

The Space in Between

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Rachel DesFosses, Class of 2020, won first place in the 2020 Bailey Oratorical Contest.

When you look at me, what do you see? If I asked you to guess my ethnicity, I bet you would be unsure. I have had people guess that I'm White, Hispanic, Greek, Italian, Asian. I've had people guess I was a lot of different ethnicities.

The upcoming census will ask us to check a box for our ethnicity. If you were to check a box for me, you might choose Asian.

Juniata has progressively grown in diversity. In the last twenty years, the percentage of mixed and minority students has doubled, from 7.7% to 14.2%. Yet, despite this growth, fellow students have often placed me into boxes. At an event on campus, I was with a group taking a photo of racial minorities celebrating our diversity. When they took the picture and saw me, someone turned to my friend and asked "Why is she here?" My friend replied that I was part Asian, and she said, "I guess that's okay."

On the other hand, if you were to check a box for me, you might choose White. During orientation, I was sitting by the campfire. The person next to me leaned over and said, "You're not White." When I said that my mom was Filipina, they said, "But you don't look Asian."

Or, if you were to check a box for me, you might try to be more specific than White or Asian.

In one of my first conversations with a friend I met freshman year, they said to me, "What kind of Asian are you?"

Few people would guess that a Filipina woman is my mom. But almost nobody would guess that a blue-eyed, red-haired, and very freckled man is my dad.

Over a lifetime of facing assumptions like these, I've come to realize that boxes don't just exist on paper. Boxes exist in all areas of our lives, attempting to define our ethnicity, our religion, our gender, our politics. So, what boxes are you put into?

Whether you realize it or not, we are all identified through boxes every day. These boxes are a problem because they ignore most of who we are. We need to become aware of how we put ourselves into boxes, how institutions choose boxes for us, and how society identifies us through these boxes. It's time

for us to think outside of the boxes and reclaim the space in between, where we can fully count all aspects of ourselves.

Biracial comedian, author, and talk show host Trevor Noah said, “As an outsider myself, I always mixed myself with different groups . . . I don’t have a place where I belong.”¹ Because we feel like we don’t belong or we’re not sure how to belong, we place ourselves into boxes.

My brother and I look like twins. If you put a wig on him, he’d look just like me. Yet he and I deny ourselves this space in between the boxes. My brother and I ask each other: “Do you think you’re White? Or Asian?”

What he’ll tell you is that he sees himself as more White than Asian. However, I tend to see myself as more Asian than White.

What we’re really asking ourselves is this: “What part of yourself do you identify with, and what part do you choose to ignore?”

The Pew Research Center led a study in which mixed race people were asked if they considered themselves multiracial. Of them, 61% said they did not; they viewed themselves as one race.² This was because they felt they weren’t multiracial because of the way they looked or the way they were raised. So many people seem to deny themselves the space in between, just as my brother and I do.

Not only do we put ourselves into internal boxes, institutions constantly force us to put ourselves into literal boxes.

I first encountered the way institutions force checkboxes onto who we are when I applied to college. When I used Common App, the application that many students use to apply to college, I confronted checkboxes of the following ethnicities: White, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, African American, and Pacific Islander. We could only choose one, and, if none of those fit, we were channeled into the checkbox labeled “Other.”

Institutions don’t see who I really am. They only see me as “other.”

I spent days trying to figure out what I wanted to label myself. I didn’t want to select “Other.” It didn’t feel right to me.

But college applications don’t wait for you to solve your identity crisis, and I was running out of time. With one box, I joined the outcasts known as “others.”

It wasn’t until this year, when I became Juniata Associate for Grants and Contracts, that I realized that choosing “Other” didn’t affect just me.

My supervisor Mike Keating, Juniata’s grants administrator, said that students who chose “Other” on college applications are not counted in the demographics of many schools, including Juniata.³

So, with one word and one box—I unwittingly chose to be rendered invisible.

But these numbers also affect funding. When students are not counted in demographic statistics, it is impossible to present accurate data when a school applies for grants. An institution is unlikely to receive funding for underrepresented ethnicities if those ethnicities are invisible in the data.

When I learned that my choice of “Other” had made me invisible, I wished I had just chosen “White” or “Asian.” At least then I would have counted.

“Other” is the option when institutions, including the census, don’t want to bother figuring out who we really are. But “Other” should never be an option.

Boxes don’t just exist for ethnicity or on paper. These boxes have been ingrained throughout our society. These boxes are on our driver’s licenses, our job applications, and the census. In the last census, many people were faced with the same choice I was. Nearly twenty million people chose to select the “Other” checkbox. Twenty million people like me struggle with an either-or choice. Society is dominated by these boxes that polarize us. For example:

Are you Democrat or Republican? Bipartisan politics creates conflict.

Are you male or female? Misrepresenting gender creates misinterpretation.

Are you Christian or Muslim? Religious opposition creates judgment.

University of California, Berkeley’s *Greater Good Magazine* published an article last year stating that “[t]his polarization makes us more likely to demonize each other.”⁴

Each of us has been put into a box by someone around us. Each of us has been forced to put ourselves into boxes. All of us have been identified and valued through a box. We are better and more than boxes.

Eliminating these boxes and accepting the space between us opens possibilities for discussion rather than conflict, for awareness rather than misinterpretation, for understanding rather than judgment.

When you look at someone, instead of seeing a box, envision a blank space for us to fill in ourselves. When you’re filling out a form or an application, instead of seeing a box, see a question mark followed by blank space for you to decide who you are. Define yourself on your own terms. The space between isn’t found within forms and surveys. The space between is found within all of us. We are all more than a set of predetermined categories.

When you look at me, what do you see?

I am not someone who should be boxed in, and neither are you.

Juniata encourages us to think about who we are. I also challenge you to think about who you will become. I challenge you to break free of your boxes, to be counted for who you truly are.

NOTES

1. Trevor Noah, as quoted in Eric Kohn, “10 Ways *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* Aims to
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Move beyond Jon Stewart,” *IndieWire*. September 27, 2015,
<https://www.indiewire.com/2015/09/10-ways-the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-aims-to-move-beyond-jon-stewart-57439/>.

2. Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Rich Morin, and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Multiracial in America: Proud, Diverse, and Growing in Numbers,” *Pew Research Center*, June 11, 2015,
<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/>.
3. Mike Keating’s official title is director of corporation and foundation support.
4. Zaid Jilani and Jeremy Adam Smith, “What Is the True Cost of Polarization in America?” *Greater Good Magazine*, March 4, 2019,
<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what-is-the-true-cost-of-polarization-in-america>.