Mixed Meaning Making: A Third Wave Investigation of Multiracial Student Development

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> *Two pieces that never truly make a whole*
> *It's like being a person moving around earth without a soul*
> *I see her shine as she banishes the other*
> *Both knowing they are disappointing her mother*
> *She navigates the world and feels the need to compartmentalize*
> *Because both can't live, it's like the whole thing dies*
> *She spends hours wondering if it is the system or maybe just her*
> *The thoughts fill up her mind until everything becomes a blur*
> *It's like trying to contort your body into jeans that don't fit*
> *Her lost soul wandering the earth but feeling ready to quit*
> *She can tell the story until her lungs run out of air*
> *But she wonders if anyone is even listening out there*
> *Both of her cling to critical hope*
> *Wondering how they ended up in this contrived trope*
> *Grasping the memories where they coexist together*
> *These are what help her believe things will get better*
> *The worst part is that no one believes her*
> *They try to box her in and guess what side she prefer*
> *The story she tells is so loud*
> *But they press mute because messages tend to create a crowd*

I start this third wave student development theory investigation literature review from my positionality and lived experiences as a multiracial woman of color. This paper gives voice to my story because it adds to the multiracial literature. It paints a picture on an empty canvas. It makes a sound in the void. This poem and paper write my narrative into existence. The scholars who created these multiracial identity development theories centered *my being* in the literature in invisible ways before they took their pen to paper and their fingers to the keyboard. I analyze their work through the three waves in student development to push this story forward and utilize theory to transform the messages that create a crowd into one rooted in liberation and solidarity. I begin with my own story and positionality because of my worldview. To know me is to see the significance of this work. My own multiracial identity informs my poststructural worldview. I used to see my identity as a fragmented puzzle. It felt like I did not belong anywhere. I now see my identity as a liminal asset to move beyond white supremacy's rigidity. My multiracial identity also pushes me to engage in coalition-building across and between identity experiences as points of empathy, solidarity, and aspiring allyship. I bring this poststructural worldview to this scholarship and analysis.

Introduction

In their text, *Evolution of Student Development Theory*, Jones and Stewart (2016) coin the term "waves" and organize student development theory within them. The first wave is characterized as rigid stage models informed by positivist paradigms. The second wave brings attention to students with minoritized identities and moves away from linear models towards fluidity and flexibility (beyond stage based). The third wave calls attention to systems of oppression and societal structures informed by power. It also demands expansive thinking, thus prompting social transformation and change. Abes et al. (2019) build upon this scholarship by focusing on critical perspectives to rethink development utilizing critical and poststructural frameworks by unsettling the rigidity of linear-based models and introducing constructs within student development theory. They assert the power of theory to transform societal structures and inequities, naming theory as a powerful tool for "liberatory praxis" (Friere, p.79, 1968). The

This paper traces the trajectories of multiracial college student development theories through the three waves conceptualized by Jones and Stewart (2016) to inform future directions in critical mixed race scholarship and praxis. Within each wave, I examine the utility and limitations of each paradigmatic perspective to construct my argument. I focus on Critical Multiracial Theory or MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) and utilize it as a frame in my analysis. This literature review demonstrates that theories of multiracial identity development are uniquely positioned to inform college student development theory; but while multiracial identity development theory is currently situated in the third wave from critical perspectives, more research is needed to capture multiracial students' lived experiences from a poststructural worldview to inform liberatory praxis.

Who are Multiracial Students?

Johnston-Guerrero and Wijeysinghe (2021) recently dedicated an entire volume to multiracial experiences in higher education, signaling the importance of mixed race scholarship, experiences, and voices in post-secondary education. Johnston-Guerrero and Wijeysinghe (2021) define multiracial people as "those who claim membership in more than one (mono) racial group/and or identify with a multiracial identity term" (p.xxi). Many terms may be utilized interchangeably to describe multiracial people, including biracial, multiracial, mixed race, and more. Terminology depends on how multiracial students choose to identify in higher education and more broadly. However, throughout the paper, mixed race and multiracial are used interchangeably. Moreover, Johnston-Guerrero et al. (2021) call for imaginative thinking when situating multiracial experience in higher education. This paper begins to answer this call by analyzing multiracial student development through three waves to inform innovative

recommendations for praxis and research.

Framing the Paper: Critical Multiracial Theory

Harris (2016) developed Critical Multiracial Theory or MultiCrit as an extension of Critical Race Theory (Ladson Billings and Tate, 1995) to center the experiences of multiracial people. While Critical Race Theory (CRT) asserts the existence of racism and centers the lived experience of people of color, MultiCrit expands upon this by naming monoracism as a lived experience for multiracial people. In 2010, Johnston & Nadal coined monoracism, a unique system of oppression that operates under the assumption that most people identify with one racial group. An example of monoracism is having to choose one race on a demographic form. MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) has seven tenets, however, for the purpose of this paper I focus on four. The first one asserts that the world operates within a monoracial paradigm, meaning that the world assumes that most people identify with one racial identity, and the Western systems of power and structures that are in place reflect this belief. The second tenet focuses on the existence of monoracism as a system of oppression and the relationship between monoracism, racism, and colorism. While all three of these systems are inextricably connected, they manifest differently. The third tenet examines micro-racialization and posits that multiracial students are racialized differently based on context, environment, and time. Many components shape the ways that multiracial students are racialized. For example, a Black and white multiracial woman of color may be racialized differently in a predominantly white institution than at a historically Black institution because of context and environment. The fourth and last principle of MultiCrit calls attention to how intersectionality different racial makeups shape how muiltiracial people move through the world (Harris, 2016).

Literature Review

This review is an overview of select multiracial student theories situated within the three waves. Within them, I trace identity development as a construct and utilize MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) as a theoretical frame to examine what is gained and missing from each paradigmatic perspective on identity development. Abes et al. (2019) build upon the wave metaphor that Stewart and Jones (2016) coin to illuminate how student development theories may fall across and between different waves. I place theories in the first, second, and third waves based on how Abes et al. (2019) conceptualize them and on the contributions that the theory provided for student development as a field. However, the metaphor of waves signifies theories may fall across and between them. I have placed them here for this specific analysis in alignment with a MultiCrit lens.

First Wave

Abes et al. (2019) describe first wave theories as "broadly addressing earlier psychological theories" (p.4). Positivist worldviews often inform theories in this wave and a scholars categorize them as stage models with rigid distinct destinations (Abes et al., 2019). In the first wave, identity development is linear and moving in a direction over time. Poston (1990) introduced a model with five stages toward healthy biracial identity development. He created it in response to multiracial voices not being captured within earlier racial development models (Renn, 2008), such as the Black racial identity development model (Cross, 1971). Even though this model centers multiracial voices, it remains in the first wave because of the rigidity of the stages.

The five levels of Poston's (1990) model include: personal identity, group categorization, enmeshment/denial, appreciation, and integration. While this closely mirrors the work of Cross (1971), Poston differentiates his model by focusing on the lived experiences of multiracial students. Poston defines personal identity as the first level as identifying with personal characteristics rather than racial identities. As a person moves to the second level (group categorization), they choose one of their racial identities based on their cultural knowledge, perceptions, and appearance. The third level is categorized as denial or anger, where a multiracial person experiences guilt and shame around not identifying holistically with two or more racial identities. The fourth level is developing an appreciation for all backgrounds, and the fifth level is integration or a multicultural existence. In this model, Poston builds upon monoracial identity development models to fully capture the multiracial lived experience.

Utility and Limitations in First Wave

The first wave's utility and contributions in the field are to honor the lived experiences of multiracial people as distinct from those that identify as monoracial, though still through a linear lens. Furthermore, Poston (1990) strengthens student development literature by contributing nuance and centering multiracial and biracial individuals. Nevertheless, there are still limitations about identity development as a construct and through the lens of MultiCrit. First, Poston's model regards identity development as linear, with integration as the final destination.Multiracial students' lived experiences may not fit neatly into Poston's levels. Moreover, they may not view integration or a multicultural existence as a goal of their identity development and college experience. Second, the first wave does not address monoracism or any systems of oppression.

Second Wave

One major critique of the first wave was failing to include minoritized populations as participants in grounded theory student development studies (Abes et al., 2019). Examples of minoritized students in higher education are people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, and

students with disabilities. The second wave begins to center non-dominant social identities, moving away from linear models and setting destinations concerning development. When focusing on multiracial students, the second wave, concentrates on microaggressions, prejudice, and discrimination rather than the systems of oppression at large (Root, 1990; Renn, 2000; Renn, 2004; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Harris, 2017; Museus et al., 2015; Museues et al., 2016).

Beyond the Linear

In the second wave, Maria Root (1990) developed a model focused on the tensions within biracial identity experiences and negotiations. She proposes four resolutions: *acceptance of the identity society assigns, identification with both racial groups, identification with a single racial group, and identification with a new racial group.* In the first resolution, biracial teens accept their own biracial racial identity because of family ties and support. In the second one, Root describes identifying with both racial groups because of societal support. The third resolution is categorized by identifying with a single racial group because of external social pressures. The final resolution is when biracial individuals move beyond rigid categories and exude fluidity within their identity to build strong communities with other biracial individuals. Root's resolution model moved beyond linear stages to recognize the fluidity in multiraciality identity development because she emphasizes that students may move between resolutions at different times in one's life. Additionally, Root (1990) names oppressive experiences that multiracial people navigate, i.e., external social pressure.

Rockquermore and Brunsma (2002) build upon Root's work within the psychology field and racial identity development models. Like Root, they argue that racial identity development is complex and fluid. Their Multidimensional Model of Biracial Identity focuses choice and ecological perspectives. The four choices they outline are *singular identity* (choosing to identify with one race), *Border identity* (choosing to identify with both races), *Protean identity* (which means to identify both singularly and with both racial identities), and *Transcendent identity (*which is moving beyond assigned racial categories). Rockquemore and Brunsma's model allows for more fluidity, agency, and choice in multiracial identity development. However, like Root's proposed solutions, this model fails to capture how racism and monoracism influence multiracial identity development.

Rejecting linear and rigid models happened outside of psychology as well. In 1992, Wijeyesinghe introduced a Factor Model of Multiracial Identity Development (FMMI) within the student affairs discipline. Wijeyesinghe argues that multiple factors may shape how multiracial people identify, these include racial ancestry, physical appearance, social and historical context,

other social identities, spirituality, political awareness and orientation, early experience and socialization, and cultural attachment. Factors work together to inform a multiracial person's *choice* of racial identity.

In addition to psychology-based theories and Wijeyesinghe's (2001) FMMI, Renn (2000,2004) establishes patterns among multiracial college students. The patterns move beyond rigid stages and toward fluid patterns within multiracial identity development. Renn (2000,2004) defines these patterns as students holding a monoracial identity, identifying with multiple monoracial identities and shifting between contexts and environments, claiming a multiracial identity, identifying with an extraracial identity beyond rigid racial categories, and a claiming a situational identity that depends on context. Renn's patterns continue into the second wave by moving beyond stages and setting destinations associated with college student development. While Renn (2000, 2004) acknowledges context, ecological impact, environment, peer influence, and phenotype, she fails to address the systems of oppression that shape multiracial identity development.

Addressing Prejudice, Discrimination, and Microaggressions

The second wave begins to "acknowledge the existence of larger structures of inequality" (Abes et al., 2018, p.11). These experiences interact with identity development as a construct. Museus et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study that illustrates that and created coping methods by educating others about what it means to be multiracial, engaging support networks, embracing the fluidity of their identity, and avoiding conflict associated with their multiraciality. Mueseus et al. (2016) continues this examination and introduces eight types of prejudice that multiracial people face: essentializing, invalidation, external focus, exclusion and marginalization, questioning racial authenticity, suspicions, exoticization, and pathologizing. Harris (2017) contributes to this work by illustrating the lived realities that multiracial students face in higher education by describing a typology of multiracial microaggressions (Johnston & Nadal, 2010), including denial of multiraciality, assuming a monoracial identity, and not feeling monoracial enough. However, beyond Harris' (2017) work, it falls short in its analysis with the failure to speak to critical frameworks and monoracism and racism as systems of oppression.

Utility and Limitations in Second Wave

Multiraciality inherently exists beyond borders and between liminal spaces (Turner, 1969) because multiracial people identify beyond the fixed monoracial categories that society has constructed. Second-wave multiracial identity development scholarship has influenced it more broadly. For example, Jones and Abes (2013) discuss Reynold and Pope's (1991) Multidimensional Identity Model (MIM), which illustrates the multiple oppressions that individuals

experience. Jones and Abes describe that Reynolds and Pope drew upon Maria Root's (1990) work on multiracial resolutions to provide more complex options in investigating multiple identities. The MIM's aimed to capture more fluidity when looking at the development of various identities. The second wave provided a lens where theorists, researchers, and scholars moved beyond development as a fixed point and allowed for more flexibility within student development theory.

Additionally, the second wave called much-needed attention to the unique forms of discrimination and microaggressions multiracial students experience in college (Museus et al., 2015, Museus et al. 2016, Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Harris, 2017). It exposes very lived realities and informed critical praxis and recommendations for supporting multiracial college students. However, where there is strength lies limitations. The second wave fails to address systems of oppression with nuance. It also has an absence of critical theories that have the power to transform systems of inequity within higher education. MultiCrit (2016) centers on the assertion that monoracism exists and is a critical theory that calls for transformation in praxis.

The most illustrative way to summarize the limitations of the second wave is to return to Abes et al.'s (2019) conceptualization. They argue that "second-wave theories acknowledge the existence of larger structures of inequality, but do not necessarily interrogate these relative to student development" (p.11). This scholarship fails to frame and investigate critical perspectives (MultiCrit), racism, and monoracism in multiracial identity development. While the second wave does acknowledge the systems, it does not examine the inextricably connected interactions between them and identity development as a construct.

Third Wave

It is characterized by the utilization of critical theory, the goal of social transformation, and "the explicit attention to larger structures of inequality as the context in which development takes place" (Abes et al., 2019). When situating multiracial identity development in the third wave, I must define the unique structure of inequality that multiracial students navigate in their collegiate experience because of the third wave's focus on systemic oppression. To be situated in this wave, student development theory must acknowledge and interrogate monoracism as the larger system that multiracial students may navigate.

MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) is a critical theory and/or framework that can be centered when focusing on the third wave because it is an offshoot of Critical Race Theory, with emancipatory aims and the purpose of centering multiracial voices. Moreover, it is grounded in the assertion that monoracism is a real system of oppression inextricably linked to colorism and racism. the following studies focus on monoracism and MultiCrit in framing and methodological executions

to highlight these necessary and critical contributions. They may not be developmental in nature, but they center experiences of multiracial identity which is fundamental to racial identity development.

Jessica Harris (2016, 2017) utilized MultiCrit as her theoretical framework when examining lived experiences of multiracial women on college campuses. Harris (2017) revealed that multiracial women navigate stereotypes associated with their multiracial identities and perceived monoracial identities. She also utilized intersectional whiteness as property from CRT (Harris, 1993) to explore how whiteness shapes multiracial student experiences in academic and social settings.

Wijeyesinghe (2012) also takes up critical perspectives by utilizing intersectionality as a frame in her Intersectionality Model of Multiracial Identity, which she depicts as a galaxy model. In this model, context, environment, and experiences are consistently changing, which shapes how multiracial students make choices about their identity. The galaxy model is meant to capture how intersectionality and interlocking systems of oppression all move in orbit to shape the choice of racial identity

Johnston-Guerrero and Tran (2018) also explore power, privilege, and oppression systems with multiracial college students. Specifically, they examine how they view their privilege by temporarily accessing multiple cultures. They problematize the tensions between whether the source of privilege is the mixture with whiteness or multiraciality. They continue this nuanced examination by focusing on how multiracial students experience oppression in higher education. Johnston-Guerrero, Tran, and Combs (2020) find that students did not name monoracism as a system of oppression they navigate because of a lack of awareness that it exists. These studies center on monoracism and critical paradigmatic approaches to explore multiracial identity development and more nuanced experiences.

Utility and Limitations of the Third Wave

The third wave names monoracism as a real system of oppression multiracial students navigate on college campuses. It centers on critical theory, MultiCrit, CRT, intersectionality, and whiteness as property to push towards social transformation and liberation for and with multiracial students of color (Harris, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, Harris, 1993). Critical theories and worldviews inform crucial recommendations for praxis in higher education that call for more awareness around monoracism as a system of oppression and a more nuanced differentiation between colorism, racism, and monoracism itself. While these systems are inextricably connected, more work is needed to honor how they operate differently. These critical perspectives allow scholars and practitioners to think more expansively about the multiracial

student population.

While the work in college student development focused on multiracial students is growing and beginning to incorporate critical perspectives, more third wave scholarship is needed to develop an understanding of monoracism and multiracial identity development in higher education - specifically research concerning multiracial student development situated in this third wave.

Notably, multiracial student development theory must also take on poststructural perspectives; they are a "yes-and" to critical approaches (Ashlee and Combs, forthcoming). The poststructural paradigm calls for more expansive thinking and opens possibilities for deconstruction and reconstruction. While critical paradigms expose and interrogate structures of power, privilege, and oppression, poststructuralism moves beyond the rigidity of structures to create more expansive ways of knowing as the field of student affairs moves towards liberatory praxis. Student affairs and higher education scholars often see poststructural theory as lofty and difficult to implement in practice. Multiracial identity development is uniquely positioned as inherently liminal and occupying an in-between space. More poststructural perspectives are needed to capture identity development as a construct. These calls for more expansive ways of knowing may shape not only multiracial students but also student development more broadly. This claim is not meant to tokenize multiracial students or assert racial hierarchies across and between multiracial and monoracial students of color. Instead, I argue that there is utility in examining multiracial development because exploring how multiracial students wrestle with identity and monoracism can inform third wave thinking.

Lessons Learned

This analysis emphasizes utility in looking at the holistic body of literature about multiracial college student development. The limitations of each wave do not negate their contributions to the scholarship. The first wave also distinguishes multiracial and monoracial experiences of identity development. However, it falls short because it relies on rigid stage-based models to an inherently liminal existence and occupies the in-between. This rigidity boxes students into progressive developmental stages. The first wave also fails to recognize systems of oppression that interact with multiracial college student development. The second wave responds to the limitations of the first one by beginning to illustrate privilege, discrimination, microaggressions, and systems of oppression. While the second wave names these systems, it does not utilize critical perspectives or interrogates these systems with intentionality.

The third wave of multiracial student development theory contributes theoretical perspectives to the scholarship by explicitly naming monoracism and developing MultiCrit

(Harris, 2016), an extension of Critical Race Theory. Within student development, there is a need for a poststructural perspective situated in this wave. My analysis demonstrates that multiracial identity development can inform college student development. Pope (1991) drew upon Maria Root's (1990) work on multiracial resolutions to inspire the Multidimensional Identity Model. Multiracial identity development models shaped and influenced this work and pushed scholars to look beyond the linear and rigid. Moreover, Wijeyesinghe (2012) expanded upon her Factor Model of Multiracial Identity Development (FMMI) to capture the complexities of intersectionality in an Intersectional Model of Multiracial Identity (IMMI). Wijeysinghe (2012) names explicitly that "the contribution of the IMMI is less about the inclusion of additional factors that affect choice of identity in Multiracial people, and more about how to advance the discussion of who represent and interpret intersectional identity models" (p.102). This work on multiracial identity, concerning choice, is more expansive in its reach by not only capturing multiracial experiences but by illustrating the complexities of intersectionality.

The analysis of the third wave denotes the importance of acknowledging systems of oppression, specifically monoracism, colorism, racism, and intersectionality. It also reveals how multiracial identity development has more broadly shaped and influenced student development theory Only, within the third wave, more poststructural perspectives are needed to capture the liminal and in-between space that multiracial students may occupy. The poststructural paradigm does not negate that systems of oppression exist. Instead, it provides a lens to continue this examining power while acknowledging that it exists. Abes (2016) states that "unlike critical theorists who have an agenda for change, poststructuralists deconstruct normality without assuming one way in which society should be structured" (p.13). Critical perspectives sit in hopelessness, attempting to make change within the rigid systems that white supremacy has built. But poststructuralism shifts the lens from hopelessness to critical hope and propels higher education to deconstruct, expand, and reimagine these realities. Like Audre Lorde (1984) once said, it allows minoritized people to know and own tools that dismantle this house of white supremacy. Multiracial identity development is innately positioned as an existence beyond the inflexible categories that the system of white supremacy has built. This multiracial positionality and lived experience have the potential to inform expansive solutions in the path towards liberation.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

This section outlines three recommendations for praxis and two for future research in the realm of multiracial student development theory. When working with students, student affairs professionals must honor and validate their lived experiences with monoracism, racism,

colorism, microaggressions, and discrimination. However, praxis cannot stop there. To critically interrogate this application in practice means to engage asset-based approaches (Yosso, 2005). Multiracial students may share experiences with monoracism, *and* they may share components of their multiracial identity that they are proud of, such as access to multiple cultures or navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). Student affairs professionals must understand that *both* of these may be true.

In alignment with MultiCrit, student affairs practitioners and scholars must name monoracism as a real-life experience for college students. The literature reveals that multiracial students often navigate a denial of their multiracial reality (Harris, 2017). Affirming and validating monoracism is crucial Moreover, there needs to be more intentionality in diversity, equity, and inclusion curriculum by incorporating multiracial voices and perspectives. As multiracial people of color, it may be challenging to carve out space in the larger activism realm in fear of taking up too much space or diverting from other movements. it is also essential to include this experience as valid and real within the larger discourse about social identities.

The third recommendation for praxis is rooted in poststructural perspectives. There is difficulty in applying the poststructural lens to student affairs practice because it seems lofty and unattainable to imagine something new. However, this does not mean it's not worth trying. What would it look like to understand identity development as an ongoing existence rather than a process with a fixed endpoint? What would it look like to reimagine student development through the lens of constructs such as authenticity, resiliency, or dissonance (Abes et al., 2019) rather than through segmented identity populations? How can construct-based development build solidarity across and between different identities? As student affairs professionals engage these questions, we must do so with compassionate caution (Ashlee and Combs, forthcoming), by still acknowledging the very real systems of oppression and not asserting sameness across and between communities. In alignment with (Ashlee and Combs, forthcoming) I recommend leaning into expansive thinking by accessing poststructural praxis with intentionality and care.

In future research, higher education scholars should employ grounded theory approaches to explore multiracial student development theory utilizing poststructural perspectives and Adele Clarke's (2007) situational analysis from a postmodern paradigm. This methodology aligns with third wave thinking and developing theories. More attention is needed to examine student development theory from an expansive lens in empirical research to understand better how the lofty, expansive, and imaginative can become a reality in praxis. A second recommendation is to examine student development theory across and between minoritized populations with poststructural perspectives that acknowledge unique forms of

oppression that students navigate and finds points of solidarity through constructs. Finally, future research should tie together the utility of the first, second, and third waves to push scholarship forward in imaginative ways.

Conclusion

This analysis highlights the utility and the limitations of three waves of student development theory pertaining to multiracial students in higher education. The three waves can interweave to push the third wave to poststructural praxis and imaginative ways to deconstruct and reconstruct the rigidity of systems that white supremacy has created. The first wave provides foundational knowledge and gives voice to the multiracial experience in higher education. The second wave begins to acknowledge microaggressions and discrimination associated with multiraciality. The third wave extends upon this further by emphasizing systems of power, privilege, and oppression. All three waves provide significant insights about the future of critical mixed race studies in postsecondary research and praxis.

However, more attention is needed to illustrate poststructural perspectives on multiracial college student identity development., multiracial college student research is also innately positioned encourage scholars to reimagine and deconstruct rigid ways of knowing related to racial categories and hierarchies within higher education structures. This paper also emphasizes the importance of pushing linear boundaries related to student development theory and racial identity. Scholars should continue to think critically about the third wave and engage poststructural, critical, and construct-centered approaches.

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