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Theories of Culture and Identity

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Ethnic Story

“I love you Lil Red,” My older, half brothers and sister say to me. I reply, “I love you guys too.” Thinking back on it this might have been my first experience with race as I understand it now, seeing as I was the lightest skinned of all my biracial family members. At the time I had no idea what race was. I grew up poor with a single white mother, and an absentee black father, with my full, blood brother, in Newark, New Jersey. In every neighborhood I had lived in as a child, minority was the majority, and white people were the minority. Up until I was seven, I only had personal connections with less than ten white people outside of my family. One was my first-grade teacher, a music teacher, my mother’s boss at work, one of her co-workers, and a couple of friends at school, most of whom were of Hispanic or Latinx descent but were white passing. It seems weird for me to say that race was not much of a factor for me growing up because I typically only hear white people say that, and its usually for the inverse reason of what I have previously alluded to. When you grow up surrounded by other people like you, seeing the disparities caused by race becomes complicated. Education and classes like theories on culture and identity are sometimes the only way to be able to expand your knowledge on those topics. My only relation them at all was that the white members of my family had more money than my direct family and even then, I had not yet made the concrete connection of whiteness and wealth.

Music has played a big part in helping me to understand my culture and identity, as they relate to the structures of the outside world. “You gotta check out this Friday Night Lights mixtape, it’s some of the best music out there” my brother said to me. I could not be more thankful for that suggestion as J. Cole is now my favorite artist, and it helps that he is also a half black and half white. We also share a lot of the same problems that plagued our childhoods, as well as enough differences for me to be able to learn from his experiences while still being capable of abstracting his thoughts and applying them to varying situations as they appear in my early years. J. Cole consistently talks about the oppression of African Americans, especially as it relates to problems we share. Songs like “Rich Niggaz” and “Problems” seem more like songs that revealed themselves in my soul, rather than something I experienced externally.

As a child, I had dreadlocks and loved them. People in my immediate surroundings loved them too, my mom especially, and she made sure to take the extra steps to have them taken care of and kept healthy. To us, they were normal, a beautiful part of my identity, but my aunt saw it differently and cut them without my mother’s permission one day. I was too young to fight back. Her lack of exposure made her think they should disappear for my benefit, and I had no choice but to be acquiescent. Up until I was 18, I had never let my hair get that long again, but in 2016 I had a spiritual awakening of my individualism. I wanted to be me, not the person people wanted me to be. I was going to grow my hair out and let it get long and curly again. This was reinforced when J. Cole concurrently made the same decision to lock his hair. He released a song called False Prophets which was about people trying to impress others and losing parts of themselves in the process. The way people deny who they really are and run from their past in an attempt to fit an image of what they want. I was done running. For the first time in my life, I stopped running and started to acknowledge my past as it related to my current identity.

When I regrew my dreads, I viewed it as an acceptance of my childhood and past self. However, whenever I let my hair grow, whether curly or “nappy” I constantly had white members of my family ostracize me for it. Saying it looked dirty and unprofessional. “It looks like you have a mop on your head,” “it scared me and made me think there was a giant spider or bug on your head.” Even going so far as comparing me to some stereotypical TV characters, seemingly removing the humanity from me and fictionalizing my existence because it is so different from their norm. Whenever I cut my hair short, they would tell me how professional it looks and how clean I was. Hairstyle and hair texture discrimination is a prominent issue in workplaces in America, and it is unfortunate I had to experience it in my own family. Stories like the kid who was forced to cut his hair in order to participate in a wrestling match, or young black girls being told their braids and hairstyle are not in compliance with school dress code, always hurt me and make me feel empathy as someone who has experienced similar things in a place where people are supposed to be accepting. The institution of family that is supposed to protect you from the prejudices of the outside world, and yet they subjected me to it in more obvious ways than the world had, blatantly disrespecting me as an individual.

Earlier in 2016, I reached a point of enlightenment. I was facing involuntary removal from school because I could not afford tuition and my mother’s credit was too bad to secure a loan. None of my white family members wanted to take the risk and cosign for me, they did not have faith in me and did not believe I would succeed in life. I was appalled and felt defeat that was seemingly insurmountable. Why was I not enough? Why did they want me to fail? Why were they so complacent in watching me fall? Family is supposed to have your back and they were sticking a knife in mine. It was surreal and I was irate. I considered members of my family my biggest haters and the biggest perpetrators of prejudice. This was the point in which I wanted nothing to do with them. I had immense disdain for my white half and held remorse for my black side because of all the damage done to it from my other half. I started to live by the J. Cole bar from false prophets that became relevant later that year, “Therefore from here on out, my hair grow out, I care nothin' 'bout opinions.” If I did not want to accept the opinions of my family, what reason was there to accept anyone’s opinions or expectations of me.

I wanted to live life in an effort to make sure that every black person had the freedoms that white people are allotted, in other words, true equality free from oppression and discrimination based on appearance. Luckily for me, I was able to secure the funding to go to school by taking advantage of federal assistance, something I recognize my privilege as being half white allotted. This became the moment where I became more of a reflective person. I began looking backwards in life to help guide myself forward. I wanted to examine instances that previously seemed natural to understand why I am the way I am in the present. To realize all the misfortunes that had occurred behind the scenes, unbeknownst to my conscious thinking, I had to examine the structure of my life through the lens of institutional oppression and all the ways I simultaneously benefitted and suffered through those processes. I wanted to provide my future kids, and subsequently all African Americans, a life free of the injustices I had been facing and benefitting from subconsciously since birth.

This newfound affinity for reflection and introspection awarded me the ability to base my actions in my morals, rather than as a product of my environment, however this required me to critically examine life experiences that inevitably shaped me as a person. While those experiences remained unalterable, I could learn from them to inform my future decisions. In second grade, my class had a project where we were required to detail an invention of an African American and what it meant to the world and every student had to choose a different topic. This is something I did not appreciate at the time, but now as I look back, I can recognize its importance. Our teacher made us face the fact that black inventors, and creators of all kinds, are washed out of history. Things we use every day are the culmination of black excellence, and yet we attribute them to the idea of whiteness, as capitalism, and the top one percent, monopolize the industries responsible for the production of these ideas. While African Americans can be some of the most innovative and brilliant minds on the planet, the only way for them to gain notoriety is by maneuvering institutions ran by predominantly white men. That idea of the white savior permeates itself in many forms of media today and I know I was able to benefit from whiteness.

Having a white mother only cemented these ideals in my early life. My white mother was the reason I was able to move out of Newark, and the reason I was able to receive public assistance growing up. I did not realize that I had that savior view of white people until the façade was broken by other members of my white family. I realized my mother had been an anomaly. Her worldview had been more diverse due to us being victims of poverty in a diverse area. Regardless, she still benefited immensely from her white privilege, and subsequently I was able to reap some of the benefits as well and become aware of all the systematic oppression I faced in early life. My mother’s name is on the loans for our home as well as all the paperwork that involves financial institutions. If it were my stepfathers name at the time, we would have faced more challenges and adversity than would have been bearable, and if not for the privilege of my mother being white, the chances of me ended up here at Boston College would have been infinitesimally small, even though based on my past, they were already. That is not to say that she is solely responsible for my success, but rather that she was responsible for protecting me from more injustices than I had already faced previously.

This story has been primarily centered around race and small parts of my cultural self, as I do not consider myself to have an ethnic self. I have always told people my ethnicity is half black, and half white, as my black ancestors were slaves, and my biological father lost his parents at an early age. He was raised by his grandmother, however she also passed away before I was born. Additionally, since he was mostly absent from my life, I was severely detached from any ethnicity on that side. The isolation of my immediate family from the rest of our white family also led me to become detached from my Italian and Norwegian backgrounds. The only parts that were held on to was some of the meals we typically ate, and even then, it was only an occasional Italian American pasta dish. I could go on for pages, and through this story I have learned that I am even more dedicated to being the change I wish to create for the world. My story extends infinitely beyond the limitations of this paper and to get into it all would have taken more time and space than one college career can allot. I find that to be the beauty in life. Everyone in the world, and in our class, has a story that we cannot even come close to explaining through a few assignments, and stories so expansive we can only hope it is digestible to a reader. We see everything that goes in between the lines of our story and can only hope that the overall theme illuminates these to the reader. This class has not presented me with many new ideas, but rather has enforced beliefs I have already had and has allowed me the opportunity to re experience them through marvelous stories and opinions of others within it.