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English 114: The Racial Imaginary

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What I Have Accomplished Is What People Should See

I identify as an African-American woman from Richmond, California. Richmond is known to be a low-income city filled with drugs and gang violence. There were not many opportunities given to me due to the lack of resources. In Richmond, most people identify as black or Hispanic while whites are the minority. The few interactions that I did have with white people were from my school staff members who cared a lot about helping each student attain success. My teachers helped me overcome the barriers I faced as an African-American girl coming from this urban neighborhood. My racial identity also placed me at the bottom of the social hierarchy in this country and forced me to work twice as hard to prove myself. If it wasn't for the encouragement that I received from the people around me, I would have not been motivated to chase big goals because there is an idea that a black girl like me from a city like Richmond isn't likely to become successful. This was the "single story" placed upon my identity that everyone who cared about me made sure to dismantle. My teachers saw potential in me and recommended that I take advanced courses and apply to challenging programs that would push me out of my comfort zone. My family was always there mentally to support me whenever I felt like the work was too difficult. Everyone assured me that I am not this single story. Unfortunately, while my loved ones tried hard to break this story, others continued to remind me of it.

The summer right before I started my first year at Yale, I worked at a considerably lavish restaurant in the Bay Area. The restaurant was located in Berkeley which had a higher population of white people compared to Richmond. After working there for most of my summer break, my coworkers found out that I would soon be leaving to attend college. Everyone was excited to hear that I was attending a prestigious school and knew that I worked very hard to earn my admission there. This news was especially cherished for all of the black coworkers and managers who were proud to see one of their own achieving something that we were not expected to do based on where we come from and how we look like. However, this excitement was not the case for everyone at my job. One of the white managers had the most shocked response to the news once he heard. From his facial expression and the comments that he made, it was clear that he was surprised that a girl like me was able to get into a school like Yale. As his eyes widened and eyebrows raised, he rhetorically asked how I got into a school like that. Although he may not have commented on my race directly, it was obvious what he was basing his beliefs off of because he did not know me at all. That was the second conversation I had ever had with him so he did not know enough information about me to make a stark response like he did. Overhearing his response, another black coworker was disappointed. She reminded me that even though I can work so hard to overcome every negative image placed upon my identity, people will still believe in them.

This encounter stuck with me as I was preparing for my move to New Haven. Yale was going to be a new environment for me with people from different parts of the world. Were these people going to perceive me the same way as my manager did? I knew I was capable of dismantling this single story because I had been doing that my entire life. I have always sought ways to excel in different aspects in my life whether it be in academics or talents. But how many

times would I have to show this capability for other people? Coming to Yale, this interaction made me also think about the other students with similar experiences. When you look at the diverse population at Yale, one can see that this single narrative is not true for everyone. I've met peers of mine who also come from different low-income neighborhoods with low resources but used every opportunity they had to excel. These are the people that I find myself connecting with as they understand my background and together help me dismantle these single stories.

Although Yale is attempting to diversify its student population, their actions are not decentering the dominance of the single stories that those in power continually place upon marginalized groups. Yale claims to be committed to admitting the most capable individuals from around the world who have diverse backgrounds and experiences. Their commitment can be seen in their student population. Although some may not know the exact statistics of the demographics, it is common knowledge that the student population is not all white. In fact, about 57.3% of the student population at Yale are people of color. Despite this knowledge, my white manager still believed that I was not capable of receiving admission in a school like that. His shock, which was based on only knowing information about my background, confirmed how the narrative of destined unsuccessfulness was still believed by people. So why is it that people outside this university are aware that people of color attend this prestigious university yet the narrative of marginalized groups is still believed?

The reason why diversity in this university is not helping to stop the spreading of this narrative is because diversity essentially protects the power of the stories told by white people. In "We Need a Decolonized, Not a 'Diverse' Education," Zoe Samudzi explains how diversity is intended to be "based on difference" which tends to "include whiteness." This inclusion of whiteness is what keeps the dominance of these narratives. Curriculums need to focus more

about the stories of marginalized groups through their own lens. There is no doubt that the history we learn in schools is taught in the perspective of whites. Countless times we learn about some of the greatest leaders in history who became successful and left legacies. Most of the time, these narratives are about white people. We hear fewer stories about successful people of color making an impact. When we do hear about these stories, they are usually told in a manner that minimizes the works of people of color and leave “oppressive structures intact” (Samudzi). We are not expected to become successful because the history that we learn teaches us that white people are the successful ones. This is why our education upholds the stories of marginalized people, like myself, in our society because we are constantly exposed to them. As long as diversity is intended to allow every group, including whites, to share the center, these oppressive narratives will continue to persist.

Unfortunately, no one seems to challenge how diversity protects the dominant stories, which is why it is important to realize the consequences of this inaction. Why is it that marginalized people and I can work so hard to overcome the barriers placed upon our lives just for it to go unnoticed by some white people? This is because it is difficult for a person of color to break their single story since our society has instilled it systematically on us. If people were recognized based on their own experience, the concept of the single story would cease to exist because people would see how we are all so different. Every person who believes the narrative about a person like me without knowing me personally sets me back as it reminds me how my actions alone are not enough to stop this problem. All my life I’ve worked hard to do well in school with the goal of attending a great university to help me achieve a successful career. This is why I stayed after school to get extra help from teachers to do better in my classes. This is why I also joined extracurricular activities to stay out of the drug and violence that Richmond kids

commonly fell into. I made sure to do everything that I could to set me on the path of success and my actions showed it. Anyone who knew me personally could testify that this was my character. So when my manager assumed my incapability without knowing me personally, it reminded me how my racial identity blocked people from knowing the real me.

It is important that everyone in the community contributes to stop the spread of these narratives. This contribution means that instead of universities, like Yale, spend their time focusing on diversifying their education, they should rather focus their efforts on decentering the dominance of whiteness in their curriculum. To do this, as Samudzi suggests, we need to address the power in these stories and stop the normalization of these oppressive narratives. This means that our education needs to recognize the perspective in which our history is told, and its effects, and make efforts to stop this cycle. Likewise, it is important for every person to realize the stakes of these narratives and take personal actions to resist spreading these stories themselves.

I am very proud of coming from Richmond and overcoming the violence, drugs and lack of resources that this hometown has placed upon me. My dedication to achieve success is what people should see when they see me, not the stereotypical story that does not apply to me. My manager should have seen me through my own personal story and not what society has presumed of me based on my background. It shouldn't be my duty to have to constantly prove myself to others, even if that was the mindset I came into Yale with. I felt that my interaction with my manager was a glimpse of future interactions that I would have with other white people. Although this has not been the case at Yale so far, this is a burden that neither I, nor other marginalized people, should have to worry about. I am not what people assume of me at first glance. I am not a single story. Nobody is a single story.