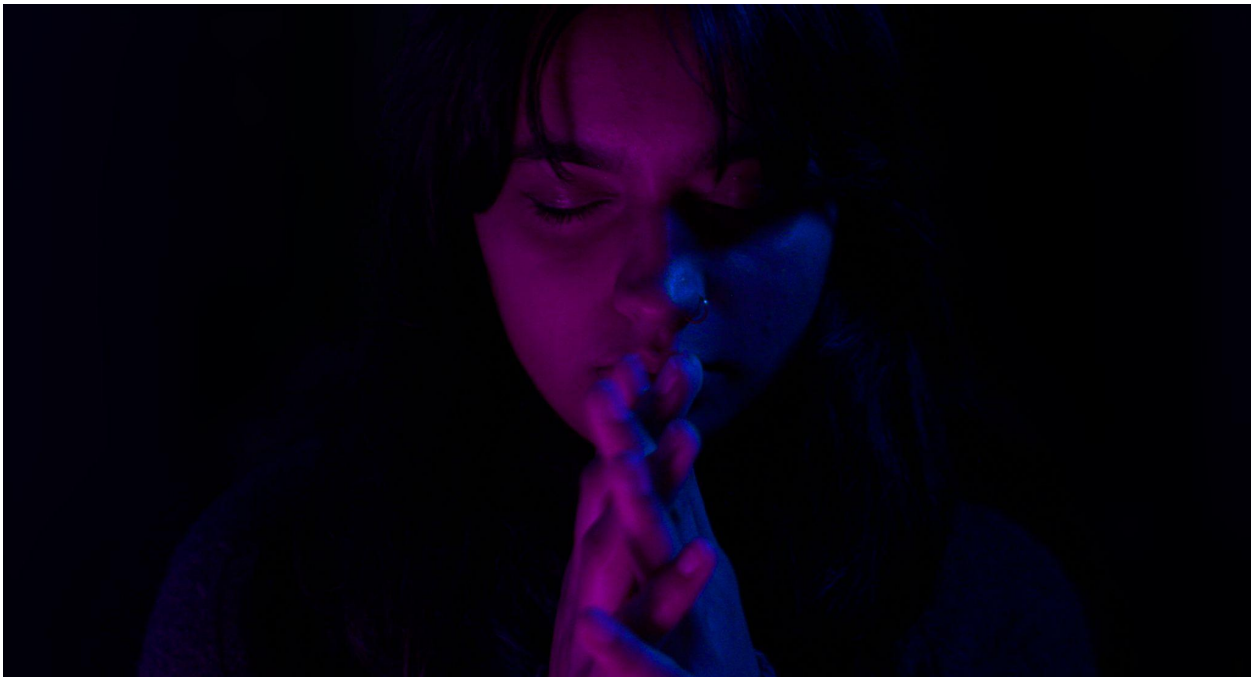


Beyond the Boundaries: Depicting Multiracial and Queer Identities in And/Or

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INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION FOR THE PROJECT

It was not until I was twenty years old that I realized that my brother and I had been the only two multiracial children at our childhood homeschool co-op of at least fifty families. As a child, I had not yet known that my very existence had been a political act in America less than a hundred years ago. I hadn't known that the default skin color in my country was white, nor that whiteness offers more privilege and power than I could possibly have imagined. I only knew that I spent many of my Christmases in India, while most of my peers never left the country. That my Indian relatives bestowed upon me the title of 'American Lakshmi', a moniker that was delivered with love but inexplicably made me uncomfortable. That my elders insisted that I resembled my white father, even though my skin was not white. That my white friends thought 'Indian' meant Native American, that my Indian cousins mocked my ignorance of our mother tongue, that I hardly grasped my Indian heritage enough to pass for Indian at all.

Although I did not possess the language to articulate my feelings, these observations about my multiracial identity percolated throughout my childhood. As I entered college, my questions about and tentative investigations of my own identity (or lack thereof) continued to grow more prominent in my life. Furthermore, once I started to explore my sexuality, I quickly realized that the intersectionality of being both mixed-race and queer deserves more critical attention. While being monoracial and queer presents its own set of challenges as well, being mixed-race/ethnicity and queer often requires navigating at least *two* different cultural backgrounds, neither of which might favorably approach the topic of queerness. Thus, as I thought about what topic I wanted to portray in my thesis film, it seemed only natural to explore this intersection of identity that has both complicated and brought so much joy to my life. In addition, I've never seen these identities explicitly discussed together in preexisting mainstream media, and I hoped that my film could provide some long-awaited representation. Even if other

mixed-race people do not explicitly resonate with my specific story, I wanted my film to at least communicate that our stories deserve to be seen, told, and validated.

SYNOPSIS OF *AND/OR*

My film serves as a metaphor for my own life, the main character represents myself and my own struggles, and her love interest represents the positive influence that I wish I'd had to help me process my own identity. I titled the film *And/Or* after a common English phrase used to indicate that you may choose either one or both of two given options. The meaning of this phrase reminded me of the progression that I underwent as a mixed-race person from feeling like I had to choose just one side of my racial identity at a time, to feeling like I deserved to choose both at once.

And/Or centers on a queer, mixed-race main character named Diya. Diya has an externalized white half, named Aspen, and an externalized Indian half named Tanmayi. Diya runs into her crush, Aliyah, early in the movie, but is anxious about this crush due to a phone call with her father in which she remembers her Indian family's heteronormative expectations. Tanmayi urges Diya to pray for help, but Diya's attempt to visit the puja room is unfruitful. She quite literally silences Tanmayi after this failed attempt to connect with her culture, leaving Aspen in charge. Aspen navigates Diya through a flirtatious conversation with Aliyah, after which Tanmayi and Diya grow frustrated that Aspen is downplaying Diya's Indian culture. This frustration with Aspen ultimately helps Diya realize that she needs to apologize to Tanmayi and reconnect with both halves of herself. Their reconnection is depicted by a scene in which Aspen and Tanmayi both help Diya put on a sari. Throughout most of the film, Diya stays silent, and Aspen and Tanmayi speak on her behalf. Diya does not gain her voice back until her apology to Tanmayi, at which point she finds peace with both halves of herself.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TELLING STORIES ABOUT MULTIRACIALITY

When I first started designing the film, all I knew was that I wanted to create a film that reflected my personal reality while still presenting aspects of the mixed-race, queer experience that other mixed-race, queer, and mixed & queer individuals would identify with. Initially, I wasn't confident about being able to balance these attributes – I knew that everyone's experiences are unique and I didn't want to presume to seamlessly grasp them, and I also knew that my white upbringing has led to a more privileged life than many other mixed people experience. I therefore decided to begin my research for the film by seeking sources that aimed to explore and communicate other mixed and/or queer people's journeys of identity discovery.

Shortly after initiating my research process, I encountered two sources that convinced me I was telling a story that would positively impact many mixed people in America. These sources were “What Are You? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People” by Pearl Fuyo Gaskins and the film “Do 2 Halves Really Make a Whole?” by Joe Leonardi. I particularly resonated with Gaskins' sentiment that “For me, being picked on wasn't the biggest problem – being ignored was. As a racially mixed person, I felt invisible and alone” (Gaskins 6). Alternatively, when mixed people *are* visible, it is often because they are underneath an uncomfortable spotlight that they did not ask for. “There have been times when I've forgotten that I looked different because everyone around me is Caucasian. But... I am always reminded by a comment by someone or a comment by my mother,” says one participant in Leonardi's film (16:35-16:47).

Many mixed Americans experience these feelings of invisibility and/or uncomfortable visibility. We do not often find opportunities to explicitly share about our lives, experiences, struggles, and joys in mainstream media, which not only contributes to a feeling of invisibility but also produces discomfort when monoracial people do not understand enough about our experiences to speak to us with respect. Thus, the narratives in Gaskins' and Leonardi's work

reminded me that many mixed people across the country still feel misunderstood and unheard, and that at least some of us would be able to personally connect with the story that I wanted to tell.

THE LOOKBOOK: DEFINING VISUAL VOCABULARY

Since I am a visual person, I began designing my lookbook in the summer of 2022, and I wanted to find sources that would help me consider the look and feel of my film. An early source from which I derived visual ideas was Kristen Renn's "Patterns of Situational Identity Among Biracial and Multiracial College Students". Renn's article examines the concept of space, namely, that biracial/multiracial college students must find physical and psychological spaces for themselves on campus. "Students also talked about having space to define their own identities," Renn writes. "These were the private spaces created as individuals sorted through the meanings of peer culture, family background, and personally held notions of culture, race, and self" (Renn 405). I was fascinated by the concept of these private psychological spaces after reading the article, and wanted my lookbook to explore how I might depict these spaces. Although I had not yet created my main character, I already knew that I would spend a sizable portion of the film exploring their personal headspace, in order to depict an intimate view of the mixed-race experience.

Ultimately, I decided that my Diya's headspace would be partially represented by the metaphor of a theater, because I wanted to communicate that being mixed-race is often an isolating experience that can feel like acting or inventing a false sense of identity. I decided that I could also represent Diya's psychological space by means of the puja room on campus, to depict my character's confrontation of, and struggles with, their own identity. The puja room would also serve as a setting for a scene in which Diya ultimately learns to cherish their Indian heritage,

since (re)connecting with culture often accompanies a powerful headspace shift for mixed-race people (I know that I often feel most at peace when I am surrounded by other Indian people, partaking in events such as Diwali that I feel invited to and included in!).

As the film progressed, I would change the lighting and color palette in the theater and the puja room in order to represent Diya's transformation. Since multiple articles that I discovered during my research explored the theme of how claustrophobic and isolating being mixed-race can be, I also decided that I would use close-up facial shots throughout the film in order to isolate Diya in the frame.

Another source that prompted me to think about visuals was Andra Basu's "The Role of Gender in the Experiences of Biracial College Students". Basu describes mixed-raced people's experiences with exotification, sexualization, feeling uncomfortable with one's own looks, and discrimination in general. Broadly speaking, Basu says that "biracial women are likely to be stereotyped as being more "sexual" and "exotic" (Basu 112). Basu's observations inspired me to think carefully about the lighting choices that I wanted to make in my film, especially since people of color are often poorly lit in visual media. I wanted my characters – but especially my multiracial characters! – to always be lit strikingly. Rather than using this tactic to further the exotification and sexualization that I referenced earlier, I wanted to employ powerful lighting as a statement of reclamation – a way to "cast light", so to speak, on the beauty that all multiracial individuals possess. Thus, my lighting and color palette that I featured in my lookbook involved blues, pinks, purples, and golds.

Additionally, *Moonlight*, another film renowned for its color schemes, helped me think about how I wanted to thematically use color in my film. I heavily utilized this source along with Maria Root's "Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People", which talks about defying your own expectations for yourself as well as expectations that others have of you. "I have the right/To

create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial or multiethnic” (Root). These sources inspired me to defy expectations in my own film by employing bold, surreal color schemes – in other words, to create my own visual vocabulary for the film. As the film progressed, the colors would shift from cold to warm, symbolizing Diya’s internal journey.

METAPHOR IN *AND/OR*

“Beyond the Boundaries: Exploring the Identity-Related Experiences of Biracial/Multiracial and Bisexual Adults” by Deana Williams and others describes a feeling of in-betweenness – “floating between things and never really feeling like you’re latching down anywhere in particular” (Williams et al.). This article prompted me to think further about the puja room scenes that I had drafted interesting visuals for in my lookbook, but had never quite fit into my plot. If Diya spent most of the story feeling like she was floating, then perhaps the puja room could represent a moment of feeling grounded. Perhaps Diya needed to visit this place twice, once to pray for help with her identity struggles, and then again in order to ground herself and prepare to seek peace with her identity.

As a part of my preproduction (and as final project for a cinematography class that I completed in Fall 2022) I shot tentative versions of these two puja room scenes. Throughout this part of my preproduction, I returned to my earlier ideas about using bold color schemes, and continued to draw upon *Moonlight* for inspiration. In particular, I appreciated how *Moonlight* uses color to represent emotion and tone. Thus, as I shot the two puja room scenes, I decided that the first scene would be pink and blue in order to cast a tone of coldness and suspicion upon the scene. The second version of the puja room scene, however, would be the golden yellow of fire, to symbolize Diya coming home to herself in a way.

While in the puja room, I also wrestled with figuring out how to represent Diya's internal identity struggle. Since the puja room is symbolic of Diya's headspace, she is all alone in both scenes, and she has no dialogue or other characters to respond to, I was not sure how to visually demonstrate her struggle. Ultimately, I decided not to overthink the situation – I ended up using shots of Ganesha, the primary deity on the altar. I framed each puja room scene such that it reads as a conversation between Ganesha and Diya. In the first puja room scene, I took care to always film Ganesha from a low angle and Diya from a high angle, so that it would appear that they were distant from each other and that he was looking down on her. In the second version, I filmed both of them head-on in order to create the atmosphere of a much more welcoming and approving environment. This symbolizes how Diya begins the film trying and failing to confront her culture and how she is ultimately able to look her own identity in the eye and accept it wholeheartedly. Ganesha represents good luck and wisdom, both of which are qualities that Diya gains as the film progresses, so I felt that in the absence of any other character he was the right deity to be present for her identity journey.

Both of these puja room scenes also incorporate the metaphor of a diya (a small clay lamp that is especially important at Diwali celebrations) being lit or unlit depending on Diya's emotional state. When Diya goes to the puja room for the first time, the diya on the altar remains unlit during her whole visit, indicating that she is not yet ready to fully process her multiracial identity. However, when Diya is ready to reconnect with Tanmayi and returns to the puja room, she is able to light the diya essentially by magic. The diya is also used to symbolize a fracturing of Diya's identity when Aspen and Tanmayi break a diya in half during a fight.

This focus on diyas inherently provided me with an interesting decision to make: in Tamil (the language that is my family's mother tongue), "diya" is actually "deepa". I knew that I wanted my main character to be half Tamil like me, even though I never referenced this in the

film. However, “diya” is a word that is more commonly recognized than “deepa”, since Hindi is more prominently spoken. Should I use slightly inaccurate language in order to ensure that my metaphor, and the significance of the diya, could be understood by a wider audience? Or should I remain true to the Tamil language and backstory of my character? I ultimately decided to pursue the first option, with the goal of making my film’s meaning accessible to more people. However, thinking about this inaccuracy was not the first time that I observed some of my directorial decisions forcing me to engage with the mixed-race experience of feeling unqualified to properly represent one’s culture.

The sari scene, one of the most important scenes in the film, was partially inspired by Alissa King’s “Environmental Influences on the Development of Female College Students Who Identify as Multiracial/Biracial-Bisexual/Pansexual”. King’s study follows mixed-race participants who “try on” their identities during their identity exploration process (King 446). King also uses the term “finding fit” to describe multiracial queer participants seeking out spaces in which they long (King 446). This language instantly reminded me of clothes and of how wearing new clothes often represents an internal metamorphosis. With this language in mind, I decided that Diya would trade a bland outfit for a colorful sari near the end of the film, to symbolize the discovery of inner peace and the intentional decision to seek out her culture. I did not yet know how this scene would fit into my plot, but I hoped that it would represent a powerful moment to my mixed-race audience, since wearing cultural clothing can be a fraught and uncomfortable experience for people who feel that they do not belong in those clothes or aren’t “allowed” to wear them. This is one way in which feeling unqualified to represent one’s culture as a mixed-race person can present itself. I know that I have certainly felt awkward wearing Indian clothes around other Indian people before, and the sari scene represents my own internal (and relatively recent!) shift around deciding that I deserve to wear cultural clothing too.

Of course, I also had to consider the possibility of seeming cliché by choosing a sari, one of the most commonly-known Indian garments, to represent this moment. However, I decided to move forward with this concept regardless because a sari is an extremely complicated garment (at least in my mind!) that I felt would represent the complex layers of Diya's identity. Later on, once I had developed the characters of Tanmayi and Aspen, I realized that they could even help Diya put on the sari. Thus, 'inner peace' does not derive from the sari itself but from Aspen and Tanmayi's closeness to Diya throughout the scene.

In the end, it was important to me that the film not end with Diya choosing just one piece of herself to resonate with – namely, even though her whiteness is overwhelming throughout the film, I did not want the film to end with her discarding her whiteness and choosing only to focus on her Indian side. From my own experience, I know that I could never be just one “side”! As such, I wanted Diya to be able to fully embrace both pieces of herself at the end of the story. Rather than portraying her Indian culture as the “better” piece of her, I wanted her to pursue her Indian heritage throughout the film simply because she feels that she has always been kept from it due to fear of homophobia from her Indian family, and to the effects of living in a predominantly white society that forces people of color to assume whiteness in order to gain privilege. These effects are why the primary tension in the film is between Diya and Tanmayi. However, Diya's whiteness is still an important piece of herself to acknowledge. This is why the sari scene shows both halves of Diya helping her put on the sari and posing in front of the mirror together, and why both sides of her are still in the audience in the final scene.

INITIAL CONCEPTS: FIRST DRAFT OF THE SCRIPT

An early source that I encountered as I started to build the first draft of the script was the poem *Biracial* by Carolyn Oxley. In particular, I was drawn to the lines “The love that made

you/was simple as the sounds/at breakfast: clink of pan/on stove, scraping-back of chair” (Oxley). Oxley’s poem speaks to the simplicity of the inherent love that bonds mixed families together, which I felt was crucial to keep in mind as I attempted to craft a film about complexity and difficult emotions. I thought of my family as I read the poem - of eating dinner together, going out to stargaze as a family, hearing my parents giggle about how they met. I am a complicated individual, and my family is a complicated family, and yet there is something so uncomplicated about simply being a family and knowing that I am the byproduct of pure love. Although being multiracial is an intricate identity that deserves to be considered critically, I did not want to forget or ignore the simple joys contained within this identity, such as engaging with your multiple cultures and finding pride within yourself for the first time. I knew that I wanted my story to be full of such moments, and to end with a tone of love and joy. Similarly, I resonated with the sweet simplicity of many of the answers of participants in the documentary film *One Big Hapa Family*, a film by Jeff Chiba Stearns about being Japanese Canadian. The film and its participants possessed, in my opinion, a certain childlike quality - a tone of pride and laughter - that inspired me to infuse my film with love and tenderness.

Thus, my first screenwriting efforts led me to a story about queer, interracial romance – I knew that a love story would provide a potentially uncomplicated path to a happy ending while allowing for the moments of simple joy that I wanted to share with audiences. Furthermore, this plot mirrors my own life, since I’m in a happy interracial relationship myself. However, I was curious about what others might have to say about such relationships, so I continued researching interracial romance. During my research, I came across Derek Kreager’s “Guarded Borders: Adolescent Interracial Romance and Peer Trouble at School”. This article addresses the inner and outer turmoil often faced by people of color engaging in interracial relationships. Although romance ultimately became a less important plot point in my second draft, this article helped me

think about the emotional turbulence that people of color in interracial relationships (including myself) can experience, which can become even further amplified for queer people of color because queerness is often stigmatized in addition to race.

Some of Kreager's ideas also apply to mixed-race people in general, especially his point that "When group social distances are large and boundaries appear impermeable, individuals with cross-group ties pose problems for those loyal to one group" (Kreager 889). For instance, a person of color might face stigma from one half of their family for choosing to date a white person, or a mixed-race person might face stigma from one half of their family for deciding to align more with one aspect of their culture than other aspects. This provides important context into the difficulty that mixed-race people must undergo socially simply due to being mixed.

While writing my first draft, I also discovered "Struck by Lightning? Interracial Intimacy and Racial Justice" by Kevin Johnson and Kristina L. Burrows, a book review of a book about interracial marriage in the United States. They state that "views about race may lead a person to marry outside their group [because] decisions about our own racial identity may influence our choice of partners" (Johnson and Burrows 544). This explanation that some interracial marriages might derive from internal views about someone's own identity caused me to think about how someone's understanding (or lack thereof) of their identity might impact their romantic relationships. I further reasoned, thinking back to my own confusion about my multiracial identity until just a couple of years ago, that a multiracial main character would potentially have an even more fractured understanding of identity than most. In my initial draft, I knew that my main character's family would frown upon their relationship, and Johnson and Burrows' work provided a basis for understanding other consequences of dating while being mixed.

Another source that I found helpful as I began my first draft was "Mixed-Race Women and Epistemologies of Belonging." In this article, Bettez discusses self-definition and belonging

– the article’s central question is “How is it that people know when they belong and to what they belong?” (142) Bettez suggests that mixed-race women (I personally would like to name AFAB/gender-non-conforming folks here as well) struggle with how to define their identities and often feel othered by those around them. This article therefore raised questions for me about the true meaning of ‘belonging’. What does it mean to belong and to be accepted by others? Further, what does it mean to feel that you belong to yourself, and to feel at home in your own skin? These questions ultimately convinced me to focus not just on the theme of interracial romance (e.g., falling in love with someone else) but also on the theme of falling in love with yourself and your own identity.

With this new theme of internal belonging in mind, I wrote the first draft of my script. This draft was about a half-white, half-Indian girl named Diya who simultaneously feels overpowered by her whiteness and unsure of how to connect with her Indian heritage. However, Diya is also struggling to process her queerness, and she can’t help but seek out the comfort of her white identity because she knows that her Indian extended family would disown her. I decided to externalize Diya’s half-white identity as another character named Aspen who lives outside of her body and can have conversations with her. Most of my first draft follows their interactions as Diya tries to follow the queer joy that she sees as intertwined with her whiteness, while simultaneously hoping to find peace with her Indian half. My first draft also includes a passionate kiss between Diya and her white self, which I had intended to epitomize the concept of falling in love with herself and her own queerness.

DEVELOPING MORE TENSION: SECOND DRAFT OF THE SCRIPT

Almost as soon as I had finished writing my first draft, I knew that I wanted to rewrite it. My kiss metaphor had far too much potential to confuse audiences. Furthermore, I realized that I

had allowed far too much screen time to the white half of Diya's identity, and hadn't devoted any attention to her Indian half. I concluded that my attempt to speak to queerness in my story had, in fact, allowed far too much whiteness into my draft, and I wanted to focus more on Diya's mixed-race identity.

As I sought to center Diya's multiraciality in my next draft through continued research and musings on my own identity, I discovered *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed-Heritage Asian Americans*. This anthology has a chapter by Christine C. Iijima Hall and Trude I. Cooke Turner that studies how lacking and then gaining cultural knowledge can affect multiracial people's insecurity or security in their own identity. Hall and Cooke Turner, while acknowledging that cultural knowledge is not the only or even most important factor in identity development, do state that "Knowledge and adherence to these cultural indices [language, music, history, and customs] are believed to be important in the development of ethnic identity of monoracial and biracial individuals" (86). I resonated with this myself, and realized that my first draft had not sufficiently emphasized Diya's initial disconnection to cultural knowledge.

I also decided, after reading Zelig Asava's article "Multiculturalism and Morphing in *I'm Not There*", to focus more on the concept of "passing" in my next version of the story. Asava writes, "'Passing' narratives question fixed social categorisations and prove the possibility of self-determination" (1). Mixed-race people, namely those who are half-white, are often referred to as "white-passing" when others assume that they are entirely white. From personal experience, being referred to as white-passing (by white people or people of color alike) is generally a painful and jarring experience (although it does, of course, come with extra privilege in American society). Even though I did not explicitly reference white-passing as a concept in my film, I instead became more interested in the repercussions of being referred to as such. How does it feel to have internalized your own whiteness to the extent that it is hard to remember

other crucial pieces of your identity? What does it mean to pass as white even to yourself? How could someone self-determine their own identity when they are simultaneously referred to as ‘passing’? Through asking myself these questions, I was able to better determine the role that I wanted Diya’s externalized white identity to play in the film. In my next draft, Aspen would still occupy a large portion of the film, but Diya would eventually learn to balance the two halves of herself better than she did in the first draft.

“Passing” is also beautifully portrayed in the film *Pariah* by Dee Rees. The film follows a young African American girl who wants to explore her sexuality but knows that she cannot be open about her explorations in her homophobic household. Thus, she is forced to change/remove multiple “queer” aspects of her appearance whenever she is at home, and only finds freedom to truly be herself when she is elsewhere. I wanted this type of intentional concealment of identity to play a role in my film in some way, so I began to think about how I might externalize the Indian half of Diya’s identity in a way that I hadn’t in my first draft. Perhaps Diya would try to “hide” or silence her Indian identity in some way, thereby creating tension and representing Diya’s inability to make space for her full identity within herself.

My idea for the primary conflict in my second draft was formulated near the end of my second round of research. Instead of focusing on a romantically coded relationship that took place between my main character and a part of herself, I realized that I could tell a much more compelling story if I created another love interest entirely and allowed all of the primary conflict in the story to be completely internal – between Diya and the two halves of her racial identity. This tactic would provide me the opportunity to thoroughly depict Diya’s inner world. Further, it would allow me to explore the concept of internalized microaggressions. “Microaggressions and the Multiracial Experience” by Kevin Nadal expounds on the types of microaggressions that mixed-race people experience. Namely, these microaggressions include “1) Exclusion or

Isolation, 2) Exoticization and Objectification, 3) Assumption of Monoracial or Mistaken Identity, 4) Denial of Multiracial Reality and Experiences, 5) Pathologizing of Identity and Experiences, and 6) Microaggressions Based on Stereotypes” (Nadal et al. 40).

Since most of my story takes place within Diya’s headspace, I was more interested in thinking about how Diya might apply these microaggressions to herself – namely, by silencing her own identity and favoring her whiteness. Externalizing the two halves of Diya’s identity would entail representing these microaggressions as a conversation between Diya and her two “selves”. This externalization would let me explore internal conflict similar to the conflict that I viewed in the film *Margarita with a Straw*, about an Indian girl named Laila who travels to America and navigates two simultaneous romantic relationships with a South Asian girl and a white boy. The inherent tension of these two relationships fascinated me, and even though I was deemphasizing romance in my second draft, I wanted my film to emulate this conflict that derives from feeling forced to make a choice.

Debora Liddell also discusses internal conflict in “‘Not Half But Double’: Exploring Critical Incidents in the Racial Identity of Multiracial College Students”. These ‘critical incidents’ included having to choose just one racial identity to resonate with, not feeling legitimized in your chosen identity, and desperately seeking to feel included in all racial aspects of one’s identity as opposed to having to “choose one” (Liddell and Kellogg). I resonated with all three of these experiences, which is why I decided to directly incorporate the concept of choosing one racial identity by crafting my narrative so that Diya would have to directly choose one identity over the other (e.g., Diya chooses to listen to Aspen instead of Tanmayi). In terms of not feeling legitimated, I knew that the entire story would be rife with Diya’s anxiety about her mixed identity – her insecurity would quite literally drive the plot forward.

However, I wanted my film to end with Diya successfully reconnecting to her Indian culture (namely by reconciling with Tanmayi). This ending mirrors the ending of the short film *Forever Tonight*, in which a young Indian girl wants to explore her budding sexuality but knows that her explorations might ruin her relationship with her traditional mother. In the end, however, her mother unexpectedly embraces her and lets her know that their relationship will remain stable. The ending struck me as especially poignant because Indian families (and Asian families more broadly) are often reputed to rescind affection and love from their children who decide to explore their identities in a way that defies tradition. Given this mostly unchallenged media representation of South Asian stigma, I wanted my film to showcase a touching reunion between Diya and her Indian identity.

Perhaps the source that had the most influence on my second draft was “The developmental process of asserting a biracial, bicultural identity.” This article postulated that mixed-race people tend to undergo

- 1) an initial awareness of differentness and dissonance between self-perceptions and others’ perceptions of them
- (2) a struggle for acceptance from others
- (3) acceptance of themselves as people with a biracial and bicultural identity (Kich 305)

It was this source that lent my final draft of the story its three-act structure. In the first act, Diya would realize that her whiteness and her Indian identity both impact her life differently. (e.g., I would begin to set up conflict between Aspen and Tanmayi, suggesting that Diya feels uncomfortable with her own perception of her identity). In the second act, Diya would seek acceptance from Aspen – symbolizing how mixed people like myself often claim whiteness as a fitting in tactic – and quite literally silence Tanmayi in the process. In the third act, she would accept her own mixed identity and reconnect with Tanmayi.

In this new draft, Diya would spend the first half of the story “pursuing” Aspen and shunning Tanmayi. Aspen even has more lines of dialogue than Tanmayi, although Tanmayi is physically present throughout the entire film, symbolizing Diya’s initial intention to listen more to Aspen than Tanmayi. This decision to spend so much screen time focusing on Diya’s pursuit of her whiteness was somewhat motivated by “The Convergence of Passing Zones: Multiracial Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals of Asian Descent.” in which Williams-León speaks to how frustrating it can be to be both queer and multiracial (part Asian). For instance – “GLBs [gays, lesbians, bisexuals] and multiracials are perceived as emotionally crippled and genetically defective” (Williams-León 158). Being multiracial and queer, when sometimes neither other people of color nor queer people fully accept that you can be part of both groups at once, is a truly frustrating dilemma that I wanted Diya to struggle with at the start of the story. I thought that my mixed audience might resonate with Diya’s seeking of whiteness throughout the film in an attempt to pursue queerness as well, already assuming that her Asian family would not accept her sexuality. I wanted to demonstrate how internally alienating this process can be towards the nonwhite piece of oneself. Ultimately, though, Diya would realize that she is responsible for how she chooses to think about her own identity, and can claim both her racial identity and her sexuality at the same time.

One of my primary goals for rewriting my script had been to ensure that I focused more on Diya’s mixed-race identity, rather than letting whiteness/queerness take up too much space. However, I also wanted to be sure to maintain the presence of queerness in my second draft. I thus decided to research the experiences of queer Indians, since the entire point of my film was to consider the intersectionality of queerness and racial identity. During this research, I discovered the documentary film *Purple Skies*, in which queer Indians in India shared about their experiences with being queer. Unfortunately, most of them shared stories of being persecuted and

of becoming physically and emotionally unsafe when their sexuality was discovered. I decided that I wanted Diya to carry around some of this anxiety as well, which was not an element of her character backstory that had been evident in my first draft. Rather than just demonstrating that she was *internally* anxious about her sexuality, as I had initially, I needed an *external* incident that would visibly trigger some of this anxiety. In my second draft, this external incident would be a phone call with her Indian father that would remind audiences of his heteronormative expectations for her. This conversation would add drama and intrigue to the story, and mark the contrast between Diya's fear at the start of the movie and her pride in her sexuality at the end.

PREPRODUCTION: CASTING AND DIRECTING

When I began my thesis, I knew that I wanted an all BIPOC and/or queer cast and crew – it was essential that I only expanded my project to include people that I knew would directly resonate with the story that I was telling. I am proud to say that about half of my cast and crew was mixed-race, nearly everyone was queer, and the actor who played Diya actually was Indian and white, like me. If there was anything that I learned from all of the research that I pursued throughout my process, it was that being mixed is an intricate identity and set of experiences that is not represented enough in media. In order for my film to resonate with mixed audiences, and to make sense to everyone else, I knew that I needed to work with actual mixed-race actors who would be able to authentically communicate their experiences and emotions onscreen, and with mixed-race crew who would bring their passion to their work behind the screen. Additionally, I intended to consult all of my collaborators on set about every aspect of my process, since collaboration is a social justice norm that I learned about halfway through college and have done my best to uphold ever since. Our collaboration on my script, shot list, acting cues, and plot decisions ensured that my final film is genuine, honest, and heartfelt.

The most difficult part of planning to shoot in the spring was preparing to be a director, since I had never directed before. I ended up drawing inspiration about how to direct actors while watching the movie *Wedding Season*, which is a comedy about two Indian people reacting to the pressure of arranged marriage. My story is not similar to this, but it was nonetheless helpful to watch how the two main characters reacted to pressure; I was able to come up with some directions that I felt would encourage my actors to behave similarly. Ultimately, however, I was pleased to notice that my actors did not end up needing much direction from me at all. All of them resonated with the plot in some way and brought their personal life experiences into the film, which was exactly what I had hoped for. I cast people that I thought would have some amount of chemistry together and would behave like a family because, in the film, Diya and her two selves do become a family of sorts by the end of the film. My actors bonded beautifully and delivered stunning performances that I could not have been more proud of!

PRODUCTION: DECISIONS ON SET

During our shooting weekends, one of the most challenging parts of working on this film was needing to wear multiple hats at once. I had to write and direct the film, both of which are far from my areas of expertise, but I was also responsible for lighting design and working with the camera operator to bring my vision to life. Even though I had written an extremely detailed shot list, we ended up making a multitude of spontaneous changes and experimenting with lighting and cinematography ideas as a team. Many of these changes were inspired by some of the visual sources that I had studied earlier in my research process. For instance, I noticed from Lauren Minnerath's short film *The Morning After*, about a queer couple arguing with one partner's conservative father the morning after Trump's election, that arguing characters were often placed in opposition to each other, either standing or sitting. A lot of our blocking in

conflict-based scenes took this visual aspect into consideration. Similarly, I often employed the tactic of visually separating characters – at certain key moments in the film, I paired Diya and Tanmayi or Diya and Aspen together in shots, but rarely all three of them together, to indicate that Diya is struggling with connecting with both pieces of her identity at once. Finally, one more spontaneous lighting idea involved giving Diya, Aspen, and Tanmayi two shadows each in a scene with Aliyah (Diya’s love interest), to further emphasize Diya’s internal disconnect in contrast to Aliyah’s inner peace.

Thinking back to the lookbook that I crafted through research at the start of my process, I knew that it was important to me to light my characters properly and use powerful lighting and color. Considering how to light four main characters with different skin tones in the same scene was challenging. However, recalling Basu’s article about exotification, I stubbornly kept rearranging all of my shots until I felt that all three characters were well lit. I knew that my lens of reclamation would not function properly if I left any of the characters out.

Generally speaking, I was quite concerned with parallel structure during filming. There are multiple pairs of shots that I set up deliberately in order to communicate a specific meaning – the first and last scene of the film, the head-on shots of Diya in the puja room, and the metaphor of shoes being taken off/put on. The first and last scene are the result of the theater metaphor for Diya’s headspace that I had decided on at the very start of my process. In the first theater scene, Diya is on stage with her two counterparts; in the final scene, she is on stage while they are in the audience with Aliyah. I decided to depict Diya standing on her own even though she has just reconnected with both halves of herself because I wanted to show her learning that she is inherently one unified being whose “halves” cannot be separated from each other. Additionally, in the first theater shot, Tanmayi and Aspen are standing on either side of Diya. In two shots from the last scenes – the final shot of the sari scene and the final shot of the scene in which Diya

and Tanmayi draw shadow puppets together – they are on either side of her again. This time, they are all leaning on each other instead of merely standing at her side, to symbolize Diya coming home to herself in a way.

We also decided during filming to shoot multiple shots of shoes being taken on and put off. In many Asian cultures, shoes are often taken off before entering important spaces such as homes and temples. When Diya goes to the puja room for the first time, she kicks her shoes off haphazardly; when she returns the second time, she places them neatly by the door. Focusing on a closeup of these two moments allowed me to describe her mental state in a different way than just focusing on her face. Aliyah also takes off her shoes in a close-up shot when she enters Diya's room, symbolizing her immediate understanding of Diya's identity.

POSTPRODUCTION: EDITING AND SOUND

We completed our initial shooting in two weekends, meaning that I was able to start editing around the beginning of February. The most complicated scene to edit was the first scene, in which Diya is silent while Aspen and Tanmayi try to get her attention from behind her. I edited this scene to be as disorienting as possible by quickly cutting between multiple angles, and cutting back and forth between medium shots and closeups. Other than this scene, my work in the editing lab did not involve many new decisions about how to portray the mixed-race experience, since I had already made most of my decisions about lighting and color during shooting.

In contrast, my work on the score was quite an involved process. I had known from the beginning of my filmmaking process that I wanted to incorporate my own (and Diya's) identity into the score somehow. Thus, I utilized sound files of my grandmother singing and playing the veena, and my grandfather chanting a sloka. However, I significantly warped and added to these

sounds in my score. To me, this decision served as a metaphor for mixed identity in general - just like being mixed is a combination of racial identities that blend together to form an entirely new identity, my score combines various familiar sounds that blend into something entirely new. While working with my grandparents' voices and instruments, I also had the opportunity to process some of my grief of not being able to understand any of the words in their song. I decided to use the songs anyway, despite my lack of comprehension, because another common experience for multiracial people is grieving their inability to understand ancestral languages that we feel should be inherent to us. In using my grandparents' music, I pay them respect while acknowledging that the best I can do, given my incomprehension, is to turn their words into a new creation that transcends genre.

I also made the decision to use only one recurring theme in the score. This is unusual because, in most movies and shows, characters often have their own theme or special instrument. I knew that deliberately avoiding this convention in my film would be unusual. However, I felt that creating a unique score for almost every scene of the movie would not only allow me to explore a wide breadth of compositional styles, but would also symbolize the often disparate and ever-changing nature of being mixed-race. The only recurring theme in my film is the piano music that accompanies Aliyah, because she is already confident in her mixed identity - it's Diya who needs to develop this confidence. Aliyah's theme plays at the very end of the film as well, when we witness Diya's new confidence, to indicate that Diya has learned to apply to herself the same kind of love that she is extending to Aliyah.

One particular moment that stuck out to me during the postproduction process - mainly because I observed within myself some of the very same feelings that I wrote this film to try to address - was when I recorded lines for the role of Appa. The actor playing the part made corrections to the dialogue that I had written for his role. For instance, he told me that some of

the lines that I had written did not sound authentic in a Tamil accent, and he offered a few other places where he could change the dialogue to make it sound more authentic. While I was deeply grateful for his feedback and appreciated the authenticity that he brought to my film, I did experience a twinge of sadness that I had not known enough about my own culture and language to have anticipated his comments myself. This felt similar to my grief about not being able to understand my grandparents' songs, and is certainly an experience that is still on my mind even as I write this paper.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, I am proud of the way that my film advocates for self-love as a mixed-race, queer individual. One of my friends told me that my film is the first film that has made them feel truly seen in all of their identities. Hearing their comment, I knew that I had achieved the primary goal that I began my project with: to make sure that other multiracial people know that our stories deserve to be told, and that we deserve to be understood. I hope that this thesis film is one of the first steps along my path to becoming a passionate advocate for multiracial people, and a proficient community builder.

In the process of crafting my film, I learned how to write effective screenplays, how to direct, how to develop better time management skills, and how to build the endurance that I needed to spend long hours in the editing lab. I know that I am a better filmmaker now than I was at the start of the process. However, the most important lesson that I learned is how to advocate for myself and others like me - how to share my story, how to collaborate with like-minded friends and artists, and how to ensure that we are so compelling that the world can't help but listen.

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