

This mixed media sculpture explores my identity and experience as half-white, half-Japanese. I sought to gain a clearer understanding of my own racial identity by learning about perception and perspective, the influence of culture on identity, and the construction of knowledge and truth. I considered the “danger of the single story” (the exclusion and close-mindedness perpetuated by holding one story to be the singular narrative of a place or a person), thereby denying the existence of any other story—of any other truth. Thinking about how we create our personal and shared webs of knowledge and truth led me to think about my own story.

This collection of images represents the tension I experience between the two halves of my racial identity. The double-sided squares pair two related images to embody the duality of my racial identity. The images are brought together in a frame similar to a Japanese shoji screen.

I hope to share a piece of my identity and experience with the viewer, and by doing so, expand the existing narrative of being multiracial. By sharing our identities, experiences, and voices, we can avoid falling prey to the single story, and instead create more inclusive, honest, and authentic narratives of identity.

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Identity and the Construction of Truth :
An exploration of identity in relation to positionalality,
perspective, knowledge, and truth.

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The research presented in this paper is guided by the question: How does identity shape what we know and think of as true? This paper addresses the ideas of identity, positionality, perception and perspective, knowledge, truth, and the implicit power dynamics of knowledge and truth. The goal of exploring these ideas was to gain a deeper understanding of the influences on how we—as individuals with unique identities living submerged in our respective cultures—construct knowledge, and in the process, come to conclusions that we hold to be true.

I haven't fully figured out who I am yet, and with that comes the challenge of clearly defining my identity, which is challenging in a society where we are frequently asked to define ourselves by checking boxes or filling in bubbles. There are some identifiers that I can easily categorize myself within. Cisgender woman. 16 years old. Straight. Able bodied. Sort of Episcopalian, but mostly I just believe in "something bigger out there". Divorced parents, small extended family. I only knew one of my grandparents.. White? Asian? Uncertainty edges in when I try to define my race. Right now, I feel most comfortable identifying as "multiracial", but when I start to think about what that really means any shred of certainty dissipates.

My racial identity is not only a product of the fact that my parents were born in countries across the globe from each other and ended up having children together. It is the product of being raised by a mother who has jokingly been called a "banana"—yellow on the outside, white on the inside—and is atypical of Japanese women of her generation. She has been Americanized in many, but not all, ways. My racial identity is a product of living in predominantly white neighborhoods – first Atherton, then Hillsborough, San Mateo, and now Pacific Heights in San Francisco. It is the product of feeling uncomfortable and humiliated when my childhood best friend repeatedly made comments about the size and shape of my eyes. She once even pulled at the corners of her eyes as she commented on my appearance, serving only to fuel my desperate desire to distance myself from my Asian-ness, the thing that someone I called a friend would use against me. Even as many of my experiences have steered me to feel more white than Asian, other experiences have brought me closer to my Japanese heritage —going to school in Japan during the summer while staying with my grandmother, going to Japanese school on the weekends, growing up speaking Japanese with my mom and sister at home, eating and making Japanese food, and celebrating 雛祭り (Girl's Day).

Before high school I never really thought about how I identified racially; I had never been faced with a situation or environment that forced me to define myself in terms of my race. I think that I really took on the label of "white" when I started high school. In elementary and middle school, everyone knew that I was half Japanese; it wasn't something that I had to tell people. So when I got to high school, I just didn't really tell people that I was half-Japanese unless they asked. Before I started high school my older sister told me that many of the Asian kids hung out together and isolated themselves socially by only hanging out with other Asians. Although she didn't explicitly tell me to dump my identity as Asian and take on my whiteness in order to protect my social life, her implied message was clear: in order to avoid social isolation I should distance myself from my Asian-ness.

Until last year I didn't know that Asians were "allowed to"—according to my hazy notion of what it meant to be a person of color—identify as people of color. For me, before last year, being Asian was somewhere between being white and being something else, but the "something else" lacked any clear definition. My particular brand of Asian—as a half-Japanese, half-white person raised in predominantly white communities, attending an overwhelmingly white high school (if not in absolute numbers, then in culture), with fairly limited interaction with other half Japanese kids and my Japanese family members—fell closer to the white end of the spectrum.

Every year at my school we have "Community Day", a day dedicated to celebrating all forms of diversity within our school and the greater San Francisco community. It involves splitting up into affinity groups, which are spaces for people sharing some common identity to meet and talk. My freshman year, when I was signing up for the affinity groups, I missed the biracial/multiracial option and signed up for the Asian affinity group. As I sat around a large

wooden table with other self-identified Asians, I couldn't have felt more out of place. I felt both mentally and physically isolated. Looking around the table, I didn't see anyone who looked like me—I felt self-conscious and uncomfortable, hyperaware of my whiteness—my freckles, my not quite black enough hair—and how in this particular context, it made me feel like an outsider. No one said anything to me or did anything to make me feel uncomfortable, so my discomfort may have come from an entirely imagined outsider status.

It was the same feeling of not fitting in that I had experienced one summer day when I was going to school at the local elementary school in Hokkaido where my grandmother lived in Japan. I was leaving the school building to walk to the parking lot where my mom was waiting for me when a boy my age yelled, “外人” (gaijin) at me, (外人 means ‘foreigner’) and in that moment I was shocked. It's a moment that I've carried with me because I was a foreigner there—in a place where I spent every summer going to school, speaking Japanese, and trying my best to fit in with my peers—and I also felt like a foreigner in a classroom filled with other self-identified Asians in San Francisco, my home.

It was in that affinity group that I began to realize that while I might identify as Asian, my experience of being Asian was immensely different from the largely similar experiences that other Asian students discussed during the affinity group. My identity as Asian is molded by my accompanying experience of being white. The influence of my whiteness on my Asian-ness also flows the other way—just as my whiteness informs my experience of being Asian, my Asian-ness characterizes my experience of being white.

My Asian-ness shaped my experience of being white by ensuring that sometimes I wouldn't pass as white and I'd be faced with the question “what are you?” and if my appearance didn't give it away, my Asian identity shone through my whiteness in school lunches that contained white rice instead of white bread, the constant request to say something in Japanese, and the expectation that I was an expert at origami.

These experiences form my racial identity but still leave me confused as to how I identify and what the significance of being able to define my identity clearly are.

From a curiosity about my own thoughts and beliefs, I came to wonder how identity shapes what information and messages we accept as true. How much of what I think, believe and hold to be true or correct is actually my own? What external factors—like my positionality and my culture—shape how I assess the messages and information that I receive and how I construct my own truths? These questions, which until now, have floated unanswered in the back of my mind, spurred my research on the topics of identity, perspective, knowledge, and truth.

Identity and Positionality

The term “positionality” encompasses both a person's position in society in relation to other people as well as the conditions which give rise to and support the individual's position.¹ Because positionality is determined by one's identity, every person has a unique positionality. Positionality is determined by the intersection of the elements of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability, age, and sexual orientation and the power and privileges afforded by the intersection of these elements. The idea of positionality also draws attention to the implications of a position as it relates to the forces, systems, and power dynamics at play in a society that maintain the position. Positionality is closely linked with perspective, as perspective is a product

¹ “What is Positionality” *IGI Global*, www.igi-global.com/dictionary/positionality/23040.

of past experiences, which are intrinsically linked to who you are, your position in a society—your overall social, political, and economic status.

Becoming aware of one's own positionality leads to a more critical and metacognitive way of learning and thinking, and ultimately a fuller understanding of the world. In a paper investigating how positionality biases epistemology in a university setting, professor of Earth Systems Science & Policy, David Takacs, asserts that, "Only by listening to others can I become aware of the conceptual shackles imposed by my own identity and experience."² By interacting with and listening to the perspectives of people with positionalities that are different from our own, we are able to see that our perspectives are only as comprehensive as the scope of the sum of experiences that contribute to the formation of our identity and positionality. With an awareness that our perspective and what we know about a given subject is limited by who we are and our standing within a society, we can endeavor to expand our thinking beyond our "conceptual shackles" to gain a more complete understanding of topics.

Perception

Perception and perspective are closely linked and both are shaped by culture, but do not mean the same thing. Perception is the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses. Perspective, on the other hand, is a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something, a point of view.

Studies have shown that as a result of their culture and its values, members of different cultures (specifically, East Asian and Western cultures) not only think about different things, but also think about the same things differently. While the cultural landscape of a place affects *what* its inhabitants think about, it also affects *how* they think. While it hasn't been shown that culture shapes the physical structure of the brain, studies have shown that cognitive processes are malleable and that at the level of perception, exposure to culture leads to the development of brain behavior that reflects the given culture's values.³ A 2006 analysis published by Denise Park, Angela Gutchess and colleagues at the University of Michigan "reported differing neural activation patterns in the brains of East Asians and Americans shown identical pictures. The Americans showed more activity in brain regions associated with object processing than the East Asians, whose brains showed more activity in areas involved in processing background information."⁴ These functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) results reflect how East Asian cultures are more interdependent, which leads individuals to spend more time monitoring the environment and others, whereas Western cultures, which value independence, produce individuals who focus more on central objects.

Culture shapes identity and how we think in ways that we are aware of and in ways that we are not conscious of. The cultural values we are exposed to shape our perception, and subsequently influence how we think and construct knowledge.

² David Takacs, "How Does Your Positionality Bias Your Epistemology?," *Thought & Action* 2003 *National Education Association*, www.nea.org/assets/img/PubThoughtAndAction/TAA_03_04.pdf.

³ "Culture Shaping Our Perception," *Serendip Studio*, 7 May 2010, serendip.brynmawr.edu/exchange/yml/culture-shaping-our-perception.

⁴ Diana Yates, "Culture sculpts neural response to visual stimuli, new research indicates," *Illinois News Bureau*, U of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 1 May 2007 illinois.edu/blog/view/6367/206654.

Knowledge

Information and knowledge, while related are not synonymous. Information is facts provided or learned about something or someone, whereas knowledge is a collection of facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education.⁵ Information can be useful but often lacks real significance because it isn't connected to anything. Knowledge is information made meaningful through the use of analytical skills that find patterns and connections within, and between, sets of information.

Knowledge is a subjective map of information, which differs for everyone because it is founded in one's values and past experiences. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that proposes that knowledge is *constructed*, not simply acquired. According to constructivist theory, "Each person has a different interpretation and construction of knowledge process. The learner is not a blank slate (tabula rasa) but brings past experiences and cultural factors to a situation."⁶ Knowledge does not spontaneously appear without effort from the holder of the knowledge; it cannot be separated from an individual's past experiences and cultural influences as the transformation of individual, scattered pieces of information into a web of knowledge is dependent on an individual's experiences, cultural values and influences, and personal belief system. If, for the purposes of this argument, we accept that there are objective truths and indisputable facts, which exist, then according to John Dewey's Theory of Knowledge, individuals learn these truths and facts *actively*, through the manipulation of their environment, and arrive at "facts". These "facts" vary from person to person because of differences in how people manipulate their environments but are nonetheless held to be true and accurate by the individual, even if they depart from the original objective truth or fact. These "facts" are then made into knowledge through the discovery of connections to other "facts" and experiences.

From an epistemological standpoint, knowledge is *justified true belief*. In this context, the concept of "true" adheres to the correspondence theory, meaning that the proposition or statement is in some way (either directly or indirectly) aligned with the physical reality of the world.⁷ The justification part of the tripartite definition of knowledge refers to the necessity for a true belief to be supported by evidence in order for it to constitute knowledge.

Truth

What is truth? We know that some things are true and others aren't and fairly easily assign the labels "true" and "false", but what does it actually mean for something to be true? There are many theories in philosophy regarding truth, three of which are: correspondence theory, coherence theory, and social theory. Correspondence theory asserts that truth is a matching of words to world.⁸ According to correspondence theory, evaluation of the truth of a statement depends on words, the world, and the relationship between the two contained in the statement.

⁵ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/knowledge>

⁶ Vygotsky, Lev Semyonovich, et al. "Constructivism." Learning Theories, www.learning-theories.com/constructivism.html.

⁷ http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_epistemology.html

⁸ Susan Blum, "Truth," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 9, June 1999, pp. 255-58, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43102481.

“The coherence theory of truth suggests that truth derives from coherent relations within a given social, semantic, and epistemological framework”⁹; in this system, truths can only be assessed within the context of a given system. Within this theory of truth, presupposition and rationality are critical for understanding truth. A coherence theory of truth claims that a proposition is true if and only if it coheres with an existing set of truths such as one’s own beliefs or the beliefs of the majority of the people in a society. “Coherence” with a system is most commonly defined at the most basic level as logical consistency.

The social theory of truth is perhaps the most applicable to my research as it “relies on the understanding of relations of power and control over knowledge and claims to possess truth.” Certain identifiers—like being white, straight, male, or of high socioeconomic status—give rise to more powerful positionalities. The social theory of truth acknowledges that certain individuals have the power to dictate the narratives and information that are labeled as “true”. While it is possible that those with power are impartial when assigning the labels of “true” and “false” or deciding which objective truths are valuable, it is essential to understand that because of their powerful positionality, the scope of their experience and knowledge is privileged and, therefore, limited as they may also possess hidden motivations—like preserving their positionality and power—for constructing the truth in a certain way. “If knowledge is power, then claims to have knowledge of the truth—transcendent, objective, universal, panchronic, biological, scientific—obscures others’ rights to their own truths.”¹⁰ By failing to see how our positionality makes us more perceptive to some information and less responsive to other information, we fall into the trap of seeing what we know and think of as true as the singular set of truths that are applicable to everyone, and by doing so, we deny other people the power to assert their own truths.

In a 2009 TED Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke on “the danger of a single story,” using the lens of her own life and experiences to explore how we can easily reduce people and places to a single story based on one fact, piece of information, perspective or narrative that we are exposed to. She tells the story of her college roommate’s single story of Africa, which she then projected onto Adichie. Adichie describes her roommate’s impression of her saying, “She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.” Adichie explains her roommate’s narrow conception of Africa as based in Western literature and media’s story of Africa as “a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner”. Acknowledging that had she not grown up in Nigeria, she too would have had a similar idea of what Africa is. This story serves as an example of how, while your positionality, which is a product of the world that you live in, may make you believe something to be true, because my positionality is entirely different, the same statement may be untrue to me and may also be objectively untrue.

⁹ Susan Blum, “Truth,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 9, June 1999, pp. 255-58, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43102481.

¹⁰ Susan Blum, “Truth,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 9, June 1999, pp. 255-58, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43102481.

Adichie also offers another example of the danger of the single story: a professor who told her that her novel was not “authentically African” because “my characters were too much like him, an educated middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African.” This example demonstrates how we are often quick to reject information that doesn’t fit neatly into our preconceived ideas about a subject and dismiss it as untrue simply because it doesn’t fit with our story, in spite of the fact that our story of a subject—especially one which we have no direct experience with—is highly lacking and therefore inherently flawed. In this example, Adichie’s professor asserted his power as a storyteller and holder of truth by reducing Africa to a single story and seeing *his* single story as the *only* possible story, choosing to reject Adichie’s, thereby *denying the existence of any other story—of any other truth*.

Epistemological relativism offers part of the solution to this problem by acknowledging the identity of the knower as relevant to knowledge claims. Retired professor Lorraine Code writes, “Philosophers have proposed methodologies for arriving at truth, and criteria for determining the validity of claims to the effect that ‘S knows that P.’ Such endeavors are guided by the putatively self-evident principle that truth once discerned, knowledge once established, claim their status as truth and knowledge by virtue of a grounding in or coherence within a permanent, objective, ahistorical, and circumstantially neutral framework or set of standard. The question “Who is S?” is regarded as neither as legitimate nor as relevant in these endeavors... Questions about the circumstances of knowledge acquisition serve merely to clutter and confuse the issue with contingencies and other impurities. The question “Who is S?” is undoubtedly such a question. If it matters who S is, then it must follow that something peculiar to S’s character or nature could bear on the validity of the knowledge he or she claims: that S’s *identity* might count among the conditions that make the knowledge claim possible.”¹¹ In this quotation, Code describes what philosophers and epistemologists have missed about knowledge: that asking “Who is S?”—S being a person who knows something—is not in fact irrelevant and actually helps us to understand why and how a knowledge claim is being made—the context that gives rise to the claim and its justification. Code references the “permanent, objective, ahistorical, and circumstantially neutral framework” within which we place knowledge and truth once we have affirmed their validity, pointing out that this way of thinking about knowledge and truth doesn’t consider that knowledge and truth are subject to change and should be clearly positioned and thought about in relation to the historical and cultural context from which they arise.

While acknowledging the short, easily made, and problematic slide from relativism into subjectivism wherein knowledge claims become indistinguishable from statements of personal opinion, Code espouses epistemological relativism, explaining its merits by writing, “There are advantages to endorsing a measure of epistemological relativism that make of it an enabling rather than a constraining position. By no means the least of these advantages is the fact that relativism is one of the more obvious means of avoiding reductive explanations, in terms of drastically simplified paradigms of knowledge, monolithic explanatory modes, or privileged,

¹¹ Lorraine Code, “Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?” *The Theory of Knowledge Classical & Contemporary Readings*, compiled by Louis Pojman, 2nd ed., Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999, pp. 595-606.

decontextualized positions.”¹² Epistemological relativism recognizes that knowledge and claims of truth do not exist in a realm isolated from culture, history and the knower’s identity, privilege, and power and considers these factors in the evaluation of knowledge and truth claims. Epistemological relativism is an inclusive way of thinking about knowledge and truth. It doesn’t discount independent truths; rather epistemological relativism serves to expand the possible interpretations of knowledge by allowing multiple, varied truths to be simultaneously presented.

Conclusion

Some of the most basic truths that I know, I don’t have any control over. I am half-Japanese, half-white with Irish ancestry and I am white passing. As a biracial person, the main point of contention I have felt is that of finding a balance between the two halves of my racial identity that feels authentic. Having grown up in the United States, I have had more exposure to American values like independence, progress, and directness. I appreciate Japanese cultural values, and some of them, like attention to detail, humility, and the philosophy of less is more are also things that I value. To me, being biracial means that I have been exposed to two distinct sets of cultural values and truths, both of which have shaped my identity and behavior. The Japanese cultural values that I possess come from my family, whereas the American cultural values that I possess come primarily from my environment.

For the most part, I am still unsure of how the biracial “cultural water” I swim in affects me. How much of what I value and how my values manifest in my behavior is a result of culture, and how much is simply personality? Or is even my personality dictated by culture?

In the way that we use the word “truth”, it is subjective; it is the product of the individual who possesses the given truth connecting information to their experiences, which are the result of their positionality. Given this nature of truth, epistemological relativism provides a useful framework to evaluate truth claims by recognizing and considering the circumstances that lead an individual to think of something as true.

What I do know is that by gaining a better understanding of our positionalities—and in my case how being biracial affects my positionality—we can begin to see that what we know about a given subject is limited by our positionality. We should strive to gain a more complete understanding of subjects by listening to other people’s perspectives and ideas on a shared subject. By understanding our positionality we also become more receptive to information that falls outside the bounds of what we already know and believe to be true; by actually accepting and processing this information we are able to construct further reaching webs of knowledge and embrace multiple truths from different perspectives, thereby creating a more equitable world in which the power to assert truths isn’t only a product of a powerful positionality.

¹² Lorraine Code, “Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?” *The Theory of Knowledge Classical & Contemporary Readings*, compiled by Louis Pojman, 2nd ed., Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999, pp. 595-606.

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