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Your Positionality and Identity in the World

At twenty-two, I'd like to think that I know who I am and how I experience the world. I can list what identity groups I belong to and explain how they intersect, resulting in various privileges and oppressions. However, the ability to make a list and an understanding of intersectionality do not account for the nuances of experience. They also do not account for how your identity constantly evolves or how you have agency in constructing and performing your identity. I immediately think back to my understanding of self when I was 18 and how it is so different from my current understanding of myself four years later.

"What are you?" I have been asked this question about a million times in my life. However, I only learned that this question was a microaggression at age 18. This revelation occurred after watching an outdated video assigned by my college in their effort to build an inclusive community. According to the video, it meant that I didn't fit neatly into other people's boxes, as there is something about me that others cannot easily identify and stereotype. It explained why I have been spoken to in Spanish, assumed that I am Jewish based on my 'looks' and my lack of religious belief, and have been told that I cannot be 'fully' white because my hair is too curly and my skin is naturally tan.

"What are you?" I used to attempt to answer that daunting question growing up. I would respond by saying that I wasn't completely white because my grandfather was Creole or Black and from New Orleans. However, that was not a sufficient response for those who were asking. They would laugh, making their disbelief clear, and some dared to ask for proof. As I did not want them to think I was lying, I would quickly scramble through my phone to find a picture of my grandfather before the conversation had moved on, but most were still not convinced. I was

always left exasperated and confused because I could never seem to please anyone or meet this "demand for separation of self into an acceptable piece for someone else's comfort and agenda" (Gatson, 2003, pp. 40-41). I was not white enough to be white, but also not Black enough to be Black, which made understanding who I am extremely difficult.

It is very evident that when people look at me, I am first perceived as white. This perception is deepened because I was also socialized as white. This physical and social appearance is a direct display of the privilege I have in our world today. However, to completely accept and embody this perception, is "to acknowledge only [a portion] of me and not many understand how that can make a person of mixed race feel" ("What I Wish You Knew: learning to accept an identity associated with being biracial," 2019, p.1).

By socializing me as white, my family denied me access to important information about my family's history and a salient aspect of my identity. My grandfather is not white. My mother's father was born in New Orleans in 1939. He is of "African, French, Haitian, and Native American descent, making him and his family Creoles of color" (Anderson, 2013, p.4). However, under Louisiana law, Creoles were classified as Black, regardless of his grandmother's fair 'French-looking,' as opposed to 'black-looking' skin tone (Anderson, 2013). My grandfather and his family, as Black Catholics under Louisiana law, experienced "segregation both inside and outside the church" (Anderson, 2013, p.5). They had to drink water from different fountains, attend different theaters, and sit behind screens in street cars and on buses (Anderson, 2013, p.7).

I include these quotes not because I could not paraphrase them, but because their origin is important. When you Google my grandfather, the first link that pops up is from Boston College. When you click on it, you are brought to an educational journal PDF titled *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits,* and underneath that title is my grandfather's name and the words "Creole,

Catholic, and Jesuit." Although I am still uncertain as to who R. Bentley Anderson, S.J., is (and should probably call my grandfather to find out), I now had my family's history at my fingertips.

I read how people occupying their same racial caste would self-segregate "between lighter-skinned people of color and darker-skinned folks" as it gave those with lighter skin a societal advantage (Anderson, 2013, p.7). However, my grandfather's family "did not subscribe to that type of socioeconomic and racial profiling" (Anderson, 2013, p.7). That being said, my grandfather still "knew of relatives who, based on their appearance, 'passed' from the black world into the white world" and "were [now] on the white side of the Rousseve clan" who "disavowed knowing any black Rousseves" (Anderson, 2013, p.8). My grandfather and his family remained in the 'black world' and proceeded to work towards "positive change in New Orleans's race relations," as "his father worked with Catholic interracial organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and civil rights attorney A. P. Tureaud" (Anderson, 2013, p.7). A continuation of what his family had worked towards when they "took issue with the law, contributing "to the legal fees for Homer Plessy's challenge in 1892 to Louisiana's race laws" (Anderson, 2013, p.4).

While this synopsis barely scratches the surface of a deeper history, it is enough to explain why, when I was prompted to fill out the *Common App*'s demographic section, I selected 'Black or African American' and 'White.' This was a decision that I had long debated, and still after doing what I thought was correct (as my mother had selected the same demographics when she was applying to college). This is because much of my family has entered the world of whiteness. They have joined the "white side of the Rousseve clan," but that does not mean that I have to follow (Anderson, 2013, p.8). There is a "sense of choice that exists in racial and ethnic identities" (Waters, 1990, as cited in Gatson, 2003, p.27). I possess a capability for resistance as

someone who is a stakeholder within this particular community of multiracial identity (Cammarota & Fine, 2010). I do not have to accept this invitation to whiteness. I can "place myself in the amorphous position" of being multiracial, in which I can "attempt to articulate the richness of the identity and ongoing thought processes that I present herein" (Gatson, 2003, p.41).

References

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