

On the Whiteness of Biracial Folk

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As the mixed-race children of two doctors—one, a white Jew from Great Neck, New York, the real-life city that inspired *The Great Gatsby's* West Egg; the other, a black woman from Saint Louis, who, at Natural Bridge and Kingshighway, was raised near nothing great to speak of—my sister and I have understandably complex racial identities. We are black. We are, by both race and religion, Jewish. If you really go through our ancestry, you might find that we are second or third generation Russians, that we have Sioux Native American blood, and probably that of some other culture I'm not even aware of, running through our veins. Still, while deciding how to appreciate the amalgam of cultures an individual comes from (for example, Madison and I were never raised among nor do we really identify with the Russian or Native cultures) is certainly not a unique experience in this place that calls itself the melting pot of the world. Growing up and attempting to reconcile the expectations of Black and Jewish culture has always proved challenging, not only because of their contradictory nature, but also because we had to do it completely on our own, without anyone nearby who really understood us. Madison and I had to figure out how to have pride in one culture while in the social realm of another—what happens to my blackness when I'm hanging out with a bunch of Jews? We had to bear the words of family members who oftentimes didn't understand the other culture—have you ever had your great aunt tell you the members of your black family seemed white to her? Or that you

shouldn't get dreadlocks because they have a “criminal element” to them? Have you ever had your black Baptist grandmother tell you that your people burned Jesus Christ?

I have, and it sucks. But none of these challenges was, has been, or is currently greater than figuring out my whiteness. As you may have noticed, I do have a white father. And, as you may have noticed, white is a notable—and deliberate—omission from the list of cultures I identify with. So maybe I should have included an addendum to that last sentence, “none of these challenges is currently greater than figuring out my whiteness, *or lack thereof*,” because I do not identify as “white” in any fraction, percentage, or capacity whatsoever. Neither does my sister, and neither should we.

The most common objection to this decision is the indictment that in choosing not to identify as white, I have disrespected and forsaken the culture of the man that raised me. Frankly, this is ridiculous. My dad cares about his Jewishness, not his whiteness, and I've always embraced that part of my culture. More importantly, my father is complicit in my choosing to identify that way: he's told me a story of when I, as a toddler, wanted to be white. This was probably to be expected considering [1] the social climate responsible for the black Barbie doll study and [2] that my primary role model's skin is pallid even for a white man. In this story, however, my father reminds me of my blackness, dispels the notion that I am white, and expects me to have pride in myself nonetheless.

Therefore, in choosing not to identify with whiteness, I've shown nothing but a son's deference.

Even so, I do receive consistent criticism on my identity. This criticism comes mostly from white people and typically revolves around the notion that I am part white.

Historically speaking, this is ironic: "half-black" slaves in the early 1800s weren't put "half" to work and given "half" of the benefits of the lavish lifestyle that their labor provided the owners; "half-black" children weren't given a 50/50 opportunity to leave the underfunded black schoolhouses of the pre Brown v. Board of Education era for a better education, nor were the schools they attended—places for black learning—often given even "half" the finances of their white counterparts; Homer Plessy was "one-eighth black"—the man only had one "fully black" grandparent—but even after he fought it in court in 1896, they still sat him in the back of the train. Even before the one-drop rule came into law in a number of states, parts of society classified mixed-race individuals as mulatto, mestizo, or as simply of their non-European race. Throughout America's history, from the slave era to Jim Crow, the language and law surrounding people of mixed descent has fixated on categorization and separation. The concept of inclusion was largely done away with, at least not as it related to the societal benefits of whiteness, which were always, of course, bestowed on white people by white people.

The implications of this extend to the very definition of whiteness itself. In 2000, the New York Times published the results of a study on race. The study concluded that the DNA differences between white people and people of

color were minute, and that consequently, race—not culture, but race—is an entirely social phenomenon...not that we should need a study to tell us this. Therefore, the history of race in America leads to the following conclusion: white is an ethnic group based entirely on exclusivity: the absence of non-European races, cultures, or ethnicities. Never has there been a middle, and never have white people wanted there to exist, a "halfway back" of the bus.

That is, until now. Suddenly, the fact that I have one black parent and one white parent means I should take as much pride in my whiteness as I do my blackness, that I have as much *or more* in common with my white friends as my black ones.

The question begs to be asked: why do white millennials expect and actively want individuals with only one white parent to identify with whiteness?

One must look no further than today's pop culture to find the answer. We live in the age of Miley Cyrus and Iggy Azalea, the age in which white girls twerk and white friends teach me that they can say "nigga" because with an 'a' it means friend, according to their favorite rap artists. Now, this isn't to suggest cultural appropriation is some sort of new phenomenon—I can emphatically state that it's not—but in my lifetime, this is the most publicly and prominently it's been put on display: never before has being black been so cool!

But really, it's the *illusion* of blackness these artists embody, not the experience of *actually being black*. To elaborate, here is an analogy that one of my white friends came up with to help himself understand the perverse nature of cultural appropriation:

Imagine you're in a group of students that gets bullied regularly. Say, for reading comic

books. One day out of nowhere, the people who bullied you start reading comic books. They're superficial fans of the comics, but they make their comic fan hood very public. Suddenly, it becomes very trendy to be reading the comics they like, but nobody gives you or your friends credit or respect for starting the trend. In fact, people still make fun of you for the comics you read—including those same people who bullied you earlier!

This experience would leave a bad taste in my mouth, and I'd be willing to bet it'd do the same for you. In this analogy, the recipients of this abuse represent people of color. The bullies represent white people that receive credit for starting a cultural revolution when in actuality, they have done nothing more than appropriating the culture of minorities. But while Miley, Iggy, Katy, and others benefit from twerking (albeit poorly), having curves, and from rolling out parades of black artists including Snoop Dogg, Juicy J, and Kanye West as featured artists in cross-genre songs, none of them bear the burden of actually being black in American society.

People who expect me to identify as white don't understand this. My blackness isn't about swagger, the ability to finish rap lyrics, getting picked first in basketball, or having people think I can dance—it's about the fact that I live the life of a black person, despite the race of my father. I've had a high school dean treat me like a problem child for no reason until my grades came out and he, in a state of shock, told another teacher, "you should have seen the 'A's on his report card!", and I've watched passers-by clutch their purses and shy away from me when I'm talking to my barber on

the sidewalk; I've spoken with my sister about how she, because of her black facial features and in spite of her near-white complexion, struggled with the concept of her own beauty among white peers, and I've heard my grandmother lament the effect of racist establishments on her family, friends, and the black community in Saint Louis. And of course, there's that other thing: sometimes, people approach me just to call me a nigger and run away.

This isn't to say that my blackness revolves around experiencing racism—from the times I've spent with my mom's family to those with Jack and Jill, Kappa League, and other parts of the community, I've had plenty of positive experiences with my culture. But I choose not to elaborate here because, unfortunately, these experiences won't help you understand my refusal to identify with whiteness.

Whiteness exists solely to separate people—it does nothing to bring Germans closer to the French, to bring Protestants closer to Catholics except to label them as "not a person of color." It is a sociological concept built on exclusivity that provides certain individuals with an ability to live their lives in utter ignorance of the experiences I've described. I can't take part in whiteness—I don't know what it's like not to have these problems—so while I will proudly proclaim my Judaism or share my family's Russian ancestry, while my father is a very pale white man and I have no desire to ignore any part of his culture, I simply cannot understand the everyday experience of white people in America.

So why should I identify with it?