

Black Like Me?

"You don't deserve to be black!"

Throughout my two-year stint at J.R. Masterman School, I was to hear these words on more than one occasion. When one is age ten and confronted with questions about racial identity and his role in an ethnic group, he does not realize the scope of the personal development which he is about to undergo.

Masterman is built in the shape of a huge concrete U, towering five stories up, with a brick courtyard on the inside curve of the U-shape. It was in this courtyard that the four or five hundred fifth and sixth graders gathered in the mornings before school started. Here children would discuss last night's television, gossip about what girl liked what boy, or simply make fun of one another interminably. The racial divide at Masterman was most obvious here on the courtyard. The black males would primarily lean against the walls, while the black females would play jump-rope or hop scotch. The white children would form in groups similar to the blacks with the only difference being that they would either sit on the great stone steps leading to the courtyard or stand in tightly-knit circles spread across the bricks.

My position in all of this was somewhat ambiguous. I was friends with many of the white children as I knew them from my diverse, middle-class neighborhood in West Philadelphia near the University of Pennsylvania's campus. However, being the product of a white mother and a black father, my light brown complexion drew me to the black children instinctively. It was expected of me by the black children to associate with them for no other reason than I was black like them. With this expectation of me to stand with them came the expectation to "act" like a black person should "act" in their eyes. What this idea of being black was, I had no clue, but was on the verge of finding out.

"Yo, Luke, man. What up with you and that fly honey over there? I know you been peepin' her hardcore all day long. So what's up? You get the digits or what, man?"

"What do you mean? I d-don't even really know her." I stuttered out my timid reply.

An explosion of laughter would come back from the boy who had asked the question, Khari Mitchell. He embodied everything that was truly black in my naive eyes. He had an African name, spoke broken English with slang substituted

for every other word, wore huge baggy blue jeans and expensive, loud-colored shirts, knew almost every popular rap song, and when he danced, his movements flowed fluidly, each step and jerk of the arm perfectly fitting with the preceding movement.

"Damn, nigga! Yo' ass is too much for me!" He would go on cajoling, making sure to let the rest of the crew know exactly what I had said and in what manner I had said it. Every time I interacted with Khari and several of the other black boys who were like him, I had the anxious, intimidated feeling that in their eyes I was not truly a black person. It is difficult to describe this desire to be considered "black." Partly it stemmed from the simple wish that most insecure, pre-adolescent boys have, which is to simply belong to a group. Additionally, this particular group or fraternity of black males was deemed by all the children in the school the "coolest," and most exclusive club to belong to. Black males were the best at sports, the largest suppliers of laughter, the most popular, even among the white students, and, with the exception of myself and several others, the worst students.

The most cumbersome obstacles in my acceptance within the exclusive black community of Masterman, even more so than my inherent lack of knowledge of how a "black person" should act, were my grades. As I, most of the white students and several other black boys and girls flew through fifth grade with A's and B's, other black boys would struggle with C's and D's. I could never quite resolve this in my own mind except that most of the black boys, despite their other favorable traits, were obviously stupid. My teacher seemed to agree with me.

Frank Gallo, a beast of a man, standing at about six-foot-four, with a booming, jolly, baritone voice, was my fifth-grade teacher. He seemed like a nice enough guy as he was always giving special attention to some of the black boys in my class. One of his favorites was one of my few black friends, Simian Poles, a very dark-skinned boy, who constantly struggled and worked harder than I simply to receive C's. Mr. Gallo would ask Simian a difficult question and as he grappled with the answer, a condescending smile would come over Mr. Gallo's face.

"C'mon, Sim," Gallo again would smile maliciously and leer at poor Simian, "don't tell me you don't know the answer. C'mon buddy, you're one of my best students. I know you know the answer."

One could almost see Mr. Gallo's mocking and taunting gnawing away at Simian's dignity as a ravenous hyena devours decaying zebra flesh. Finally, tight-lipped and staring down at his desk, Simian would mumble something about not

knowing the answer and could Mr. Gallo please ask someone else. This tragic scene played itself out many times in several versions, with seven or eight different students, the common denominator being that they were all black males who were bad students. It never occurred to me that possibly Mr. Gallo's taunts crushed the boys' confidence and they had simply given up on school. Nor did it occur to me that Mr. Gallo had already made up his mind that these boys were idiots, and he was simply trying to reassure himself. Of course I was badly affected by seeing my comrades such as Simian being put through this torture, but my naivete again told me that it was their fault for not knowing the answer. I sympathized with the boys even less when I received taunts from them after receiving a good grade or stating a correct answer.

"Yo, man, that nigga Luke is a goddamn oreo."

"Yeah, man, no shit. That nigga swear he white."

It was as if I was the house-slave working for the white master. I received praise from Mr. Gallo, did not have to work as hard as some of my black friends, and reaped all the benefits of good grades. My other black counterparts were the field-slaves. They were beaten with Gallo's condescension, toiled in futility in the fields of their schoolwork, the responsibility of which they regularly shirked. Eventually, they could not help but hold some level of resentment towards me.

This is not to say that all the black males at Masterman were unlike me. There was a fair-sized minority of us who did do well in school but were not, in my view, the quintessence of "blackness." Several of the sacred few, however, were like one boy, Hollis Jones. He was able to find that balance of conformity to school's academic standards while maintaining his identity as a black male within the tightly knit circle of the "fraternity of blackness" at Masterman. Hollis wore glasses like me, yet he wore stylish, thin, gold-rimmed frames. He was able to converse with Khari on his level, using all of the slang and vernacular which I found so difficult to comprehend, yet so appealing. However, in my eyes, Hollis' greatest feat was that he was still considered "cool" by all, despite receiving better grades than I.

Needless to say, I modeled myself after Hollis and those like him. I so desperately wanted to be able to fit in with Khari and the like that I soon changed my tastes in music and clothes and even adapted my speech. It reached the point where I was not quite one of "them," but was somehow accepted as an honorary member.

These tastes in music and clothing have survived to this day in me, only now not because I am attempting to fit in to some pre-conceived mold of what a black male is, but because it is who I am. I have realized that there is no such thing as "being black." What is "black"? One cannot define an entire race through a narrow view which includes basketball playing, entertaining, or committing a crime, an image of the black male which is all too prevalent in today's society. To look at Black America through a television or a newspaper is to look at the ocean from the beach through a telescope. I was caught in this type-casting as a young child; I had only seen black people in a certain, negative, intimidating light. Of course, my father was the constant black presence in my life, but in my childhood view he was not a black man, nor would he have been a white man if he were white. He was simply my father and it was inconceivable to picture him in terms of race, much as it is inconceivable to picture one's parents as sexual beings.

The development of a child into his or her ethnic and racial identity is the result of conditioning. Whatever the child sees represented as what it is supposed to be, it will inevitably conform to that expectation. In my case, it was the desire to fill the role of a black male in today's society in terms of my shallow view. With the progression of time and my exposure to the multi-faceted being which is the black male, these stereotypes which I had conceived have fallen by the wayside. In the end, my quest for the identity of the prototypical black male was never completed. What I sought does not truly exist.

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