Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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# Invisible Girl

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**Abstract**

The student-author wrote this narrative to reflect a personal literacy assignment in their freshman English course at college. The project asked the students to describe how a certain event has impacted their lives or changed them somehow. They were also tasked to tie in reading, writing, and language themes and explain their role in the story. The author chose to narrate how their high school years, spent in a predominantly white institution (PWI), affected their perception of self, language, and processing of events occurring around them. Trying to exist and learn as a Black student in a white-dominated space profoundly impacted their life.

*Keywords:* education, PWI, language, identity, privilege, code-switching, appropriation

The author of this piece is a second-year Black student at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. They have a strong interest in the study of society, history, and human dynamics, particularly with a focus on race, gender, and sexuality. They enjoy using creative and narrative writing styles to express their own identity and perspectives of social issues.

If you asked me now to recount my adjustment to boarding school in the eighth grade, I wouldn't be able to tell you much. It's hazy, but I do remember that I called those first couple weeks—"The Dark Days." Five years later, I believe while it was an easy physical transition, it was more challenging mentally. I caught on quickly with laundry and waking up at 6:45 a.m. every day, but I had more trouble finding community. This small girls' school in the Baltimore suburbs was an alien world compared to what I was used to. Growing up in Prince George's County, a relatively ethnically diverse area in Maryland, I was surrounded by people who looked, talked, and acted like me. I was accustomed to laughing with friends as we played soccer or basketball, joking around with family during cook-outs, and playing Pokémon with my siblings. When I arrived at the school, I had never heard of their popular sports before: lacrosse and field hockey. Laughter was harder to come by, and the students were more obsessed with *Vampire Diaries*, Coachella, and Vineyard Vines, which I knew nothing about.

It was a blistering August day when my parents dropped me off at what would be my home for the next five years. Backpack laden with hastily packed clothes, I took in sky blue balloons tied to light poles, indigo signs directing families to "Check-in this way!", brilliant smiles, and name-tags scribbled with Sharpies of every color, while Orientation Leaders scurried around carrying luggage or directing tours. Between that and the sheer size of the campus, I felt dizzy. Nevertheless, when I drifted off to sleep that first night, I was left thinking, *Wow, everyone is so nice here! I can't wait to meet them all.* I had been too overwhelmed to notice how I didn't see any other Black girls that day. All I knew was that I was pretty excited for this next phase in my life.

While I wasn't too far away, school and home gradually came to feel like two completely separate worlds. I shifted from visiting my family every two weeks and calling my mom every night, to instead diving into classwork and creating a new social life at school. Whenever I hung up the phone with my mother, I subconsciously shifted to being my "school self." I dropped my double negatives along with eliminating slang words like "dope," "ain't," and "bruh." Even if it were singular words or phrases, I was terrified of slipping up and having someone think I was stupid or be confused about what I was saying. "Dat," "nuthin," "errbody," and "gon" elongated into "that," "nothing," "everybody," and "going." Even "nah" became "no." This code-switching impacted my behavior in addition to self-perception—one version of myself lived at home, while the other lived at and attended school every day. As the edges of my identity smoothed out, that latter variant became a 2D version of myself.

While I shrank further down, it seemed that many of those around me only took up more and more space. During overnight fall trips, many white girls would enter the buses with messy buns locked in place with Grab & Gos, but exit with three, four, five, or more braids on their heads. Apparently, they would ask some of the Black girls if we could do braids for them. Then there was standing in the cafeteria while an international friend asked me, "Why do all the Black girls sit together?" with a hint of animosity in her voice. I was shocked: *As an international student, how couldn't she see that we sought the same community as she had in a white-dominated school?* It was infuriating at first, especially to observe others freely steal the very elements of my culture that I could be punished for and that

I suppressed. Over time, however, I expected the appropriated braids that came with those trips. As well as the hostile glances tossed our way whenever I ate with my Black friends in the cafeteria, especially when we became one decibel "too loud."

It faded to dim irritation, and bit by bit, I became used to the loneliness too. However, as I grappled with my racial identity within a predominantly white institution (PWI), the racial dynamics within the country were intensifying. I entered school not long after the Freddie Gray riots. By my sophomore year, it seemed like increasing cases of police brutality made headlines. At one point, I was so on edge that news of another shooting triggered an anxiety attack. Despite the head of diversity hosting emergency meetings, there was never any follow-up. Nothing was done on the administrative level to address current events or hold a conversation about racism. So, another piece of me faded away due to a lack of that support. I've only recently fully realized the mental effects of my time at high school. Still, the psychological effects strained me at the time. When my college counselor prohibited me from doing a course overload because I "couldn't handle it," I sat beside her quietly. Many of my non-Black friends were allowed to balance seven or eight classes. *Why couldn't I?* I was left feeling a bit more invisible, a bit more incapable.

Even my mom took notice. On drives back to school from weekend visits, she would peer at me in the rearview mirror: "Are you sure you're okay?" or "You're not the same as when I dropped you off all that time ago." Then, I thought: *Yes, I've just grown up a bit.* But despite that, I could feel myself transitioning from "home me" to "school me" as familiar landmarks whizzed by. It was almost like it became harder to breathe as I got closer to the school. Whenever I would ask to visit, my mom would say, "Yes, maybe you need some time home," with a knowing look.

Something else I noticed was that my peers co-opted the same language I tried to erase. As "internet slang" (what I knew as *African American Vernacular English*, or AAVE) became more mainstream, words like "sis," "period," and "snapped" flew around the hallways like little hummingbirds, snatching at my hair. Often these words would become bent out of shape, misused to form sentences that didn't make sense to my ears. These words and language were central to my identity, but I heard them be used like seasoning in day-to-day conversations for humor or entertainment. If I used them normally, people thought I was trying to be funny. What was trendy to everyone else has a deep-rooted history of survival in Black culture and colonization. The irony of watching white people appropriate this language after some 500 years was not lost on me. Language is alive and must be understood fully, not used blindly. Language gives you a voice to advocate, support, protest, speak up, assert your ideas and opinions on how you want to see the world transformed. I hated that I had lost my own.

By the time I graduated, the country and my school were in the middle of reckoning with decades of racial relations. In the midst of the June 2020 protests, a very good friend told me: "It scares me to see how your whole attitude changed once this event happened. It shows through your texts, and I've never seen this in you in the past five years." It felt like a slap in the face. *Had I silenced myself so much that I had never spoken out against police brutality or racial discrimination?* That couldn't be right; I was enraged every time this made headlines, even when my head couldn't reach the

countertop as I listened to news of Trayvon Martin's murder. *Did I just keep these feelings to myself? Have I bottled them up inside with my culture's language?* I vowed never to be as silent as I must have been during those five years ever again. I would fully embrace who I was and reconnect with my lost language. I would not tolerate being treated as invisible or having imperative issues within my community be pushed aside.

I began eighth grade shortly after the murder of Freddie Gray and graduated during that of George Floyd. Instead of Baltimore being on fire, it was Minneapolis. As I write this, it is Kenosha and Rochester. Living full-time at a PWI against the backdrop of police brutality affected the formation of my critical years as I made decisions about my future. This internal conflict fundamentally affected how I perceived myself and presented myself to the world. I felt pressured to hide my language and identity to be seen as equal in the classroom, so I dialed myself down, zipped myself up. But in times of necessity, I found it challenging to find my voice. Five years and many perspectives later, I'm trying hard not to make the same mistakes I had in the past. Even so, I question: *Should I even be put in a situation where I felt I had to do that to survive? Should anyone?* Now, I proudly own my voice and am committed to pursuing what I truly believe in: a truly inclusive, equitable world. I am also authentically me and embody the values dear to my heart. My voice and language are tied deeply to my identity—I promise myself never to stamp them out again.