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Racial Autobiography

Growing up as an only child made me more aware of my surroundings. I always observed; I saw things quicker than everyone else did. I could quickly tell what was different. It was a blessing and a curse for me, and let me tell you my story and where I came from. I grew up in the Philippines, and as you may have known, the Spaniards, Americans, and Japanese colonized us. Asian countries like China, Malaysia, and Indonesia also have had an enormous influence on our country, historically speaking. What is truly important to know in our history is that the first settlers in the pre-historic Philippines were the Negrito (Aeta) groups, followed by the Austronesian people. The complexion of Filipinos ranges from fair, olive, and light tan to dark brown. Our physical features range from being Asian-looking, Caucasian, or having black, short, with kinky or curly hair, just like our ancestors.

All these said differences have given other people the power to insult, bully, or discriminate against individuals with dark skin. Unfortunately, some Filipinos still think having a fairer complexion is superior to being black or brown due to our history. Ever since the Western people colonized our country, Filipinos have felt inferior to themselves. They were no longer confident in their roots. Being tall, having a pointy nose, straight hair, and fair skin is what Filipinos believed as the beauty standard. Adoring what the Westerners have that we lack is what we call *colonial mentality*. According to the definition, it is a sort of internalized oppression that conditions people subjected to colonialism to believe that their ethnic or cultural identity is inferior to Western culture or whiteness. As a result, they strive to adopt western culture and are taught to despise their indigenous heritage (Balbas).

My earliest memory of race is when I first started reading books when I was four. I noticed that all the characters in my book were white; none were brown or black. I had a classmate who had monolid or Oriental eyes and another who had big eyes. I was a curious kid, so I would ask my parents questions like “Why are her eyes different from mine?” or

“Why is my cousin’s complexion different from mine?” I have learned from an early age that people are different from each other, just as our faces and build are different. Only when I turned seven years old that I first encounter a half-British/half-Filipino classmate whom everyone adored and was always told pretty. She was taller than us, her hair was blonde, her eyes were bluish-green, her skin was fairer than all of us in the classroom, and she just spoke English. At that time, I thought to myself, “Oh, she is not from here; she is different from us. She is just like one of the characters in the books that I have read.” She was not made fun of compared to my other classmate, who was dark and was called names. White people were loved and adored; meanwhile, people of color were treated differently.

I did not know how it felt to be made fun of, for I was one of the kids who had a fair skin complexion back in the Philippines, but not until I came here to America. Some international student who is also foreign from this country made fun of the way I talk. I felt belittled and insulted, so I stood up for myself and asked her directly if she was making fun of me, and she stopped. I was unsure if she was just not culturally aware that people have different accents or was just plainly attacking me. Another experience I have is back when I had a server job and a table that consisted of a Hispanic lady and three white ladies. All of them were pleasant. However, right after I turned my back, the Hispanic lady, whom I did not expect to actually say something, said something that left me scarred. She said that she hates to be prejudiced, but the restaurant should not hire anyone who cannot understand English. I have always had bad hearing; the restaurant was so busy and super loud then. Just because I had her repeat whatever she said, she already thought I could not understand English. That hurt, and everything that happened is still vivid to me.

Being racially conscious at an early age helped me become aware and respectful of everyone’s identity and culture. I was fortunate to travel to different countries starting when I was eight. I was also lucky to have my dad, a seafarer, who tells me countless stories of people he met abroad. I was a fan of learning about cultures and knowing what people from other countries are like. They were the ones who taught me that people come from different backgrounds may it be culture, religion, or gender. My parents also taught me not to judge, to always respect people around me, and to treat others as my equals. Having this foundation and upbringing really helped me become grounded and humble.

As per the stages of racial identity/development that I have gone through (using the first model), I went from stages one through four. I am currently in my introspection phase and have been working on getting to the fifth stage. The more I traveled and the more I interacted with different people from different cultures, the more I was able to accept myself, my culture, and theirs as well. I learned how to co-exist in a diverse environment. I have learned to just accept people of different backgrounds without having any prejudices. The reason why I said I am working on reaching the fifth stage, which is Integrative Awareness because I still have to work on being willing to be a spokesperson for the group. I can advocate for them and function in a diverse setting, but being the voice is still something that I have to build in myself.

My concern about my racial past is that I could not step up and defend kids being bullied because I was afraid I might get bullied too. I was a bystander. Looking back, I should have done or said something. I now wonder how that kid felt growing up. Did we destroy his self-esteem? Was he able to build himself back up? Was he able to at least accept himself at some point? Was he able to forgive those who hurt him? I feel bad for not being able to do anything despite learning from an early age that discriminating against and bullying someone is bad. What encourages me about my racial past is that I come from a family whose sense of justice is very strong. I was brought up in a household where bullying is condemned. My parents raised me to become humble and grounded at all times.

Advocating for racial justice is important because it seeks to address systemic inequalities and discrimination based on race. The purpose of racial justice is to create a society where individuals of all races are treated fairly and have equal opportunities and access to resources, power, and privileges. This includes addressing issues such as police brutality, economic disparities, and educational inequalities. The ultimate goal is to create a more equitable and just world for all individuals, regardless of their race.

Works Cited

Balbas, Cassandra. "Colonial Mentality in the Filipino-/American Community." *Asian Mental Health Project*, 22 Oct. 2020, asianmentalhealthproject.com/2020/10/22/colonial-mentality-in-the-filipino-american-community/. Accessed 1 Feb. 2023.