not derogatory. Some I inadvertently/naturally fulfilled one of them, being strong in math and sciences, having academically focused parents. In grade school, stereotypes became my only knowledge of the Chinese. Friends could not help as they “had never known the confusion of being a 3rd-worlder” as none were caught outside of cultural context or even bi-racial (Anzaldúa 207). Reflexively defensive against derogative slurs or abuse against Chinese – my supposed heritage – I could not contradict the standard stereotypes pitted against the Chinese race. My own ignorance was nearly level with those children who propagated the stereotypes and jokes.

Half Chinese, half white, I was always asked about my assumed Chinese abilities but never once of my white abilities. Perhaps it’s because America has a white majority, and finds it more interesting to hear of minority qualities. But why is it that here in a society where minorities are constantly culturally questioned, why are not whites? Is there a white culture in America; does one even exist? Is it living among green lawns, and cookie-cutter homes or is it trips to museums and time in libraries? Expecting to find answers within my father’s bloodline, I only succeeded in hitting another wall as even more questions arose.

For instance, why do I even lump my bloodlines of Irish, French, German and English under one heading and call it white, as if it was one race? Why does society do the same? This society has come to depend so much on the visual – the face, skin,

appearance – of the individual that it has come to lump the races based on primary colors: white, black, yellow, brown. As a result, society is stripping away the unique diversity of individual cultures to make them fit under a socially manufactured heading with other races/ethnicities which may have no other similarities save for a shared skin tone. We attempt to ascribe *culture* to a fabricated notion created by this society.

At this point my bi-racial confusion has gotten to the point where “I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one [side] cancels out the other and [I am] zero, nothing, no one” (Anzaldúa 85). What cultural aspects, rich language, or customs are there for me to be proud of?

With blood of homelands that have never been home, and a soul born to a society that is always evolving, changing, I may be proud of my own freedom of identity. Not trapped, but free from cultural ties, free to learn if I wish, free to move on to others without the guilt of family or honor, “willing to share, to make [my]self vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking” (Anzaldúa 104). Here in a land where fresh starts begin new lives, and new paths, America is a borderland itself, leading often farther away from family, history and the familiar but towards new adventures and futures. If nothing else in my racial background can be certain, I can at least be certain of my own freedoms as a biracial face, a biracial mind.

With biracial descent, I am blessed with the advantages of racial ambiguity within a society that still holds racial bias and profiling, despite its fanfare of equality. My mixed features coupled with my native English tongue waylay the normal processing of racial

features, putting people off as they know not how to place me in a racially-based social context. I am unusual, out of the norm, thus people cannot assess, pass, toss me aside as easily as the rest of the mono-racial world that they have become accustomed to judging and categorizing. If the races are black and white, consisting of clear divisions and borders, than I am the color grey, which forces others to tread cautiously around me. I hold the advantage of mystery; I may pass as white, I may pass as Asian American, I may choose to be no one but myself, and the world need never know. Made of smoke, I have the benefit of walking through numerous circles without detection or question from those too confused and/or hesitant to preach the race question. The assumption of whiteness, the appearance of “‘white’ skin in the United States opens many doors... whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us,” a reality wisely expressed in Wellesley professor Peggy McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (12). My “earned advantage” of “whiteness [has] protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress and violence,” due to racial lens of the American eye concerning white privilege (McIntosh 11). I still consider myself a *mestiza* of the borderland, for as a shape shifter, “she becomes a *nahual*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person” (Anzaldúa 105). Armored by the assumptions and/or confusion of others, until a time when I’m willing to remove that protection, I hold the power of disguise, to make those who look at me colorblind. Despite the turmoil of finding cultural identity, “there have been compensations for this *mestiza*, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s

shifting and multiple identity and integrity... there is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being ‘worked’ on” by myself and no one else (Anzaldúa Preface).

According to the words of Holocaust survivor and writer of psychology, Viktor Frankl, “Any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually” (Frankl 66). I am not a man nor have I endured genocide, but I must agree with the sentiment that the mind’s enduring freedom is the advantage of my circumstances. All mestizas must start from scratch, shake off society’s pressure and false assertions and seek the truth for themselves. I cannot change my blood yet this identity is always evolving, for “when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves” (Frankl 112).

The blood of my mother is like the dark side of the moon, shrouded in mystery; my father’s is the bleak landscape of the moon’s shining stark whiteness. Racially, I am the moon, divided, unknown, always shifting, devoid of discernible characteristics, left to simply stare at the world before me. But I will stare and think and be there always, gazing from behind my guise of ambiguity, above the norms of society, down onto the cultures I chose to embrace. Born biracial, without a defining culture, I have the freedom of choice that others often cannot recognize or understand. A freedom that I realize is a blessing, as in the following words of Viktor Frankl:

[For] every day, every hour, [has] offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the

plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into... the typical inmate [of society]. (66)

A work in progress, my identity is not solely my blood, or the history of that biracial blood. My identity is the mark of every day, every decision that has passed to create the human being that stands today with a head, a heart, and rich blood to sustain her through future phases of the moon.

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