

Mason Pippenger

21 September 2018

JOUR 328

Essay

Reconciling Blackness

The southern Texas sun cooked us three black boys darker than we already were. Bentsen Elementary had been let out, and kids scurried out to their parents' cars as the final bell rang. I sat with my brother Matthew in the back seat while Micah occupied the passenger seat.

We were used to being the new kids in school. Now in the fifth grade, I had moved five times. Matthew and I, who were the same age, adjusted nonchalantly to whatever school we were at. Micah, who was two years younger, had a more difficult time adjusting. He'd cry to my parents often, normally about wanting to move back to Indiana and how he hated the Texas heat.

That's why when we got into the car, I wasn't surprised when he started sobbing. Matthew and I exchanged tired glances and my dad asked him what was wrong. After a few minutes of him not answering and more sobbing, he finally responded.

"Someone called me a nigger."

I looked over at Matthew, and we both rolled our eyes and let out apathetic sighs. My dad was already halfway across the parking lot going in to talk to the principal as Micah continued to cry.

"Micah," I informed, "That's just what people are going to say. Get used to it."

"Yeah, you got to stop crying about it. Toughen up," Matthew chimed in before my dad made his way back to the car.

I didn't recall this experience until last semester when I went to an on-campus showing of "Dark Girls," a documentary that touches on colorism within the African-American community. There is this scene in the movie where a little black girl takes the "Doll Test." The Doll Test is a study where a black doll and a white doll are displayed. A black child is then asked questions about the dolls, such as "Which doll is nice?" Contrastingly, the child is asked about which doll is bad. They are also supposed to identify which doll looks like them. Many of the children attributed the white doll to positive attributes and the black doll to negative attributes. The original 1940s study concluded that black children displayed strong signs of internalized racism, stemming from discrimination and segregation.

In the era of Black Lives Matter rallies and racial empowerment, it sounds hard to believe that I was not only ashamed of my blackness, but ashamed of other people's blackness. Looking back, I realize that much of my childhood, I felt like I had to prove myself to my white peers because I was automatically a step behind them. This idea grew to me wanting all black people to prove themselves to white people because we were "lesser." I turned on my own brothers and sisters and demanded that they accept our inferiority.

Internalized racism is not the shocking concept of my anecdote though. What shocked me was my age. In the fifth grade I barely knew what sex was, let alone what internalized and inter-community racism was. But there I was, telling my third grade brother to suck it up. *Where did this come from? Who taught me this?*

I haven't come to a clear answer. My parents and older siblings are white meaning that this couldn't have been something learned from them. I didn't have any older black role models in my life who could tell me to toughen up.

In the end, I guess it doesn't really matter how my young brain turned on itself. I just believed that since we were black, we should get used to the racism. This, in turn, validated racism to a certain extent.

Today, I know who I am. I embrace my blackness. My own personal journey with internalized racism is still a struggle though. I have to constantly remind myself that I am worthy of the same things white people are. Reconciliation with oneself is a process. And so is reconciliation with my community.

Multiple replications of the 1940s Doll Test have been done in recent years, all yielding similar results. Young minorities view themselves as less than. And I believe this cycle of internalized racism and inter-community racism will continue until something changes.

This generation is known for fight for civil rights and equality. Minorities are now being given more platforms than ever. But it must go further than putting black people on a pedestal. Rallies and protests mean nothing if we have to keep doing them every few months. Changing this preconceived, racist mindset includes educating and letting black children know that they are valid and that their differences should be celebrated. They should be taught the value of community and chosen family. Black girls need to support black girls and black boys should be as close as brothers, no matter what a whitewashed world throws against them.