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Ms. Antonio

Spiritualities of the Oppressed; Period 2

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Navigating a Multiracial Identity

“Kevin, I’ve received a complaint from another student about you and Jakob. You’ve been accused of excluding a white student from the parties you have at lunch. You need to stop being racist.”

Racist? What does that mean?

But let me offer some background.

From kindergarten to eighth grade, I attended St. Simon Parish School in Los Altos. I had a happy life as a child, but as a little biracial kid surrounded by a nearly homogenous population of white children, I tended to stick close to the other Filipino kids in my grade. In first grade, we sat in four seat table groups, and when the teacher, Mrs. Larson, allowed us to choose our seats in the first grade, I sat in what the other students called the “Filipino Corner” with three other Filipino kids. We didn’t really know what we were doing, only that we liked being with kids that looked like us. And in 2nd grade, we hosted this little celebration during most lunchtimes called “The Feast”, where we pooled all of our food in the middle of one of the lunch tables, so we could all sample each other’s lunch, similar to the family style dinners typical in Filipino-American parties. And sure, we were a little exclusive, just because we liked hanging out with each other, but I distinctly remembered that anyone who had food to share was welcome in The Feast. But this one kid, let’s call him Charlie, got really frustrated with us because he

thought we were “excluding” him on the pure basis that he was white. So he proceeded to tell our teacher, Ms. Green, who pulled me aside while we were walking to dismissal (a HUGE deal at the time), and berated me using the words above. Racist? How could I be racist, as a 2nd grader?

I still think about this experience sometimes. It was ultimately a summation of a larger issue that I have been grappling with my entire life: this challenge of navigating a multiracial identity, being half Filipino, half white, as I struggled then and continue to struggle now to reconcile what seem to be two mutually exclusive parts of myself.

Let’s offer a little context. The United States, for much of its history, has been obsessed with singular categorization, filing each person in the country into a homogenous box that allowed the country to sort its people. This is reflected most clearly in the US Census, through which the United States has demanded citizens to choose only one racial selection among the categories. Multiracial people have often been forced to choose just one of the few categories available, rarely having a selection that was an accurate identification of their ethnic background. This forced categorization is emulative of the concept of race as a social construct, as even though multiracial people may belong to several different ethnicities, they were required to select a single “race” to describe their existence, despite how inaccurate it may be. Censuses dating back to the 1800s have had options such as “mulatto” and “octoroon” in order to identify any mixed African-American heritage, based on the concept in the Southern U.S. of the “one-drop rule,” but these were removed on the basis of “inaccurate data”, and were often ineffectual anyway in describing people of mixed race.

Particularly, more current censuses have highlighted the singular racial categorization that the country is known for. The 1970 Census counseled Americans on how to choose a race: they instructed census takers to mark the single racial category that they most identified with, and in case of uncertainty, the race of the person's father won out. In the 1980 and 1990 Censuses, if a person marked more than one selection, the Census Bureau recategorized them into a single race, usually to that of the person's mother, if it could be found. Only in the 2000 Census were multiracial respondents allowed to mark more than one race to identify themselves. And 2013 census data showed that 9.3 million Americans chose to identify as multiracial, comprising 3% of the population and with a median age of 19, demonstrating a steady shift of America's population to a more multiracial background. As a 17-year-old teenager, I am one of this growing number, and I have struggled to be proud of my multiracial background given America's mixed past on the subject.

Growing up, I was lucky enough to have two wonderful sets of grandparents, my German and Swiss grandmother and Croatian grandfather on my dad's side, and my Filipino grandmother and grandfather on my mom's side. And because of a variety of social, economic, and religious differences, these two sides always had sort of a prickly relationship, marred with sassy and ill-placed comments behind the backs of each side. I remember one Christmas Eve, my Filipino Lolo and Lola (grandfather and grandmother in Tagalog) handed my brother and I Christmas cards with a \$100 bill in each of them. My Lola says loudly enough for the entire family to hear, "I'm sorry it's only one hundred dollars, we are not nearly as rich as your other grandparents!" I remember thinking that comment was pretty rude, but I proceeded to have brunch with my white grandparents on Christmas morning and was handed a \$1000 check as my Christmas present. So

my Filipino side wasn't wrong, I certainly received a different gift that year from the two sides. Money and gifts like these were only symbolic of a larger conflict, as the boundary of wealth was just one of the many ways the differences between my grandparents was expressed. And of course, they care about each other, because their children love each other, but the uncomfortable tension between them still exist today. What's so funny to me is that I am the combination of them all: genetically, I carry around an equal part of all four of them, and personally, I carry all of their lessons and wisdom with me through everything I do and everywhere I go. But as a child, I didn't think about that. These little conflicts made me even more confused about how I can be these two completely different things, and still be 100% me. I struggled to find places where I belonged, always feeling too white for the Filipinos, and too Filipino for the white folks.

Starting at Bellarmine during the first week of school, I was a timid, 5'4 freshman, who was going to a school with a senior as a brother and a mom who was very involved in the school community. I knew a lot of friends, a lot of teachers, and I knew that the Schmidek name would be known by some of the people on campus. I wasn't wrong, as in my Freshman English class, my teacher recognized my last name, asked if I had a brother, and she realized that she had Michael in her English class his freshman year. Michael and I may not look exactly alike, but we are indeed brothers, but this woman didn't seem to think so. On one of our first days of class, she asks me, "You don't look anything like your brother. Are you adopted?" Woah, I thought. I chuckled a bit, told her no, and we moved on with the conversation. To this day, I still laugh at this story, because I'm sure she had the best of intentions. It was so hilariously ironic, as well, because coming into Bellarmine, I was sure that Schmidek would bring me a positive reputation,

one that had been created and maintained by my family. But instead, my very relation to that name was doubted, as this teacher doubted that I was even a part of my family, of my last name.

I had faced little comments, countless microaggressions about my multiracial identity many times over the course of my life, but I had always made excuses for it, justifying it as ignorance with well-meaning intentions. That was until I met Ms. Antonio, my religion teacher during my sophomore year, who I would become so close with that we now consider each other family. She encouraged me to attend her Justice Summit Breakout Session entitled “What are you? Navigating a Multiracial Identity”, during our Justice Summit Week in April of last year. Ms. Antonio, a Filipino-German teacher at Bellarmine who I had affectionately come to know as Tita (“aunt” in Tagalog) Cora, had recommended this Justice Summit session to me because of my multiracial background, but I would’ve come anyways just because it was Tita Cora. And through her PowerPoint Presentation that presented facts and statistics about being multiracial in this country, the Multiracial Unity Circle she put on which allowed us to share our experiences with people like us, and through the Power in Our Stories activity where we shared our stories of experiencing a multiracial identity with each other, I learned that being multiracial was something that was truly a part of me, and this is not about to go away anytime soon. And it was not only okay, but it was truly a good thing, as I had that much more culture, experience, and family dynamic shifts that allowed me to live two different lives that could truly coexist. Not only that, but I realized that the little comments and passive aggression I had been experiencing my entire life were unacceptable, and a product of true ignorance and superiority. I was fully validated in my eyes, and I thought that this wave of inspiration and empowerment could validate my multiracial identity.

It didn't last.

The week after the Summit, I was still feeling good, and I decided to share that with the squad I spend every morning with. I feel it necessary to add a little context about them: it's about five guys, all rich, white, with pretty much no experience with racism directed at them. Anyways, I decided to share with them about this session, and how I realized that I had experienced real instances of ignorance and discrimination in my life and how I was beginning to accept myself as multiracial, and proud. And they proceeded to tell me how everything I had experienced, everything that had been said to me, was either insignificant or just misinterpreted. A 20-minute period before school started essentially invalidated all the progress I had been making in self-acceptance, as these friends of mine thought all these realizations I had come to were completely ridiculous. And that sucked.

But it didn't really matter. I didn't need their approval to recognize the steps I had taken on my journey of self-acceptance. I understood from that moment on that I was multiracial, and I didn't need other people to understand or validate my experiences, as long as I could do it myself. I am proud to be who I am, and even though my grandparents may continue to bicker, or my teachers may doubt my family relations, or I might receive a thousand little comments about not being Asian enough or not being white enough over the rest of my lifetime, I know who I am.

I'm half white. I'm half Filipino. And I'm not racist, Ms. Green.

Works Cited

“Chapter 1: Race and Multiracial Americans in the U.S. Census.” *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 11 June 2015, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/chapter-1-race-and-multiracial-americans-in-the-u-s-census/.