

My Experience with Racism

Unfortunately, in today's society, there still exists the belief that racism, stereotyping, and discrimination are all aspects of the past and are no longer relevant or applicable. Those supporting this belief prove to be predominantly privileged white Americans who have never had to deal with the issues of racism or discrimination on a daily basis. I personally believe that the reason many white Americans support this narrow-minded worldview stems from a feeling of guilt for the history America has had with overt racism and the fact that it was one of the strongest foundations the country was built on. By claiming that racism no longer exists today, people not only dismiss America's oppressive past by saying it was "so long ago" that it doesn't matter anymore, but they also disregard and minimize the current racial issues the country faces today. While I do believe that racism does not present itself the same way it did during the times of slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, I do believe that this same racism has merely taken on a new, more covert form in society. In recent years, I have noticed that it is becoming increasingly more socially acceptable for people to boldly voice their racist views and ideas, yet the struggles of America's minority groups are still heavily disregarded.

I can admit that when I was younger, I too subscribed to this belief that racism no longer existed and it was just an aspect of the past. Or maybe I was just too young to know any better. The time period I am referring to is up until I was in sixth grade or so. Up to that point, I had learned almost nothing about America's history with slavery or racism in school and received whatever knowledge I did have on the subject from my father who would make me watch movies like *Roots* to ensure I was well-rounded in my understanding of our African-American culture. I attended school from first to fifth grade in Sacramento after my mom moved there once I finished Kindergarten. I still came to San Jose to stay with my dad every weekend but in sixth grade, it was decided that I would move schools again and complete my remaining middle and high school years in San Jose. The school I moved to was St. John Vianney, predominantly Latino and Asian Catholic School in the Alum Rock area of San Jose. It was during this time at St. John Vianney that I would first experience racism and stereotyping in my life, changing my perspective of the world permanently.

My transition to this new school went relatively smoothly at first but by the middle of the school year in sixth grade, some things started to get uncomfortable. I had grown my hair out during that year and had a small afro, which the school had some problems with initially. They asked me to cut my hair multiple times claiming it broke the school rules on having hair that was too long, but I would point out that the handbook said boys' hair cannot cover their ears or touch

their collar, both of which mine did not, so I refused to cut it and my parents supported me. Not only did the school itself have a problem with my hair, but other students would constantly be touching my hair or inquiring about why it was like this, felt like that, looked like this, etc. I might have forgotten to mention that I was the only black student in my entire grade of around 70 people all three years I attended that school. For this reason, I guess I understand people being curious or interested in my hair, but continuously touching and grabbing at it even after I would tell them to stop was something I had a problem with.

During my time at St. John Vianney, my hair was not the only racially charged issue I experienced. While I did decide to cut my hair at the start of seventh grade, simply because it was becoming a hassle to maintain, I still faced countless microaggressions and nonchalant comments regarding my race. Because I spoke “correct” or “proper” English, achieved highly in school, or maybe because of the way I carried myself, I would constantly hear people, even my close friends, remark that I was “the whitest black person they knew” or that I was “whitewashed.” Even though I would always downplay comments like this and act as though I was not bothered by them, I truly hated when people would say this to me. Looking back on this issue, I think the root problem is the fact that African Americans, especially African American men, are shown in film and pop culture to often be illiterate, violent, under-achieving people, which damages the way almost all black people are treated on a daily basis. I think the people at my school who would make assumptions about me and the kind of student/person I was “supposed” to be based on the depictions they would see of people who looked like me.

This time spent at St. John Vianney was one of the most significant turning points in my perspective of the world and one of the first times I had ever been confronted with the issue of racism. Not only did this experience and the remarks I would hear cause me to be more aware of racism and stereotypes, but I believe it also had a negative impact on me and my academic performance. When so many people draw comparisons between you and what stereotypes have depicted you to be, I believe you start to embody those stereotypical qualities so as to help make those around you feel more comfortable. I know that this was something I struggled with during seventh and eighth grade, and still today at times. I have always been very smart and done well in school, but when that successful behavior became to draw the racially charged remarks I previously mentioned where people are starting to call your “blackness” into question, you do what you can to make those comments stop. For me, that meant suppressing my intelligence and dumbing myself down a little, and while I now know that that was the wrong reaction to have in that situation, I still find myself doing the same thing even now.

These microaggressions and instances of racism did not stop after middle school but

actually seemed to become more common in high school. Yes, I am talking about the prestigious Bellarmine College Preparatory, where the “overwhelming diversity” of the school is constantly flaunted and marketed, and so many people believe racism doesn’t exist for some reason. Now, I do really love this school and agree that it carries itself highly, holding some of the best experiences I have had thus far in my life, but I also know that this school isn’t just exempt from all things racist for some reason. I’m not suggesting that racism is just overtly a huge problem at Bellarmine because it’s not, but it definitely does still exist. During my time at Bell, I continued to hear some of the same comments about being whitewashed and all that, the same as in middle school, but some things were different. For one, I was not the only black person in my entire class, and it is true that Bellarmine is a fairly diverse place, or at least a lot more diverse than my middle school.

Despite this diversity, I have still heard people telling jokes, using words or slurs they shouldn’t, or making assumptions about people based on their race. For example, someone who I once considered to be a close friend who happened to be Asian would regularly use the n-word around me, about me, and to me as a “joke.” He only started doing this towards the tail end of our friendship and claimed it was because “we were close enough friends that I should know he doesn’t mean it and not get offended,” but how I am supposed to not get offended when I walk up to a group and you “jokingly” say “ahh a n****r!” or “call the police!” Every time he would do this I would call him out on it and I admit I cursed him out a couple of times, but it seemed like every time I would call him out on it, he would do it more frequently and it began sounding like less and less of a “joke” each time. Eventually, I just started ignoring him completely, but those constant remarks along with plenty of other factors and issues I had with kind of person he is all culminated with me really intensely losing my cool and going off of on him again, but also just cutting off the friendship as a whole. As you can probably tell, I’m still super upset about that whole situation, but that little anecdote is all to say that racism does still exist today, and some instances are much more overt than others.

In addition to the situation with Nathan, I have also experienced a couple of microaggressions comments on the way I speak, how I dress, the school I attend, the area I live in, the cars my parents and I drive, etc. When it comes to these things and more, people are often surprised by the way I carry myself or my lifestyle and express that it does not correlate with what they would expect an African American person or family to do. These experiences do not only occur at school but outside of school as well. I can recall a time a couple of years ago when I attended a basketball camp at Salesian College Preparatory in Richmond, and I was faced, yet again, with comments pertaining to my “blackness.” Many of the participants in the camp were

black and spoke, dressed, carried themselves, and behaved very different from me. A few of them pointed out that I “talked like a white person” or that I was bougie, and I could tell they didn’t consider me to be like them. This just goes to show that this discrimination can occur within a single race as well, as these were other black kids discriminating against me for the way I acted.

These experiences and the others I have mentioned have all helped to shape my view of the world into what it is now. While there was not just one isolated event that marked the point when the lens through which I once saw the world as a safe and accepting place was shattered, the past 6 years of my life have served as that event. I now believe that I am a more well-rounded individual as a result of these experiences, and am better prepared to deal with any similar experiences I may have to face in the future. Based on what we have learned in class, I believe that by bolstering or conforming to negative stereotypes, treating people with cultural disrespect, and making assumptions about someone based on their race, we fail to uphold the dignity of all people. Every person is born with dignity, and it is up to those around that person to uphold and respect that individual’s dignity, which is something we as a society fail to do all too often. By continuously undermining a person’s dignity we fail to promote a society or community capable of upholding a sense of equality and justice for all people. We have established the fact that race is nothing more than a social construct designed to separate and divide people for the advantage of the majority, but that doesn’t make it any less of a real or pressing issue that we must combat.