

SASHA ENDO '07 May 2007

Putting Myself Back Together:

At the beginning of this year, I complained to a friend, "Why do I keep taking all these classes about deconstructing my own identity? Remind me next semester not to take any classes about subjects I care about. I can't take this any more."

She agreed (with this self-indulgent habit of mine; her college major had not included the same kind of self-reflective soul searching) and answered, "Yeah, maybe if colleges offer all those classes about deconstructing yourself, they should have one before you graduate so you can put yourself back together."

So my goal this year has been to put myself back together.



Here's a secret: Even though I've often worried that it is a stereotype or cliché of multiracial people, or perhaps of queer people of color as well, at times I have felt "fragmented" and perhaps even "contradictory." The quickest example is the standard answer to that ubiquitous question, "What are you?"; naming yourself as "half Asian" or "half white" automatically reduces you to a mathematical equation, the sum of fractions. Within the politics I've engaged in these past three-and-a-half years at Wesleyan, through groups like the Asian American Students Collective and Trans/Gender Group, these questions become more confusing as support of a movement is often tied to pride in that identity and self-presentation as such; hence, the closet becomes a dark, shameful place. Out is good,

passing is bad. However, something in one context does not convey the same meaning as the same thing in another context. So, having long, dark hair may mean being a proud Asian American to some, or it may mean being a closeted (sexual or gender) queer to others. Blasting the Indigo Girls from the stereo might make you feel some connection to that "universal" lesbian culture, but it might also lose you a few authenticity points in be-(come?)ing a person of color.

Over the years, involving myself with Asian American, broader student of color, and queer groups has meant that these intersections have become especially apparent, for example in student of color forums in which I worried that bringing queerness to the table would render me unreadable as a student of color, or that talking about race won't be seen as relevant in a queer space. I understand better now that these worries about authenticity occur precisely because race and gender and sexuality are anxious categories, always formed from comparison and contrast, and so inherently rely on exclusion as the basis for inclusion. In this constant awareness of difference I often tended to lose sight of the individual agency of people, seeing them instead as a sum of their positions within systems of power. Because I went through periods in which I was always comparing my position to that of each other person I encountered, I assumed that they were always doing the same, creating an atmosphere of constant hyperawareness of how each of my actions would place me inside or outside of a number of categories. As a result, during times of my sophomore year I felt literally unwilling to leave my house or to enter a crowd of people, for the fear of that feeling of the dismembering power of eyes upon my body.

Because of these feelings of constant self-awareness, the most formative part of my first two years at Wesleyan involved becoming friends with older students who seemed to have similar experiences. Through classes, working on the April Planning Committee (for Asian, Asian American, Arab, Arab American, and Queer Awareness Month), and Fusion (Wesleyan's multiracial student group), most of my role models in Asian American activism were Arab American, South Asian American, multiracial, and/or queer students, many of whom were not immediately read as Asian American. My student heroes in the queer organizing world were students of color, many of whom were not the most famous "queers on campus" and who often did much more work organizing events and groups than they were ever recognized for. As a first- and second-year student, I gravitated towards

these juniors and seniors not because we had exactly the same background or experiences, but because they also seemed to feel the pressures of multiple identities or communities. However, instead of being debilitated by this, they were also models of continued engagement in different forms, some through their leadership as interns or group leaders, others through their senior thesis research. They seemed to use their constant awareness of social categories, and the knowledge of the privileges and oppressions that accompanied them, not to try to fit themselves better into those categories, but rather to make conversations and actions more inclusive and considerate and also more rigorous in their breaking down of social structures and dynamics. It is in a large part because of the support and influence of students like Justin, Lily, Pia, Hetert, Nicole, Xi, and Liz that I felt enough self-confidence to facilitate groups like the April Planning Committee, AASC, and the national multiracial student conference we organized through Fusion, also learning through mistakes and successes along the way. This self-confidence was not based so much in a sense of authority or authenticity in these groups, but more in my commitment to myself to try to pay attention to the margins of any category whose goals I was working towards in creating and implementing those goals.

In a sense I think that this is a large part of what the Dwight Greene '70 Internship tries to achieve: connections between students (especially between younger and older ones) who may feel themselves to be on the margins of the collective unit of the greater Wesleyan campus as well as of smaller communities. This creates peer support for students to have enough confidence to continue their academic and activist work despite multiple pressures, and combats ideas of authenticity which may limit students and their success in school and extracurricular work. Projects like the graduation stoles are symbolic gestures expressing an awareness of the diversity within communities, as well as a commitment to marginalized students, hopefully followed up by larger efforts to create the institutionalized academic and emotional support necessary for our campus to stop losing some of its finest student thinkers and contributors for financial, mental health, and other reasons.

In the time that I have attended Wesleyan, the most important lessons I have learned have taken place both on and off campus. One of the key experiences for learning to live as a whole instead of the sum of parts was studying abroad in Ecuador last semester.

This is not because there were no similar issues of recognition and authenticity there; of course there were, but living in a completely different racial and gender system proved that these categories really are context specific instead of essential. For example, for the first time in my life, the lesbian organization and community of which I was a part included mainly women with long, dark hair. Also, existing completely off of the racial map, depending on the context I was asked if I was *ecuatoriana*, *colombiana*, *mejicana*, *chilena*, *española*, *francesa*, *latina*, *chicana*, *norteamericana*. The freedom I felt did not come from ceasing to think about how people perceived me in categories such as race and gender, it came from the sudden transparency of those categories as constructed because of their differences from those in the United States and at Wesleyan.

One must remain committed to challenging the ways that race, gender, sexuality, etc. unevenly distribute oppression and privilege. Race is important precisely because its very existence is based on the ways that institutions treat people differently. However, being able to recognize myself and to live has meant trying not to engage in the constant internal war dividing myself into sections of distinctive, recognizably authentic chunks of this identity or that one; instead, each of those categories must be flexible enough to contain all of me. Putting myself back together has meant allowing those categories I love and uphold also to be pulled apart and questioned.

