

# The Asian Reporter

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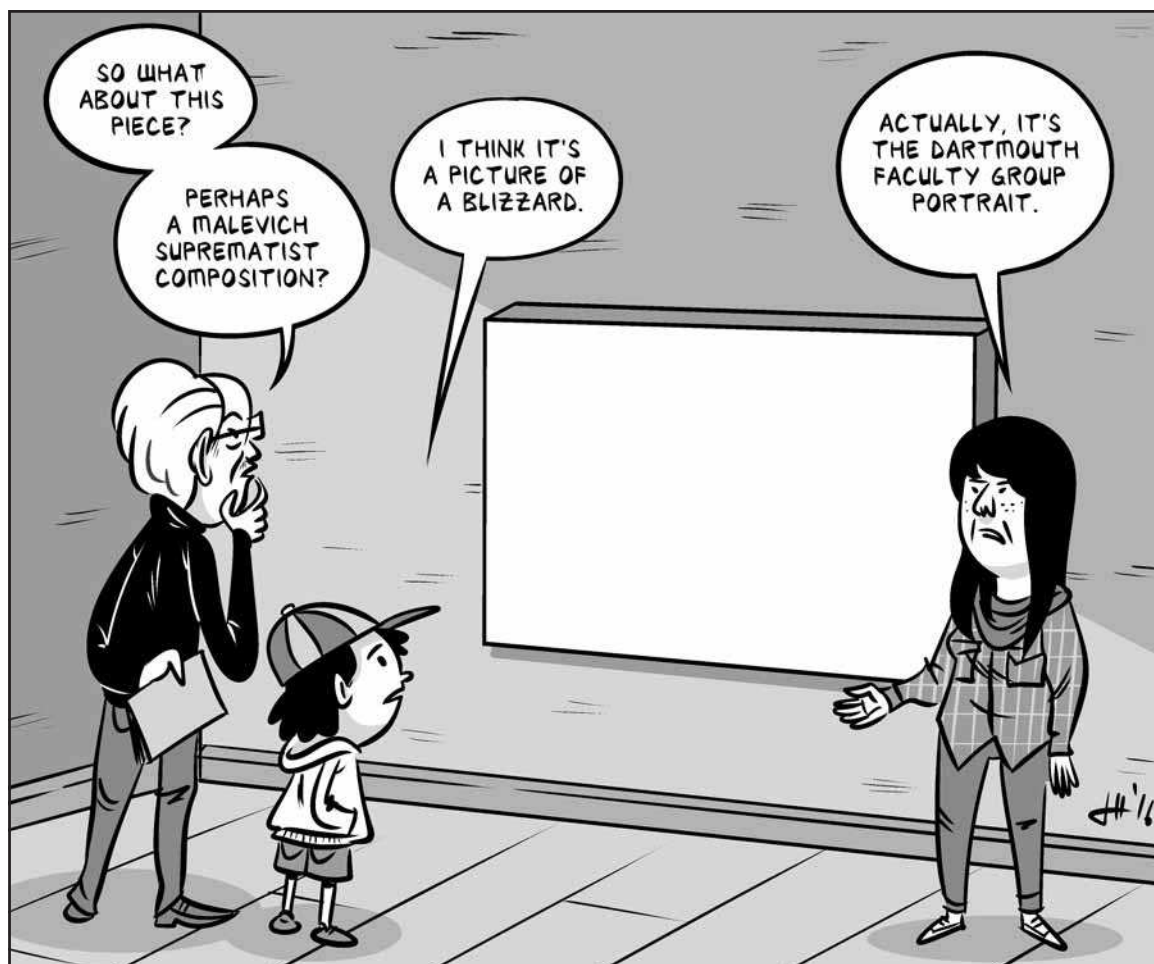
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## MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



# Mixed-race in Oregon

I received some exciting news this month. I was selected as one of the speakers for the Oregon Humanities Conversation Project, a program that brings people together to talk about current issues and ideas.

Participating in the program wasn't something I was eager to do at first, since I've always seen myself as a bit shy. Although as an actor I've performed Shakespeare on Portland stages, typically I'm more of a wallflower. As I've gotten older, however, I found it wasn't that I didn't like talking to people. Instead, I realized I only enjoy talking when there's an intriguing subject.

During the past decade, I've gravitated toward discussing the meaning of my mixed-race identity. While growing up in rural Oregon, there were few people of color. In my small school in the 1970s, I suspected I had mixed-race classmates, but it was a taboo subject, so it was not talked about. Students who could not pass as white, like my younger brother, endured racism. I, on the other hand, who appeared white to others, felt like a secret Asian girl. In my 40-plus years of adulthood, I've experienced shifts in the understanding of and attitude around multiracial identity and also witnessed the transformation in terminology for race and ethnicity from derogatory slurs to an expanding list of proud names.

The number of mixed-race people in America is quickly increasing. According to a 2015 Pew Research report, the number of multiracial Americans is growing at a rate "three times as fast as the population as a whole" and 60 percent of mixed-race American adults are proud of their multiracial heritage. At the same time, however, 55 percent say they've been subjected to racial slurs and jokes. In 2013, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that about 9 million Americans selected two or more racial categories to describe themselves. Nearly half (46 percent) are younger than 18 years old. Also, between 2000 and 2010, adults with a "white and Asian background increased by 87 percent."

During my life, the names and categories available to describe multiracial Americans have advanced from invisibility to the point that now there are multiple classifications on the U.S. Census form. But, of course, that evolution has experienced growing pains and a sordid state history.

The Oregon Department of Education has published a history of state exclusion and anti-miscegenation laws many might find shocking. The first law, passed in 1848 by Oregon's provisional government, stated it was unlawful for any "Negro or Mulatto (of mixed ethnic heritage) to reside in

Oregon Territory." Several years later, in 1854, Oregon's exclusion law was repealed. The following year saw a new law preventing mixed-race males from becoming citizens. Then in 1862, interracial marriage between blacks and whites was banned in Oregon; the legislation said it was against the law for whites to marry anyone who was "one-quarter or more black."

Finally, in 1951, Oregon repealed its laws prohibiting interracial marriage. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned the ban on interracial marriage in 1967 with the famous *Loving v. Virginia* case, which was filed on behalf of a white man named Richard Loving and a black woman, Mildred Jeter, who were arrested in their home in Virginia shortly after their marriage. Many interracial families now celebrate "Loving Day" with picnics and parties on or around June 12 (the date of the Supreme Court decision). In addition, a new movie about the couple called *Loving* has been released and is receiving Oscar buzz.

There's no doubt the multiracial population in Oregon will expand as indicated by the many students of color now registering in schools. Portland Public Schools reported that 44.1 percent of student enrollments during the 2015-2016 school year were children of color; statewide, the figure was about 36.57 percent. As Oregon's minority population grows and interracial marriage continues to become commonplace, the multiracial student population will increase.

We've come a long way since Oregon's first exclusion and anti-miscegenation laws, yet misunderstandings still exist. Unfortunately, it's still common to be discounted on the subject of racism and non-acceptance by monoracial Americans, even by one's own family members.

Whenever dialogue about racial understanding takes place, often there are more questions than answers. Racial understanding can only happen with questioning, which begins by looking at one's own actions and biases. But by talking about it, we can evolve. One person cannot "fix" racism permanently, but if we continually practice self-investigation, we can change our own attitudes, assumptions, and biases. It begins with conversations and listening. I hope discourse encourages healing and more tolerance and an understanding that there are no easy answers.

While travelling to different communities around the state with the Oregon Humanities Conversation Project leading discussions about issues surrounding interracial families and mixed-race Oregonians, I hope I can make a difference. I want to be a part of that change.