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Caught Between Myself and Society: The Story of Unraveling Identity and Accepting Authentic Self

Christine Virginia Roundtree

“Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story” (hooks, 1989, p. 43).

Growing up, my mother told me stories about her childhood in the countryside of Haiti. She vividly described the beautiful landscapes that abound in Haiti, places full of flourishing fruit trees and carefree people. Her stories were foundational for me and provided me with a sense of place and filled my heart with pride. However, as I transitioned into adolescence, I faced a steady stream of counter-narratives about Haiti and the identity I came to embrace. Drawing on both my personal experiences and my time in higher education, I will explore the role that storytelling and media narratives play in forging one’s identity; in this case, my Haitian identity. These types of narratives have highly deleterious effects, generate an abhorrent perspective toward one’s own identity, and lead to self-denial and social marginalization. This scholarly article will expand on the quest for authenticity and the shaping of identities, especially in the context of how social and societal pressures can influence a person’s views and beliefs.

“What does it mean to be Haitian? How can I even consider myself to be a Haitian? I have never even been to Haiti! I don’t speak the language!” Questions like these were constantly on my mind during my teenage years. On occasion, I overheard my mother on the phone, saying in her stentorian voice, “Sak pase?” I always knew she was asking someone, “How are you doing,” but that is as far as my mind could follow. Even when I attempted to listen to my mother’s full conversations, picking up on her tongue’s movements that made the flow of her speech sound songlike, I could never grasp what she said. In fact, I could not

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even discern if she was speaking in a positive tone or a disdainful one about my siblings or my father.

Where It All Began

I was born and raised in Queens, New York. The last of seven children to be born, I grew up in a two-story home across the street from an elementary school. Without a doubt, I conformed to the stereotype for a prototypical youngest child – I was daddy’s girl and the apple of my mother’s eye. As a young child, my most vivid memories were of Sundays when my mother rose at 7:00 AM and began a thorough cleaning of our house. My bed shook as the bass thumped with Haitian music from the floor below; immediately, I knew what day it was and that it was time to help my mother clean. I trudged out from my room and I saw my mom dancing merrily in the hallway, broom in hand. Sometimes her head was covered with a hair bonnet when she dyed her hair to conceal a smattering of gray that appeared. The swift movements of her hips and the hard stomps of her feet hitting the wood floor reverberated throughout the house. You could hear her voice filling the empty corners of the house, as she crooned the lyrics to the song, “Pam Pam Pam” by TanTan. Many times, I asked, “What does that song mean? What does it stand for?” She told me, but I always managed to forget.

The Importance of Identity

When I began to question and even deny my Haitian identity, it came from a fount of self-loathing, implicit bias, distaste for Haitian history, and a warped perception of Haitian identity. As I learned, implicit biases toward one’s identity can lead to outright denial of oneself and one’s legitimacy. During my adolescent years, I found myself confronting various stages of denial, as well as various feelings of inadequacy and illegitimacy. Constantly consuming negative stereotypes of Haitians, reiterated to me by classmates and media, gradually pushed me to believe that these messages were true. I began to see every Haitian through the prism of what I heard, despite knowing in my heart that it was not true. Over time, I formed a strong implicit bias toward my Haitian heritage and I projected that distaste onto other Haitians, scapegoating them because of my own discomfort.

Where does implicit bias stem from or originate? Mahzarin Banaji (2013) ascribes this phenomenon to two primary factors: our brains and culture. Humans amass information by learning. Repetition of information, even if incorrect, shapes our thinking a great deal and gradually becomes our reality. A prime example that Banaji talks about is the inherent biases that cultures holds regarding the gender binary. Banaji explains how certain professional positions are associated with a particular gender; for example, men working as plumbers or surgeons, while

women are associated with nursing and teaching roles. As these biases are repeatedly fed to us through many different streams, we are naturally inclined to accept them as factual. In my situation, my Haitian identity underwent a metamorphosis as the surrounding knowledge ecosystem fed me falsehoods (Benet-Martinez & Hong, 2014). A turning point came for me in college when I recognized that I was in denial about my Haitian identity. I realized that implicit bias distorted my perspective of my heritage and I, at least partially, suppressed my authentic self.

Today, I am a proud Native American Cherokee, Haitian, and African American woman; someone who was once ashamed of what my Haitian heritage signified. Over the years, I resorted to only associating myself with the Native American and African American culture that my family, friends, and the broader community were generally supportive. Meanwhile, I conveniently decided to cast aside my Haitian heritage, allowing myself to fall prey to prevailing stereotypes and generalizations that existed about Haitians. Peers and teachers made negative comments about Haitian culture, both covertly and overtly, and I stood by without defending the Haitian community from their preordained views and scurrilous notions. As a multiethnic person, I bore the existence of foreign ways without having to confront the difficulties of being foreign. People often said things such as, “Haitians are dirty and poor,” “Haitians are loud and their language disgusts me,” or, “Haitians are ugly.” At the time, I chose to placate my friends and accept their comments, rather than defend my heritage and part of my identity.

The Deficits of Implicit Bias

The acknowledgement of implicit bias varies from individual to individual and from experience to experience. It is the prerogative of individuals to confront and deconstruct these biases. In my own case, the self-hate and internalized racism that I embraced led to strong sense of discomfort. Bottled up inside of me, my discomfort bred my distrust of the Haitian community. In an environment where most people viewed my Haitian background with a disdainful eye, I decided it was easier to cast aside my identity so that I could fit in with the prevailing American culture. Words from others were just one form of oppression that led to my disavowal of my heritage. Media also played an outsized role; media clips and newspaper articles about Haiti reinforced the thoughts and statements that many of my peers relayed to me. The media projected such a consistently negative image of Haiti. For me, Haiti basically became a place to hate.

As Plato (380 B.C./1961) indicates in *Republic*, appearances can often be mistaken for reality. Haiti has come to be wholly associated with poverty. This representations of Haiti creates, at best, an incomplete picture of the country within Western society and fails to acknowledge Haiti’s remarkable

contributions. Haiti ought to be associated with freedom from oppression, as Haitians successfully rebelled and freed themselves from French colonizers during the 1791 – 1804 Haitian Revolution (Dubois 2004). In *Poverty as Danger: Fear of Crime in Santo Domingo*, Taylor (2009) alludes to the consistent portrayal of poor areas and nations as violent, disorderly, underdeveloped, and therefore hazardous to the Western world. It is no surprise, then, that those who consume media on a consistent basis have come to fear Haiti and other marginalized, poverty stricken countries.

Higher Education Exposure: The Importance of Immersion into Groups

Fast forward to the first week at college. I immersed myself in two organizations: the Umoja Black Student Union and La Unidad, a Latinx organization. I yearned to understand why I had so much pent up self-hatred inside me, and decided that joining these student organizations could help me gain a better understanding of cultural and racial issues. Through discussion and self-evaluation, I began to appreciate the constructs and importance of storytelling. I was introduced to the works of Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-American author who writes about the importance of storytelling in relation to self-expression. Haitian slaves used the technique of storytelling and Vodou (religious practice) to preserve history and circumvent restrictions on their personal freedoms imposed by European colonists. Danticat relayed stories about individuals who were in search of their voices during French rule and in the post-colonial regime. The Haitian characters were silenced, stripped of identities, and lacked the standing to represent themselves. As I read books such as *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1998) and *Krik? Krak!* (1998), my eyes opened to what I was closed off from for many years. The beautiful, rich and upbeat culture that Haiti held, as described in the stories my mother once told me, began to resurface in my mind.

As a member of the Umoja Black Student Union, I heard stories from my peers who struggled to embrace their own identities, but who were now willing to reclaim and reconnect with them. Heartbreaking stories of being assaulted, bullied, ignored, and marginalized on a daily basis because of their identities, brought a sense of unity and cohesion to the club. We uplifted each other because no one else was doing so. We expressed ourselves, our true selves, in front of each other knowing that we would be able to work through our struggles together. Being in this environment was cathartic, as everyone challenged the notions facing their backgrounds and identities. I recognized that I experienced similar circumstances to others and knew that I would be okay confiding in an open and expressive group. Sharing my thoughts and feelings was very influential in helping me gain further understanding of my pre-existing notions and feelings about Haitians.

The Story of Action

Now recognizing the sources of my objectification while residing at a predominantly White institution, I looked to deconstruct the academic realm, as well as understand how I formulated my own thoughts. The academics do not mesh especially well with issues of identity, as perspectives tend to be highly one-sided. A prime example can be seen in history classes in public high schools, where teachers continue to deliver almost entirely one-sided lessons from a highly Eurocentric and White perspective. Despite the predominant Eurocentric approach adopted by instructors, education can be an integral part of marginalized identity development.

Education was an immensely helpful component while my peers and I reconnected with and strengthened our cultural identities. My peers and I used academics to tell our stories and shine a light for others who wanted to follow. At Connecticut College, I found a space for expression within the residential life department. Due to my exposure to anthropology and sociology in the classroom, and experiencing a lack of sufficient cultural programming on campus, I took it upon myself to understand why I felt the way I did about a part of my identity. Programming utilizing personal art, images, and stories became my outlet to deconstruct the stereotypes formulated by mass media. I explored ways in which I could reconnect with that part of my identity and then go forth and educate others. These avenues hinted at the true authentic story behind Haitians and Haiti, rather than the prefabricated visuals and narratives that are normally utilized. Our programming focused heavily on bias, the need for individuals to acknowledge pre-existing biases, and recognize that often what they see and hear may not be true – that is within themselves to dig deeper.

Society wants individuals to conform to certain standards and people must check the right boxes and not be too different. The truth is we are all very different. Our stories are different; our lives are different. We, as individuals, bring input to the table which shapes the social context and values in our lives. Through higher education, I sought out avenues to address and deconstruct the beliefs behind not only my own culture and ethnicity, but behind the identities of others. The search for meaning of self, and the rejection of self-loathing, involves a great deal of complexity. However, once I gained the courage and addressed my fears directly, I was able to discover my true authentic self.

I decided to use my experience and self-discovery in a forum where the possibility of reaching out to students who may have encountered similar experiences to me could find confidence and introspection. It felt important to share the things I had learned with others, rather than keeping it to myself for my own edification. In my mind, no one ought to experience the identity issues and implicit bias

that I and other students felt.

Academics as Monoracial

Freire (1997) theorized that embedded biases permeate our society to the point where individuals can no longer think for themselves. There is an intense fear of being different from the rest of the general population. Freire advised that people must go beyond themselves, observe the situation at hand, and think about the world around them. Consider academia and the ways in which many institutions are designed to favor certain histories and narratives over others. Avoiding cultural differences and varied backgrounds has led to a stunning lack of diversity in both thought and approach within education systems. Throughout my schooling, the story of Haiti's triumphant victory over the French was deemed a satanic move in which Haitians called upon the devil. Rather than viewing Haitians as a courageous and victorious people, they were depicted as monsters (Dubois, 2004).

My primary and secondary education took place in urban schools where the emphasis on uniformity and like-mindedness was praised. When looking at my urban school, as well as many others across the country, I find that diverse communities naturally harbor diverse mindsets. Unfortunately, many schools in the United States have deeply rooted structural and cultural components that do not allow for diversity to thrive. One example of this denial of cultural differences was when I prayed before I ate my meal. One day, a teacher saw me praying and promptly escorted me out of the cafeteria and told me that I was offending the children around me, and that praying was not permitted at school.

I learned about an interesting phenomenon while reading *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* by Victor Rios (2011). Rios exposes the cultural gaps within urban schools and neighborhoods, as compared to their White counterparts. The data demonstrates that Black and Latinx people have higher rates of suspensions for similar acts as White people in private institutions and White neighborhoods. This trend demonstrates that there are clear discrepancies at play, which highlight the issues surrounding identity formation and cultural values.

For a long time, I disregarded the tremendous effects textbooks and other readings had on my mind, specifically in regards to the dehumanization of Haitians during the Haitian Revolution. Textbooks portray racial identities in vastly different lights and often in an uneven manner (Howell, Lewis, & Carter, 2011). But who is in control of textbooks? Policymakers. Policymakers have failed to ensure that the content in students' textbooks do not promote racial inferiority com-

plexes, which can of course trigger the aforementioned struggles for acceptance and a sense of belonging, as well as contribute to poor academic performance in urban schools (Howell, Lewis, & Carter, 2011). Awareness of these racial and cultural diversity shortcomings in academia drove me to challenge the status quo and reassess my Haitian identity through programming, research papers, and projects.

Conclusion

“But you are Haitian. Your experience is the experience of a Haitian person and more. Just because it is not like someone else’s experience does not mean it is not a valid Haitian experience.” (Student leader, personal communication, n.d.)

Through discovery, stories, triumph, exploration, resiliency and vulnerability, I connected with my cultural heritage and feel as one with myself. As I venture through the realm of higher education as a student affairs professional, I seek to empower all who face oppression in its multitude of forms so that they can stand up and define their realities for themselves. Reclaiming what was once stripped away from me was an uplifting and mesmerizing experience. Whether it was people who did not accept my identity, or the media dehumanizing and disparaging my heritage, I am now capable of sharing my story of the obstacles I overcame as I unlearned and rethought what I was taught.

My journey has not yet concluded. I am still working towards reaching full acceptance of self, but I am proud of the steps that I have taken so far. I continue to remind myself to stay true to my convictions and recognize that my identity is mine to justify and speak to, not for others to validate. In order for me to feel and be whole, just like my ancestors attempted to do as their freedom was trampled upon, I need to tell my story and hope that those who read this paper gain the courage to explore and find that recognition, community and understanding of self. I look forward to visiting the land of my mother.

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