# A PERFORMANCE OF THE SELF FOR MYSELF, WATCHED BY YOU: AN ANIMATED EXPLORATION OF THE RACIAL FETISHIZATION AMONG MULTICULTURAL WOMEN IN COLLEGE

by

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This thesis examines the impact of racial exoticization and fetishization on the internal sense of self among multiracial women in college, focusing on those of both white and non-white heritage. The study draws on the sociological frameworks of George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley – specifically the *I*, the *Me*, the Generalized Other, and the Looking-Glass Self.

The creative component of this thesis is a 3–5-minute hand-drawn animated short film, *A Performance of the Self for Myself, Watched by You*, in which a young woman falls asleep after a late-night date and enters a dream in which she is forced to watch herself perform before an arena full of men. The film attempts to render something that academic writing alone cannot: gaining awareness of the parts of oneself that have been created in responses to social roles that never asked for consent.

This written thesis documents the conceptual research, animated film influences, and production process behind the work. It situates the project within existing scholarship on multiracial microaggressions, racial fetishization, and the psychological costs of navigating a world that still largely sees race in single categories. Ultimately, this project is one multiracial woman's attempt to give form to a complexity she has witnessed within her community – one that deserves to be seen, named, and examined.

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# Chapter 1: Project Introduction & Conceptual Framework

## 1.1 – A Sociological Understanding of the Self

Prior to exploring the impact of racial fetishization on one's relationship to the self, it is necessary to establish a framework for understanding identity. To that end, I draw on conceptualizations from American social theorists George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley.

According to Mead, the self is composed of two distinct yet interconnected parts: the *I* and the *Me*. The *I* is the active self: the part that makes spontaneous, creative decisions and experiences itself as a subject. The *Me*, by contrast, is the passive self: the part shaped by habit and perceived social expectations, it experiences itself as an object of social evaluation. The framework by which the *I* judges the *Me* is structured by what Mead calls the *Generalized Other*: the internalized beliefs, values, and expectations of a given social group that inform how individuals evaluate both themselves and others (Mead, 1934).

Cooley expands on Mead's framework with the concept of the *Looking-Glass Self* — the process by which people develop their sense of identity through interactions with others and the emotions those interactions produce. More specifically, the Looking-Glass Self describes the image an individual believes others hold of them, and how that perceived image shapes their own self-concept (Cooley, 1902).

Together, these frameworks establish the self as multifaceted, relational, and continuously shaped by external environments — a foundation essential to understanding how experiences like racial fetishization can disrupt one's sense of identity.

### 1.2 - Recognized Racism in Multiracial Versus Monoracial People of Color

Race, as recognized by the American Psychological Association, is one of many affiliations influencing identity, alongside factors such as geographic location and socioeconomic class (APA, 2025). In a society structured around monoracial categories, the ways in which racism is internalized and externalized are shaped accordingly. For multiracial individuals, this process manifests distinctly.

The spectrum of multiracial experience is far too broad for any single generalization. An individual of both white and non-white heritage likely reconciles racial identity differently than someone of only non-white heritage, and even within those groupings, significant variation persists.

Monoracial people of color experience traditional racism — discrimination, prejudice, and systemic oppression targeting their racial group membership. Multiracial individuals face this as well, but they also encounter a distinct form of oppression that exists beyond monoracial categories. Researchers Marc P. Johnston-Guerrero and Kevin L. Nadal identify five core classifications of multiracial microaggressions:

1. **Denial of multiracial reality:** Others may be aware of a multiracial person's mixed heritage but refuse to acknowledge it, pressuring them to identify with one race. This rejection can come from both white and non-white communities.
2. **Assumption of monoracial identity:** Strangers assign a racial label based on arbitrary cues — skin color, last name, hair type — which can lead to situations where a multiracial person overhears racist remarks because the speaker assumed a monoracial identity.
3. **"Not enough" to belong:** Multiracial individuals are seen as insufficiently belonging to any of their heritage groups, with rejection again potentially coming from both white and non-white communities.
4. **Exoticization and objectification:** Being treated as racially unusual or "exotic." For those of both white and non-white heritage, this can also take the form of being positioned as more "palatable" to white communities.

5. **Exclusion and isolation:** Being marginalized from both white spaces and monoracial communities of color, with no clear community in which to land.

It is worth noting that phenotype adds further complexity to an already nuanced area. Multiracial individuals who appear phenotypically Black may face anti-Black racism, while those with racially ambiguous features may encounter more explicit forms of scrutiny and erasure.

This is not to suggest that multiracial individuals have worse experiences with racism than monoracial people of color — that is not the argument here. Rather, the point is that current discourse around race and racism has long operated under what scholars describe as a "monoracial paradigm," one in which legal systems and institutions "consistently fail to recognize racism directed at those seen as racially mixed" (C. Harris, 2017; Leong, 2010). Monoracial individuals are generally not subjected to this specific form of invalidation because they fit within socially recognized racial categories. At a minimum, their existence is acknowledged by larger systems and institutions. The absence of multiracial recognition at the institutional level normalizes its erasure at the interpersonal level, as systemic frameworks shape the social expectations individuals impose on one another and on themselves. Forcing multiracial individuals into a monoracial paradigm risks significant loss in the representation of marginalized cultures; a concern that becomes increasingly urgent as the broader culture moves toward post-racial ideology.

### 1.3 — Exoticization And Fetishization of Multiracial Women

Racial exoticization and fetishization can affect individuals regardless of age, gender, or monoracial versus multiracial identity. Both phenomena involve the dehumanization and objectification of a person, reducing them to "a bodily part or characteristic [associated] with … a group based on racial, sexual stereotypes" (Stacey & Forbes 2022). For the purposes of this

project, I focus on the impact of these experiences on the sense of self among multiracial college women, specifically those with heritage from both white and non-white racial groups.

Research from Chapter 6 of *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact* identify a recurring pattern in which multiracial women of both white and non-white heritage, or those phenotypically located near the borders of whiteness, are subjected to remarks such as "You look so exotic," frequently followed by sexualized commentary. Multiple participants described encounters in which white men publicly approached mixed-race women with phrases like "You're dirty white" or "spicy white" — typically used as an entry point to inquire about racial ancestry — followed by responses like "That's hot!" or "That's sexy!" (Mohajeri, 2024; Johnston-Guerrero & Nadal, 2010).

A 2023 study published in the *Western Undergraduate Psychology Journal* further illuminates this dynamic. Recruiting approximately 200 undergraduate women of color (average age 18.76), the study used measures including the Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale and the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale–21 to examine potential links between racial fetishization and mental health outcomes. Results indicated a positive correlation between racial fetishization and poor mental well-being, particularly in the areas of trauma symptoms, personal safety anxiety, and depression (Mirahmadi, Lindloff, & Calogero, 2021). Given the ongoing need for empirical research on women of color and multiracial individuals, this study is significant for providing quantitative evidence of what many experience qualitatively.

**1.4 — Guiding Questions**

These frameworks converge around a central concern: the relationship between external racial experiences and internal identity formation. As I move through my creative project (discussed in Chapter 3), I am guided by the following questions:

- Drawing on Mead and Cooley, how has the internal sense of self among multiracial, college-age women of both white and non-white heritage been shaped by racial exoticization and fetishization?
- In what ways does the internalization of these experiences manifest — socially, psychologically, and emotionally?
- What are the longer-term implications of this internalization for identity development?

**1.5 — Author Positionality and Acknowledgment of Privilege**

As a multiracial woman, I have firsthand experience with racialized exoticization and fetishization. Before I had the words for either, I had already felt them. Since attending college and joining the Mixed Student Union (MSU) at the University of Oregon, I have encountered countless other mixed-race students with similar stories. Despite our shared experiences, each person felt alone in navigating them. Overtime, it became clear to me that I had both the opportunity and the responsibility to use this project not only to bring mixed-race identities into traditionally academic spaces, but to represent the value of the arts as the vehicle for doing so given my background in Art + Technology.

I also want to be transparent about my positionality. As a person of partial white heritage, I carry privilege that shapes how I move through the world and, by extension, how I approach this subject. This is especially worth noting in the context of current discourse surrounding "Wasians" — individuals of both white and Asian heritage — where questions of proximity to whiteness and its social advantages are alive. My goal here is not to determine who has it worse, but rather to illustrate an experience that is simply *different*. Part of what makes it different is the particular tension embedded in the *I*, *Me*, and Looking-Glass Self: feeling the emotional and ancestral weight of colonization's consequences while simultaneously recognizing

the need to decolonize one's own mind. That internal negotiation, inherited pain alongside inherited privilege, is its own distinct experience.

My experiences with racial fetishization, while real, are not universal, and they differ meaningfully from those of multiracial individuals without white heritage. While I cannot speak for all mixed-race people, I can create something that captures the complexity I have witnessed within this community — one that deserves to be seen, named, and examined.

### 1.6 — From Theory to Practice

The sociological construction of the self, the unique forms of erasure experienced by multiracial people, and the psychological toll of racial exoticization and fetishization discussed in Chapter 1 set the conceptual foundation for this project. However, understanding a concept intellectually and rendering it as art are two completely different beasts. With that said, before diving headfirst into animation, I turned to the work of other animators and storytellers who tackle questions of identity and objectification in their own artistic ways.

# Chapter 2: Animated Film Review

The following films and series were selected for their thematic and stylistic relevance to this project. While the review is not exhaustive, it is intentional. Each work informed my approach to storytelling, visual language, and the portrayal of complex identity in its own specific way.

## 2.1 — Pear Cider and Cigarettes (Robert Valley, 2016)

*Pear Cider and Cigarettes* is an experimental animated short by Canadian illustrator and animator, Robert Valley. Much of Valley's broader body of work has served not only as a significant influence on this project - specifically in the way he renders authenticity within a single scene - but on my artistic style in general. Told through the perspective of a close friend, the film traces the chaotic, tender, and ultimately tragic life of a man named Turbo.

Valley demonstrated that a sole narrator need not be a limitation. The key, I found, is intentionality. Every line the narrator speaks should primarily achieve two things: advancing the story while simultaneously quietly revealing who they are. Visually, the film's restrained use of movement was equally instructive: Valley consistently asks how much can be expressed with the least amount of motion, a question I have since brought into my own practice.

What struck me most was Valley's willingness to be experimental without losing emotional clarity. While the film recycles visuals, Valley's use of varied effects keeps the repeated sequences fresh. In combination with a rather poetic narrative, Valley establishes a space that leaves more room for audience interpretation. By comparison, the first draft of my own script was too straightforward and eager to explain itself. Overall, Valley's film pushed me to take more creative risks, trust ambiguity, and consider what a story can communicate when it resists easy interpretation.

### 2.2 — "Good Hunting," *Love, Death + Robots*, Season 1, Episode 8 (2019)

"Good Hunting" centers on an unexpected relationship between a hunter and a huli jing — an ancient Chinese shape-shifting spirit, colloquially known as a "fox woman." As industrialization and colonization encroach upon her world, the huli jing is robbed of her supernatural form and ultimately forced into prostitution. Of the works surveyed in this review, this episode bears the closest thematic resemblance to my own project.

The most valuable lesson found in this film was one of restraint. By layering meanings without pausing for explanation, the episode extends a fundamental trust to its audience. I hope to channel this trust within my own work. Similarly, there is also a deliberate rhythm to how the story unfolds; heavy moments are given room to settle before the next element arrives. That breathing space is not emptiness - it is what brings life to the story.

### 2.3 — *Blue Eye Samurai* (Netflix, 2023)

*Blue Eye Samurai* follows Mizu, a mixed-race sword master living in disguise as a man in 17th century Japan, as she pursues revenge against the four white men she holds responsible for her existence; one of whom is her father. The series is among the most narratively ambitious animated works I encountered in this review, and one of the most personally resonant.

Two instincts this series helped me resist: over-explanation and linearity. My goal is not to produce a guidebook on the multiracial experience, but to visually render one facet of it. *Blue Eye Samurai* reminded me that there is a meaningful difference between the two. The series also reinforced the emotional power of nonlinear structure. Its most affecting episodes were, without

exception, its most surprising.  That relationship between structure and feeling is something I intend to carry forward into my own work.

# Chapter 3: The Creative Project

## 3.1 — Project Overview & Intent

The goal of this project is to produce a 3–5 minute animated short film exploring the racial exoticization and fetishization of multiracial women in college. More than an academic exercise, the work is intended to open space for honest dialogue — one that honors the complexity of mixed-race identity without flattening it into a lesson or a list of dos and don'ts.

This distinction matters to me. While the academic research grounding this project is necessary and important, I was equally committed to ensuring the film itself didn't function as a guidebook on how to treat multiracial women. Much of the existing media addressing multiracial identity tends to overexplain, leaning so heavily into explicit messaging that the nuance gets crowded out. My aim is something subtler: to capture how racial fetishization quietly manifests in everyday experience, and to sit with the underexamined way racism operates on multiracial people. There is something uniquely disorienting about that experience, and I wanted the film to reflect it honestly rather than resolve it neatly.

At its core, this project is less about race as a subject and more about the feeling of reckoning with something you don't yet have the language for. Art, I believe, is one of the few forms capable of holding that kind of complexity. Art communicates what resists being said directly.

## 3.2 — Technical Process

To produce this short film, I am loosely following the industry-standard three-stage production model: Pre-Production, Production, and Post-Production. I use the word "loosely" intentionally. Because my aim is to create an experimental work, the stages below are better

understood as a general framework than a strict sequence. My creative process is rooted in authenticity — I make choices that feel true to the moment, allowing the subconscious to lead and meanings to surface on their own terms. In practice, these stages overlap, inform one another, and occasionally reverse. What follows is a rough outline, not a blueprint.

### *3.2.1 — Pre-Production*

Pre-production encompasses the foundational decisions that shape the film before animation begins. Script writing establishes the narrative — the dramatic arc, key moments, and any dialogue that will carry the story. Storyboarding translates the script into visual terms, determining how each moment is framed and in what order. Character design develops the visual and psychological profiles of the film's central figures, ensuring the characters feel grounded and specific rather than symbolic or representative.

### *3.2.2 —Production*

Production is where the film begins to take shape visually. The animatic functions as a rough moving blueprint, sketching the general timing and movement of each shot before full animation begins. From there, the animatic is refined into finished animation, with each shot developed in greater detail and brought closer to its final form.

### *3.2.3 — Post-Production*

Post-production draws the completed animation together into a unified whole. Sound design — encompassing music, ambient sound, and any dialogue — is layered in to complement and deepen what is happening visually. The footage is then arranged and refined through editing before the final sequence is encoded and prepared for distribution.

### 3.3 — Animation in Action

The following section documents my journey through the animation process. As noted above, the stages of production rarely operated in isolation.

#### *3.3.1 — Pre-Production*

My original concept centered on two characters on a date that goes horribly wrong because the male character's fixation on multiracial women. I unofficially surveyed multiracial friends and family for inspiration. I drafted a full script with fleshed-out dialogue and even recorded voice-over tracks. However, the further I developed that version, the flatter it fell. As previously noted, it felt too eager to explain itself — less like a story and more like a guidebook on what not to do when dating a multiracial woman. The narrative also centered on the wrong character: the date rather than the multiracial woman herself, whose internal experience was always meant to be the heart of the project. Following my film review, I returned to the drawing board with two guiding principles: *less is more* and *keep the focus on the girl's experience with herself*.

The shift came unexpectedly. One afternoon, a song I hadn't heard in years came on — *Human* by Sevdaliza. It immediately transported me back to the first time I'd discovered it in high school, specifically through a dance choreography by Galen Hooks on YouTube. I remembered feeling something move through me when I first heard it, even if I couldn't articulate what. *Good dance*, I had thought and moved on. Listening again now, with older ears and a clearer frame of reference, I finally understood what the song had been saying all along: it was about reconciling with the self. My soul had recognized it before my mind could name it.

That realization reshaped the project entirely. The new concept follows a girl arriving home alone after a late-night date — one the audience never sees. She falls asleep and enters a

dream in which she is forced to watch herself perform a dance before an arena full of men. By the end of the sequence, the dancer transforms into something half-human, half-elephant.

*3.3.2 — Production*

The film uses two distinct animation styles to distinguish between reality and the dream world. Scenes grounded in reality are rendered with more depth and dimension, while the dream sequences are rendered in a rawer, sketch-like form — a visual language meant to reflect the unfiltered, surreal nature of the subconscious.

My workflow drew on several software platforms across different stages. For sketches, illustrations, and graphic elements, I worked primarily in Procreate and Adobe Illustrator. For animation and movement, I used a combination of Adobe Character Animator, Adobe After Effects, Premiere Pro, and Procreate Dreams. The general process involved creating assets in Procreate or Illustrator, then transferring them into a motion software for animation. Hand-drawn scenes were executed directly in Procreate Dreams.

The dream sequence is entirely frame-by-frame — a deliberate choice. In an era increasingly shaped by AI-generated imagery, it felt important to assert the value of traditional, labor-intensive animation. The tactility of that process carries meaning in itself.

That said, I significantly underestimated how much work animation demands, particularly as a one-person production. Without a team behind me, timelines shifted and certain portions of the film were shortened to preserve the quality of what remained. It was a conscious trade-off: depth over length, quality over quantity.

*3.3.3 — Post-Production*

Within this section, I discuss my experience navigating the final editing stages, sound design, and other post-production concerns that require further explanation. Likewise, I reflect on the technical process of animation and what this stage revealed about my creative practice.

Moving through the final post-production stages proved to be the most rewarding phase of this project. In this stage, my work transformed from a sequence of images into a cohesive, cinematic experience. Specifically, sound design brought the animation to life by activating a physical, human sensation. For sound selection, I sourced royalty-free audio from Pixabay.com, carefully curating sounds that complemented the film's tone rather than overwhelming it. This process required selecting sounds that did not take away from or overwhelm the visuals, as the goal was to show life's quieter, more reflective moments. To achieve this, I prioritized ambient, understated audio to support the film's deliberate slow pace.

In previous productions, the post-production stage has typically been the most extensive in my workflow. However, this project presented a distinctly different challenge for me because of its slow pace, which is intended to encourage audiences to soak up each image and resist the pull toward narrative urgency. Instead of layering sound and editorial choices to build momentum, I had to resist to create breathing room. This was a significant personal challenge: the feeling that I was not doing enough. In reflection, I recognize this as a critical area of growth in my artistry – learning to trust stillness. The slow film demanded a slow hand, and sitting with that discomfort ultimately deepened my understanding of creation through intention.

## Concluding Remarks

The sociological framework established in Chapter 1 gave language to something I had long experienced but struggled to find the words for: the process by which the self splits under an uninvited gaze. In my film, this split is shown directly. The girl who comes home represents the I, the active and unobserved self. The dancer in the arena is the *Me,* the object of observation, a spectacle for an audience she did not choose. Filled with lustful men watching, the arena characterizes the *Generalized Other, deciding* who she is before she can decide for herself. The version of herself tied to the chair, forced to watch herself perform alongside the men in the audience, visually represents the *Looking-glass Self.* Ultimately, my film attempts to communicate the loop of seeing yourself through the eyes of people who have already decided what you are.

Academic writing can show the link between racial fetishization and trauma symptoms or list types of multiracial microaggressions. Still, it can't really express the emotional weight of living through these experiences. Animation can do that. I chose to make the dream sequence by hand, drawing each frame, to slow down and really face these uncomfortable truths. This was my way of accepting the complicated and uncertain parts of reality.

This project is my attempt, as a multiracial woman, to show just one part of a very complex experience. I want to make it clear that it doesn't speak for all mixed-race women or their experiences with racial fetishization. There is more research on this topic now, but it's still limited, especially when it comes to the long-term effects of multiracial experiences in a world that often sees race in single categories. The experiences of multiracial people are real and important, and I hope my project helps add to these bigger conversations, even if only in a small way. Academic and artistic fields are stronger when they inform each other, and both have

significant progress to make regarding multiracial identity. Increased empirical research, greater representation in the arts, and more dialogue between these areas would be highly beneficial.

Overall, working on this project has been an honor, a privilege, and at times –a pain. In many ways, this project validated my own experiences with multiracial identity, as well as those of my family and friends, which is more than I could have asked for. Likewise, the opportunity to create something artistic is what fills the space for feeling something but not having the language for it. I spent years feeling the weight of experiences I couldn't name. This thesis gave me the tools to name some of them. The film gave me somewhere to put the rest.

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