

James Madison University Communication Studies Conference

Analyzing the Minority Experience Through Poetic Inquiry



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Abstract

Poetic inquiry is the process by which the author unearths key words from the data and strategically truncates these words into poetic structures. The following poems utilize this process in order to articulate the findings of a two-year qualitative study investigating the minority experience at a predominantly white institution (PWI). This qualitative study employed eight semi-structured interviews and was conducted at a mid-sized, public University in the Chesapeake region of the United States. All participants identified as a racial minority on the predominantly white campus and their varied experiences represent the heterogeneity of the minority experience on campus.

Keywords: minorities, predominantly white institutions, campus environment, poetic inquiry

Susan

I wake up and pray—
—I don't know if this is appropriate to say,
But I pray the day never comes that it happens to me.
When it's my face representing the black community.
When it's my face plastered on Twitter and TV,
Saying look at this black girl beaten in the street.
She was dumb enough to go to a white party.

No.

I wake up and step in Susan.
She protects me.
Constantly cheery,
European pretty,
I never have to worry
When I'm wearing
Susan.

As long as they're around I'm bound inside of her.
But they never leave! Around every corner,
A co-worker. A classmate. Professor.
Another stressor telling me I'm lesser,
While I smile to please my oppressor
Because that's what Susan would do.
She would smile.

Yet,

I wake up and pray.
I pray the day never comes that I get too tired.
That this mask that I've acquired becomes expired.
If the appearance I created by the skin of my teeth,
Were to break and expose the girl who chokes underneath,
I'd be fired. Unfriended. Undesired. Unshielded
From the world that never wanted me.

So,

I wait to be surrounded by my community,
Before I unleash the real me.
They're the only ones who understand
The circumstances that have befallen me
As an undergrad at a predominantly white university.
So until there's a solution,
I continue to be
Susan.

Navigators

These Confederate flags are nothing new to me,
But these red hats give me anxiety.
This new, secret society tests my sobriety—
Making sure I'm constantly aware of the lack of variety
That are in my classes, at the parties, in the dorms I live in,
Making sure I don't get too comfortable in the America we're in.

Because we're "Making America Great Again"
Oh, you missed it? Haven't you heard?
Watch the news—I saw a man spit the words
"BUILD THAT WALL" in the face of a DREAMer
And walk off.
Intimidation is not a misdemeanor.

They can go around with Confederate flags and red hats
And just laugh at the snowflake democrats.
They can go around unrestricted and free,
While I navigate this campus to get my degree.

We are the navigators.
We know which classes are safe.
We know the words to avoid and the topics you hate.
We know the palpable tension in a class with white peers.
We know to mind our own business for the next four years.

We are the navigators.
At this point, it's how we survive.
We work best as a community so everyone thrives.
Since we navigate together through the flags and hats,
It's good to know someone on campus has my back.

Perfectly Fine

I'm perfectly fine to admit that I'm an African American.
That's just a skeleton.
It doesn't define me.
Why can't we all look past color?
It doesn't mean anything.

Just stay well-informed on Martin Luther King.
Learn about other cultures and go to an ethnic thing.

If we all do that, then the problem is solved!
Education is a sign that we have all evolved
Past the racism and hatred—things of the past.
I saw a movie coming out with an all-black cast.
How progressive!

What a message to send to our youth.
Just do more of that and we can spread the truth
That black people can do anything!
It's not that hard.
Just look at me,
I got far without the race card.

See? I'm perfectly fine.
That must mean you are too.
Because if I can do it then so can you.
So what's holding you back? Go and chase your dreams!
Racism on campus? No, we're all on the same team.
The worst that can happen is missing the sunset skyline.
I don't know what you mean.
I'm perfectly fine.

A Simple Solution

Identity wrapped around black culture,
History of slavery,
Where does my ethnicity hail from?
Educate myself on African American history,
Simultaneously unwrapping other culture's mysteries.
Education is the answer to the racism cancer.
Plagues America as it continues to tamper
With our perceptions of the world and how we treat people,
So fix that, ends the racism evil.

It's a simple equation, really.
A very easy problem to fix.
Haven't had trouble talking about politics.
Keep an open mind and others will too.
Be judgmental and closed off,
It will all fall through.
So live by example.
Be the change you want to see.
We're all on the same side.
Just trying to get a degree.

Hush, Hush

Three in the car against one.
Nowhere to run.
Stunned silent when a certain someone,
Proudly proclaims—in my presence! —
Her allegiance to the professional troll.
The man who called my country
A giant shithole.
The man who called my people
Terrorists, rapists and thieves.
The man whose caused
so
much
hatred
For refugees like me.

Looking at the tension created,
I see two options for me:
Hush, hush and shut up
Or grow up and own up
That I feel unwelcome
In this country
In this car
In this school.
But majority rules.

So hush hush, right?
Better not stir the pot.
I push that thought aside.
My voice is all I've got.

The One Chocolate Chip

A bland, ass cookie
With one chocolate chip.
A sheet of fresh snow
With one murky, muddy footprint.
I walk in a room,
Impossible to miss.
Yet why does no one
Acknowledge it?

Would that be special treatment?
Always going back and forth.
I want to be acknowledged
But shouldn't it be for my work?

But my work isn't me.
Not my identity.
Bare, naked, and stripped,
I am a chocolate chip.

I am gooey to my core.
Creamy, rich, and pure.
Guaranteed to make you smile,
I am the Queen of Sweet.

Maybe that's how I want to be seen.
How I want people to acknowledge me.
Not for my workmanship,
But as a special
Chocolate
Chip.

I Am American

I am Latina.
Spanish flies off my tongue comfortably.
It is familial—it is familiar.
Where I speak it is where I am most
at home.

I am loud.
I speak not only with my voice,
But with my hands.
They dance around me,
Painting pictures to
Accompany my words.

I am honest.
If I have a problem,
I say it. I say it
Out of love.
I want you to
do the same.

I am passionate.
My chest rises and falls
Rapidly as I cry out for what I
Believe in.
I forget to breath in between the
words.

But here,
I tone it down.

Here,

I am soft.
Two-faced.
Subdued.

I am American.

Something Else

I am
Mature
Intelligent
Responsible
So people don't see my color.

I am
Poised
Reliable
Eloquent
So I don't get passed up for a job.

My race does not affect me.
I've never been robbed of an opportunity.
I am judged for my character, not my color.
As is should be.

We do have differences physically.
It's a fact. But it doesn't typically
Affect my upwards mobility
In the workplace.

Blaming your problems on race—
Something many minorities do.
But look at the big picture.
They're not targeting you.

Not acknowledging it is saying
There is no difference between us.
So if you're going to acknowledge it,
Do it in a way that is encouraging.

They may have their personal views
About how they feel towards people like you.
That I can't deny
But you probably weren't qualified.

It obviously wasn't because of your race.
It had to be something else.

It's not a hindrance
But maybe it could influence it?

I saw a video on Facebook
Where a black woman and a white woman
Were treated differently.
How powerful.
Shared it with my friends so they can see

Sometimes we're treated different as minorities.
But they say my qualities
Are what make me great for STEM.
There's a need for that apparently?
It's such an opportunity that
I'm a minority.

Our differences don't define us.
Diversity is not just race.
There is so much more to it.
That's what I love about this place,
They only see my spirit.