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Into Words *A Cultural Background Assignment*

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Assigned in COM 313: Intercultural Communication (Dr. Milton Shatzer)

I reside in Carson, California. My home is located in a diverse suburb just outside of Los Angeles. My mother used to be a teacher, but now stays at home, and my father is an LA County Fire Captain. I have two older brothers. The younger of the two, Jabari, is a Junior at Eastern Washington University. The eldest, Damani just graduated from Harvard. My ethnic background is African-American. I was raised in the Lutheran Church. My parents and I are of the same religion.

That was the easy part: questions one through four. Meek inquiries; simple responses. Calm facts. But the fifth is an interrogation camouflaged in leisure. Slid into an introductory “Cultural Background Assignment.” It reads, “Have you ever personally experienced discrimination (e.g., ethnic, gender, age, nationality, social class discrimination)? If so, please describe the situation. How did this make you feel?” The sixth question asks if I’ve ever witnessed discrimination toward another person.

My fingers tremble upon my keyboard as I attempt to approach this topic...

This subject has affected my life more than I can put into words. While my peers may approach this question by simply thinking of an experience they might’ve had, and write it down, my experience with discrimination has roots far too deep for casual discussion. I am pressured with the responsibility of explaining the history of a race of people which was not adequately taught in schools. Although this is a personal cultural background assignment, this question is not solely about *me*.

Firstly, it is not possible for me to sufficiently account for all aspects of the heavy topic: discrimination/racism against Black people in America. Perhaps an ironically beautiful poem, or a heart wrenching film, or a collection of literature could explain all that must be explained. I am merely an African-American teenager emerging into adulthood, constantly in rooms full of people I feel will never wholly relate to me. I am somewhat uncomfortable with openly expressing

myself, yet passionate about voicing the pain that has been forced upon the community of people of African descent in the United States—which is ultimately unaddressed and largely undocumented. It is known that the United States has a large immigrant culture, and is very diverse. The common misconception is that everyone here is either an immigrant or a descendent of immigrants, and that those who immigrated to the United States did so in pursuit of the ‘American Dream.’ However, my ethnic group is the only group who is an exception to that rule. We did not willingly journey in pursuit of the ‘American Dream’ — we were kidnapped and forced to work as slaves so that others could, all the while being barred from the aspects of life that are said to make America great and unique. This issue has never been addressed fully by our government or our citizens. Consequently, it leads to many complex issues because we exist in a country that was not designed to incorporate us fully as rightful citizens.

The fifth question asks if I have ever personally experienced discrimination. My experience was like a child losing the stars in her eyes because the sun had kissed her skin. And her parents’ skin, and their parents’ skin and so on and so forth. It is sorrow more grave than losing your youthful innocence and blissful ignorance about the world — it is personal. My experience with discrimination surpasses the grief of having lost a loved one. It is realizing that the “freedom,” “democracy,” and “justice” that the United States preaches was never meant for me.

My experience with racism and discrimination is my everyday life. I am aware that in this world, with my identity and others like me, it is inevitable. Racism is institutionalized in America, and is factual. It is so engrained within our society that it is retained through the subconscious mind. It is in the media, television, and worldly religious culture; it is scattered throughout every aspect of life through subliminal messages and it proves a nation of hypocrisy. My “experience” is living knowing that to the world, first, I am Black, and

second, I am Nyah. It is feeling the weight of my pigment as if I am constantly lugging oversized suitcases through life's airport. It is the overwhelming majority of magazines I pick up, books I read, movies I watch, and mainstream messages I absorb telling me that European features are most beautiful. It is having been taught to hate the color of my skin, the shape of my nose, the build of my body, and the texture of my hair — all of which are God's creation. And it is the majority of the population holding those same beliefs within their subconscious, because they have been ingrained within all of us.

It is knowing that the height of the intelligence, discoveries, abilities, and greatness of Black people has been intentionally destroyed and eradicated out of my school textbooks. It is a constant belittler of who I am, who my parents are, and who my brothers are. It is a constant awareness of disadvantage in the back of my mind, ready to reveal itself at any point and time — it is anger and sadness. It is living oppressed, while your sorrow, pain, and cries of injustice are not always viewed as valid. It is seeing injustice against Emmett Till, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Renee Davis, Mike Brown, Tanisha Anderson, Eric Garner, Kendra James, Oscar Grant, Sean Bell, John Crawford, Ezell Ford, Chris Lollie, and a countless amount of other Black individuals because of the color of their skin. It is acknowledgment of the presence of such injustice being rejected by an innumerable amount of people, because of the inevitable racist roots of the nation, and lack of thorough education. It is mourning the loss of my hopeful spirit, after having met a sorrow I had not known before, while many of my friends/associates remain ignorant to enormous cries of horror, or simply do not care. It is feeling overwhelmed about writing about being Black, because I know I cannot fully elucidate what it is like in a small, introductory "Cultural Background Assignment."

In addition to dealing with racism and discrimination from the society Black people live in, it can be found in Willie Lynch's "The Making of a Slave" that the foundation of our place in the country was based on manipulation in order to also turn us against ourselves, and break apart our family structures. The United States teaches us that "White is right," and "Black is bad," intensely psychologically harming Black people. Most people do not understand that the many negative labels attached to being Black were created by White

people and falsely forced upon Black people for the economic, social, and political gains of White people.

Many also often hold the assumption that our society is "post-racial," while it is not. The differences of culture between White and Black people, as put by Lyndon B. Johnson, "are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice. They are anguishing to observe. For the Negro, they are a constant reminder of oppression. For the White, they are a constant reminder of guilt."

Because of such heavy history regarding Black people in America, in my case, "life" and "being discriminated against" are synonymous. The topic is too complex for me to give a quick story about being discriminated against, and then explain how it made me feel. The feelings never leave because racism oozes out of the creases and corners of the nation. Because the foundation of the country I live in was based on racism, implied along with my skin color is a package deal of often feeling *Black in White space*.

Until high school, the schools I attended were always ethnically and culturally diverse. Attending a predominantly White high school in Orange County put my brothers, parents and I through many tribulations, having served as a microcosm of the world — exposing the realities of the unjust and inescapable consequences for the color of our skin.

And that was the hard part: questions five and six. The remainders are meek inquiries for simple responses and calm facts: I have always had extremely diverse friends. I have a few relatives who are Filipino, and some who are white. The most vivid smells I remember from childhood are of hot turf from track meets, grass from Victoria Park — where I practiced cheerleading — my parents' cooking, cilantro, Jergen's lotion, SleepyTime Tea, "new car," new books, and my grandmother's house. I am Black ink on White pages. My background is my foreground. There is always room to spill. I will have more to write. If only the trembling could stop. ^{FC}RC