

On Being Biracial

by Lynda Marin

It's happened to all of us. We're filling out a school application, a census bureau questionnaire, a passport application, and we get to the ethnicity box. For some people it's an exercise in compromise of some sort. We check the category that most nearly resembles the way we think of ourselves, understanding that these kinds of forms can't possibly reflect the complexities of our real identities. But some of us anguish more than others over the necessity of these reductive choices. For biracial- /multiracial people, having to choose one ethnic box over another simply reinscribes the deep contradiction of our lived experience.

Black is not black and white. White is not black and white. To be black and white, or Latino and Anglo, or Native American and Japanese, is to be both and neither simultaneously. A world divided into boxes encourages us to choose one and let the other half rest in its shadow. But if we comply with that system, we find ourselves diminished, divided against our wholeness, not fully who we are.

In the last few decades, those troubling forms with their boxes (that so conspicuously mirror real-life social divisions and hierarchies in our country) have presented an alternative - an "other" box. For the first time, the United States Census

Bureau is recognizing the ethnicities of people who identified themselves as multiracial-ethnic in the 1990 census. That's good. But the systems are slow to change. Meanwhile, each of us "others" must, in our own ways, negotiate on a daily basis the challenge of being both and one. Ours is a unique task, for while ethnic groups have forever seen their difference as the basis for political and social struggles against one another, those of us who embody ethnic difference, whose very being is that difference, must find a way to honor and nurture it. That is how we strive for wholeness, and it is our valiant and valuable contribution to a world trying to change.

The ways we make families, the kind of work we do, the types of interactions we have, the stereotypes we refuse to perpetuate - in each of our choices, we honor ourselves when we honor difference. And since it's not always easy to genuinely honor difference, it's oddly comforting to remember that the fact of our being biracial /multiracial leaves us no choice but to keep trying.

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