

Constructing Dialogue, Constructing Identities:  
Mixed Heritage Identity Construction in *Half and Half*

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**For my parents**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Talking about talk is something that many of us probably do on a daily basis without even noticing that we're doing so. As Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher of language, observed, "In all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people's words" (1981, 337). Telling others about who said what to whom, and how it was said, can make for fascinating stories both from the narrator's and listener's perspective. But talking about talk can also do something else: often, when we repeat the words of someone else, we are actually creating identities for ourselves.

In this paper, I will explore some of the ways that constructed dialogue, also known as reported speech, can construct and shape the identities of mixed heritage (defined for the purposes of this paper as bi-ethnic, bi-racial, or bi-cultural) narrators as 'outsiders' and individuals who live between cultures, but also sometimes as agents who form their identities through reactions and responses to encounters with others. Several linguistic studies already exist of how identity is shaped by constructed dialogue and the elements that surround it (Buttny 1998; Hamilton 1998; Schiffrin 2006; Tannen 2007), but these studies primarily examine constructed dialogue transcripts of oral narratives or conversations<sup>1</sup>. I have turned instead to the examination of identity construction through constructed dialogue in a literary form, through autobiographical, creative, non-fiction essays by professional writers.

Therefore, in the literature review portion of this paper, I will present an overview of constructed dialogue, including its definitions, some of its uses, and discussions of relevant articles that have shown how constructed dialogue shapes identity. Additionally,

because I am examining autobiographical essays, I will also briefly address three theories of autobiography in the literature review, and contextualize my research within a framework that views autobiography as constructed by both the writer and the reader. I have chosen to assume a constructivist view toward autobiography because it complements the social-constructivist approach to identity that will be later be explored in this paper.

While I have stated that I am interested in how authors use constructed dialogue to shape their identities, it must be acknowledged that identity is a broad concept indeed. It would be quite a task to examine every facet of identity that can be conveyed through constructed dialogue. Therefore, I have narrowed my focus and chosen to apply my observations about identity in this paper to aspects of mixed-heritage identity in particular, drawing my data from a book called *Half and Half [Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural]*. This book and its contributors are discussed in greater detail in the methodology section of this paper, but the front cover's open declaration of its textual matter guarantees that matters of identity are likely to be at the heart of this book. The analysis of constructed dialogue is particularly useful for examining mixed heritage identities, because when authors use constructed dialogue to present the words of others and previous conversations, they are able to show that mixed heritage identities are often created in relation to interactions with others.

That said, mixed heritage identities are sometimes particularly difficult ones to navigate. Readers will be better equipped to understand some of the tensions at work in the excerpts that will be presented if they have some background knowledge of the

prominent issues surrounding biethnic and biracial identity construction. Therefore, in addition to overviews of constructed dialogue and autobiography, the literature review portion of this paper will also include a note on how race and ethnicity may be conceptualized. The conclusion of the literature review portion will discuss how multiethnic identity development can be viewed through James Gee's lens of Discourse theory, which argues that identities can be performed through the use of symbolic markers, supporting a view of ethnoracial identity as complex and fluid.

Following the literature review and methodology sections, the discussion section will present relevant excerpts from essays in *Half and Half* that show mixed heritage identity as essentially outside of the mainstream, with those who claim it embodying a space between two cultures. My discussions of constructed dialogue and how it shapes bi-ethnic/biracial identities will focus on four themes: (1) narrators' interpretations of questions about their race or ethnic origins, (2) narrators' responses to challenges to their racial or ethnic authenticity, (3) narrators' experiences with racial name-calling, and (4) narrators' uses of non-standard linguistic features as a tool for identity construction. In the conclusion, I will summarize my findings and briefly address implications for further research.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

A great deal of research exploring how narrators use constructed dialogue to construct their identities has been developed within the disciplines of literary theory and linguistics (Bakhtin 1981; Schiffrin 1996; Hamilton 1998; Tannen 2007). Additionally, because autobiographical essays provide the basis for discussions of the ethnoracial identities of mixed heritage people, readers will also benefit from the knowledge of the frameworks employed here for understanding autobiography and mixed heritage identity. Therefore, the literature review portion of this paper will 1) define reported speech, 2) explain why reported speech is perhaps better termed ‘constructed dialogue,’ 3) explore Bakhtin’s and Goffman’s ideas in regards to constructed dialogue, 4) clarify how constructed dialogue constructs identity, 5) stress the importance of examining constructed dialogue within the context it is produced, 6) establish a relevant framework for understanding autobiography, and finally, 7) briefly explore the fluid nature of racial and ethnic identities, and how those constructs may be evidenced through language.

### **2.1 Defining Reported Speech**

When a narrator uses the words of others outside of their original context, the phenomenon is often referred to as reported speech. Richard Buttny (1997; citing Sternberg 1982) has identified at least seven characteristics of reported speech. However, for the purposes of this paper, only four of these characteristics are particularly relevant:

1. The reporting speaker may quote another person or quote him- or herself.

2. The quote may be verbal or non-verbal, where the latter includes bodily movements and vocal qualities such as intonation or regional/ethnic accent or dialect.
3. The quote can report the words of a single person or of a dialogue between two or more persons.
4. The quote can be overtly marked by a reporting clause, a shift in intonation, or in writing by quotation marks; or it can be unmarked.

I will now discuss each of these aspects in turn and discuss their relevance to the examples I will draw my arguments from. First, the reported speech that will be examined in the following pages includes utterances that were purportedly said both by the authors and by others. It is essential to recognize that narrators use both the words of themselves and of others to create their identities—in this way, they explicitly show that their identities are not created in a vacuum, but are influenced by the words of others, and by their interactions with others. Next, because the reported speech to be examined occurs in a written context, it may seem unexpected that intonation or regional/ethnic accents or dialects, as captured in number two in the list above, would be included as part of a reported utterance. In fact, some of the authors whose narratives will be examined depend on accurate portrayals of linguistic features like intonation and ethnic accents to shape their own identities. Third, while sometimes the authors present only a few words of reported speech for a certain purpose, other times entire dialogues are shown. Dialogues are useful sites for examining identity construction, because they also show that social interactions play an important role in identity construction. Finally, as the list above suggests, sometimes reported speech is signaled by quotation marks or a quotative verb, but often writers rely on other strategies, such as italics or indentations, to signal to

their readers that they are presenting something that was previously said. In the examples that follow, not all reported speech is shown in quotation marks; therefore, readers should keep other techniques authors use to signal reported speech in mind when they are reading the examples that will be discussed shortly. It is important that writers help their readers understand when they are using direct reported speech, particularly because of the ways in which direct quotation allows authors to present specific linguistic features for a purpose, support a point they are trying to make, or clearly assume a stance in relation to what was said.

Reported speech, whether found in oral or written narratives, usually falls into one of two categories: direct or indirect (Coulmas 1986; Tannen 2007)<sup>ii</sup>. In oral narratives, direct reported speech can be difficult to recognize, but it is sometimes introduced by a quotative verb<sup>iii</sup>—a word like “said” or “screamed.” (Jenna screamed, “No, stop!” when she saw Mark putting her wool sweater in the dryer.) Direct reported speech is sometimes understood as an attempt to convey exactly what it was that someone else said, with the speaker momentarily taking on the reported speaker’s role (Tannen 2007). Though Clark and Gerrig (1990) agree that such a conception of reported speech, which they refer to as a dramaturgical theory of quotation, may have some merit, they have also argued that such a theory is inherently flawed, their own argument being that direct reported speech is selective, and should be seen as a demonstration. According to Clark and Gerrig, when a narrator uses direct quotation, he or she may do so for three reasons: to demonstrate a feature, support a point, or annotate what was said. Clark and Gerrig’s theory of the demonstrative nature of direct quotation places responsibility both on the

speaker and hearer for interpreting an instance of reported speech as the narrator intended. Therefore, their analysis is particularly compatible with the nature of data analysis undertaken here, since the narrators rely on their abilities to use reported speech in a way that ensures a certain interpretation by a reader, but readers have the responsibility of looking for textual clues that indicate how reported speech is to be understood.

In contrast to direct reported speech, indirect reported speech can be thought of as a paraphrase of some previous utterance. Instances of indirect reported speech may sometimes be marked by the word “that” before the report (i.e., Jenna said that Mark should have known better.), although such an indicator is not necessarily present. Additionally, as was seen in the list above, Buttney draws attention to the fact that indeed, narrators using reported speech in an oral form have a number of prosodic tools such as speed, tone of voice, or accent at their disposal to aid in signaling an instance of direct or indirect reported speech to their listeners.

Writers employ some of the same tools to indicate reported speech that speakers use, but because of the differences between writing and speaking, there are naturally some variations in how reported speech is signaled. In some ways, readers may find it easier to recognize reported speech in written texts, since reported speech (when direct) often not only follows a quotative verb, but also may have quotation marks around it. But not all narrators use quotation marks; for example, a writer may choose to indent instances of reported speech, particularly in cases where dialogues between two or more people are presented, or they may present the reported speech in italics. Though writers

do have strategies for signaling reported speech to readers, one particular challenge for authors may be the difficulty in conveying prosody through the printed word. As mentioned before, linguistic features such as intonation, dialect, or accent may be crucial elements of reported speech, which narrators use to shape their own identities. Nevertheless, many writers have found ways to overcome this challenge, some of which will be examined later in this paper.

## **2.2 Reported Speech as a Misnomer**

Though the term “reported speech” is frequently used by linguists, its accuracy and appropriateness is contested. The problem with the term lies primarily in the word ‘reported’. According to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, a report “gives an account of” something, while one reporting something “serves as a carrier” of that message (1995, 445). Implicit in these definitions is that what is being reported is expected to be unchanged by the carrier of the message. But in the case of reporting what others have said, can that ever truly be so?

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), a Russian philosopher of language, argues that it cannot be. He contends that by taking words out of one context and transferring them to another, a narrator who is reporting speech has unquestionably changed the utterance’s original meaning. Drawing on Bakhtin’s assertions, Deborah Tannen has suggested that the term “reported speech” is indeed misleading, because, she argues, what is conveyed as reported speech is actually unlikely to have ever been said exactly in the way that it is supposedly reported. Furthermore, even if something reported as prior speech was

actually said, it matters little—it has been taken out of its original context, and as a result, does not carry only its original intended meaning. Thus, she has suggested the term “constructed dialogue” as a more accurate description of what takes place, as it also calls attention to the fact that though speakers and writers may choose carefully when to construct speech in their narratives, rarely, if ever, are these instances of constructed dialogue meant to serve the same purpose as the first time they were uttered (2007).

Following Tannen, I will choose to adopt the term “constructed dialogue” for the purposes of this thesis. This study will provide insight into how constructed dialogue functions as a strategy that narrators use to construct their identities as mixed-heritage individuals, particularly in relation to others.

### **2.3 Layers of Voices in Constructed Dialogue**

There are many reasons why narrators use reported speech in their storytelling which go far beyond that of simply wanting to present an accurate, seemingly non-biased account of something that was said or a conversation that took place. Let us return to Bakhtin (1981) for a moment and consider what happens when an utterance is taken out of its original context and reproduced in a new setting. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin explores the nature of reported speech primarily in a literary context. He uses the term *heteroglossia*, defined as “another’s speech in another’s language”<sup>iv</sup> to describe dialogue constructed in novels, arguing that dialogue in novels is “double-voiced,” in that it serves a purpose for two separate speakers. While the dialogue in a novel may at first seem to be attributable only to the character who is speaking, the

author's own voice and ideas may be heard in the dialogue as well, since the author is the constructor of the dialogue<sup>v</sup>.

In addition to Bakhtin (1981), Goffman (1981) has written in his book *Forms of Talk* about the multiple voices a narrator may embody. He identifies four roles that may be represented through speech: *animator*, *author*, *principal*, and *figure*. The *animator* can be thought of as a 'talking machine,' or the person physically producing an utterance. The *author* is, as Georgakapoulou and Goutsos explain, "the aspect of the self which is responsible for the content of the talk" (2004, 50). The *principal* refers to the person whose position is evidenced by what is said, and a *figure* is a 'character,' belonging solely to the storyworld being spoken about. In the narratives examined in this project, narrators often embody more than one of the roles suggested at one time, and by examining the roles they are taking on, it is possible to determine what stance (discussed in greater detail in the following paragraph) they are assuming in relation to the constructed dialogue they report.

#### **2.4 Reported Speech and Identity Construction**

As Clark and Gerrig (1990), Bakhtin (1981), and Goffman (1981) have suggested, constructed dialogue can function in a number of ways, including as an aid in constructing identity. Theoretically, this can occur in the three-step process of *stance taking*, as put forth by Du Bois (2007), where a narrator *evaluates* something, *positions* him- or herself in regard to what was said, and *aligns* to his or her hearers. Trester (2009) shows explicitly how this process can be accomplished through prefacing constructed

dialogue with the word “oh”. Other analyses of how constructed dialogue shape identity can be found in Heidi Hamilton’s (1998) “Reported Speech and Survivor Identity in On-line Bone Marrow Transplantation Narratives” and Janet Maybin’s (1996) “Story Voices: the Use of Reported Speech in 10-12 Year Olds’ Spontaneous Narratives.”

Hamilton (1998) examines the use of constructed dialogue in an online community that supports bone marrow transplant recipients. She analyzes the uses of reported speech found in narratives posted to discussion boards, and concludes that patients used reported speech frequently when they wanted to detach themselves from an utterance, or were taking a negative stance towards the utterance. Additionally, by using constructed dialogue to convey inappropriate or callous statements made by healthcare professionals, patients allowed the healthcare professionals to “incriminate themselves” (63) in the context of the online community. Hamilton argues that through constructed dialogue, patients were able to create identities as agents in their own healthcare and as survivors not only of bone marrow transplants, but of unfortunate healthcare experiences as well. In a similar way, narrators in *Half and Half* often use constructed dialogue as a tool that allows those who have made offensive remarks to incriminate themselves to readers. Also, by assuming oppositional stances to such remarks, the authors show themselves to be agents who have the power to react to the remarks of others, as opposed to victims who are merely acted upon and defined by others.

Like Hamilton, Maybin explores the role constructed dialogue plays in identity construction. Maybin examined transcripts of stories told by 10-12 year olds, which were collected in two schools. Some of the stories analyzed came from tapes of informal talk

that happened during the school day in which the researchers were not necessarily involved, while other stories were elicited during informal interviews between the researchers and children in “friendship pairs” (1996, 38). Maybin analyzed how the instances of reported speech the children produced helped them try on and construct different identities. For example, she explains how one boy constructed an identity of kindness for himself by telling a couple of stories about times that he had shown compassion for helpless animals, and what he had said to his mother in those situations. As he told these stories about himself, he placed himself in opposition to another boy, who seemed to embody a “more violent” masculine identity, characterized by doing things like knocking a bird’s nest out of a tree (44). After exploring this boy’s stories, along with a few others, Maybin concludes that children’s external evaluations, defined by Labov as “the point of the narrative” (2006, 222), of the constructed dialogue helped them to convey certain identities. However, she found these identities were occasionally ambiguous and at times seemingly contradictory, and that constructed dialogue was a tool through which “issues [were] explored and negotiated rather than resolved” (47).

This is also frequently the case with the constructed dialogue from *Half and Half* that I have examined. Often, though a narrator may assume a stance or interject his or her own commentary about a situation through constructed dialogue, no clear ethnic or racial identity will emerge; rather, constructed dialogue allows the narrator to explore a bi-ethnic or bi-racial identity that may refute the assumptions of others, but remains somehow vague and full of complexities.

## 2.5 The Importance of Context

Because constructed dialogue is inherently imbued with multiple voices, any analysis of it must be contextualized. Volosinov (cited by Buttny, 1998) notes that it is impossible to correctly interpret reported speech if it is isolated from the context in which it was reported. Indeed, Goffman's theory of footing is deeply dependent on context, as it takes into account the setting of a conversation, the social dynamics between conversation partners, and the content of the conversation itself (1981).

Buttny in particular argues strongly that context can be found in text itself, particularly when reported speech is involved—narrators organize their stories in certain ways on purpose, either by providing a frame that alerts listeners as to how they are to interpret an instance of reported speech before they hear it, or by providing an evaluation of the reported speech afterwards, which helps listeners understand the point the narrator is trying to make (1998). To illustrate this point, he examined a transcript of a couple's therapy session in "Putting Prior Talk Into Context: Reported Speech and the Reporting Context" (1998). In a broad contextual frame, the speakers orient themselves to the therapeutic context; for instance, when the therapist asks one of the patients to describe his feelings about something, the patient honors the therapist's request, and uses a narrative to evidence his feelings. However, the context Buttny is primarily interested in examining is the context of the story itself, in relation to the constructed dialogue featured within it. Buttny calls attention to the instances of constructed dialogue produced within the narrative, and shows how a patient frames instances of constructed dialogue. For instance, in one place a patient prefaces reported speech by saying, "I MEAN

THERE WERE A LOT OF EMOTION THAT I-I” (53), which indicates to listeners that the reported speech he is about to use is intended to be reflective of that emotion. This type of analysis contributes to Buttny’s argument that it is difficult to simply look at an instance of reported speech in a transcript and understand how it was meant to be interpreted without examining what was said before and after. Bearing this in mind, in my analysis of constructed dialogue in *Half and Half*, I intend to examine both the framing and evaluation of constructed dialogue in order to interpret its meaning. In many of the excerpts I will discuss later, context plays an important role in narrators’ stance-taking, which in turn helps the authors shape their identities as mixed heritage narrators.

## **2.6 What is Autobiography?**

Having just written about the importance of context in both a broad and narrow capacity, I find it necessary to contextualize the research I will be presenting in this paper not just in a linguistic framework, but in a literary one as well. One assumption about autobiography that is perhaps easily made, but not necessarily easily defended, is the idea that through reading an autobiography, we can make certain concrete claims about the identity of the person whom we have read about. Traditionally, the autobiography is seen as a “metaphor of self,” where the text is an accurate representation of the autobiographer’s identity (Goodall 1994, 182). This view assumes that the autobiographer has a “true” identity, which leaves no room for a conception of identity as dynamic and influenced by context. Additionally, the position of the autobiographer is seen as inherently privileged, in the sense that one can write about one’s self because one

knows one's self better than others (Gunn 1982). Such a view leaves little room for interpretation on the part of the reader, suggesting that an analysis of the autobiography can either be "wrong" or "right."

Perhaps not surprisingly, this position has been heavily contested in post-modernist and post-structuralist literary theory, which takes the stance that the self expressed in an autobiography does not exist in reality. Instead, it is "produced" because of society's demand to consume through the act of reading a simplified, tidy life--which does not actually exist. If one accepts this view, it follows that one's identity cannot be evidenced in autobiography, because the autobiography itself is a "convenient fiction" (Goodall 1994, 191).

A third view, which is the framework I adopt in the analyses to come, holds that autobiography is necessarily dependent upon and does not exist outside of its context, which includes its historical moment, the social environments in which it was produced and read, and the individual reader. In this view, the writer and reader are in communication with one another and work together to construct reality—in other words, no external reality exists. Goodall, quoting Elbaz, explains, "One does not report, duplicate, or verify the truth: one makes it" (193). It is with this understanding that I engage with the writers of the narratives I have analyzed. I have set forth to show how writers use constructed dialogue to shape their own identities, but I must acknowledge that I do not claim my interpretations to be an externally fixed truth; that is, the identities I examine have been produced in a specific context, and may change outside of it. In other words, I am arguing that the identities authors create in *Half and Half* should not be

viewed as the authors' "true" identities, but should rather be viewed identities that exist specifically within this text.

## **2.7 Some Notes on Ethnicity, Race, and Mixed Heritage People**

Since this project uses autobiographical essays to examine the identities of mixed heritage narrators, readers will benefit from an understanding of some of the issues surrounding race and ethnicity in relation to identity construction through personal narrative and language use. Also, because much of the analysis of constructed dialogue I will be providing will focus on how mixed heritage authors use constructed dialogue to develop their identities, it may be helpful for readers to have a lens through which mixed-heritage identity construction in particular may be viewed.

In many ways ethnicity is a nebulous concept; in fact, in *Language and Ethnicity*, Carmen Fought devotes an entire chapter to various definitions of the term, but ultimately concedes that it is a difficult concept to define in an isolated context (2006). For now, perhaps it is best to think about race and ethnicity in terms of how the concepts seem to function practically. Urciuoli (1996, cited by Fought 2006) suggests that when people think of ethnicity, they think of things like national or cultural origins and practices associated with these origins, whereas when people think about race, they think about natural features such as skin color or hair. Distinctions between race and ethnicity are particularly difficult to define in many of the narratives I will analyze, because ideas about what is a race versus what is an ethnicity are frequently changing—for instance, some people may feel that an African-American is of a different race than a European-

American, but that a Puerto-Rican American is the same race as a European-American, but a different ethnicity. In the narratives in *Half and Half*, race and ethnicity are often intertwined. For this reason, I do not intend to make any strong, irrefutable claims about whether narrators are asserting a specific racial or ethnic identity, but will rather focus on their experiences in forming identities as mixed heritage individuals.

Thus, it should be noted that mixed heritage identities, like many other identities, are only relevant in heterogeneous societies where they can be seen as different in some way from other ethnic and racial identities. In the United States, where the majority (though not all) of the narratives in *Half and Half* are grounded, mixed heritage people tend to contrast what they see as typical “American” culture with the minority culture they’re a part of. Kendra Wallace, a social science and education researcher who has worked frequently with bi-racial and bi-ethnic populations, notes that for bi-ethnic individuals, “the home culture tends to be described in terms of bas-relief with the heritage of the racialized minority parent providing the cultural detail” (2001, 62). The image evoked by this metaphor shows two things—1) that “American” or mainstream culture is often viewed as being unremarkable, but as a base from which difference arises, and 2) that minority cultural differences may rise away from mainstream American culture, but for a bi-ethnic individual, the two cultures are still essentially part of the same sculpture, fundamentally connected.

In “Situating Multiethnic Identity: Contributions of Discourse Theory to the Study of Mixed Heritage Students,” Wallace (2004) argues that Gee’s (1990) Discourse theory provides an elegant lens through which bi-ethnic and bi-racial identity may be examined.

Gee's idea of Discourse as a "tool kit" (1998) can help us to understand that bi-ethnic and bi-racial identities are often symbolic in nature<sup>vi</sup>, and can vary across the contexts in which they are performed. Wallace also notes that there is a "nonsynchronous relation among ethnoracial heritage, group membership, and individual identity," (201) which underscores the fluidity of identity across contexts. Bucholtz (1995, cited by Fought 2006) also draws attention to this fact, noting that the ethnic identity an individual performs may change quickly, even during the course of a single conversation. Therefore, the ethnic identities being constructed in the narratives in "Half and Half" should not be viewed as fixed in any way, or easily categorized. Schiffrin (1996) has shown specifically how identities even within narratives may be in flux, and certain aspects of an identity may be more or less prominent depending upon what a speaker is doing and with whom<sup>vii</sup>.

To that end, Natalie Schilling-Estes' "Constructing Ethnicity in Interaction" (2004) provides a useful model of how ethnic identities can be constructed through narrative. Schilling-Estes' analysis focuses primarily on how a Lumbee and African-American speaker utilize phonological and morphosyntactical features to highlight particular ethnic identities in conversation with one another, but also discusses how these speakers' identities shift slightly as they position themselves differently towards one another depending upon the topic of conversation. Though Schilling-Estes found in this case that the speakers did retain fairly fixed ethnic identities, her analysis supports two facts important to this project: 1) that narrative is in fact a rich and fruitful site for the examination of ethnic identity, and 2) that narrative analysis complements a social-

constructivist view of ethnic identity, where ethnic identity is multifaceted, flexible, and very much dependent upon context. The approach to identity making found frequently in *Half and Half* certainly challenges the notion that personal identities are non-complex, fixed, and thereby closed to interpretation. In the analysis and discussion sections of this thesis, I will show how constructed dialogue is used by authors to create bi-ethnic and bi-racial identities that draw on two distinct cultures but remain somehow flexible, compelling narrators to inhabit a space somewhere in between.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 What kind of a book is *Half and Half*?

*Half and Half*, the focus of the present study, is a book comprising eighteen short narratives and an introduction written by authors who are bi-racial, bi-cultural, and sometimes both. The authors featured in this book are writers by profession, whether they are journalists, poets, novelists, professors, essayists, or any combination thereof. Though the subtitle of *Half and Half* is *Writers on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural*, the narratives focus on the bi-racial/bi-cultural experience in different ways. Some are written as a sort of chronological tracing of an author's life, while others focus on a particular event that serves as a moment in which to explore complex themes surrounding race and ethnicity. Writers discuss things like family, food, special occasions, moments of joy or pain, and hopes for their futures and the futures of their children. Most of the narratives were printed for the first time as part of this book, but not all. "Lost in Place" by Garrett Hongo and "What Color is Jesus?" by James McBride were published in the L.A. Weekly in 1996, and in the Washington Post Magazine in 1988, respectively. This may mean that O'Hearn did not solicit the essays by McBride and Hongo in the way that she may have asked others writers for their contributions. In any case, though McBride and Hongo may have had different audiences and purposes in mind when they wrote their pieces than the rest of the writers who are featured, McBride and Hongo's works certainly are thematically consistent with the rest of the narratives.

### **3.2 Data Collection and Analysis**

Because an examination of all instances and forms of constructed dialogue would be significantly beyond the scope of this thesis, I decided to focus on instances of direct constructed dialogue, which provided plenty of rich, varied data to analyze. To produce a data-driven, bottom-up study, I developed a coding scheme which included the author of the narrative, the utterance of constructed dialogue, the quotative verb used to introduce the constructed dialogue (if any), who said the constructed dialogue, to whom the utterance of the construct dialogue was directed, and how (if it was fairly readily apparent) the author positioned him- or herself in relation to the quote, framed mostly in either positive or negative terms. Data from thirteen narratives and the introduction were coded, for a total of fourteen authors<sup>viii</sup>.

After coding the data, I began to look for patterns among the narratives. Certain elements of the bi-ethnic and bi-racial experience began to emerge, and constructed dialogue often played a role in the way narrators developed their identities through the situations they described. In this paper, I have presented only those themes explored through constructed dialogue that appeared in four or more of the fourteen narratives I coded. In my analysis of the authors' uses of constructed dialogue, I have tried to dissect the constructed dialogue and explain how the narrators have used it to give shape to their own ethnic and racial identities. However, to do this effectively, I have presented and examined the constructed dialogue within its context.

In the following section of this paper, my analysis focuses on four main themes that authors used constructed dialogue to explore. First, I will focus on how narrators

interpret the questions “Where are you?” and “Where are you from?” and how their interpretations influence their ethnic/racial identities. Next, I will turn to demonstrating how narrators responded to challenges to their racial or ethnic authenticity, and how their responses highlight their race and/or ethnicity. Thirdly, I will present narrators’ early experiences with racial name-calling, and explore how name-calling shaped their concept of themselves as ‘other,’ or somehow outside the mainstream. Finally, I will provide examples that demonstrate the use of dialect, accent, or other prosodic features to establish or refute an identity.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I will use relevant excerpts of text from *Half and Half* to demonstrate how constructed dialogue functions as a tool in ethnic and racial identity creation. I will, in turn, discuss the four themes addressed in the methodology portion: (1) interpretations of the questions “Who are you?” and “Where are you from?”, (2) responses to questions of ethnic/racial authenticity, (3) early ‘othering’ experiences through racial name calling, and (4) the use of dialect, accent, and foreign language in identity construction.

### 4.1 What are you? Where are you from?

In five of the eighteen narratives found in “Half and Half,” authors use direct constructed dialogue to present two variations on a question frequently asked of those with bicultural or biracial heritage. The questions “What are you?” and “Where are you from?” appear in narratives by both biracial and bicultural people. However, these questions are not interpreted as simple requests for information, and are seen by the narrators as a tool through which those who ask the questions attempt to gain a position of power by excluding and marginalizing the narrators on the basis of their racial or ethnic backgrounds.

At first glance, these two questions “What are you?” and “Where are you from?” may seem different from each other, and the case can be made that the questions refer to two completely separate things, but the implications each make and the way they make those who are asked it feel are much the same. Schiffrin notes, “A good way to check an

interpretation of an utterance as a speech action...is to see how interlocutors themselves seem to interpret the action” (1996, 176). Directly speaking, “What are you?” could refer to many things—are you a dancer, are you a Girl Scout, are you a high schooler—but when the authors in *Half and Half* report either of those questions being asked, they interpret them as demands for full disclosure of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. These demands establish a subtle power dynamic that allows the person asking the question to exert dominance, since the addressee is expected to supply information in a non-reciprocal way. Also, in either case, the implicit assumption behind this question is that the person who is asking it is somehow fundamentally different from the person of whom it is being asked, and is in a position to pass some kind of judgment. It is in this way that “What are you?” becomes linked with “Where are you from?”

The five authors who present this question through constructed dialogue are Danzy Senna, Malcolm Gladwell, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, Julia Alvarez, and Claudine Chiawei O’Hearn. Though these authors come from various backgrounds, they do have one thing in common in addition to their mixed heritage status: they are all at least half non-white<sup>ix</sup>. This may explain why they may have encountered these questions more frequently than other writers, who may consider themselves bi-ethnic or bi-cultural, but monoracial. In any event, the five writers listed above considered questions about their racial and ethnic background important enough to mention in their respective autobiographies, and their use of constructed dialogue as a part of their various presentations of the questions and their reactions to it helps them to establish identities as ‘outsiders.’

The first thing I will examine in the instances of constructed dialogue where an author is asked, “What are you?” or “Where are you from?” is who the referent is—in this case, who is doing the asking. In a broad sense, the authors present this in three ways: 1) by not providing a referent responsible for an utterance, 2) by providing a very general referent, and 3) by assigning the question to a specific referent. One instance where no referent is shown as responsible for the quotation occurs in Danzy Senna’s “The Mulatto Millennium.” Senna is half black and half white, and labels herself “mulatto” in her piece. The question, “What are you?” appears within one of her own observations about her attitude toward mulattos:

Not all mulattos bothered me back then. It was a very particular breed that got under my skin: the kind who answered, meekly, “Everything,” to that incessant question “What are you?” (p. 17).

In the excerpt above, Senna does not define a questioner who asks “What are you?”, but rather, by using the word “incessant” to describe the questioning, gives readers the feeling that the questioners have, in fact, been too numerous to name. These observations support Tannen’s argument that constructed dialogue can be used as “instantiation,” to show a kind of utterance that happens frequently (2007, 113). Additionally, because multiple questioners are implicated in this context, according to DuBois, “What are you?” can be considered an example of pseudoquotation, which she defines as “not a rhetorical question or a feature of dialogue, but as a *rhetorical answer*, whose discourse function is emphasis of an important point” (1989, 346).

The important point that Senna is trying to make is that she and others like her are constantly placed in a position of subordination where they may feel compelled to

account for their ethnicity to anyone at any time. However, Senna evidences herself as an agent in these encounters by stating that those who “answered, meekly, “Everything,” got “under [her] skin.” In this way, though she does not claim a particular ethnicity, she exerts control over her identity in two ways: 1) by insinuating that mulattos *do* have ethnoracial identities that go beyond the over-simplified concept of “everything,” and 2) by turning a critical eye to those who answer questions about their identities “meekly,” instead of exhibiting pride in their origins, or simply telling questioners that their questions are rude.

Another author, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, cites no specific speaker when she uses constructed dialogue to present the question “Where are you from?” Danquah moved to Washington, D.C., from Ghana when she was six years old, so “Where are you from?” may indeed have at times referred specifically to her country of origin, but the implicit assumptions behind the question remain the same. Danquah writes,

*Why do you talk like that? Where are you from? Is that string in your hair?* Newness is easy to detect, especially with immigrants. Everything about you is a dead giveaway. And people constantly watch and stare through the scrutinizing lens of curiosity (104).

When reading this passage, the reader encounters these questions without knowing who is asking them. By neglecting to provide details about who asked her these questions or how frequently they have been asked of her, she shows that it does not matter if the questions were asked once or a thousand times, by her closest friend or by a total stranger. Whether one person is asking all three, or if three different people are all asking one apiece, is unknown. The questions are however contextualized through the sentences that follow. If we read what follows the constructed dialogue as Danquah’s interpretation

of the questions, it becomes clear that she did not view the questions as simple requests for information. Danquah's use of the phrase "scrutinizing lens" suggests that she has construed the questions as a request for information with which she is to be judged. Any answers she can provide to the questions above will be viewed through this lens, and where there is scrutiny, there is the question of acceptability. Undoubtedly, these questions have 'right' and 'wrong' answers according to the people who are asking them—not in the sense of truthfulness, but in the sense of desirability. Every time Danquah is asked "Where are you from?" she is not only dealing with the obvious insinuation that she is an outsider, but also may have to worry that her answer is not socially desirable. Her interpretation of the constructed dialogue shows that she does not see such a question as an innocent inquiry as to her country of origin, but rather feels it is used against her as a way for non-immigrants to assess the legitimacy of her nationality and culture.

While Senna and Danquah choose not to provide speakers for the question "What are you/Where are you from?" three other authors do, although they employ two slightly different strategies. The first strategy, used by Julia Alvarez, provides readers with a generalized category of people who ask a certain question. Alvarez, who refers to herself and her family as "white Dominicans," moved to New York from the Dominican Republic when she was ten years old. She was sent to a boarding school, where she encountered questions about her background:

"So where are you from?" my classmates would ask.

"Jamaica Estates," I'd say, an edge of belligerence to my voice. It was obvious from my accent, if not my looks, that I was not *from* there in the way they meant being from

somewhere.

“I mean *originally*.”

And then it would come out, the color, the accent, the cousin with six fingers, the smell of garlic (144).

This passage from Alvarez identifies her classmates as the source of the question “Where are you from?” Previous to this passage, readers learn that Alvarez is at a boarding school, so it is likely that the students who are asking Alvarez this are not only her peer group at school, but are in essence her entire social sphere, since not only does she attend classes with them, but likely eats, sleeps, and spends her free time with them as well. As was the case in Danquah’s writing, here one gets the sense that the question “Where are you from?” is being used as a determiner of social acceptability. This comes out particularly strongly as Alvarez notes that her first answer, her non-boarding school home, is not the answer her classmates were looking for. Alvarez frames her next words as a confession: “And then it would come out, the color, the accent, the cousin with six fingers, the smell of garlic,” showing that she has interpreted “I mean originally” as a request to provide details about her family that will surely mark her race, ethnicity, and social background as undesirable. Alvarez’s interpretation of the constructed dialogue uttered by her American classmates serves to distance her from them, temporarily bringing her Dominican identity to the foreground; on the other hand, her use of “and then it would come out,” to introduce “the color, the accent, the cousin with six fingers, the smell of garlic,” simultaneously refutes her alignment with that identity, as it indicates that she did not feel particularly proud of or willing to disclose those aspects of her family history.

Another author who identifies the speaker of the question “Where are you from?” as being asked by a more general group is Claudine Chiawei O’Hearn. O’Hearn is half white and half Chinese, and grew up in Taiwan. She writes:

I stopped being American when I first came to the States to live eight years ago. Growing up in Asia, I knew being mixed set me apart, but I didn’t have to name it until people began to ask, Where are you from? (viii).

O’Hearn’s account is very telling in terms of just how profoundly this question affected her conceptions not only about how others saw her, but also about how she viewed herself. Though a specific naming of “people” is not given here, O’Hearn’s use of “people” evokes the sense that the question has been asked of her more than one time, as does the continuity signified by ‘started asking me’—there is no end to the asking. The reader may assume that while she was growing up in Taiwan, O’Hearn knew that she was different somehow, but was able to identify herself at least partially as “American” in her own mind. When she finally came to America, she interpreted the question “Where are you from?” as a request “to name” what it was that set her apart. This signified to her that she was not being perceived as an American by those whom she might have previously considered her countrymen, creating a distance between herself and her sense of American-ness. Through constructed dialogue, O’Hearn shows readers a fundamental shift in her self-identification.

The final author who reports being asked, “What are you?” is Malcolm Gladwell. Gladwell is unique in a sense because he is the only one of the five authors who tells readers exactly who asked him the question. Also, within his narrative, he explains how the question itself had an enormous impact on his thoughts about his own identity. The

question appears in the context of Gladwell's running at a track meet. Gladwell, born of a brown Jamaican mother and a white Mennonite father, was growing up in Canada when he first encountered the question "What are you?" He writes,

There was a West Indian on my track team—a magnificent long jumper by the name of Chris Brandy—who came up to me one day, looking closely at my hair and features, and demanded: "What *are* you?" The question was entirely unexpected, and I remember blinking and stammering, momentarily overwhelmed by the word *what*. I had always thought that my singular alienation was the result of *who* I was. But now it occurred to me that perhaps it was the result of something entirely external—the result of nuances of color and skin and lip and curl that put me just outside the world of people like Chris Brandy and just outside the world of the people I grew up with in rural Ontario (122-123).

The fact that Gladwell reports details about the identity of his questioner is a testament to just how strongly his first experience with the question affected him.

Additionally, Gladwell's account is the first instance where a particularly strong quotative verb is used to describe the manner of questioning. Whereas in Alvarez's narrative, classmates "would ask", and in O'Hearn's narrative, "people began to ask", in Gladwell's narrative, Chris "demanded". The use of the word "demanded" signals that Gladwell felt he did not have the option of not answering, which in turn establishes a power dynamic that favors Chris. Additionally, the force of Chris' question comes through with Gladwell's italicizing of the word *are*. Since writers' abilities to convey nuances about reported speech prosodically is limited by the virtue of their medium, the use of the quotative "demanded" in conjunction with the italicizing of *are* allows the reader to get a sense of not only how the question was asked, but also why it might have had such an impact on its hearer.

Gladwell quite clearly describes how his identity was affected by the question. However, it may be necessary to contextualize the phrase “I had always thought that my singular alienation was the result of *who* I was.” Gladwell’s sense of difference didn’t necessarily originate in terms of race; religion was probably a larger catalyst, as he grew up the son of a Briton and a Jamaican (both non-Mennonites) in a Mennonite community. He implies in his essay that any early sense of difference had more to do with differences between Mennonite and non-Mennonite culture than anything else. However, through using constructed dialogue to present Chris’ question to readers, Gladwell shows readers the transformation that occurred in his thoughts about his own identity. Right before Chris asks, “What are you?” Gladwell mentions that Chris looked at Gladwell’s hair and features closely. Generally, hair and features are considered part of a whole human being—a “who,” as it were— but Chris separates Gladwell’s physicality from his humanity. Chris’ use of the referring term “what” instead of “who” frames Gladwell in non-human terms on the distinct basis of what Gladwell has always thought of as human features. Chris’ use of the dehumanizing referring expression “what” minimizes Gladwell’s own humanity. Gladwell’s evaluation, “I had always thought that my singular alienation was the result of *who* I was,” shows a moment of identity crisis that reaches far beyond ethnic or racial identity; it shows a moment where Gladwell faced a challenge to his human identity.

## 4.2 Questioning Authenticity

In many of the narratives in *Half and Half*, authors use constructed dialogue to tell readers about instances where someone else has made an assumption about the author's race or ethnicity that the author disagrees with, takes offense to, or both. Sometimes this happens when someone makes a statement questioning the authenticity of the author's racial or ethnic identity in some way, as will be seen in three excerpts presented in this section. As I will show, authors use constructed dialogue to present the utterances that they felt questioned their racial or ethnic authenticity. Clark and Gerrig (1990) argue that direct quotation can be used by narrators who wish to detach themselves from something that was said, and as Hamilton (1998) found, when constructed dialogue is used as a detachment strategy, it can function as a way for narrators to signal a negative stance towards something that was said. For instance, narrators may detach themselves from a particular statement by presenting the words of others to the reader with the understanding that the reader will interpret a statement's inappropriateness for him- or herself. Though evaluations sometimes accompany constructed dialogue used for this purpose, the technique still serves to highlight the oppositional stance the narrator is taking to what was said. The first example I will present of a narrator who has done this is Danzy Senna, who is half black and half white. She writes:

Then the white people in my midst seemed to forget whom they were talking to, and countless times I was a silent witness to their candid racism. When I would remind them that my father was black, they would laugh and say, "But you're different." That was somewhere I never wanted to return (18).

Here Senna uses constructed dialogue to describe a situation where someone made a statement that effectively challenged her claims to a specific racial identity. Since, through prior reading, readers know that Senna has identified strongly with her blackness in the past, constructed dialogue functions as a tool allowing Senna to present the utterance to the reader as a report, with the hopes that the reader will understand the inappropriateness and offensive nature of the statement. In conjunction with this strategy, by providing the evaluation “That was somewhere I never wanted to return,” Senna shows readers that she does not want to think of herself as “different” from other black people. By not claiming the white identity that has been offered to her, she makes it clear that her blackness is important to her.

Another author who was put in a similar position and chose to evidence it in a similar way is the book’s editor, Claudine Chiawei O’Hearn. O’Hearn recalls,

I remember once one of my American friends let slip a racial slur, something about irreputable, gold-digging Chinese women trying to trap Western men. Appalled, I pointed to my face—the product of such “unholy” joinings. She responded, “Oh, you’re not *really* Chinese”—as though this were a plus (xi).

Like Senna, O’Hearn was put in a position where someone of a different race/ethnicity made a comment that challenged O’Hearn’s claim to a Chinese identity. O’Hearn detaches herself from the utterance by presenting it as a direct quotation, which functions as an affirmation that she *is* really Chinese. In both cases, the original speakers of the constructed dialogue seemed to be making what they felt were positive statements. However, the narrators’ use of constructed dialogue to detach themselves from the supposedly positive utterance indicates that they did not interpret those remarks as

positive. Additionally, if we recall Labov's definition of evaluations as "the point of the story," then the evaluations, "That was somewhere I never wanted to return," and, "as though this were a plus," indicate that the narrators have presented the constructed dialogue specifically to point out the hurt and incredulity that supposedly complimentary statements can cause.

Unfortunately, for bi-ethnic and bi-racial people, challenges to their racial and ethnic authenticity do not come only from mainstream culture; as Wallace (2001) found, their mixed heritage may make it difficult for them to be accepted as a part of their minority heritage culture as well. For Lisa See, whose ancestry is Chinese and white, challenges to her ethnic authenticity come from family members. When discussing the lack of discrimination she has encountered from mainstream Americans because of her white appearance, she addresses what can be seen as the other side of that particular coin. She writes:

Nevertheless, I have paid a price. If in the white world I'm white, in the Chinese world I'm white, too. I've had relatives—100 percent Chinese-blood relatives—say to me, "Oh, so-and-so is Caucasian just like you" (136).

Although she describes herself as not looking particularly Chinese with her red hair and freckles, See feels a strong attachment to her Chinese heritage. Before constructing the dialogue shown above, she contextually clues readers in on how to interpret the statement that is to come, by introducing it with, "Nevertheless, I have paid a price," which lets readers know that what follows should be interpreted as problematic for the author. See's description of "100 percent Chinese-blood relatives" draws explicit attention to the fact that those questioning her ethnicity know for a fact that See *does* have Chinese heritage,

which See highlights in order to signal to readers that they should interpret the statement “Oh, so-and-so is Caucasian just like you” as absurd. Through constructed dialogue, See shows that her phenotype has negated her Chineseness in the eyes of some of her relatives, but by using constructed dialogue to present the utterance, “Oh, so-and-so is Caucasian just like you,” See distances herself from that notion. By showing distance between herself and the utterance, See she is able to take a negative stance toward her family’s assertions that she is Caucasian, which in turn functions as an assertion of her Chinese identity to readers.

#### **4.3 Identifying as the Other: Early Experiences with Racial Name-Calling**

In these narratives, authors not only use reported speech to highlight a specific ethnic or racial background; they also identify themselves frequently as outsiders, taunted and rejected because of the way they look. For many authors, using constructed dialogue to make readers aware of the names they have been called is a tool that helps the author construct an outsider identity while simultaneously claiming a particular ethnoracial one. Philippe Wamba, the son of an African-American mother and an African father, who grew up in both in the United States and in Africa, uses reported speech to show that he was not accepted in either place. First, he writes,

Remy and I had to fight to defend the honor of our race on more than one occasion; we had a number of memorable scuffles with neighborhood kids who called us ‘niggers’ (156).

A bit later, when he moved to Dar es Salaam, his experience with racial name-calling continued:

As we walked through the complex of dingy, state-owned bungalows, barefoot children pursued us, playfully chanting, “*Wazungu, wazungu!*” I spoke enough Swahili to know that *wazungu* referred to non-Africans in general, and to white people in particular. The taunts wounded me. Why did they see us as outsiders when we were blacks returned from America to our rightful homeland? (163).

Although these episodes of constructed dialogue where Wamba shows readers the names he was called are separated by a couple of pages, their juxtaposition is close enough to allow the reader to identify important differences and similarities between the two episodes. Wamba describes the fights where he was called a “nigger” by neighborhood kids (whom readers will probably assume were white) as “memorable,” and by saying specifically that he defended the “honor of his race,” he shows that he feels his race is honorable, and is proud of it. However, Wamba is faced with a new dilemma when he is essentially taunted as a racialized other by those he considers to be of his own race. Wamba’s careful description of the children’s taunting in Dar es Salaam as “playful” suggests that Wamba is hesitant to vilify the name-callers, perhaps because he would have liked to see himself as one of them. But Wamba’s question “Why did they see us as outsiders...” undoubtedly acknowledges the fact that they did not see him as one of them. He recognizes that the taunt was used for any foreigner, but specifically notes that he felt it applied to white people. By taking a stance that rejects the label “wazungu,” he reasserts his blackness, remarking that being seen by black children as a white young man saddened him. Through showing readers the tension that existed between who he thought he was and how he was viewed, Wamba constructs a complex ethnic, racial, and national identity that, regardless of his skin color, places him in between the realms of black and white, American and African.

Just as Wamba is not the only author who uses constructed dialogue to show racial taunting, it is interesting to note that he is also not the only writer who uses a variation of the quotative verb “chant” when describing racial naming taunts. The verb “chanting” emphasizes the singsong, repetitive nature of the taunt, and can evoke thoughts of racist, cult-like groups that use chants as part of their rituals<sup>x</sup>. Therefore, perhaps it is not surprising that two Asian-American writers of Chinese descent use the quotative verb “chant” to recount their experiences with racial names. Lori Tsang writes,

Most of us Chinese American kids remember our parents telling us how the Chinese invented the printing press. This was supposed to make us feel better when the other kids made “slanty-eyed” faces at us and chanted “Ching-chong Chinaman” on the way home from school (212).

O’Hearn’s experience mirrors Tsang’s almost exactly:

...I experienced my first sting of racism when preschool classmates pushed me off the playground slides, pulled tight their eyes, and idiotically chanted, “Ching, Chang, Chong, Chinese.” *Early learners* (viii).

In all three of these accounts, racial insults, powerful not only because of the present mockery they carry with them, but also because of the historical oppression and prejudice they represent, are being hurled at the writers, and in all of the cases, there is repetition of the “ch” sound. In *Talking Voices*, Tannen (2007) discusses various involvement strategies, one of which is the repetition of certain sounds. The alliteration that Wamba, Tsang, and O’Hearn have created functions effectively as an involvement strategy, particularly powerful as part of the frame of racist practices created by the verb “chant.” Note also that in the case of Wamba, it is “children” who “chant,” which juxtaposes

images of youth and innocence with racism and evil, creating an even greater tension within the situation he recounts.

Discussions of alliteration aside, the other thing that Wamba, Tsang, and O'Hearn all demonstrate is that their racial and ethnic backgrounds impacted them greatly, particularly at a young age. As a result of the teasing they endured, they were given an early awareness that their ethnic and racial backgrounds led them to be perceived as different. Also, particularly in the cases of Tsang and O'Hearn, the taunts may have functioned as tools that marginalized their minority parents' language and culture. "Ching chang chong" and variations thereof are often used by those unfamiliar with the Chinese language in attempts to imitate the sounds of Chinese. In an insightful blog post, David Beaver argues that when speakers use words like "ching chong" to imitate Chinese, the "alliterative nonsense" they create is meant to be representative of an entire language ([www.itre.cis.upenn.edu](http://www.itre.cis.upenn.edu)). Since anyone who had even a passing familiarity with Chinese would understand that "ching chong" does not truly resemble Chinese, those who use that language as a part of their taunts show how distant Chinese seems to them, and by extension, how different Chinese speakers are from them. Thus, taunts like "Ching Chong Chinaman" provide strong evidence that the narrators' peers saw the narrators as 'others.' However, constructed dialogue allows the narrators to show themselves as agents who react to being marginalized by creating distance of their own. By using direct quotation as a tool to detach themselves from the taunts of their classmates, Wamba, Tsang, and O'Hearn detach themselves from the referents of those taunts as well, giving the impression that any distance created is, at least in the story world, mutual.

One other author who uses constructed dialogue to reconstruct a scene in which she was insulted as a child because of her race or ethnicity is Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, who, readers may recall, moved to the United States from Ghana at age six. Though she went to school with African-Americans, her skin color alone was not enough for her to receive acceptance:

The black kids I encountered, in and out of school, were the cruelest to me. While other children who were being picked on for whatever trivial or arbitrary reason were called a host of names tailored to their individual inadequacies—Frog Lips, Peanut Head, Four-Eyes, Brace-Face—there was no need to create a name for me. *You—you—you African! Go back to Africa!* Who I was seemed to be insult enough; where I was from, a horrific place to which one could be banished as a form of punishment (105-106).

Like Wamba, Danquah learned that skin color was not enough to help her be accepted. Danquah writes, “*You—you—you African! Go back to Africa!*” to show how she was cast as an outsider specifically because of her continental origins. It is no mistake that Danquah mentions prior to this instance of constructed dialogue that it was “the black kids” who were the cruelest to her. As she writes for an American audience, Danquah knows that skin color is often viewed as a determiner of inclusion or exclusion. By making skin color salient but effectively irrelevant, she is able to construct her identity in terms of ethnic, national, and continental origin. Additionally, it is important to note that the referring term “black kids” is used instead of “African-American kids.” Schiffirin (2006) notes, “Referring terms initiate the process whereby we see others in different domains...a reference introduces and continues to display identities of those in a textual world” (130-131). By choosing not to refer to the “black” kids as “African-American” kids, Danquah strips a sense of African-ness away from them, and leaves the reader with

the impression that it is only Danquah who, whether she would have liked to or not at the time, can lay claim to an “African” identity; by the same token, because of the detachment Danquah creates between herself and the “black kids” through constructed dialogue, she refutes an identity that is only “black.”

#### **4.4 Constructing Mixed Heritage Identity Through Linguistic Features**

As mentioned in the literature review portion of this investigation, constructed dialogue may include vocal qualities such as intonation or regional/ethnic accent or dialect. Let us also recall Schilling-Estes’ (2004) argument, discussed in section 2.6, that accents, dialects, and lexical choices are often displays of a particular ethnic identity. Though narrators in *Half and Half* are restricted to using print to convey linguistic practices that might inform ethnic identity, they use representations of language to convey these identities just the same. By examining how writers portray what may be considered non-standard prosodic features and lexical choices, and how they orient themselves in relation to the language of others, we can infer certain things that the writers may wish to convey about their own linguistic, and by association, ethnoracial identities.

In *Half and Half*, there are a few particularly good examples of how writers use constructed dialogue to present pronunciation features, non-standard grammatical usages, and even other languages as a way of building their own identities. Clark and Gerrig’s (1990) markedness principle asserts that when a narrator presents language in a way that marks it as different, (through the use of dialect or foreign language, for instance), the

narrator expects his or her hearer or reader to realize that the narrator has done so for a specific purpose. Let us therefore turn to specific instances of linguistically marked constructed dialogue considering how narrators have used this strategy for the purpose of identity construction.

The first example I will present is from Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's essay "Life as an Alien." In the previous section, I discussed how Danquah's use of name-calling in reported speech showed the distance she felt between herself and her African-American peers. Another way that she shows this distance is through her use of dialect representation in constructed dialogue. Danquah tells readers how she was made fun of because of the way she sounded when she spoke. Danquah's friend Karen, an African-American girl, tried to help Danquah make her speech sound more like the speech of their African-American peers. Danquah writes of Karen,

She taught me how to double-dutch and "snap" back when kids teased me.  
"Tell 'em, 'Yo momma,'" she'd advise.

"Your mama," I'd repeat, rolling my eyes and sucking my teeth the same as she had done.

Allen would always barge into Karen's room when she was in the midst of schooling me and poke fun. "You sound like a ole white girl," he'd say. And at that time, that's the last thing I wanted, to "sound" white (108).

Danquah shows how, even as a child, she and her friends understood that language and identity were complexly intertwined. The two different spellings Danquah presents, "Yo momma" versus "Your mama," show how she was unable to recreate the sounds she heard from her friends, specifically, the loss of postvocalic /r/ as a mark of African American Vernacular English (Fought 2006, citing Bailey and Thomas 1998). Karen's brother Allen's observation that Danquah sounded like "a ole white girl," furthers the gap

Danquah feels between herself and her African-American friends. Her assertion that the last thing she wanted to do is “sound” white solidifies her decision to not align herself with mainstream white culture (not that she would necessarily have had the option anyway), even though she is also unable to align herself with African-American culture phonologically. Through constructed dialogue and the evaluation, “And at that time, that’s the last thing I wanted, to ‘sound’ white,” Danquah is able to construct her identity as, to her chagrin at the time, distinct from either white or black culture in the United States.

Another author who uses constructed dialogue to shape her identity is Le Thi Diem Thuy. Thuy immigrated to the United States from Vietnam with her father and sister when she was eight years old. Her mother was only able to join them two years later, and Thuy presents readers with a hint of the linguistic differences that emerged between her mother and herself. Thuy writes of her mother,

She set about correcting my odd Vietnamese—I’d taken to saying things like, “Can I help you shampoo the dishes?”—and acquainting herself with English via songs from television commercials. Her two favorite songs were: “This Bud’s for you” and “G.E. We bring good things to life!” which she pronounced “lie.” She often sang these songs—in lieu of the traditional lilting Vietnamese lullaby—to the little girl who, oddly, seemed to like them...(40).

It is interesting to note that Thuy presents readers with a kind of symmetry between her Vietnamese language skills and her mother’s English by describing her own Vietnamese as “odd,” while gently poking fun at her mother’s English by noting specifically that her mother pronounced “life” as “lie.” But this is not something Thuy views with embarrassment or sees as a shortcoming in her mother—it is in fact quite the opposite.

Thuy continues to tell readers that as a child she liked her mother's rendition of the song. By showing readers that she, though born in Vietnam, spoke "odd" Vietnamese, she hints at her American-ness. Conversely, by showing readers that she was not embarrassed by her mother's pronunciation of American words, she hints that she enjoyed the Vietnamese nature of her mother's English pronunciation, and was able to embrace her Vietnamese-ness. Thus, Thuy places herself as someone who lives between languages.

While Danquah and Thuy use constructed dialogue to present non-standard linguistic features and construct their own identities in relation to those features, they do not acknowledge just how the language of others affects them quite as explicitly as another author in the book, Garrett Hongo. Hongo, whose essay is titled "Lost in Place," is of Japanese descent; he grew up in parts of Hawaii and Los Angeles, both which he describes as very diverse. Later, Hongo and his wife moved to Oregon, where he began to feel suffocated by the lack of diversity. In lamenting what he felt he had been missing, Hongo recounts a conversation with a driver in an airport in Ontario. According to Hongo, the driver's name was Presco. Presco told Hongo:

"My mother's Filipina from Manila—she's romantic to the bone. My father's Chicano and tough, *pero*. They met overseas when he was in the military. They come home then, had me, and I grew up in El Monte."

I was liking anything he said by then because of the music in his voice, the way he formed his sentences, the torque and torsion of his speech. It had the city in it and a touch of some kind of twang I guessed might be from relatives who came from "the Valley"—which meant the San Joaquin Valley in my old circles (8-9).

Hongo's presentation of Presco's speech utilizes two nonstandard linguistic tools—the use of "pero," a non-English word, and the nonstandard use of "come" as past tense.

"Pero," means "but" in both Tagalog and Spanish, and his use of it (and others which are

not shown in the excerpt above) can be viewed as code-switching, which can be used as an identity marker (Schilling-Estes 2004; Fought 2006). Also, the non-standard use of “come” reflects an absence of past-tense marking, which has been attributed to both AAVE and Creole English (Rickford 1999; Fought 2006), and may also be viewed as an element of code-switching. Hongo’s purposes for presenting Presco’s non-standard linguistic features may be two-fold: first, he may want to depict Presco’s speech as accurately as possible to give readers a feel for what he later calls “the music in his voice” and “the way he formed his sentences.” But perhaps more importantly, by using these nonstandard features with Hongo, Presco shows that he sees Hongo as a linguistic ‘insider’ with whom he can communicate. In turn, Hongo’s choice to include his conversation with Presco in the form of constructed dialogue that highlights these non-standard features indicates that Hongo is proud to be accepted by Presco, who, like him, claims a minority identity. This establishes a sense of solidarity between Presco and Hongo, who is able to shape himself as an individual who appreciates both the language and the experiences of those who find themselves living between two cultures.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have revealed how the direct constructed dialogue used by narrators in *Half and Half* contributes to their identities as mixed heritage individuals; most importantly, these identities highlight the authors as outsiders, and individuals who are often caught somewhere between two cultures. Following Schiffrin (1996) I checked the meaning of an utterance by its interpretation, showing that seemingly innocent questions like “What are you?” and “Where are you from?” can be seen as intrusive requests for information that in effect determine a mixed heritage person’s social acceptability. When mixed heritage people are asked this type of question, they are immediately cast as ‘outsiders,’ because inherent in the question is the sense that the person being questioned is somehow fundamentally different from the person doing the questioning.

Embedded meaning is also found in cases where people question the authenticity of some part of a mixed heritage person’s ethnic or racial identity. Even statements like “But you’re different,” that can be assumed to be meant complimentarily, can cause great offense. As a result, instances of constructed dialogue that show challenges to narrators’ identities prove to be useful sites for mixed heritage narrators to assert strong connections to their racial or cultural backgrounds, creating identities that are oppositional to the ones that have been assigned to them.

Identities are also assigned to mixed heritage people through racial name calling, and constructed dialogue can serve as a tool for narrators to detach themselves from the offensive names, as well as from those who are taunting them. Though they may refute a

racialized identity by doing so, they also create an ‘outsider’ identity. In cases where narrators receive taunts from a group to which they thought they belonged, constructed dialogue and the naming of referents can be a powerful way to demonstrate just how mixed heritage individuals live their lives in between groups, finding it difficult to be accepted anywhere.

Narrators can also identify facets of their mixed heritage identities by presenting non-standard linguistic features through constructed dialogue, and taking stances toward those utterances that convey distance from a group, alignment with a group, or a sense of living a dual-culture identity through language. Although the details surrounding the experiences of each narrator in *Half and Half* were markedly different, and the narrators identify with many cultures in different combinations, all narrators in this paper used constructed dialogue to construct identities of ‘otherness’ and cultural duality. The fact that constructed dialogue, which is often representative of previous social interactions, functions so frequently as a tool for identity construction in a literary form strongly suggests that mixed heritage identity is in many ways formed through talk. Through constructed dialogue, narrators can explain how what was said has contributed to who they feel they are, and often allows them to portray themselves as agents who take an active role in forming identities. My analysis of constructed dialogue in *Half and Half* adds to our understanding of how mixed heritage narrators see themselves in relation to the world around them, and vividly highlights the role words may play in the constructions of their identities.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Hamilton's study is somewhat of an exception; she examines postings to an electronic discussion board. Though her study focuses on written language, the written language on a discussion board is much different than the more formal language found in a book of essays.

<sup>ii</sup> Instances that seem to blend direct and indirect have also been discussed; see Clark and Gerrig 1990 for a better discussion of this phenomenon, which they term "free indirect."

<sup>iii</sup> Not all reported speech is introduced with a verb; therefore, Barbara Johnstone has used the term "dialogue introducer" for any word or phrase that presents an utterance as reported.

<sup>iv</sup> Here language does not refer explicitly to language in the sense of say French or Spanish, but in the broader sense of the term.

<sup>v</sup> This is often almost instinctively acknowledged. Consider an author like Jane Austen. When we discuss the political and social commentary in a book like "Pride and Prejudice," we often focus our criticism on things that characters say. Nevertheless, we do not attribute a negative view on the silliness of Mrs. Bennett's behavior to Mr. Darcy's words, but think instead of Austen using Mr. Darcy as a vehicle for her own commentary.

<sup>vi</sup> Examples of symbolic identity markers might be things like style of dress, language use, style of hair, application of makeup, etc.

<sup>vii</sup> In her 1996 article "Narrative as a Self-Portrait," Schiffrin examined conversations in which women portrayed two different identities. For example, Zelda created a dual-position of both solidarity and distance toward her daughter-in-law, weaving together an identity that created solidarity with her in a storyworld while evidencing a slightly more critical identity in her evaluation of the situation to a hearer who was not her daughter-in-law.

<sup>viii</sup> The authors whose narratives were coded are as follows: Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn, Garrett Hongo, Danzy Senna, Roxane Farmanfarmaian, le thi diem thuy, Fransisco Goldman, David Mura, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, Malcolm Gladwell, Lisa See, Julia Alvarez, Philippe Wamba, James McBride, and Lori Tsang.

<sup>ix</sup> Alvarez may be considered an exception here. She describes herself as "white Dominican," but later mentions that her color was something she felt she had to explain to those asking her, "Where are you from?" So, though she may have considered herself white, she discovered that those around her did not.

<sup>xx</sup> The Ku Klux Klan in particular is known for its members' use of chants as a method of intimidation.

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