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"I Don't Want to Be Ashamed, I Want to Learn About My History":

Racial Isolation in Portland's White Schools

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Abstract

Students of color in predominantly white school systems face significant challenges in their path to positive racial identity development due to racial isolation. Their journeys through the education system are impacted by a lack of same-race peers and educators, and the challenges they face are amplified by neighborhoods that are equally devoid of same-race community members. This paper explores the experiences of self-identified members of the African diaspora in predominantly white schools in Portland, Oregon. Their stories were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Analysis is informed by critical, feminist and constructivist perspectives, and utilizes a narrative approach. The experiences shared by these students offers teachers and educators in predominantly white schools useful context in understanding the viewpoints, challenges and unique journeys of their underrepresented students.

A Study in Racial Placelessness

My father calls me his “little white girl.” I am in fact Afro-Latina, with skin brown enough that I am never confused for white by white people. But, to my Puerto Rican father who grew up in the violent and culturally vibrant streets of Philadelphia and Camden, NJ, I might as well be white. My interests, the way I speak, how I carry myself – to him, it’s all white.

I will admit that I am lacking culturally. My black and Puerto Rican ancestry seems to have dried up in me; I do not speak Spanish, or dance salsa, or like collard greens. I am not invited to the cookout. For most of my life I gravitated toward the tuneless stylings of white indie rockers. My best friends growing up were white. My partner is white. The schools that raised me were white.

But I am not white. Right? Right. So how do we reconcile this cultural dissonance? How generalizable is my experience? How is racial identity developed in the absence of racially similar peers? Based on the anecdotal evidence of my fellow racially placeless people of color, along with the groundbreaking work of Beverly Tatum (1997, 2004) on black identity development in predominantly white schools, I theorize that there is a common thread that binds us. The study aims to investigate that common thread by exploring the ways students of color describe their experiences in predominantly white schools. This is a short, exploratory study funded through the McNair scholars program. Rather than offer up anything generalizable, this paper aims to simply share the stories of two students whose experiences are important and not uncommon.

Students of color in predominantly white school systems face significant challenges in their path to positive racial identity development due to racial isolation. Their journeys through the education system are impacted by a lack of same-race peers and educators, and the challenges they face are amplified by neighborhoods that are equally devoid of same-race community members. This paper

explores the experiences of self-identified members of the African diaspora in predominantly white schools in Portland, Oregon. Their stories were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Analysis is informed by critical, feminist and constructivist perspectives, and utilizes a narrative approach. The experiences shared by these students offers teachers and educators in predominantly white schools useful context in understanding the viewpoints, challenges and unique journeys of their underrepresented students.

“Torn Asunder”

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (DuBois, 1903, p. 2-3)

The literature already tells me that, in many capacities, I am not alone in my sense of racial isolation. That in itself has been empowering. Those who have written on this topic often describe it as a violence, which has legitimized the aching that I feel. When DuBois famously wrote of the “double consciousness” over a century ago, he wrote of being “torn asunder.” For a hundred years, his theory of double consciousness has resonated with black people in America. This conflict between the white American consciousness and the black consciousness persists even in those of us whose black consciousness has been wrenched from us through isolation from our people. For us, the black consciousness is a phantom limb we still reach for; for us, it is both there and not – a ghost that we grieve, something killed and yet lingering, still.

So long as power dynamics privilege whiteness in America, DuBois’ theory of double consciousness will resonate with the marginalized. Gloria Anzaldúa’s seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera* is in some ways eulogy to the wounds DuBois described. In other ways, it is a rallying cry -- a

call to reject the wounding and become whole in ways that were never sanctioned by whiteness. She, too, writes on the bifurcation between selves. For Anzaldúa, these selves are myriad and always mirrors – the indigenous self, the Mexican self, the American self; the female and the male; the academic and the spiritual. Like DuBois, Anzaldúa’s bifurcation is rooted in a strong sense of the two things at war – two things that cannot hold the same space, and yet must. Both DuBois and Anzaldúa acknowledge that this bifurcation of identity is both personal and imposed by society. We carry our own set of expectations for the identities we hold, and society carries another (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Navigating White Space

Lacy (2004) continues this conversation on dual consciousness with her contemporary work in strategic assimilation. Models of assimilation are often used when considering immigrants, but Lacy argues that all native-born blacks are immigrants in the United States, a country born of colonialism. Whiteness is centered here, and so all of us who fall to that more pigmented side of the color line must assimilate in varying capacities, balancing precariously between our cultures and the dominant, white culture.

Lacy’s 2004 study explored how black members of the middle class adapt in these traditionally white environments. What she found was a survival technique she termed *strategic assimilation*. Black community members in predominantly white neighborhoods did not abandon all ties to their black community. Instead, they actively and intentionally retained connections to black spaces, and used these black spaces to carefully nurture a sense of racial identity in their children. These black spaces offered a sense of community, reprieve from discrimination, and an opportunity to construct a black identity among peers.

Anderson (2016) also writes on blackness and white space. Anderson highlights the omnipresence of the black ghetto in the American consciousness, and the potency of this symbol in the lives of all black Americans -- regardless of their own personal relationship to the ghetto. For blacks in white spaces, the symbol looms large in the minds of whites around them. It relegates all blacks to caricatures of themselves in the white imagination. This, in turn, creates real, negative outcomes for blacks in white spaces.

Blaisdell (2016) hits the ground running by extending this racialization of space to schools. Blaisdell argues that black students navigating white schools are at an inherent disadvantage as outsiders to the dominant culture. Blaisdell discusses the “deracing” of schools, characterized by treating *symptoms* of systemic racial inequality without addressing the root problems. Otherwise known as “colorblindness,” the deracing of schools erases the identities and realities of students of color in curriculum, instruction and access. For example, curriculum design generally prioritizes and centers white perspectives, histories and ways of knowing.

Blaisdell’s work also explores the role of teachers in these white systems. Blaisdell argues that without specific, strategic counter-effort, even the most well-intentioned teachers will uphold and subsist white supremacy in their classrooms. More specifically, Blaisdell discusses teachers who buck these trends, and whose classes are better addressing and closing the achievement gap than their peers. They key, unifying element between these teachers was a commitment to understanding and acknowledging race and centering the experiences of students of color in their work.

“Acting White”

There has been much ado about the concept of “acting white.” Scholars have long postulated that black students self-sabotage their peers’ academic success by negatively equating it with whiteness.

“Acting white,” therefore, becomes something researchers point to in order to situate problems of academic underperformance within black student culture, rather than in white school systems.

Critical race theorists, however, have found a clearer explanation for the “acting white” phenomenon. Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) argue that there is no intrinsic “burden of acting white” associated with academic success for students of color... until they’re put in environments which create animosity between high-achieving and low-achieving blacks. Tyson (2011) later expanded on this idea, demonstrating how the usage of the “acting white” slur is connected to the school organization practice of tracking. In elementary students interviewed, there was almost no mention of race and no mention of “acting white.” Elementary students felt positively about the gifted program in their school and black students in the program were proud to be a part of it. Adolescents, however, found race more salient – perhaps because the racial composition of classes became more pronounced, and because identity development is a core developmental stage for adolescents. This study found that the “acting white” concept was a consequence of the racial composition of advanced classes. When black students were underrepresented in AP classes and segregated from other black students, students are left to fill in the blanks of why this happens. In schools where black students are routinely segregated out of advanced classes, “acting white” represented visual display, or participating in, white supremacy. This study found that the “acting white” label could be mitigated or avoided by socializing with other black students. Most notably, the study found that the “acting white” label was virtually nonexistent in predominantly black schools.

Ispa-Landa and Conwell (2015) take this concept further by discussing not only the racial classification of individuals, but the racial classification of schools. They wanted to know what caused certain students to classify high-achieving schools “white schools” and low-achieving schools as “black

schools.” Similarly to these other studies on “acting white”, these authors found that the racialization of school achievement was directly related to tracking. Black students in predominantly white schools strongly associated low academic performance as a “black school” trait. These black students distanced themselves socially from black peers and were more likely to hold negative stereotypes about the students who attended black schools. Most notably, the researchers found that black students in predominantly black schools did *not* have these strong distinctions about “black schools” and “white schools.” These students were more likely to point to resources and other factors as the causes of low school performance -- not race. These findings demonstrate that attending predominantly white schools has an impact on the worldview of students of color, and how they understand the larger black community.

Racial Identity Development

A child’s self-esteem is defined as a sense of their own self-worth, and is often influenced by messages from others (Wassell & Gilligan, 2010). Early adolescence is a critical stage in identity development. In his theory of human development, Erikson introduced the idea of “identity crisis”, wherein the adolescent contends with identity confusion and begins a reflection process to determine a sense of self (Wassell & Gilligan, 2010). For children who belong to ethnic minorities in predominantly white populations, early adolescence also involves an “ethnic identity search,” characterized by “a sober realization that in society people of color are treated differently” (p. 214). The child’s environment, parental influence, and messages the child receives about their ethnic group play a strong role in whether the child’s ethnic identity development is positive or negative.

William Cross offers a widely researched model of Black Identity Development that outlines five stages of racial identity formation: Pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and

internalization-commitment. While this model does not necessarily progress with a specific developmental age group, the transition into early adolescence is often the catalyst. Table 1 describes these five seminal stages in detail, as summarized by contemporary scholars.

Table 1. Stages of Black Identity

1. Pre-encounter	The black person has a Euro-centric, “anti-black/pro-white” frame of reference and view of themselves and the world. (Robinson, 111). In this stage, the black individual is either consciously or subconsciously seeking white approval and distance from blackness. (Tatum)
2. Encounter	In this stage, the individual experiences an event which forces them to acknowledge the impact of racism in their life, and a new racial identity search is born from the dissonance that creates. Tatum (1999) writes, “Faced with the reality that he or she cannot truly be White, the individual is forced to focus on his or her identity as a member of a group targeted by racism.”
3. Immersion	This stage can be seen as an inversion of the “pre-encounter” stage. The black individual has a “pro-black, anti-white” perspective, and seeks to visibly associate themselves with blackness and distance themselves from whiteness.
4. Internalization	In this stage, the black individual finds ease and confidence with their racial identity, and no longer feels an urgency to prove or quantify their

	blackness. The internalized black individual is less hostile toward white people/white culture, and is open to relationships with white people who are respectful of their black identity. (Tatum, 1997)
5. Internalization-commitment	This stage is characterized by “positive self-esteem, ideological flexibility, and openness about one’s blackness” (Robinson, 113). In this stage, the black individual is committed to the concerns of black people as a group and involved in finding solutions (Tatum, 1997).

I offer one critique of Cross’ model of identity development. When a child lives in a neighborhood without black peers, this model may see some variation. Without black role models and culture readily available to explore, the immersion stage may be unreachable, or at least delayed indefinitely. This model seems to suggest that a positive black racial identity is always reachable, yet it offers conditions which are not easily met in a primarily white city, like Portland Oregon.

Beverly Daniel Tatum’s seminal work, “Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?” (1997) addresses the way race and space impact racial identity development. Adolescence presents a critical developmental point characterized by self-discovered and identity development for all children. Tatum argues that during this developmental stage, black adolescents must also grapple with racial identity, because society considers them in racial terms.

Tatum also explores the ways that racial identity is developed when black students go to predominantly white schools (2004). Tatum found that race-conscious black families who speak in open

terms about race are more likely to foster a positive racial identity in their black children than race-avoidant families (2004). However, white-dominated schools can undermine even strong racial identity foundation -- especially schools with racialized tracking. Tatum found that black students at these schools had white friends, but their social ties to them were tenuous. Black students were less likely to date than their white peers.

Theory

“Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting-the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend-to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.”

(hooks, 1991, p. 1)

I have been a storyteller since I was very small. My handwriting has not changed since I was 8 years old, when I would cram so many words into timed writing assignments that the letters would bleed into one another and the end result was indecipherable. I always had so much to say, so many stories to tell. I still do.

Critical race theory has been my saving grace. In her open arms I have found validation of my need for narrative. One of the core tenets of this theory is the right to name one's own reality (Ladson-Billings, 2004). We recognize that reality is constructed. Critical race theory values the unique voice, the subjective, the experiential -- that which is not yet proven, or can never truly be proven. Critical race theory asserts the necessity of story in a society situated in white supremacy. Story adds necessary context.

Critical race theory (CRT) insists that racism is the norm in U.S. society (Ladson-Billings, 2004). It is both foundational and systemic, embedded in all aspects of daily life and how we understand our

world. As such, CRT necessarily critiques liberalism (Ladson-Billings, 2004), and highlights the ways that whiteness prohibits civil rights gains unless whites also stand to gain.

In education, CRT holds that schools are socializing spaces which are designed to uphold white supremacy. Curriculum centers whiteness, white achievements and white ways of knowing. Instruction presumes a deficit model for black students. Testing serves to reify stereotypes about black deficiency. Inequality in school funding is a function of structural racism. Desegregation has only been promoted in ways that privilege whites. For more on this topic, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2004) is a genius.

Yosso (2005) introduces a framework to challenge traditional interpretations of cultural capital theory, and introduce a counter-theory: community cultural wealth. Yosso insists that cultural capital theory has been used to analyze community of color and challenges the white middle standard by which all other cultures are assessed as either succeeding or, more commonly, found lacking. This type of deficits theorizing is especially harmful in schools, and often strips schools of their enormous potential as sites of empowerment and emancipation. Schools then become chained to the “banking model of education” defined by Freire, and become sites of marginalization, where diverse cultural capital is not valued. Yosso (2005) offers up community cultural wealth as an alternative to cultural capital theory, as a way of removing the white middle class standard and “seeing” a community’s cultural wealth by looking at factors such as aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital.

Feminist theory is in many ways a sister of critical race theory. As with critical race theory, feminist theory is a friend to stories. It exists to legitimate women’s lived experiences as sources of knowledge (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Feminist theory asserts that science is not, in fact, objective and instead, like all things, reflects the social values and concerns of dominant societal groups. Accordingly, women have not be adequately represented by scientific findings. Feminist theory addresses these

discrepancies by placing an emphasis on the nature of knowledge (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Feminist theory asks, “How is reality constructed? How do we know what we know? What legitimizes that knowledge?”

Process is also critical to feminist theory. While there are no set “feminist methods”, there is certainly a feminist approach to methodology. This approach honors and respects the lived experiences of women, and aims to minimize the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the participants. While feminist approaches need not always be qualitative, feminist theory does recognize the limitations of quantitative research in adequately doing the work of challenging dominant paradigms.

Methodology

Participants

This study recruited two self-identified people of color who went through predominantly white school systems for most of their lives. These participants were found through word of mouth -- the exchanging of stories, so critical to critical theory. Both participants are current college students in programs for high-achieving students of color.

While the study was open to all students of color and received several more volunteers, time and funding limitations necessitated a small pool of participants. With these limitations, I chose to prioritize the voices of the black individuals who volunteered for this study. This choice is supported by Afro-pessimist theory (Wilderson, 2010), which centers "racial blackness" as a condition of oppression. In other words, racial identity for any person in the United States is contingent upon a relationship to blackness and anti-blackness (Sexton, 2016). Non-black students of color can (and already have) identify with the results of this work because anti-blackness is not limited to categorically black individuals.

Initially, this study was designed to emphasize the experiences of *children* of color, with the goal of collecting the stories of children of color currently or recently attending predominantly white schools in Portland, Oregon. Unfortunately, this study was met with intense scrutiny from Portland State University's Human Subjects Internal Review Board. In order to pass through the review process, I was required to both remove children and debate and defend the foundational concepts of my work. I mention this to highlight the ways institutionalized racism has shaped this paper, and how this mirrors the experience of the participants interviewed. Portland State University is a predominantly white institution.

Design

The two participants were interviewed for 1 to 2 hours each. Interview questions were informed by the work of Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997, 2004) and William Cross Jr. (1991, 1978, 1991) and focused on participants' K-12 school experiences and experiences at predominantly white universities. The taped interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically, with particular attention to details regarding school experiences and changing self-perceptions regarding racial identity.

A Conversation with Ian

Ian is a recent graduate and a true academic. I state this first, because he describes this as a salient part of his identity -- perhaps the most salient, second only to his love for classical music. He takes his academic work very seriously and has bold plans for PhD work ahead of him. He's a linguist, and as such thinks a great deal about language, the way it is used, and the way it shapes his own identity. He has a clear and thoughtful way of expressing himself, always clarifying to make sure his point is made accurately. When asked how others would describe him says, "a lot of people think I'm smart" -- and he's right. I think he's smart; that was one of my first impressions of him.

Ian loves swimming and cycling. Or, as Ian describes it, “I do a lot of sports that a lot of white people do.” He describes a lot of his interests in these terms. He tells me he loves classical music and speaks German. He follows up by saying, “I do lots of things that not a whole lot of black people do.”

Racial Identity

Ian grew up here in Portland, Oregon. Like so many Black Portlanders, Ian went to predominantly white schools throughout his K-12 education. He lived with his mother in SW Portland, an area on the opposite side of town from Portland’s historically black neighborhoods. He says, “I was definitely always the only black person in the classroom.”

Ian remembered very little from elementary and middle school -- he was much more eager to talk about college. Race was less significant for Ian in those years than it is now. He remembers caring very deeply about gender inequality, about an early and persistent willingness to call out sexism. He does not have the same early memories of calling out race and racism. When he mentioned this, I wondered aloud why that was.

Interviewer: Did you feel like it was easier to label sexism, or that you were just more in tuned to that?

Ian: I think, probably both? Because I was able to label it in my extended family too, so I suspect that it was just easier. Yeah... I think it was just far easier for me to figure out. It must have been. And I think I was just more interested in it. Like once I hit high school, I got really into gender studies...

In many ways, Ian seems to still hold a bit of this preference. Throughout our conversation, Ian’s identity as a trans man often superseded his identity as a black man in his responses.

Ian describes his family relationships as fractured. Ian says they didn’t talk about race. He hesitates to give that too much weight, however, because he says, “We didn’t talk about it a whole lot in part because we just didn’t talk about anything.” Still, black individuals whose families talk about race have different experiences from families that discuss it openly and often.

It is difficult to profile Ian's racial identity. Ian is dedicated to holding others accountable for racism. He shared a number of stories of bringing race and racism into focus in classroom settings where attention to the topic was sorely needed. On the other hand, Ian describes all of his interests as "white" pursuits -- or, coded as white by others. He mentions only white friends. I ask him if he "feels like" his race, and he struggles to answer, pausing often.

"I don't know if they "feel like" my race... I think I do in relation to like, police brutality and like racism and like, stuff like that... [pause] - And, I mean, I think it's certainly been alienating [...]"

This is often the context that Ian describes some affinity with his race: oppression. This is the thing that Ian describes as tying him to other black people. Throughout our hour and a half long conversation, he rarely mentions other black people at all. Ian describes only white friends and almost all of his stories focused on white spaces he participated in. In terms of participating in blackness, Ian described holding white people accountable for racism.

I wondered aloud whether his school background had anything to do with how he feels about his racial identity, and again he paused and answered slowly.

"I mean, I think that I don't... I don't... I'm not like... normative, I don't fit into any normative box. I think that's kind of really what it comes down to[...] Yeah, I think that's fair to say."

He's referring to his myriad of intersectional identities, which came up a lot in our conversation. He answered my very first request for a description of himself by listing those identities: "Black. Trans. Queer. Jewish. Portlander. Lots of intersecting identities." Race did not seem any more or less salient to Ian than any of the other ones he listed; it was just one more way he was marginalized.

This intrigued me so much that I followed up with him, to see if this impression I had made sense to him. Ian agreed with my analysis. He says that his blackness becomes more salient when paired with other parts of his identity. For example, his work with the Audre Lorde Project was important

because it included both his black and trans identities; the same thing without the queer focus may not have resonated with him as strongly. He mentions a love for black classical musicians as another example -- blackness is important here because it is connected to something he is already passionate about.

This concept of blackness raises some interesting questions on the nature of blackness in general. What is it that ties folks like Ian and me to the rest of the African diaspora? Is it only oppression we share? Melanin and marginalization? We couldn't think of any answer to any of these questions -- just that the questions themselves made us sad to think about.

School Experiences

Many of Ian's early experiences in education exemplify colorblind racism. He remembers being bullied for race-related things, but race was never named. He doesn't seem to have connected it to race at all.

I: Yes on the bullying, namely about like physical features. So like my nose, my lips... and that was definitely elementary school, probably middle school as well[...]

R: How did you... How did you make sense of that? Because you were saying that race wasn't something you were necessarily thinking about, but you're also getting bullied...

I: I suspect that... I wonder if I even tied it to race. [...] Yeah, I very easily could have just not tied it to race.

This disconnection from race represents something truly heinous that happens to black students in predominantly white schools. Racialized bullying is experienced, but no explanation is given. With no language or framework to make sense of the bullying, it is internalized as a personal flaw. In the following case study, Z'ara has a similar experience.

Ian struggled to think of many stories from his K-12 experiences, but when the conversation came to the present, his responses were more animated. White space is unavoidable for Ian; he shares

interests with white people and lives in the whitest city in America. In these spaces, emotional labor is unavoidable for Ian.

He talks about white spaces he occupies because of his interests. He participates in a German-language social group, where most participants are friends but a few hold openly racist views. He describes, in tired detail, the way an evening is derailed by an ignorant comment about race and class. He describes how earnestly he must correct these people in a space he would otherwise enjoy. It sounds exhausting.

He talks about classroom experiences, too, in a tone that alternates between frustrated and resigned. He talks about white students asking questions about his identities that make his skin crawl. He feels an obligation to correct their misconceptions and call them out when they say things about the oppressed groups he belongs to that are not true. He feels an obligation to redirect the conversation when race is being willfully ignored. He describes this work as exhausting, and often falling squarely on his shoulders as the only person in the room occupying the identities he holds.

“And so there isn't anyone else doing this work. And so I think in those situations, that's when I do. In classrooms, sometimes. [...] I've definitely, like... not taken classes because I'm like: I can't sit in this classroom while people are like, trying to figure out race and trying to figure out gender and I'm like, nope.

The problem, Ian adds, is not that these students have questions. He's glad that they do, and he believes it's important for white students to have space to learn about race, or cis students to learn about gender, and so on. He's even volunteered to teach students about trans issues in classroom settings before. What Ian struggles with, again, is the inescapability of emotional labor.

“The problem is that when you have students who are in those demographics in your classrooms and they're not getting paid... then like, what does that mean? Because it's one thing if I'm getting paid, or even if I'm agreeing to do it on my own time, like with Trans 101, then I can prepare myself -- also it's not every, not multiple times a week -- but I can prepare myself for these questions. And I know that I will get paid, or I know it's not five million days a week, or I know that I'm volunteering for this and then I can leave. Or I can I decompress with my friends or whatever. But in a classroom setting, I don't have those options. And also my grade is at stake [...]”

I ask him if there could ever be an ideal environment for marginalized students in white spaces. He pauses a long time. Finally, he says no -- with one caveat: “So I think within college, no. Within high school, maybe. With an elementary middle school, yes.” The difference, he says, is that children are more open-minded and able to accept and process new information. The younger they are, Ian argues, the more capable they are of learning about race. We don't get a chance to talk about emotional labor for black students in those K-12 spaces -- I think that is an area worth exploring more.

His suggestions for white educators are simple: hold students accountable for racism, and teach black history in schools.

A Conversation with Z'ara

Z'ara is as much a convenience sample as anyone ever could be – she's my friend and has been familiar with my research question from its inception, back when it was only a fuzzy, floating concept I spoke about in indistinct terms and vague hand gestures. We share an academic interest in racial identity.

Z'ara volunteered enthusiastically to be interviewed. She overheard me asking someone else to participate in my study, and her eyes lit up. I was asking someone else, “Did you live in a predominantly white neighborhood growing up?” and Z'ara interjected, “Me. I did.”

I will admit that I did not think to ask Z'ara to participate because of how genuinely *comfortable* she seems to be in her blackness. She's in leadership at her campus Black Student Union. The friends and significant others she has mentioned to me have all been black. She speaks in a way that I associate with blackness. I assumed, incorrectly, that this apparent ease indicated that she went to schools with same-race peers. I did not have any basis, academic or otherwise, for that assumption. I recognized, when she volunteered, how much of myself I had been projecting on my participants before any selection even happened.

Z'ara grew up in Gresham, a city that directly neighbors Portland, Oregon. As an adjacent city, Gresham gets a lot of flak from Portlanders. You hear italics when people say *Gresham*. "I had to go all the way out to *Gresham*." "Oh, he's from *Gresham*." These are poverty italics, speaking of race and class in the coded lilt of the word. For this reason, too, I assumed Z'ara grew up surrounded by same-race peers – more unfounded assumptions. I wonder about the ways these kinds of assumptions have floated around Z'ara her whole life. In some ways, the experiences she described in our interview, throughout her K-12 journey, are a jumble of similar assumptions compounding upon one another.

Z'ara is friendly, extroverted – the kind of person whose attention makes you feel important. She describes herself as a "a 21 year old black womxn, with a 'x', who is on a journey to heal and accomplish her goals." I don't think I could describe her any better.

Z'ara started her first few years of elementary school in one of Portland's historically black neighborhoods. In those first few years, she attended a school where she had same-race peers and teachers. She moved from that neighborhood to Gresham halfway through second grade. After that, she says, "I never had a black teacher. Not one." From that point on, Z'ara was always one of the only black students her class.

Her memories of race in school are complicated, often contradictory. When she shared something that sounded negative, she would often add qualifiers to lighten it up. For example, after talked about wanting to participate in sports and other activities throughout childhood and not having the money, she hastily added, “But I was okay, I was taken care of [...] I would say I had a comfortable childhood.”

Yet the yearning in her words often seemed at odds with “okay.” She described feelings of economic isolation, borne from being poor in a white, middle class suburb.

So, instead of being around others who also were on the same level, economic level, I was surrounded by all my friends who had big-ass houses and I was always... I remember being so envious. I was so just like, not even envious, just like... Man. You know? *I want that for my family.* You know? Like, my mom would want that too. But that's not something we could ever afford.

In her words was the strangeness of dreaming for your own what your peers already have. This feels like a power imbalance. It is an experience both similar to, and distinct from, more popular narratives of low-income students who are bussed into middle-income neighborhoods for school. There is no solidarity of shared struggle -- only the omnipresent image of that which your family hopes to obtain. The critical difference, however, is that in Z'ara's case, there was no returning to a neighborhood of peers at the end of the day. There was only her own isolating experience; there was only her unresolved yearning.

Like with many of the stories Z'ara shared, the significance of race is understood only in retrospect. As budding academics in black studies, Z'ara and I both know now that Portland's fraught racial history since its inception underscores the poverty of its black residents today. The whiteness of Z'ara's peers is directly related to their “big-ass houses” -- but at the time, Z'ara only understood what her family lacked and what others had.

Attention to Race

In elementary and middle school, race was a shadow Z'ara couldn't shake and could hardly make sense of. She describes wanting to put race to the back of her mind -- wanting to distance herself from it, to detach herself from it, without success. It was constantly brought to her attention that she was different from her white peers, even when educators paid no attention to the impact of that difference.

Racial bullying was commonplace for Z'ara; so was inaction in response to the bullying. In seventh grade, a white student told her she was "going to get lynched." News of this violent statement spread through her class in a murmur. No teacher made any mention of it. Even as an adult recounting this story, she sounds incredulous: Where was the attention this important thing deserved?

A lack of attention comes up a lot for Z'ara. She talks about a missing piece in her elementary and middle school relationships. Despite being a friendly and outgoing kid, Z's friendships felt with her white peers felt superficial, lacking closeness. When they reached dating age, she watched her white peers couple up, but the interest in her wasn't there. Whether or not on a conscious level, her peers had racialized expectations of her that impacted how they interacted with her:

"And the girls would be like, 'oh, come be my bodyguard. Someone says she wants to fight me!' And I would be like, 'What? I've never even been in a fight in my life.' You know what I mean?"

Mixed up in all of this is race: it's affecting her relationships, but it's never named. In the absence of an explanation, she searches inward.

It just made me feel insecure, just made me feel like, "Well, damn maybe I'm not pretty." You know what I mean? Because since second grade, all the girls that were considered the most beautiful and pretty were white with blue eyes, hazel eyes, with long hair, you know? Long blonde hair, you know, just things like that, like features like that, very European.

Shame colors her experiences from early childhood. When that kid told her that she was going to get lynched, she was too ashamed to tell her teachers. When peers bullied her about race, she was ashamed that she had the problem at all. She was the only person with the problem, and so she situated the problem within herself, within blackness itself.

It was just so... it almost became... it almost became being ashamed. You know? Because there were, like... I was ashamed that I even had to have that problem. And so I think it made me ashamed of my blackness, you know? Like, I was like, why me? Like, why do I have to be teased because of this? It's just who I am. [...] So I think it just became... And, on top of the being teased and messed with, I was like, "Well shit. Being black ain't shit." So it was like, you know damn, don't nobody like me, I get teased, I don't even wanna be black no more.

And the shame came from family, too. Her extended family could sense how distanced she was from the culture they held dear. Z'ara has a sister in Chicago, whose identity was steeped in blackness, in understanding of black history and white oppression. When she would visit, she found fault with Z's avoidance of race. Again and again, Z'ara's sister told her she was "acting white" because of her interests, the way she spoke, and how disconnected she seemed from her history. In retrospect, Z'ara thinks her sister was well-intentioned. But at the time, the scrutiny was overwhelming, and she distanced herself even further from her racial identity.

"And so, when I tell you I like ran the other direction from wanting to think about race and racial issues... I like sprinted."

Around high school came a turning point for Z'ara, when she could no longer abide so much shame. The moment came in a high school U.S. history class. In this class, the teacher only spent 3 days talking about black history. Three days was not enough. In high school, Z'ara was finally old enough to recognize this. She describes this moment as the beginning of a journey.

"And so I think, just on my own time, on my own I just started to come around and was like... I want to love myself. I want to... I don't want to be ashamed. I want to know about my history. And so, from then on, I just started to kind of take a personal journey of, you know..."

Suggestions for Educators

Z'ara shared stories about white educators who stand out in her memory. She acknowledges that a few of them were trying, in their own way, to address race. At the time, she appreciated any and all efforts to bring attention to race. Now, looking back, the attempts seem fumbled and uncomfortable. She only mentions one teacher who addressed race well.

The word “fetish” is one that is uncomfortable to associate with educators; this is the word that Z'ara used when she talked about these teachers who handled race poorly. One such educator simply showered her with an excess of attention and praise... attention and praise that felt good at the time, but feels uncomfortable in retrospect. She paused a lot when sharing about this educator. She reiterates that he’s a good guy -- he was trying to help, she thinks. She wanted it to be clear that his intentions were good. It is only in the magnifying glass of memory that his behaviors seem bizarre.

Like, he... he... It was weird. It was like -- like -- not in an inappropriate way but like... I don't know, he's awkward... but like, a fetish kind of thing? I almost felt like it was. With like... I was like a young black girl and he would -- he would always say, like, "I'm so proud of you," like, "I'm so, so proud of you," all the time because, you know, like "as a young black woman, you're so accomplished, I'm so proud of you."

Similarly, she talked about another teacher would try to address race, whose failings stand out only in hindsight. His behavior toward her was a sort of false code-switching. He would talk to her in ways that he wouldn’t talk to her white peers. Again, an effort to show support ended up singling her out:

My [...] teacher was the white man that is always like, "My sister from another mister! Oh my gosh, you got your hair done again, let me see! Can I get that?" Yeah... and I lowkey love Mr. [NAME], like I did. But now that I look back on it, I'm just like... *hella* irritating, super micro-aggressive.

The regional context of this behavior is important. White Portlanders are uncomfortable with race. Portland is a rapidly gentrifying city covered in Black Lives Matter signs (with nary a black person

in sight). Distanced from everyday interactions with actual black people, even social-justice-minded white educators are liable to fall into the trap that these educators fell into -- fetishizing blackness. However well-intentioned, this approach is harmful. Z'ara herself acknowledged the fine line between embracing difference and fetishizing it.

The professor that Z'ara spoke about most fondly did address race. The thing that stood out in her depiction of him was *authenticity*. He seems to have simply been himself with Z'ara, and allowed her to be herself. He didn't treat her any differently than his other students, but he made space for Z'ara to talk about what was important to her. He listened to, and acknowledged her questions and ideas about race. And, perhaps most importantly, he was well-informed. He was well-educated in issues of race; he knew what Z'ara was talking about and could respond accordingly. She says:

“In class a lot, I wanted to bring blackness into the discussion or black history or things like that. He would let me do that [...] he didn't try to impose anything, he wasn't weird, he just had like a better understanding of like, that -- that we didn't have enough space in the academic community. And I just felt like he understood that.”

It hardly seems earth-shattering, and yet it was to Z'ara. She had gone through her school experience with teachers who either avoided race or fetishized it. Here was a teacher who made space for race. Here was a teacher who treated her genuinely, authentically. Something so simple was so revolutionary.

Discussion

Again and again, Z'ara told me some version of this: “*At the time, I did not understand.*” At the time, Z'ara did not realize that kids didn't like her because of her race. At the time, she thought it was because she was ugly -- that she needed to change. At the time, she didn't know she was worthy of self

love. At the time, she didn't know that race had anything to do with her loneliness, or the way she was treated.

She has this in common with Ian. They both describe avoiding race, ignoring race, wishing race away. As adults, they recognize the impact that race had on their childhoods and their school experiences. They both expressed a quiet sadness about the time filled with not knowing.

Educators, your students of color in white schools may not understand what they are experiencing. In an environment where race is not addressed, students will flounder to make sense of their experiences. Race will impact their school experience whether you give race its due attention or not. Why not talk about it?

Conclusion

It is hard to honor complex, human stories while wrapping them up in neat bows at the end. Ian and Z'ara are two black students who went through Portland's public schools. The nuances of their experiences are important. I would invite readers to pay attention to the turning points and experiences that shaped their paths. These are the things that are resonating with students. These are the beats that shape a life's story. As educators, we are heavily featured.

There is a invisible line connecting some of these beats -- this thread that tugs when Gloria speaks of *borderlands* and DuBois speaks of *double consciousness* and when an elementary-age Z'ara wished she wasn't black. Racial isolation, in a country built on

Both participants cited high school U.S. history class as a transformative space. For Ian, it was the moment when he was finally seen -- when his history was acknowledged and brought into focus. For Z'ara, it was the moment she realized she had never been seen, all her life. U.S. history is a collection of

narratives we use to define our nation's identity; how we talk about U.S. history defines whether or not some students identify themselves in our nation.

Educators must grapple with the role we all play in nurturing oppressive environments. Social workers and educators are situated in positions of power, where they can influence the racial identity development of their students and clients – with or without knowing it.

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