

Positionality and Identity

Claire Jenkins

CYES 290

It was a sunny afternoon. The weather was warm. I was walking across campus past Clark's red brick buildings when I heard a commotion on Red Square and decided to go check it out. It was the club fair. There were many makeshift tables set up. People organizing different clubs were talking with enthusiastic students. One table drew my attention because of the vibrant, up tempo music that was playing from it. Some of my favorite tunes, afrobeats. Afrobeats comes from West Africa but is played all over Africa and the caribbean. The African Dance association sign drew my attention. I went to go talk with the two girls who were standing there at the table. I told them I knew the song playing. They were very friendly. They said I should come and audition.

I auditioned a week later. I didn't get into the club. I was disappointed but felt ready to try it again, which I did in the spring semester. That time, I felt more confident. The day of the audition came. It was a small studio in the back of the Kneller. I felt the excitement in the air. I was given a number and told to wait. There were other people huddled around anxiously, waiting as well for their number to be called. I could see through a crack in the door the group that was going. In particular my eye was drawn to an African girl who was so naturally in rhythm that she could pick up the moves

without thinking. It made me worried because I thought I might not ever be able to have that instinct. It would have been better to do this audition in a big group rather than a small one. Just as I was feeling the pressure, a girl organizing the club called my number. Now was my chance to prove myself. I was ready to dance and to enjoy the vibe of the music. As soon as I stood in front of the group of people judging my performance, I felt the butterflies in my stomach. I didn't like being watched because for me dance has always been about fun. As I came out of the room my South- East Asian friend came up to me and said: "You killed it in there."

The next week I anxiously waited for the response from the African Diaspora club. I was really looking forward to being a part of it. My love of the afrobeats music and dance would make it fun. I was eager to learn about the culture from those who grew up in it and share it with them. I remember the moment when I checked my e-mail and there was one from the African Diaspora Dance Association. It said: "We are sorry but you are not accepted. Thanks for effort." I couldn't believe my eyes. I was really disappointed. My immediate thought was: "What could I have done better?" The rejection stung. It was more than just an audition for me. It felt that I wasn't being accepted. My strong desire for being accepted into this community might have come from growing up in two different cultures, French and Americana and never really fit into one or the other. I was hurt by that exclusion.

This was the first time I experienced that exclusion. In the past, I had been accepted into spaces where I didn't fit. In high school, for instance, I took a class on

the history of the African Diaspora. Except for me and one other student, all of the kids in that class were Black. I learned a lot from their experiences when talking about their history and how it still affects them to this day. They were open to sharing with me what it was like to be black in our society. I found out there were many things that I didn't experience daily of the color of my skin. My classmates were open to having dialogue instead of seeing me as someone who is ignorant and not open to hearing.

When I was 15, I started dancing hip hop. I wanted to learn about hip hop street styles and music. I have been dancing at a studio in the East Village for 5 years now. Despite being one of the few white people who took those classes, I always felt accepted into this community, and I was able to share the culture with teachers and students who are black and hispanic.

Finally another experience when I was accepted was when I went volunteering in Kenya two summers in a row. The children in the schools in the slums of Nairobi obviously noticed that I was white and called me a "mzungu" which means lighter skinned in Swahili but they embraced me and really loved my teaching there. I had a wonderful time dancing with them at their school performances. Even the teachers at the school who were all Kenyan welcomed me as well. One teacher even called me her "daughter". In Kenya, there is a notion that everyone is a part of one big extended family.

Being rejected made me question my identity. I didn't know why I had been rejected. It could be because my dance wasn't good enough. It is possible because I

struggle with learning choreography. It was also possible that I wasn't on rhythm. But I couldn't help wondering whether racial identity played a role. What did they see when they looked at me? Possibly a white girl who didn't share racial and cultural identity with them. I wondered if they wanted to remain among themselves and saw me as an outsider. I certainly felt like the outsider.

As I got older, I started to realize more how much of an importance Americans put on the racial identity. With this experience of not getting into the African Diaspora dance team, I didn't wonder simply if it was also because I was white, but also if this dance club was one of the only safe spaces for black people on campus. When James Baldwin, in the documentary, *I am not your negro* says: "Most of white Americans I have ever encountered had a negro friend, a negro maid or somebody in high school but they never or rarely after school was over came to my kitchen. We were segregated from the schoolhouse door. Therefore he doesn't know, he really does not know for me to leave the school and go back to Harlem. He doesn't know how negroes live." This quote from the 60's, which is still relevant to the black experience today, made me realize in great detail what it's like to be a black person in America.

I too had felt excluded sometimes, but it was because of cultural, not racial identity. I know it's not the same thing but, as I grew up between French and American culture, people never knew where to place me. I was never French enough or American enough. In the US people have often asked me : "Where are you from?" They were making the assumption that I wasn't from the US simply because I didn't have the American accent they were used to. The South African comedian Trevor Noah speaks different languages and understands different cultures. I identify with him

because he always has used his knowledge to connect with others. Trevor Noah also never quite fit in racially since he is light skinned and so people never thought he was African enough in South Africa and black enough in the US.

Through this rejection I learned that I had to become more aware of how other people viewed me. I never thought physical features could be important. I thought that people saw me as someone empathetic. I have often seen myself through the lens of non-physical features but I realized that the first thing people will see about me is physical: how I look, how I speak, how I move. I also realized that physical identity could be more important to black people than others, because it stops them from doing certain things in society and they are the victims of prejudices and racial profiling that is ingrained within American society.