Race & Ethnicity Essay

I am black. I am of African decent. I am Chinese. I am of Korean decent. I am white. I am Canadian. I don’t have a race or a culture. These statements are common examples of how many people view their race and identity. Even though many are unsure or unaware of what it really means to have a culture, we make claims about it everyday. Some feel they have a race, while others simply feel they do not. We include based on who fits into this ideal and exclude those who don’t. The fact that culture is complex, learned through common daily experience, conflicting and contradictory, relational because it is learned through interactions with others, and performative, as our interactions are performances within a public domain, is something that people never seem to think about, until we are put in a situation, in which we then become aware that we are different. Our knowledge of culture, ethnicity and identity is subconsciously internalized on a daily basis through constant social interactions. Although the concepts of race and ethnicity are socially constructed, they are real in their consequences. Their affects on the social world can be seen from my very own experiences from institutions, to peer groups, to media representations, and lastly, to how I’ve come to view my own sense of identity.

Growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood as a child allowed me to constantly become aware that I was different. Through interactions with my peers in elementary school, I noticed that my hair was a different texture, that my color was a lot darker than most, and that I was different. “Give the horse back its hair” were comments that lingered throughout my junior high days, where I struggled to fit in by putting hair extensions in my hair. Although I longed to feel a part of the bigger group, I kept sane by hanging with other minorities, they were my clique. We were all ethnic minorities and all felt that we belonged in this clique on the basis of
feeling excluded from the majority of whites in the school. Based on this exclusion, ethnic symbols such as hip-hop and reggae music were what set us apart and what defined us.

Not only was this alienation felt among my peers, but it was also felt in the classroom. Growing up I never quite felt that I could really speak up in class and show my outgoing persona, for fear of people making fun of me. I knew I was different and did not want to do anything that could cause them to focus their attention on that difference. For projects in school, I would always take the role that required speaking the least, so that I wouldn’t have to speak in front of them. I got along with everybody, but was not truly myself until I set foot inside my home, my private domain. At home, I could get let loose, I could eat all the patties and hardo bread I wanted to, listen to all the Caribbean melodies of Bob Marley, and let loose my kinky afro, without any fear or exclusion.

As I moved on to high school it is as if there was a shift from being ashamed of my race and culture to embracing it and wanting to showcase it. It was not overnight, and I don’t think that there was ever a time where I just changed like that. But I think that it was a process of just starting to become comfortable in my own skin and being surrounded in an ethnic school with all different cultures, and not just whites, that allowed me to really embrace my racial difference.

High school is where, whether subconscious or not, racial sub-cultures emerge. In high school, cliques are formed on that very aspect of ethnicity and culture. You hang out with people that look like you, that dress like you, and with people with whom you feel you can relate. It was in high school that I truly began to have a sense of my Jamaican culture. I ate all my ethnic foods such as ackee and salt fish, danced to the reggae music of Sean Paul, sang along to Jay Z’s lyrics, and wore my hair in braids. It was only here that my true outgoing and friendly persona came out. I became a more active participant in the school, I was on various committees
and organizations, and eventually prom queen of my graduating class. Although I associated with all races, I took pride in hanging with my friends in my ethnic group. Only there could we talk about the latest lyric in 50 cent’s new song, the newest book by Maya Angelou, or ethnic jokes that only my group of friends would understand, there was where I truly belonged.

Part of this new found confidence in my culture had a lot to do with media representations. As I moved through high school, black artists had become increasingly popular, and so had urban culture. Hip-hop and reggae music had been brought back to light, and it had taken my fear of being different with it. Not only did I listen to it, I welcomed it with open arms. When I watched television I began to see faces that looked like mine. I could relate to what they were saying. I related to the culture. The culture of music is what helped define my identity, and it is what finally allowed me to have respect for it.

Not only did media representations of black culture help me to understand my identity, it also helped redefine it. What I thought it meant to belong to my black culture, had begun to change. “Why you can’t dance to reggae?”, “Can’t you talk patois(Jamaican language)?”, were common statements that were made to me as I moved up in my high school years. I began to feel stigmatized by my own black people. Now I had to work twice as hard because I didn’t fit in with the whites, and I didn’t fit in with the blacks. For blacks I did too well in school, spoke to proper, and wasn’t loud enough. For whites I was too loud, liked too much hip-hop and reggae, and had a style that was too “ghetto”. So again, I began to have doubts as to where I fit in. It was not until my university years where I was surrounded with other African Canadian students like myself, did I feel a true sense of identity.

It is now since I am older and in university do I understand the power that the media had in reinforcing stereotypes and maintaining racial inequalities. It is this aspect that I continue to
struggle with today. As I am plagued everyday with images of black women pregnant, only speaking in slang, fighting, and in music videos half naked. Only within the last few years have I come to understand why I was struggling with fitting in. It is because the media portrays how they perceive the majority of black women. We get caught up in their misconceptions, and just buy into what we think we are destined to become. The media leaves out black women that are in school, church and that are becoming doctors and lawyers.

It is through my family and my close friends that I have come to a point in my life where I can really embrace my black culture and just be me. I look at my mother who is of Jamaican decent and I listen to the struggles that she had to endure growing up in Hamilton, at a time that it was predominantly white. She rose above the expectations of her to fail, and is a successful nurse today. It is these stories of trial and triumph that motivate me and allow me to understand that I can be successful and appreciate my culture without feeling less “black”, because I want to succeed, or not listen to rap and reggae music all the time. It is because I have chosen to surround myself with people that have the same values and ambitions as me, and that are educated, rather than just on the sole premise of race, that I have I truly come to slowly understand who I am and where I fit in. Although I am comfortable with my identity today, I know that this is a life long process, and something that will continue to be defined and redefined long after my move into my later adult years.