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Not Black Enough

My first experience of the intraracial gap among black people occurred on my first day of high school after I moved to the United States. I filled out documents including one about my race, presented with the options: black or African-American with the description “related to any of the racial groups of Africa.” Being as I was African and not any of the above regardless of my relation to an “ethnic” group in Africa, I skipped both and went down to the “Other” box where I put down African. During my time here in America and taking my experiences into account, I have developed definitions for the three classes of black: African, African-American and black. Being African refers to only having ties to Africa, African-American means having ties to both America and Africa while black means although one is African, the harsh effects of slavery have stripped away their ability to relate to Africa and therefore use the term black.

While conversing with a friend, he asked if I’d considered attending any of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to which I replied negative with the reasoning I didn’t feel “black enough.” I find it tragicomic that although I didn’t feel black enough to attend an HBCU, I felt black enough to attend a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) like the University of Pittsburgh

because it was demographically similar to Langhorne, the small Pennsylvania town I'm from. In actuality to many non-black people who see all of us for just our skin color, we are black and that is that. In hindsight, deciding to attend Pitt was perhaps one of the best decisions I have ever made because I learn something new about myself daily and have been able to develop an unedited view of America.

During my first semester here at Pitt, America went through the 2016 presidential elections which accelerated my lesson on America. For so long, America has been hailed as the place to be with many citizens making the last sentence of the national anthem- "land of the free, home of the brave"- their motto. During the months leading up to and after the election, I was introduced to several aspects of America, including the ideas of second-class citizenship, white privilege, and the token black person while allowing me to formulate the theory of microaggressions, exhibiting hostile behaviors toward marginalized groups, being the bedrock of American culture. Second-class citizenship stems from the fact that for the first time in many years, black people were shown that regardless of the fact that slavery ended a century and a half ago, we weren't free people. This began with certain individuals and organizations trivializing the Black Lives Matter movement, outspoken conservative journalist Tomi Lahren criticizing actor Jesse Williams for exercising *his* freedom of speech during the BET Awards, covert racists such as members of the Ku Klux Klan feeling empowered to come out of hiding, the dismantling of institutions set in place to

support black people such as the Affirmative Action policy and Donald Trump referring to a black supporter as “my African-American” (Diamond, 2016). For so long, American history had been whitewashed to present the country as the best in the world which is true if you’re white and can take advantage of the privilege that comes with it. Being white in America means your poor actions are explained to victims and brushed under the rug. For example when a news station leaked Donald Trump’s “locker room talk,” his favorite news station, FOX News, rushed to defend him. When a white student couldn’t get into her dream college, she sued the college for being racist. Not getting into her dream school began the debate and became the basis for an official government inquiry into discrimination against white Americans. Brock Turner, a white college athlete accused of rape received a six-month sentence, less than the two-year guideline for sentencing. When Neo-Nazi riots took to the streets of Charlottesville, the president during an interview said, “I think there is blame on both sides” (Merica, 2017).

TheFreeDictionary.com defines tokenism as “the practice of hiring or appointing a token number of people from underrepresented groups in order to deflect criticism or comply with affirmative action rules.” A token black person exists not only in the workplace but in friendships where a person of another race feels okay using certain terms and feels attacked when corrected because they have black friends and can’t be racist. In addition to tokenism, cultural appropriation is a phenomenon in America where other races believe in

representing black culture without giving the due credit such as white celebrities being given the credit for historically black hairstyles and renaming them.

Cultural appropriation goes to the very extreme when people of other races try to look like black people, a phenomenon known as “blackface,” particularly popular during Halloween. This is often coupled with the entitled need to use the “n-word” because of how mainstream it has become and finding it appropriate to ask why they cannot use that word. Microaggressions are so common in the American culture that pointing it out earns you the backlash of “overreacting.”

During all this time, no one qualifies who is black enough because regardless of how we label ourselves, we were still going to be mistreated, something black Americans have dealt with for centuries. In Doctor Martin Luther King’s words, “It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.” Millennial black Americans including myself have to deal with all these problems and more because the country is in a constant state of ignoring its issues and solving those of the world, bringing a new meaning to the phrase, “charity begins at home.” For the black people like myself who didn’t feel black enough to attend HBCUs, we have the chance to connect with people who share our feelings and survive in environments which aren’t always conducive to us while learning that we are black enough to do anything we want and that we are free to take advantage of the rights and freedoms many have died for to enable us celebrate our blackness. These days I feel comfortable using the term African-American because I am of African descent, and have ties to the United

States, having lived here for a significant part of my life. I also feel that the term African-American bridges the gap and that once we all feel comfortable enough to close the intraracial gap, we might be able to address the issues our leaders feel good ignoring because it isn't affecting the majority.