

Dayinaira Davis

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ENGL 1121

Identity Essay

Mixed up

What are you? Is a question I've receive more than I would like. Asking what are you? can be such a vague but complicated question. Often leaving me wondering how to answer and why this person is inquiring this request of me. Could they just be curious and genuinely like to know how I became so beautiful. Maybe because most humans want to categorize each other naturally. Or it could simply be a conversation starter. I have no problem proudly responding with I'm white and black. It's the follow up response of "oh I thought you were Latina or something" that gives me microaggression vibes. Making assumptions about someone's identity solely based on the way they look.

There have been many misconceptions about the mixed-race identity. Historically many Americans haven't publicly acknowledged their multiracial heritage due to social pressures, taboos against miscegenation and the one-drop rule. I've often been told in a joking manner that I need to pick a side, black or white. People say that you're a sell out if you choose to identify as "mixed". and claiming mixed, instead of black, is a tactic to distant myself from my blackness. They say mixed people don't really fit in and they are seen as loners.

I say growing up mixed gave me a unique life experiences giving me the ability to be extremely open minded and understanding to people with different ethnic back grounds. I say I'm not rejecting my

heritage by claiming mixed race. I just think it's very important to acknowledge who you are and everything that makes you, you! I say being mixed has given me the opportunity to make friends. I'm able to make friends with white, black and other multiracial people, just by having a common denominator.

I was raised by my White, Polish and Norwegian mother from Minneapolis, Minnesota. My father's Black African American with Congo roots from Atlanta, Georgia. Complete opposites found similarities within each other. They decided to get married and have little mixed babies. While it all sounded like the perfect story but because of their interracial relationship they received back lash from family, peers and society. Not realizing it would trickle down and create new obstacles for their mixed-race children.

One of my biggest obstacles was getting my hair to line up with my identity appropriately. From as early as 8 years old. I would spend hours in the bathroom fixated over my hair. I would destroy my natural curls by adding an extreme amount of oil and heat from a straightener, ultimately just making the bathroom smell like burnt pizza. I practiced French braids, cornrows and protective styles until my arms turned into noodles.

I remember when my elementary school hosted after school events to get the parents involved. This particular event stood out the most to me and I begged my mother to attended it with me. It was a mother daughter event called bonding through braids. The school had all different colors of braiding hair, gels and accessories provided. Once I looked around knowing exactly what hair style, I had in mind grabbing a fine-toothed comb, the longest blonde hair and this strawberry holding gel. The gel smelt so good it took everything in my impulsive excited body not to lick the gel. I presented my idea to my mother in hopes that she would execute this style with ease. Not knowing my mother was extremely nervous knowing that she's never attempted a black hair style in her life. She rolled up their sleeves and

got to work. Although my mother was not skilled in braiding, she gave it her all by asking questions, taking pointers and never giving up. I loved my results I had color in my hair without damaging it. My hair looked neat and pulled back rather than the normal wild curly mess on my head. I left feeling satisfied and bonded.

The next day in the neighborhood was a different story. Most of the families where black growing up in a monoracial household. Which prioritize doing each other hair and bond through doing hair. Which often meant, their mothers were experts at hair braiding. I went outside to take part in our normal jump rope contest. Two of the kids blurted out “you got dookie braids”. I could feel the blood rushing to my face heating up like a radiator. Filled with embarrassment I tried my hardest to ignore to and keep my confidence. I also didn’t get the response I wanted from some of my white family members. They suggested that I keep my hair straight because it makes me look white passing.

With the type of backlash I endured, just from a hair style, could defer the average person. Making them want to stick with the same ole boring hair style. But it pushed me closer to defining what my identity consists of. So, the same question arises. What are you? I’m a mixed woman who doesn’t mind a lightly seasoned casserole but I’m also the designated chief at the cookout. I love me some Taylor Swifty but I can also get down to some lil Durk if I want. I wear my hair however I want. If it’s highlights and bone straight hair or its some jumbo box braids. Being mixed makes me furthest from a loner or a sellout. I’m embracing both the white and black within me not, excluding neither of them. So, the next time you ask someone what are they? Simply switch out that what word, with who are you?

