

## **Eradication of “race”**

What experience have you had with racial or ethnic bigotry?

This essay is an honest rendition of what I have experienced in the light of race and racism.

Growing up and attending school in a small rural community was everything you might expect. Long lazy bus rides down bouncy dirt roads while gazing out the window at cows and horses on the hill sides or at the rows upon rows of corn and beans. After an hour long trip we met the doors of our brand new elementary school, Emmons Lake Elementary, at approximately 8am. A row of unusually hyper children would emerge from the muddy bus dressed in blue jeans, t-shirts, and brown boots. The girl’s hair was neatly pinned up, soon to become a disaster liking that of a birds nest but without purpose. The boy’s hair combed down carefully although it seemed it was attempting to escape the confinements of the gel that held it into place. Children disappeared within hallways and into classrooms. The gentle mumble of teacher’s voices silently echoed the halls and every so often around a corner one would see a child slowly making their way to the bathroom, tracing their finger tips along the rough brick of the new elementary school.

“Race” was a distant, invisible concept at this school. It was a topic that was never discussed. I cannot remember any time at Emmons Elementary in which I felt that other children were any different than I. I had no concept of another identity. No idea about the mass of cultures lurking beyond the county highway, lurking among the deep inner cities so far away. Thinking back I cannot remember a child of another race, but looking through my year books today, I can easily point them out. It seemed that “race” in the quiet culture I had grown up in was not a thing at all, it was not a concept, it was not something to be pointed out. There was no “racism,” because no one identified anyone else as different, or strange, or any lesser than themselves.

When I was nine I was transferred to a suburban elementary school in metro-Detroit. Woodale Elementary. My mother drove my three sisters and I to school. We sat in the LGI room every morning for before care because my mother worked every day, 7am to 6pm. We were in school the entire time.

I remember the first time I stepped foot into Mrs.Foster's fourth grade classroom. She was a short lady, mad grey hair, oddly shaped glasses. She was large and round and had an evil smirk. The students were excited at the concept of having a new student. They found it strange when I told of my stories of horses, chickens, fields, pigs, fireplaces, open roads, and hour long school bus rides. I quickly settled in and made new friends. I remember walking around the entire school for the first time. It was forty years old. The floors scuffed and tinted. The bathrooms had a strong sewer and chemical odor that reached the hallways and took me a while to get used to. The drinking fountains were small and out of date, and the water was warm and tasted like rust.

"Race" for a few weeks was not something I had a concept of. Although the school was full of many different ethnicities, I had no notion to recognize them as being different. To me, they were like any child I had ever met. A blur of faces with no division. This ended however when we came upon the section in our curriculum about "race." Thrust upon me, a fourth grader, were concepts of African Americans, segregation, genocide, Indians, Islamic people, Arabians, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and South American. Our history book bolded each term, each name, each concept that had to be defined, that had to be memorized. It was a field day of separation, of division. Fences it seemed had been thrust between myself and the children in the class room. "Where are you from" sang Mrs.Foster as we went around the room identifying ourselves as different from everyone else. No longer could I look at Soore as my friend, for now she was my Nigerian friend. Sneha was my Indian friend, Brandon was from Iran, Ben was from Asia. We are all different sang my history book.

As fifth grade came around, we all began to grow into teenagers. The children of the classroom began to separate themselves. There was the rich popular white girls, all into dance and gymnastics. The white skater boys who pretended to not care about school, the bully's a very diverse group of Chaldean, African American, and Indian children. The nerds, mostly Asian. And my group, the losers, a mixture of Nigerian, white, and Indian children.

Middle school came fast. At first we were all strangers unknowingly friendly to one another, but quickly we became divided. It seemed that race played a large role in establishing the hierarchy of our middle school class. We were slowly adapting to identify ourselves as unlike. Although family income and class played a large role in classifying children as popular or not, race seemed to be a large part of it as well. We began to learn more and more about the different races in our society. Economics was thrust into our education and we became familiar with the word "minority." We could now look around the classroom and identify who was a minority and who wasn't. Who was an immigrant and who wasn't. Who was rich and who was poor. Division was becoming us.

High school. Thinking back on it makes me feel sick. It is a sore spot stored within me, a time of which I do not like to recall. Harrison High school was the most divided of all. It looked like a prison from the outside, designed to protect students from mobs during the 70s. Race became most obvious during lunch time. Half of the room was African Americans, a quarter was foreigners (a new term to us students) and another quarter was white Americans. We all sat apart, we did not even acknowledge the existence of the other groups. It was as if an invisible force field were placed between the tables and if one crossed it they were faced with a painful social taboo. I hated high school. I identified myself as a minority. It was a time in which the Detroit Public schools were closing, and the children that once populated them were shipped to my school.

It was a silent battle within itself. I feared walking down the hallways. They clumped them up, standing around, pointing at you and laughing. They'd walk slowly on purpose, so that you would have to suffer amidst them. They'd knock your books down. Screamed profanity. Their pants hung down to their ankles, gang signs quietly marked their attire, a silent battle. They were loud. They were rude to the teachers. Never before had I seen a member of my generation belittle a grown woman or man. I would shudder if I saw that we had a substitute teacher that day. They would stand in front of the class smiling, not knowing the battle they were about to embark. I would watch drugs being passed during class. I would watch and run from fights, girls pulling out each others hair. Pregnant girls on the ground being stomped on by other girls. There were guns hidden in coats. The luxury of wearing a coat during the day was taken away. If we were late to class it was a detention. Hall monitors walked the halls like silent soldiers armed and ready to interrogate the next child slowly stumbling innocently to the bathroom. The bathrooms. They became places for illegal activity. Sex, drugs, gambling. It was amazing what could occur in the bathroom.

I chose Northern Michigan University for many reasons. But one, was because I knew I would find the quiet society I had once grown up in. I could not take the racial battles that were happening back home. I believe, that because we strive so hard to identify ourselves as different, because we define ethnicities, because we stereotype, there is still racism. It is important to spread awareness about things such as slavery, segregation, racism, and genocide however, it is important that they remain a part of history. These negative ideas are brought up in schools so frequently that we are creating a society of segregation. We force the idea of "race" on our children. We force them to identify themselves as different from one another. We are slowly feeding "racism," we are creating a monster that we have been trying so hard to irradiate for so many years.

The definition of race biologically is “a subgroup within a species, not scientifically applicable to humans because there exist no subspecies within modern *Homo sapiens*.” It is, a biological concept and has no place among our people. I believe that race should be described when pertaining to mankind, just as it is, inexistent. It should not be a concept, a theory, nor an idea. It should mean nothing. Genetically, there is no segregation. Genetically, there are no races, no ethnicities. We are all *homo sapiens*, not separate species.

Yes, there are differences, and these differences should be celebrated in a different sense. We should commemorate our cultural differences. We should educate our children about the different people around the world from an anthropological perspective. One in which we define culture, define the elements of culture, and dive within the societies of the vast space of human existence. No longer should there be definitions of race in our history books. Instead we should contribute to the notion that we are all equal. We are all the same genetically, but we chose to go about life in different ways. Skin color, language, religion, and culture should be cherished. Not identified, separated, and stereotyped.

#### CITATIONS

Haviland, W. A., Prins, H. E., McBride, B., Walrath, D. (2008). *Cultural Anthropology: The human Challenge*. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.