The Struggle of Unacceptance

From the outer perspective of the majority, being a little different may not seem like an issue at all. **What are the conflicts that arise from having a minority identity and how can those problems be recognized through pieces of poetry?** Lee Mokobe, an award-winning slam poet addresses his identity and conflicts of being a transgender through the Ted Talk “What it Feels Like to be Transgender”, which was a relatively small and misunderstood issue at the time*.* Lee is a young poet from Cape Town who also focuses on human rights, LGBTQ experiences and African history. Growing up as a child, Lee was mistreated and bullied for his identity, encouraging him to write this personal spoken word to publicize and bring attention to the issue in the hopes that people will have more acceptance for transgenders. “What kind of Asian are you?” written and performed by Alex Dang at the National Poetry Slam in 2013 shares the history of Asians in America and the mistreatment that Asians face today. Alex Dang fell in love with poetry during his years in high school while exploring hip-hop / rap and began to find interest in poetry and topics related to identity, inspiring him to produce this powerful message and also being able to speak up for a much larger group of people. **Although both pieces of writing share completely different experiences and problems on their own, both writers merge towards the same struggle of unacceptance and shame in their minority identity through their use of imagery and tone. The reader can recognize the power of these devices to get a better meaning and understanding of the conflicts that arise from being a minority.**

A huge problem in having a minority identity is that usually one is not accepted for their individuality and difference. Usually people end up pointing fingers at anything that is slightly different from the rest of society and will try to assimilate them. In “What Type of Asian Are You?*”,* Dang goes as far as saying “Or like how every time you lump an Asian person into one culture, it’s systematically making us assimilate into an America we thought was better than our war-torn home.” (Dang, 64-65). While many may view assimilation as a process of progressive improvement to society, Alex sees this issue as a threat to his people. Similarly, Lee also faces the same issue from his peers. What’s worse is that even family members such as his aunts would “miss seeing [his] knees in the shadows of shirts” (Mokobe, 25) or remind him that his “attitude would never bring a husband home, that [he] exists for heterosexual marriage and child-bearing" (26). With all these expectations from Lee’s family members and without anyone including his mom to support his identity while also being raised in a catholic environment, Lee felt alone in his situation as opposed to Alex who has a long history of discrimination against his people.

Whether the writer decides to use explicit tone or proceeds to paint their story with imagery, both poems bring a powerful message to describe the pain and struggle of the shame they’ve felt from the disapproval of society. Alex’s pleading attitude explains how he’s often left feeling inferior from the way society projects his race “as nothing but the secondary role and never the leading man” (47-48), resulting in him still feeling “the shame of being Asian” (68). Alex speaks up for his people with this quote in hopes that society recognizes their mistakes and the pain that has influenced Asians over the years. In contrast, Lee chooses a more powerful approach to illustrate how he feels from the disapproval from his peers using literary devices. He states, “No one ever thinks of us as human because we are more ghost than flesh, because people fear that my gender expression is a trick, that it exists to be perverse, that it ensnares them without their consent” (53-55). Lee brings out his personal experiences to show to us the way people treat him as an inferior human being and that his identity exists to be unacceptable. Naturally, Lee had no choice but to swallow “their insults along with their slurs” (28). Having no one who could understand and support him at the time was a major conflict in his life. Regardless of the conflicts that he’s dealt with, he has still learned to love himself and push past those issues to get to where he is today.

In conclusion, Alex uses his attitude and tone to speak up for his fellow Asian people. According to his slam poem, he has had his fair share of discrimination and mistreatment along with a long history of Asians who have also shared a similar experience, and although racism against Asians have improved over the years, Alex pleads that people can recognize that everyone is individual and it’s important not to forcefully assimilate or lump all Asians into one culture just because people will think it’s convenient for them. Lee is confident and proud of his identity as a male transgender but has also went through many stages of judgement from the people around him and shows this through the power of his imagery and writing from his personal experiences. As years go by and society progresses, will people be able to recognize the conflicts of being a minority? Or are we going to see people like Lee Mokobe being forcefully put “back into the closet” (59) and hung back “with all the other

skeletons?” (59)