

Identity Thief

What I thought would be a peaceful dinner turned into a full blown robbery. On October 10th, around 7:30 pm I was asked to eat dinner with my friends Savi and Ryan at the dining hall. After meeting up we grabbed our food and sat down at a table to the far right under an industrial blue light that illuminated our faces. It was a regular crowded night at College Eight dining hall, with a sea of indistinguishable students. When I walked to the soda machine, I noticed my friend David sitting alone, so I invited him to sit with us. After nonchalant conversation and sips of soda, David asked "Are you guys all roommates because you seem like very close friends." Noting the fact that I was the only girl at the table and a freshman, it was pretty funny that he included me in the group. So I answered playfully "Yes we are, the best roommates ever! Except Ryan's loud snoring keeps us up at night." We all laugh at my corny joke. But once the laughter settles, Savi chuckles and adds, "Yeah we are, but when we turn off the lights at night Danielle disappears! We can't find her! Where'd she go? The only way we know she's there is if she smiles." There was another uproar of laughter, but it was louder this time, more mocking. The spotlight that was shining on us, now seemed to focus only on me.

There was a sudden change in the atmosphere, like a flick of a light switch. The air felt thinner and my heart rate slowed down. My bite of pizza became harder to swallow and my blood rose in temperature. The genuine smile that was once on my face turned into a grimace. I looked around me and I began to notice the color white. Not the walls, but people's faces. I was sitting at a table with predominantly caucasian males including my mixed "friend" Savi. This "friend", a fellow African American, sat there and belittled me by displaying colorism- the discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated better than those of darker skin. I had been "othered" by someone I thought I trusted. There were so many conflicting emotions coursing through my body all at once. I felt uncomfortable, ridiculed, isolated, powerless, and most importantly angry. In silent fury I took my unfinished plate and abruptly left the dining hall.

After that shocking experience, I waited until the next day to confront Savi about it. I wanted to tell him how angry his joke made me feel. I wanted to ask him why turn such a casual conversation into some obscene joke by mentioning race? His response was an un heartfelt apology. "Aww come on. It was a joke! Oh well, uh I'm sorry I made you feel that way, it was seriously just a joke." It was obvious that he did not understand the blatant disrespect I felt because later that evening he sent me a disturbing picture message of a black man smiling in the dark, only showing teeth.

It did not matter if it was "just a joke." Trust me I can take a joke as much as the next person. What mattered was the fact that I was robbed. My identity was snatched right in front of me effortlessly. His joke racially identified me, by categorizing my color of skin and excluding me from others at the table without me even defending what is mine. Instead of just being a friend at the table, I was now identified as the black girl at the table. Savi's joke had provided him a "color-blind

way to state racial views without appearing to be irrational or rabidly racist”(Bonilla-Silva, 137). His color-blind racism was clearly displayed because the joke was a derogatory statement that, in context, is considered racist. Yet, it was laughed upon and passed on without notice.

A robbery was in process and I'm sitting there wondering if anyone else sees this happening. This thief had no mask to shield his face, so someone, anyone, help, look! No one acknowledged the fact that I was casted out by a discriminatory remark. The ghastly acts of discrimination will keep perpetuating within generations to come if “jokes” like these are still left unremarked. This exemplifies that racism has become an institutionalized system in society where inequality is based on race. Savi and the other white males at the table sat up on this pedestal where they felt privileged enough to laugh at jokes like these. Not only because they were men, but because they were white and did not even consider how the joke affected me. In “Racial Formation in the United States”, Michael Omi and Howard Winant state “...we live in a society where racial awareness is so pervasive”(Omi, Winant 60). The comment was not only offensive, but also irrelevant to the situation in which it occurred. However, race was brought up in the conversation and in the end treated as something as miniscule as a joke.

The moment we sat down I thought we were all equal, but I figured out that I was racially identified as different because of my skin tone. A characteristic that I cannot change, nor would ever want to change. Gloria Anzaldua in “Haciendo caras, una entrada” states “ethnic colored people in this country are not on an equal footing with other ethnic American groups. This pull to believe we can “belong,”... can seduce us into putting our energies into the wrong battles and picking allies who marginalize us further”(Anzaldua, 87). In other words, people of color do not share the same racial status, but what we do share is the same oppression. We can not belong in certain groups because we are, in various occasions, isolated throughout our lives. As a result, I realized we could never be equal because the unrelenting use of racial stigma in society is still alive and well today.

After leaving the dining hall I wanted to curse him out. A series of “fuck yous,” “assholes” and “whys!” swept through my brain relentlessly. He has no right to commit theft and get away with it. At that moment, I felt a “killing rage”(hooks, 11). I wanted to gorge his eyes out with my fork, blinding him so that he could not see any color. I wanted to release my wrath and tell him how distasteful and unethical that remark was. In that moment, I realized that if I did so, I would have been instantly racially constructed by society. I would have been stereotyped as the typical “mad black woman” shouting about something as insignificant as a joke. At a table full of white students, my outrage would have been viewed as inappropriate and “hypersensitive” (Bonilla Silva 138). While I was forced to witness firsthand the willful ignorance of racism from Savi, I had to suppress my rage in order to repudiate these socially constructed stereotypes (hooks, 17). I was stuck in between a rock and a hard place. If I chose to defend myself I was branded as a “mad black woman” and if I kept quiet I would be oppressed by the societal construction of race. Isn't outrage justifiable when a burglary occurs?!? Your identity is all that you have at the end of the day. Racial construction had stolen my identity before I could even claim it. My identity is a one of a kind, priceless, and an intangible item. It is my

prerogative, as an individual, to claim what is mine. Therefore, at the University of California, Santa Cruz I am proud to say that I am part of the small group of people of color we have on campus. I am 5'10, with medium length black hair, dark brown eyes and weigh 145 pounds. My hometown is Long Beach, California and I was born March 31,1995. I can not tell a joke for the life of me but I laugh joyfully when approached with one. Deep down I am a hopeless romantic, and hope to find my one true love. My hips tend to sway back and forth when I walk and I tend to talk with a bit of sass when I know I am right. I am a strong, beautiful, tall, educated, blithe, African-American woman. I am Danielle Williams.



Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Making Face, Making Soul/ Haciendo Caras*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990.

hooks, bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. New York: Henry Hoh, 1995.

Omi, Michael & Winant, Howard. *Racial Formation in the United States (2nd Edition)*. London, NY: Routledge, 1991.

Rothenberg, Paula S. *Race, Class, And Gender In the United States (7th Edition)*. New York, NY: Worth Publishers, 2007.