

### Culture Clash-room

Fitting in, a concept many children struggle with and I was no different. My cultural identity always placed me firmly in the middle. The spawn of polar opposites, a wealthy African American father and a middleclass Caucasian mother, I was born at a fork in the road never knowing which path to take. Custody landed me with my mother 90% of the time meaning I initially viewed myself through her mirror. This quickly shattered. Being called a “nigger” in elementary school, and my grandma expressing the desire to pinch my nose to make it more in line with her European heritage, made it clear I was different. I found no more comfort through my father’s lens; chastised by a classmate after a haircut claiming I did not appreciate the hair struggles of black women and not feeling black enough at family reunions due to inner grumblings about light versus dark skin within the community. Economically I faced similar struggles. My daily life was not extravagant, but outsiders viewed it differently. One shopping trip a year with my father led to designer clothes and rumors about my wealth. I was teased, unable to find my designated “box” as I did not live a wealthy lifestyle but occasionally had these perks. My gender identity is perhaps too complicated to unpack. My father was something of a womanizer, having different girlfriends in every city and strange women living with us on and off. After having dealt with my father, my mother swore off men for a decade. Spending only a minute amount of time with my dad, I lacked a regular masculine figure and found myself gravitating to male friendships. While my gender-identity has always been female, the world is never kind to a little girl who surrounds herself with boys.

Never having a clear place, not even a designated home as I packed and went between mom and dad each weekend, I became defiant. If no group wanted me, I didn’t need them either. It was in this stubbornness that my cultural identity began to take shape. I discovered fitting in wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. I learned that I could have the best of both worlds, I appreciated aspects from each dimension, the Black and White experience, the middleclass and the wealthy, and could relate with both genders. I was a renegade, “I chose my own fate, I drove by the fork in the road and went straight” (Jay-Z. 2001). From this, I have learned to never make assumptions about another, particularly my students.

My lived experience has culminated into a blurry picture, realizing that what we see rarely aligns with what it is, but a few clear strokes have formed my axioms: we are all unique from our skin color to our learning styles, our dimensions of difference cannot be placed into a generic box, and everyone needs support. I project these beliefs onto my students and my teaching style. Perhaps not yet culturally proficient, I simultaneously blind myself from these differences while providing equal learning opportunities and adapting with each student, understanding the effect of cultural identity. Learning from my experiences; I individualize additional help not assuming wealthy students can afford private tutoring, encourage learners to not bind themselves in “boxes” by preparing *everyone* for advanced courses diminishing any correlation between ethnicity and excellence, and inspire students to use their cultural identity to enhance their learning, not be limited by it. I am an instructor, a tutor, and a teammate. My experience has taught me to embrace and celebrate differences, and this concept drives my teaching. ■