

My Colored Identity by Ashley Daniels

My best friend Kristen and I met in Mrs. Colman's junior kindergarten class. I remember the day the following school year when our kindergarten teacher began the lesson about colors. Mrs. Dixon distributed to each student a set of note cards that had different color shapes on each card. She instructed the class to hold up the card that matched the name she called out. Like any anxious five-year-old, Kristen and I began to go through cards before Mrs. Dixon began the activity. As we shuffled through the cards we came upon a card with a black square on it. Kristen didn't hesitate: "Why do they call you black? You're brown." She held the black card against my arm. I couldn't figure out what to say. I had never really thought about it. I don't know if I ever answered her question. I guess I could have said, "They call me black for the same reasons they call you white." But, while her skin color resembled the white card more than my skin resembled the black card, neither one of us exactly matched the card. At that time, neither Kristen nor I knew that our race had nothing to do with the color spectrum.

At age five, I had experienced an issue that would change my life forever. Kristen was right—I did not match the black card, so why was I called black? What made me black and her white? With the constant mixed messages communicated by society, it's hard to define one's identity as a black person. On the one hand, you are told that because you're black, you steal, you're probably not going to college, you feel bitter and angry, you speak loudly, and you ought to feel ashamed. On the other hand, people tell you to take pride in and embrace your identity, but how can you take pride in and embrace a racial identity when you don't even know who you are? According to "Identity Matters: A New Intervention Threshold for Social Work Practitioners Working with African American Adolescents," an article found in *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, it is hard for ethnic and racial minorities to develop their identity because they not only experience puberty, but they are expected to adapt to the western European culture as well as their own, while facing "image denigration, and racism" (Decarlo 36). It is not easy to try to fit into two different cultures, especially where one culture is characterized as superior to another. This identity crisis causes much confusion and discomfort in life.

Mrs. Dixon's lessons on colors were only the beginning of my journey of finding my identity as a person of color. As the years progressed, the uncertainty intensified. My next encounter with this awareness of color occurred at age eight. I remember sitting in the back of my mother's car as she drove me and a friend home from piano lessons.

"I'm white," my friend said. I'm not sure to this day how we even got to this topic, but I remember it like it was yesterday. I can hear her repeating herself:

"I'm white."

"No, you're not," I argued in disbelief.

"Yes, I am," she retorted.

"No, you're black."

I could see she had obviously lost her mind. Sure, I wore glasses, but I wasn't blind. Whom did she think she was fooling?

"Well, my mom said I could be white if I wanted to."

She could see I didn't buy her story. Why would her mother tell her that? Even at age eight, I knew she couldn't change the color of her skin, so why didn't her mother know that too? I couldn't understand why she wanted to be white. This discussion prompted several questions in my mind. Was she ashamed of being black, and if so why? At the time, I didn't realize that oftentimes kids refuse to identify themselves as black because of the messages sent. According to psychologist

Beverly Daniel Tatum, the author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* some children express their desire to be white because of the “white privilege” portrayed in the media (43). It never occurred to me that maybe my friend wanted to be white not because she disliked being black, but because she felt if she said she were white, then she would be judged differently by others. Because of the lack of education and low economic status, blacks are often portrayed as ignorant and poor, while whites are portrayed as rich and educated.

The fact that society has set boundaries to define what’s black and what’s not only causes blacks to develop misconceptions about their race, but it also allows those outside of the black race to form false beliefs concerning the black race. During my freshman year in high school, my own “blackness” came into question. My earth science teacher ended his lecture early, leaving the class to chat before the bell rang. I sat talking to my friend Shannon, who was also black. While discussing our plans for the weekend, a white girl that sat at the end of the table interrupted our conversation.

“Can I ask you two a question?” she said.

“Sure,” Shannon and I responded.

“Why don’t you two act like other black people?” she chirped.

“What do you mean?” we asked.

“Well, ya’ll are so quiet, and ya’ll don’t fight or anything.”

Slightly amused by her ignorance and slightly shocked she had the gall to ask such questions, I sat in silence for a moment.

“I mean most black people are so loud and angry. They always want to hit somebody or something, but ya’ll aren’t like that. You guys are nice.” She seemed so serious.

“First of all, not all black people are alike, and second, I have always been the quiet type, and third, I wasn’t raised to solve my problems by fighting,” I responded.

“Yeah, but still ya’ll aren’t like other black people.” She continued on to say, “Ashley, you’re from Chesterfield. That’s why you act the way you do. But, Shannon, you’re from Petersburg, and you don’t act like other kids from Petersburg.”

I understood perfectly what she was trying to say. Because I was from Chesterfield, a majority white county, I was supposed to act differently. On the other hand, Shannon was from Petersburg, a majority black city, but she didn’t fit the stereotype. This encounter marked the first time that I realized that maybe I didn’t act like the black stereotype, yet I was angered that my race had been portrayed in such a negative way. I guess she could see that Shannon and I had become put off by her choice of conversation, so she comforted us with this final comment: “It’s not a bad thing, it’s a good thing.” If she believed that was a compliment, she was mistaken.

After this encounter, I found myself constantly wondering, did others see me in the way she did? Even more importantly, what about those of my own race? I became more aware of my race and developed sensitivity to attributes that set me apart from my race. For example, one of my friends was talking on the phone to a black male, and I just so happened to be talking to some other girls in the background. The guy on the phone, overhearing this background conversation, asked what color we were, and when my friend responded “black,” he laughed and said, “Man, ya’ll all sound white.” I immediately began to wonder what made him say that. Bothered by this statement, I asked a black girl whether I sound white, and she said yes. I was quite perplexed and couldn’t understand what made me sound like something I wasn’t. Once again, a line was drawn between me and my race.

Not only had someone of another race separated me from the black race, but those of the black race had also separated me from the race. I thought it was odd that others considered me so different from the black race since I mostly associated with those of my own race in and out of

school. While I had several white friends like most of the other black students, in class, in assemblies, and in the cafeteria, I sat with black people because I identified with them.

I soon learned that some of my other black friends had experienced the same separation from the black race when they discussed how in middle school they were the only black students in their honors classes and when they made good grades they were labeled as “acting white.” Classifications like “acting white” are not uncommon among minorities. According to field research conducted by renowned scholars Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, minorities consider “certain activities or events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because...[they] are characteristic of white Americans” (qtd. in Tatum 60-61). As a result, their black classmates would tease them. Psychologist Tatum states that this type of behavior is not uncommon among black students because academic achievement is excluded from the black cultural stereotype (62-63). Because of the lack of educational experience and the economical disadvantage, black students in general do not have as much early exposure to the mainstream society. As a result of this delay, black kids gain knowledge at a later age than their white counterparts.

While some considered me an oddity of my race, others just couldn’t see past my race. For example, when conversations arose about racial issues such as slavery, they appeared to become uncomfortable about the topic. On the other hand, other students addressed me using slang as if it would make me feel more comfortable.

The flip-flopped messages have made it difficult for blacks to find one true identity. Although the aspect of embodying two different cultures appears unique, it makes it difficult to find one identity that fits you without feeling rejected by either culture, or both. It’s like when a child’s parents get a divorce, and the child must decide with whom he or she wishes to live. How does one remain true to him- or herself without feeling as though he or she will be ostracized by one culture or another? Dr. King once said he had a dream that one day we would not be judged by the color of our skin, yet color plays a factor in the way we define ourselves.

As I reflect on the past, the present, and the future, I don’t think the identity crisis will ever come to an end because in reality both skin color and society’s perceptions of skin color play significant roles in one’s development; however, it is important that everyone be seen as an individual. Accept me as black not because of the way I carry myself, dress, or speak, but because of the rich history and culture I have to offer you. Understand that I strive to achieve my highest potential not because I am “trying to act white,” but because I have set goals and ambitions for myself. When you look at me or any other person of color, know that the path to finding our true selves has not been easy. The blending of two cultures has been both a curse and a blessing: I am blessed because I can utilize the experience from both cultures, but I am cursed because some believe I can only symbolize one culture or the other.

Works Cited

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