Gray Matters:
Mulattoes, Miscegenation, and Me

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“Are you walking home by yourself?” an older girl asked me as we walked away from our elementary school.
“No, my mom’s over there waiting for me.” I pointed towards my family’s conspicuous conversion van.
“Where?” She looked all around.
“Right there!”
“Where??”
“Right there. In the red van.” We had arrived in front of the van at this point.
“Are you adopted?”

My mother is white. My father was black. I mean, he still is technically, but he died when I was 12 so it feels weird to say things about him in the present tense. These facts were never news to me. It was never questioned in my house, of course. But when I was in second grade and Alexis Walker asked me if I was adopted, it occurred to me that in reality, I don’t really look like my mom. She’s white. I’m not. But she is my biological mother.

The color of my skin is almost exactly reflective of the mix of my parental genes. My dad was like milk chocolate and with my mom, he made me like a carmel. It was always as clear to me as mixing paint. My dad’s red and my mom’s blue made me purple. Duh. But I wouldn’t understand what that actually means for a long time. I still don’t know if I really understand it, but I’m getting there. It’s a history as complicated as the history of race in the United States. It’s two poles that don’t exactly attract, and yet I’m here, existing. When I first learned about the Civil Rights Movement around February (I assume) of first grade, I started to think about these

complications. Would I have just sat in the middle of the bus? Of course not, because I probably wouldn't have existed because before 1967, my parents couldn't have gotten married.

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For the 2000 Census, the United States Census Bureau allowed Americans to identify themselves as more than one race for the first time. The term "mulatto" was an option from 1850-1900, with "quadroon" and "octoroon" listed as options on the 1890 census. However, census respondents could not select their own racial identity on the surveys until 1960. Until then, respondents were assumed a race by census-takers.[1]

Aside from simple data collection, the issue of mixed race identity in the United States is an incredibly multifaceted one including social standing, ancestral ownership, and outright invalidation. Of course, the plight of mixed raced peoples is not comparable to the struggle of black Americans. The two are intermingled, but distinctly their own. While slavery bound millions of Africans over two and a half centuries, it also contributed to a huge population of people caught in the middle of a racially polarized nation—mulattoes. The United States' history of racial mixing combines structural racial inequality with an ingrained identity crisis still relevant to those of mixed race today. There is not a singular encompassing mulatto experience, and if there was it would certainly change throughout history. But there are many common factors to be observed about the identity and how it is perceived by society over time.

[1] "Multiracial In America," Pew Research Center, published 11 June 2015, accessed 27 November 2017 http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/.

Arguably the most notable occurrences of mulatto peoples are those who were children of enslaved women and their white masters. The trend was too common over the course of the slave trade, and the way they are talked about is just as provocative. The basis of thought that allowed for the slave trade to happen is that Africans, negroes, people of color, are inherently *different*. Not only are they different, but they are inferior to whites. Therefore they can be enslaved and the white man's conscience clear because if they are not *humans,* the institution cannot be *inhumane.*

However, the practice of sleeping with slaves should theoretically subvert the idea that the enslaved peoples were just property. Sexual intercourse is something that happens between two members of the same species, or so it should be. Yet slave owners while degrading their enslaved people in keeping them as property, often took the step further and raped them. Racial mixing in the time of slavery cannot be looked at as a simple social or familial occurrence—it was a war crime. Nancy Bentley explores racial mixing through a critical analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She describes the *awkwardness* of racial mixing in this fictional work as a reflection of what was happening in real life at the time of the book's publication. Bentley writes, "A true portrait of the American family would have to include the sons and daughters who were the legal slaves of their fathers."[2] The tension at play here is clear—in a society where familial relations are at the center of life, things get really messy when one's blood family also happens to be one's legal property.

[2] Nancy Bentley, "White Slaves: the Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction," *American Literature* 65, No. 3 (1993) 502.

Bentley describes the purpose of Harriet Beecher Stowe's work as a warning to slave owners that a revolt is not ideal. Bentley analyzes the juxtaposition Stowe presents between family and violence. It is a conflict that itself should have unraveled the institution of slavery, but instead just adds another layer to the atrocity of the slave trade. If the enslaved people were to riot, the violence would be detrimental to family life. But this argument, of course, imagines that slavery was not inherently violent itself. If that fact were acknowledged, whites would have to acknowledge the overwhelming violence of their own race, and that was clearly not something the majority of them wanted to do. Bentley continues,

> "...white anxiety came from what law and social order would not recognize: that blood relations bound Africans and Europeans and subverted the idea of a natural boundary between black and white. Repressed in social laws, this knowledge produced in whites a combination of sympathy, revulsion, and fascination for the figure of the Mulatto. The person of mixed black and white parentage stood precisely at the place where nature and culture could come unbound. The Mulatto figure was a scandal—not only a sexual but an intellectual scandal, confounding as it did the racial categories that were as fundamental to social life in the North as in the South."[3]

Even something as ugly as violence was too much for whites to have in common with blacks. And in their hearts, they knew their violence, so they tasked themselves with preventing blacks from becoming violent. This of course, assumes that blacks are not violent. They of course, like any other race, can be. However the difference is in the systems. At the time there was no

[3] Bentley, 504.

channel in America for systemic for black citizens to perpetrate violence whereas the entirety of America was a violent system run by whites.

W.E.B. DuBois' characterization of enslaved mulattoes swiftly encompasses the slew of issues that came with their identity.

> "The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also the hereditary weight of a mass corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home."[4]

DuBois' points out that not only was the act violent, but the creation of another person who had to bear this burden from the day of their birth is violent in and of itself. Of course, the argument is not that the races should never mix. The argument is that while one race is enslaved, interracial sex is actually violent rape that perpetuated psychological violence on the generation it created. Like DuBois writes, "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[5] For mixed race Americans, that twoness is divided even further—they have their negro soul, their white soul, and their American soul. How does one navigate that against the backdrop of enslavement? And then the Civil War? And beyond? When skin color decides one's fate the way it did in the 19th century (and not to mention still does in the 21st century), the secondary colors are ever important.

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[4] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Skyros Publishing, 2015), 5.
[5] DuBois, 2.

The issue of race at large runs much deeper than skin, but the foundation for the issue lies of course, in the physical appearance of humans. There is plenty of literature analyzing the how characters are depicted and how this relates to race on a subconscious level—"good" characters are lighter and *bright*, while "bad" characters are darker and mysterious—but those metaphors do not work the same for characters of mixed race. But their physical attributes are still exploited and are telling of the mulatto dilemma.

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"The Race Thing" *Originally posted to my blog, Perfectly Offensive on November 9, 2015*

To answer the big question of "what am I?" I am mixed black and white. My father was black and my mother is white, and I am a beautiful caramel macchiato.

This has never really been a problem for me. When I was in first grade a girl asked me if I was adopted when she saw my mom, but that's been pretty much the extent of my raced-based interactions. I struggle with my hair. People ask "What am I?" and sometimes men approach me with a reluctant, "Hola?" thinking I am Latina.

The quick answer and identity I used for college applications was and always has been black. Partially because I've always just kind of felt black, and partially because whatever I am, I am simply not white. However, I realized something this week. I am very white.

No, I wasn't trying to prove my dance moves. I wasn't complaining about the food being too spicy. I was actually in a classroom. My writing professor assigned a reading to us about "Black English," and one teacher's passion for teaching the cultural dialect as a written language. I could not have felt whiter.

The goal of the piece was to highlight the issues with "Standard English," and to speak to the injustice done to the black community by not accepting their syntax as "proper." This did not sit well with me. I was raised to not say "ain't," not use double negatives, and to enunciate each word carefully. I've spent years drilling the rules of English grammar into my skull, and here this professor seemed to be undoing all my hard work. I don't want to address the question of prejudice here. I want to speak more about my own experience and identity that was brought to light from this lesson.

I found myself hating this piece because I was angry that someone was saying my precious rules for grammar were systematically oppressive. Then I was confused because in feeling this anger, was I coming from a place of internalized racism? This begged a larger question, and one I have kind of held in the back of my head since coming to college: am I black enough? There are things I know and things I am not sure about. I know that I stand against racism. I am not sure I am a victim of it.

I know, especially compared to too many other people of color, I have never experienced outright personal racism. But have I internalized it based on the fact that I can't get down with

"Black English?" I know some people would tell me yes. I only hate Black English because the white man has told me to hate Black English. But I think I actually, as a writer, as a rule follower, enjoy conforming to the rules of standard English. Yes, these rules came from a bunch of white men, but so did the Constitution and I do love my freedom of Speech.

I don't know where my endgame here is. I guess, if you are someone who wants to speak and write in "Black English" I can't and won't try to stop you, but I'm not going to use it myself. And I don't think that makes me any less black. I think it means I was raised differently or come from a different culture. I will respect that it does not make you less educated or less refined, as the piece pointed out, students who tried to switch from Standard English to Black English had trouble conforming to its rules. And even if it was "easy" it would not be invalid.

I guess my point is, don't make me choose. I cannot choose which race I want to be every day. I don't think any part of me is strictly based in one-half of my chromosomes. I just don't want to feel like I'm betraying either one of my races in saying this, so I'm not going to. I'm mixed, and that's not important because at the end of the day I'm Kamaron no matter what.

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Because enslaved mulattoes were so prevalent in the 19th century, they received a regular share of representation in cultural works of the time. The nature of the representation of these characters is ranging, but there are a number of noticeable patterns across different works. The

most prevalent pattern is the focus on color of these characters. Whether the characters are enslaved, like Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or slave owning like Armand Aubigny in Kate Chopin's *Désirée's Baby*,[6] color plays its own character alongside these figures and often creates conflict.

Charles Chesnutt wrote a number of stories exploring racial identity particularly for those of mixed race. He has two parents of color, but knew his grandfather was a white slave owner.[7] In *The Wife of His Youth*, Chesnutt tells the story of Mr. Ryder, a biracial man, who is the "dean" of a club called "The Blue Veins." The group consists of individuals of color who were "more white than black."[8] Chesnutt writes,

> "I have no race prejudice," he would say, "but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one doesn't want us yet, but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step. 'With malice towards none, with charity for all,' we must do the best we can for ourselves and those who are to follow us…"[9]

This small soliloquy summarizes the character of Mr. Ryder and alludes to his internal identity struggle. He feels he is living on the cusp of elitism and degeneracy, as a person in the middle of

[6] Kate Chopin, "Désirée's Baby," *Vogue,* January 1893.
[7] John L. Sutton, *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature: The Authors*, ed. Philip A. Greasley (Indiana University Press, 2001) 108-110.
[8] Charles Chesnutt, "The Wife of My Youth," *The Atlantic* 1898, 1.
[9] Chesnutt, 3.

white and black. He has internalized the fear of blackness that his society has engrained in him. Robert McDowell analyzes this work and Chesnutt's other characters:

> "The problem of identification is precisely the undercurrent tugging at most characters in Chesnutt's tales. In more than half his tales, the crisis of identity is central… the questions reoccur: Who am I? Who is the Negro? What is the white man?"[10]

The identity crisis McDowell references is exactly the mulatto problem. If they are enslaved, they are caught between a master who may be their father and their peers who might look down on them for finding favor from their master. If they are free, they are caught between acknowledging their privilege and still being caught up in the racism around them by white people who still see them as black. For Mr. Ryder, choosing to reclaim his first wife, an old and tired black woman, over the beautiful mixed princess he has chosen to be his new wife and ticket into high society, is his decision to claim his black identity. He is lucky in that he has this option, whereas enslaved mulattoes in fiction are not afforded that choice.

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> "She's mixed too! But her dad is white, and her mom is black," I told my dad about my new friend, Ivery.
> "I hate that," he said.

[10] Robert E. McDowell, "Reviewed Work: The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line by Charles W. Chesnutt," *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910*, no. 2 (1969): 182.

I would not understand that he was kidding until years later when my mom made the same joke. My parents joked like this. We did not talk much about race growing up. There was nothing really to talk about. We were a mixed family in a fairly diverse suburb. According to the 2010 Census, Lawrence Township is approximately 70% white, 10% black, and 17% Asian. This is slightly more diverse than the 2000 Census that would better temporally reflect my childhood, but not too far off rationally. I say all this to point out that I was rarely, if ever, the only black kid in my classes growing up, and I was never the blackest kid. So ironically, it's fair to say that I did not understand Race. I wouldn't for a long time.

I'm 21 years old, and I told my black boyfriend about the qualms I have when I see white women dating black men. He called me a racist. I understood the hypocrisy that complements with my prejudice—the daughter of a white woman and a black man—but something about seeing it around me just kind of puts me off. In reality, I understand it comes from a grudge. Black boys are the only ones who ever paid attention to me. White boys usually made fun of me when I was a kid or ignored me in high school. So to see a black man paying attention to a white woman who would easily get the same attention from white men just fuels an irrational jealousy in my blood. This isn't a huge thing. I don't walk around advocating for the end of interracial dating—I celebrate it at least on the surface—but there's something *there* that quietly irks my insecurities.

"I just don't think black people are attractive," Marie Buschman, my childhood best friend, said to me and Ivery in Ivery's pool one summer day. We were 12 or 13. Ivery was my first close black friend. We looked at each other and silently questioned, "Did she just say that?"

Nearly 10 years later, I see a tweet from Marie celebrating the 50th anniversary of Loving vs. Virginia, citing the supreme court case that essentially allowed her to marry her soon-to-be husband who is of Latin descent. The tweet made my blood boil. I thought of the words she said to me a decade before. Yes, we were young and didn't understand things like inherent prejudice or even race itself. But the fact that now she wanted to celebrate it because she secured her brown fiancé to make perfect mixed babies with infuriated me. Being mixed in that moment felt like a privilege that should not afforded to white women who will never understand what their children will go through. I clicked the quill icon to write a new tweet in a subtle angry response, but deleted every draft and let it go for a few reasons. I knew my tweet would not educate this woman about why her future family will be a social commentary. And I knew tweeting something angry about white women dating men of color would only look like an attack on my own mother. So I let it go.

If God had bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of a female slave.[11]

[11] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2001), 27.

That mixed privilege that I don't want for Marie's future children is also an achilles heel. Everyone loves a mixed baby. Okay, maybe racists don't love mixed babies, but the general population loves mixed babies. The mixed population is broadly *prettier* than any other racial population, and I'm not saying that out of my inherent bias and I don't just mean black and white mixes. I think the more diverse a person's background, the better looking they are. This all sounds really, but I feel like most people reading are either like, "Yes. Fact." or they're looking up famous mixed people and realize, "Yes. Facts." I don't know if it's something about biology, but I have eyes so I know it's true.

It's a *hamartia* because it perpetuates the commodification of mixed people. We are reduced to just a beautiful thing, which yes is not the worst objectification a person can face, but it's not productive. If you're like me, you grow up and all your life you just hear about how *beautiful* you and your siblings are. How *tan* you look even in the dead of winter. How people would *die* for my hair. How turqoise looks *so good* on my skin. Then I just become my skin. I'm nothing but an intersection of a pretty white woman and her dark partner. That's a bit melodramatic. But they physical features of mixed people are always a point of conversation when it doesn't need to be.

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In reality, however, there is some opportunity for reclamation for people of mixed race. Frederick Douglass characterized this in his life and in his work. A biracial man himself,

Douglass expressed the struggle of grappling with this identity in two parts. In his autobiography, Douglass describes a fight he got into with his master at the time, Covey. Douglass defeats Covey in the fight, but further, he gains an understanding of his own identity from the scuffle. Bentley writes,

> "While the men were fighting, Douglass was temporarily a "white" man- that is, they were "equals before the law." Douglass does not deny an African identity, but he does claim white manhood, a manhood conditioned upon an inviolate body. Covey never touches him again, and Douglass, though a "slave in form," will never again be a "slave in fact."[12]

Douglass in this moment is able to transcend race in a way he would not fully understand until he was writing about it years later. Bentley asserts,

> "The fight is a physical expression of Douglass's simultaneous struggle for the intangible currency of identity. In addition to whatever pain he may have inflicted, Douglass's actions are a vocabulary through which he pronounces a more fundamental mastery over Covey and a concomitant possession of his own identity as a man."[13]

Douglass in this moment is able to both shed the identity of a slave and his complex racial identity. Because he defeats both a white man and his master, Douglass seems to begin his journey of overcoming his own slavery. He takes one step closer to liberation. He calls this fight the "turning point" of his history of enslavement because it gives him the first sense of humanity

[12] Bentley, 518
[13] Ibid.

that he has in a long time. His identity from this point forward will be able to be self-defined. In this regard, Douglass is the antithesis of the mulatto in fiction. Bentley concludes,

> "Frederick Douglass was far from the fictional Mulatto type in the pages of antislavery novels, but as a biracial man his story nevertheless displays the particular cultural calculus of body and identity that governs the antebellum novel."[14]

Douglass' journey to identity is a syllabus for all mixed people. Their identity is a process that needs to be explored and disentangled and put back together in a way that makes sense to the individual. It is important because the structures in place tell mixed people to fit a certain mold, and they should fit in black or white. Douglass not only defeats his literal white master, he defeats his inner white master.

The white master of the American racial system has yet to be defeated, but men like Douglass were luckily able to come into some form of liberation through personal achievement or like Douglass, worldwide acclaim. It will likely not be easy, as it was not for Douglass, but upward mobility is possible.

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"Eat your crust, it will make your hair curly," my mother would tell me. But I didn't want the crust, and I didn't want curly hair. My hair was a tangled web and a daily battle. My mom would pull and rip the brush through my thick curls and try to manage it into a ponytail. I cried almost

[14] Bentley, 503.

every day. They blamed it on my spot in the lineup—as the youngest, I got to pull everyone else's hair, but no one pulled mine because I was a baby. It left me tender-headed for life.

We went through bottles and bottles of L'Oreal detangling spray as if the apple-scented water was actually releasing the knots weaved to my scalp. My oldest sister taught me how to scrunch my hair. Wet it, mousse, gel, hairspray. The products turned my bird's nest into a space helmet. Crunchy spirals moved with me. I tried the technique on my blonde best friend, Rachel. Her thin hair fell flat, and I didn't understand why.

Throughout middle and high school I straightened my corkscrew locks into pins. It made things easier. I didn't have to wet my hair just to manage it. I could wear it down like the other girls. It was a solution to an ancestry of confusion. There is no handbook for mixed hair. It is random chaos and no two mixed girls are the same. Between me and my two sisters, we hold three different textures and curl patterns. We have the same blood. My hair says she's not black, but she's definitely not white. My hair says we don't know where came from, but we're trying to figure out where we're going. My hair has a history. It has course African roots with a European disciplined softness.

Twenty years and countless products later, I begin to understand my hair and its needs. It's actually pretty low maintenance when I let it breathe and define itself. I still straighten it sometimes to change things up, but I love my curls. I love the bounce and the personality. My

straight hair is conformity. My curls are freedom. My straight hair gets slick and oily. My curls say "Let's play in the rain."

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Richard Steckel characterizes the institution of miscegenation as "a sensitive subject in Southern history."[15] He references the abolitionist allegations that plantations were being run "like harems" that was eventually dismissed as "exaggerated." Regardless, the records are clear. It was not uncommon. Steckel goes on to offer some questionable analysis on the effects of racial mixing in enslaved communities as well as among their owners.

> "Additional research on the subject, however, not only clarifies the record of whites, but also contributes to our knowledge about the operation of the slave family. Miscegenation was one of the pressures that impinged on the family; advances by whites must have made life miserable for some slave couples; and single slaves who had children by whites may have been stigmatized in their efforts to build a family."[16]

Steckel's characterization of miscegenation as a "pressure" arguably oversimplifies the complexities of this institution and makes light of a horrific situation. Yes, the pressure must have been terrible, but it was also literal bondage. He continues, "Advances by whites must have made life miserable for some slave couples." Of course, he is focusing on one aspect of slavery that had its own complications and implications, but perhaps he takes the idea of slavery too lightly. He goes on to talk about the damage whites cause when mixing with blacks.

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[15] Richard H. Steckel, "Miscegenation and the American Slave Schedules," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XI, no. 2 (1980): 251.
[16] Ibid.

> "Whites made contact with slaves at a cost to themselves. The cost was a penalty imposed by slaves, by one's family members, or by a society and this penalty deterred relations between whites and slaves. Slaves could not demand payment for these activities, but they could impose costs on the owner by shirking their work or by running away."[17]

His assumption that enslaved people could take advantage of the situation when a white person fraternized with them is frankly unnerving. Steckel seems to be ignoring the violence of the whole institution. He briefly mentions rape as one extreme version of miscegenation, but claims the alternative is seduction. I question the legitimacy of a successful consensual seduction when in the framework of *owner* and *property.*

Reading these kinds of analyses continues to complicate the mulatto identity. From a modern perspective it is already difficult to put one's self in the mindset of someone two centuries ago. But add to that thought an image of one's parents pitted against each other in a situation like slave owner and master. Then convolute it by imagining now one is a slave to his own father. Bring that familial image to nearly any point in American history and that mixed identity is even more ambiguous.

It is a complicated issue. And perhaps it is a cop-out to put it so broadly, but racial mixing in a historical context is simply complicated. The concept in a vacuum without structural racism and other factors, racial mixing is a good thing. It promotes diversity, cultural fusion, and

[17] Steckel, 254.

eventually a third space creating a whole new culture. Unfortunately, the structures in place have made that third space a chaotic ongoing identity crisis. Soon enough the world will be populated for the majority with mixed people, but for now we must continue unpacking, processing, and liberating ourselves anyway we can manage.

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"Mixed" as its own identity is not often an option. People in general don't understand. I think it's our tendency to compartmentalize with binaries. It's the reason we—the majority population, I mean—don't understand and therefore too often don't accept things like bisexuality or gender fluidity. We want everyone to be one thing, one one side, left or right, there is no in between.

Race in the 21st century is funny because I'm not picking between being enslaved or being free, outright. I'm expected to be picking Beyoncé over Taylor Swift or basketball over baseball. I'm expected to pick which stereotype I'd rather take—white or black. There isn't a very big, if any, culture unique to being mixed black and white. The hair thing kind of ties us together in that it's a struggle for pretty much all of us, but it's unique to every person.

Stereotypes are a problem. We can all agree, right? No one likes to be automatically associated with a larger thing I think in general. We all like to feel special and unique, and yes we find things in common with other people and groups and larger things, but we don't like to *be* those commonalities. Yet at the same time, it's nice to have stereotypes to fall back on, in a sense. Like the idea of "Black Twitter"—it's not one specific location, but in general they are tweets from

black people that other black people relate to, and they're often kind at least somewhat stereotypical, but reclaimed stereotypes by the community.

Again, I know the conflicts I face as a mixed person are nothing compared to the discrimination faced by black people or Muslim people or Latinx people. But they are conflicts. I had two friends in high school who one day were cracking black joke after black joke while I sat with them. I admit I laughed at some while saying, "That's messed up" or tried to resist smiling. And then they turned the tables on me. "Are you *half* offended?" "Are you gonna *half* fight me?" They turned the already racist jokes into targeted jabs regarding my status as one of these people *in between.* They would not give me the permission to be fully offended as a black person, or as a person who would just be upset by racist remarks. I had to only connect with half of my lineage because if I added in the white factor, I had no reason to be upset, at least not *fully* upset.

It was before Black Lives Matter, before Trump, and before Ferguson. It was before we (at least I) remembered the race problem in this country. I say remember because people living it—black Americans who wear no question on their skin—know the problem never went away. They know Rodney King was not an isolated incident. They knew Michael Brown was not an isolated incident. They know the perpetrators of these acts were not radicals or rogue, but part of the larger institution of oppression under which black people have been living since white men saw the shores of Africa.

Yes, I was one of the millions of people who was ignorant for most of my life to the ongoing race problem. I always knew racism continued to exist in certain people or certain places. But I, like many others, did not understand the systems at work in America and the world until Ferguson and beyond.

When I got to college, it was not long before I realized I was not black enough. I started school just after Ferguson wrapped up, and at this private white institution, as they say, I was immediately put off by the so-called "political correctness." I truly thought it was ridiculous and I would never fit in here. Not *because* I was black, but moreso *despite* being black. It felt like the few black students around me were all so angry and I wasn't angry. I was annoyed and confused. Ignorant, really.

I started seeing things though. I'd go home and hang out with my high school friends, and for the first time I started *hearing* what they were saying. They teased me about my liberal safe space school, and I laughed with them until I realized some of them weren't joking. As time went on and I grew in my understanding of race and its history along with forming my own political opinions and maturing my beliefs, things became clear for me—well, clearer.

I am not white. I hate rap music. I like bland food. I wear Uggs. But I wear Timbs too. I use more cocoa butter than I can even afford. I love watermelon. I worship Katy Perry. I know all the words to "Miami" by Will Smith. I get nervous in the South. I get nervous in South Philly. Seeing *Straight Outta Compton* was the first time I ever heard the music of NWA. My favorite

movie is *Clueless.* I "talk white." I went to private school for both high school and college. I'm Baptist. I play softball. I'm terrible at running. I think I'm pretty loud. I shop at American Eagle primarily. I hate vegetables. I can go on just listing other things about myself, but the point I'm making is I cannot fit either mold that society has determined to be "black" or "white."

I'm not saying all this to say break down stereotypes and be a post-racial society. I think heritage is incredibly important. But for people like me, heritage is a complex and often lost narrative because of the weird mix of cultures and the history of race relations. It is incredibly strange to think about the fact that my mother's ancestors could have owned my father's. It is bewildering to think if my parents were 20 years older, they wouldn't have been able to get married, and they probably wouldn't have even met. Are these things that constantly affect general livelihood? No. But do they affect my understanding of my identity? Absolutely.

In second grade, we held "International Day" where each student was to bring in a food item native to their family's heritage. I brought in corn dogs, asserting that I am American.

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