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Solo Show at UCSB's MultiCultural Center Examines Notions of Racial Identity

When actress and playwright Fanshen Cox DiGiovanni married the love of her life in 2006, her father did not walk her down the aisle. In fact, he declined to attend the wedding altogether.

Seeking to understand why he chose not to participate, DiGiovanni began a trek through family history -- and time and space -- that ultimately led to her M.F.A. thesis project: the multimedia one-woman play, "One Drop of Love: A Daughter's Search for Her Father's Racial Approval."

DiGiovanni will perform the hourlong show at UC Santa Barbara's MultiCultural Center Theater on Tuesday, May 7. The performance begins at 6 p.m. and will be followed by a question-and-answer session with G. Reginald Daniel, professor of sociology at UCSB. Daniel is a leading expert in the field of critical mixed race studies.

Incorporating filmed images, photographs, and animation DiGiovanni tells the story of how the notion of race came into existence in the United States, and its effects on her relationship with her father. To tell her story, DiGiovanni travels back in time to the late 1700's and the first census in 1790, to cities across the United States, and to West and East Africa, where both father and daughter spent time in search of

their racial roots.

A leading activist on issues related to mixed race, DiGiovanni is an actor, comedian, producer, and educator. She developed "One Drop of Love" as the thesis project for her Master of Fine Arts degree in film, television, and theater from California State University Los Angeles. She will use footage from her performances -- the most recent was at the University of Maryland -- to produce a documentary film.

DiGiovanni, who appeared in the Academy Award-winning film "Argo," is also the co-creator, co-producer, and co-host of the award-winning weekly podcast Mixed Chicks Chat, and also co-founder and co-producer of the Mixed Roots Film & Literary Festival.

"I grew up being very enamored of my dad," DiGiovanni recalled. "My parents divorced and separated when I was young, but I always wanted to be close to him." After the divorce, she said, her father identified himself very closely with Pan-Africanism. "The house was filled with African art, and there was a negative view of white people," she said. "I'd spend the summer with him acting like my mother didn't exist. So, later, I fell in love with a man who happens to be European, and my dad didn't come to my wedding. And for a long, long time I'd been wanting to ask him why."

With the help of her father's memoir manuscript, DiGiovanni began combing through her family history. "I wanted to dig deep to figure out how we came to this moment that my dad didn't come to my wedding," she said. That history took her far and wide.

Over the course of the play, DiGiovanni takes on the personas of various family members -- her father, mother, grandmother, brother -- among others, all of whom help provide context for how it came to be that she got married without her father present. "My father and his second wife are very Black-identified," she said. "Reading my dad's memoire helped me to get to a place of acceptance."

DiGiovanni said she hopes the play will be a catalyst for people in close -- and even estranged -- relationships to talk about race. "I want people to walk out and talk to their family members about race. We have to understand the impact it has on all of us. We've created this monster out of our belief that there is such a thing as 'race,' and that monster is racism."

While the play tackles issues of multiracialism, DiGiovanni pointed out that the repercussions of not appreciating differences extend beyond race. "Everyone has a mixed something," she said. "And that's why I bring in the census. Every single person is assigned a race. It affects everyone."

Daniel, who was instrumental in bringing the performance to UCSB's MultiCultural Center, concurred. "Fanshen's personal story has a universal resonance. She's very captivating as a performer, and she's able to contextualize her own personal struggle with identity and her relationship with her parents with a complicated history of how we have come to view race in the United States."

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