

Choosing Sides: The Struggle to Exist as a Multi-Ethnic American

“Ultimately, America’s answer to the intolerant man is diversity,” said Robert Kennedy some fifty years ago. Given that, it is curious that the problem of intolerance is nowhere near solved in the U.S., where the number of multiethnic citizens is on the rise exponentially. According to the census, the multiracial population grew more than any other single race in the last decade. So, in a nation that touts itself as the melting pot, one would think that these shifting demographics would be well met, and acceptance would permeate throughout. However, because the “ideal” of colorblindness is also exalted, our understandings of how race and ethnicity work in concordance are, perhaps fittingly, underdeveloped. According to Sociologist Mary C Waters, members of ethnic minority groups often do not have a choice in identity as it is routinely dictated by society. That ubiquitous multi-culturalism remains a tagline for lofty speeches and nothing more. On top of that, because there is no space in American culture for the multi-ethnic individual to exist, an extraordinary understanding of self is needed for the multi-ethnic individual to affirm his or her identity. In the U.S., the appearance of an individual often supersedes the complexity of their background and for individuals like myself, that are born of two cultures, this provides a constant frustration. As a 2.5-generation immigrant, or the child of one domestic-born and one foreign-born parent, the limited space for cultural identity has shaped my development.

I was born and raised in Great Neck, a Jewish enclave tucked into the suburbs of Long Island. Even with the massive influx of immigrants, particularly Chinese and Korean, over the past few decades, one demographic fact has always held true: the Black-

American has been a minority. Although this is the case in many towns across America, I cannot think of another single fact that has so defined my life in such a significant way. Growing up, to be Black in Great Neck was to be the ultimate other. It meant that the vast majority of the town had little experience with people that looked like me. It meant my history was not one they had read, or would read, while in the confines of suburbia. It did not mean, however, that I would exist as an “ambassador” for my race. For better or worse, my classmates did not look to me as an example of what the average Black male might be. No, that’s why mass media existed. My classmates had a seemingly unlimited exposure to people that looked like me through their television. Although minorities have been criminally under- and misrepresented in television for decades, the tropes and caricatures have stuck and ultimately have become the definitions for what Black identity should be. Black people were more athletic, Black people spoke in a different dialect, Black people didn’t care about class, and Black people were more violent. On Great Neck, Long Island, Black was a clear-cut category that I did not fall into.

So it was by White people that Blackness was defined, and it was by White people I was told: “You’re more like us, than them.” I was the White-Black Kid. But that didn’t ring true for me. They weren’t stopped by police when walking through town like I was, they weren’t pulled aside in class with allegations of cheating after a good performance like I was, and they weren’t made to feel different every day of their life like I was. It is not as if my school experience was a nightmare, far from it, but it was a rare occasion if my race was not brought up multiple times a day. My acceptance in a race born of experience was a constant point of contention.

What I began to notice, however, as I got older was that I possessed a representative identity that led to more acceptance among my classmates—my Haitian identity. As I matured, I began to mention my Haitian background with more frequency. Here was an identifier that was even more rare in my community. Here was an identifier that they could not define because their media outlets had yet to caricature the Haitian-American. For once, I existed outside of preconceived ideas and, for better or worse I became an ambassador for an identity that I could fully claim. For once, my academic achievement, personality, and appearance could be reconciled all under the umbrella of a nationality of which most were wholly ignorant.

That has been the nature of the relationship between American and Haitian identity for decades. According to Sociologist Malcolm Gladwell, the first-wave of Caribbean Immigrants were dubbed “Jewmaicans” in New York upon their arrival due, in no small part, to their penchant for “hard work and education”. Soon, a dichotomy was formed among the incoming and the native Blacks of the land. The Haitians of the early 1900s were highly educated and able to quickly acclimate to and succeed in a historically racist country. Storeowners reported hiring these immigrants over native blacks because they were untainted by an assumed culture of ineptitude. They became the model for blackness and were used as even more evidence of the Black-American’s immutable negativity and inherent laziness.

This also led many West Indians to teach the idea of Caribbean superiority to their children. Naturally, an animosity among black ethnic groups followed. As Flore Zephir observes in her book *Haitian Immigrants in Black America*, it was very common for Haitian children to be shamed for their identity by Black-Americans. Stereotypes of

poverty and disease were thrown at many first- and second-generation children. Without many Haitian-American role models early on, these insults were hard to defend against and, in turn, many Haitian-American children began to adopt a Black-American ethnic identity. However, adopting an identity to fit in, rather than inheriting an identity from your culture are markedly different processes. For Zephir, “Haitianess” is accurately achieved through the latter, while an inauthentic identity is achieved through the former. To an extent, she is right.

The slow realization that my Haitian identity was inauthentic came when I visited the country as a teenager. For all my enthusiasm and admiration for the country, I found myself mute upon arrival. Kind conversation from family members and friendly strangers was met with a blank stare or a fake nod of understanding. I was, and am still, unable to speak Creole and knew next to nothing about the people I was really seeing for the first time. I was little more than another tourist in a country that I so often claimed as my own. It felt as if I was losing what little identity I had. That seems to be the nature of being raised as a second and a half generation immigrant. You are the descendent of two beautifully expansive cultures, yet the owner of none.

This experience, unfortunately, is far from unique. So often, multi-ethnic adolescents are forced to choose between identities or forced into identities in order to fit into existing cultural archetypes. Blackness has so many more stories than the ones currently ascribed onto it. Countless histories and traditions can exist below the surface of the skin. For myself, I find that I need to be engulfed in the stories that I want to claim as my own. Blood no longer matters, because if your identity is not readily visible, then it might as well not exist. Here, in the U.S., it is a daily struggle to assert who you are and

where you've come from. It, perhaps, might be more fruitful if we learned to appreciate the individual history of each person. Imagine the beauty of a country where we were taught to value our makeup, and all its complexities, rather than hide it. Maybe the answer to the intolerant man is for him to recognize the diversity within himself. Once he has done that, the diversity around him becomes that much more wondrous.

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