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### Being Biracial and Biculturally Incompetent

Let me begin with a disclaimer that I'm white... at least for the most part.

Without knowing any better, people that look at me assume without a second thought that I'm Caucasian and nothing else. Generally, also that's how I perceive myself.

Technically though, I'm only half white. The other half is Filipino. Surprised? Most people are; especially other Filipinos. Generally when I bust out with that bit of trivia and the person on the receiving end is Filipino, the skeptical response is along the lines of, "No! You're lying/joking/etc." After I insist though, the Filipino I'm talking with will usually give an unenthusiastic, "Oh."

Encounters like this tend to dishearten me. It's not what I'm used to. Let me explain why:

I was born and raised in Sonoma County, California. I lived most of my life in a little town called Sebastopol (about 90 minutes northwest of Berkeley). The town is almost wholly Caucasian, where the adult population consists of a large mass of middle to upper-middle classed ex-hippies turned yuppies. It's sort of like a piece of Marin County accidentally got misplaced thirty miles north of where it's supposed to be (for those of you not familiar with the Bay Area, disregard the above analogy). My graduating class from high school consisted of two blacks, five Asians (not including me, though I don't think I should be included in that number regardless), and another half-dozen

Latinos out of about 250 total graduates (making my class more than 90% white). So, as you might imagine, being anything other than white was anomalous. Being an anomaly was something that I enjoyed though; I took pride in being able to say that I wasn't 100% white. I didn't want to be 100% white. It just seemed so boring. Though I was (and still am) happy that I was at least half white. I think if I ended up being 100% non-white, I would have been a little too anomalous for my liking. Not that I think there's anything wrong with being a minority, but rather the all white environment I was in didn't present much resistance to blatant racism. Though because I was half white, and looked for the most part completely Caucasian, I never personally experienced any sort of racism for being half Filipino.

Before I wander on further, let me restart with a little history about my family. My mother is the contributor of my Filipino half. She emigrated from Cebu in the Philippines to the Bay Area when she was 18 and married my South Dakotan father at age 20. This marriage initially didn't go over very well with my mom's side of the family. My grandparents were pissed; not only was my mom not marrying a Filipino, but he wasn't even Catholic (my father is Baptist)! I should note that my maternal grandparents sent all their kids off to America sometime after graduating high school. My two uncles found brides in the Philippines and brought them over to America with them. My two aunts came to America and found some Filipino guys to marry. My mother's choice of breaking the mold with my dad didn't do much to make her family happy.

When my brother was born in 1970, my family moved to a town called Petaluma, which is just south of Sebastopol. It was in Petaluma that my mother first started encountering racism in the community that would effect how she later raised my brother

and I. One of the more blatant examples that she's told me about is the old white lady that used to live across the street from us; whenever my mom would be outside in front of the house, the old white lady would come outside and yell at her across the street, calling my mom a chink and telling her to go back inside (of course, since my mom is Filipino, that derogatory label of "chink" doesn't really apply to her, but of course my mom never took the time to go explain that to the old lady).

When my brother, John, was born, my father encouraged my mother to teach my bother Tagalog (a.k.a. Filipino). My father was mostly thinking of the economic advantage of being bilingual. Unfortunately, she refused. The reason she refused is because she didn't want people to discriminate against John for being (half) Filipino. She expected that if she taught him Tagalog, he would develop an accent and would end up being teased or beaten up in school because of it. Despite the fact that my bother didn't know Tagalog, this didn't prevent him from being teased in school due to his appearance. My brother has a significantly more Asian appearance than I do. He looks more like my mom; I look more like my dad. Because of his looks, he was easily picked out in his nearly all white elementary school classes, and was teased, abused, beaten up a few times. Surprisingly, this didn't dampen his interest in learning about his heritage. My brother grew up with infinite more interest in learning about Filipino culture than I did. During elementary school, he read a lot about the history of the Philippines and Filipino culture. When he was 10, he announced to my parents that he wanted to be more Filipino and was only going to eat with his hand from now on. That lasted about two months until he finally switched back to utensils. My maternal grandmother had extended visits at our house several times, and my brother would take advantage of the opportunity to lean as

much about the Philippines as he could from her. He also got a Tagalog-English dictionary from the library and tried to learn Tagalog from my grandmother during her visits (my grandmother had no qualms about teaching us Tagalog). When he started cooking during high school, he had my grandmother teach him how to cook Filipino dishes. In contrast, I never had any interest in learning about Filipino culture or language and I was more than happy when my grandmother made me oatmeal for breakfast.

I believe this stark difference in my brothers' and my attitude about Filipino culture stems from two main factors: our difference in appearance and the relative amount of access we had to the culture. The first factor is easy to rationalize; my brother looks more Filipino and is readily identified as being Filipino by his peers and therefore he felt the need to fulfill his peers' expectations of being "more Filipino". I on the other hand never felt any expectations from my peers to know anything about Filipino culture and therefore never felt obliged to learn anything about it. Additionally, I was aware of prejudice that my mother and brother faced and this factor probably discouraged me from pursuing studies of Filipino culture. In Root's paper on, "Resolving 'Other' Status", she validates my theory by stating that "mixed race persons who are part white and can pass as such will be very likely to strive for this racial identity in order to have maximum social power and to escape the oppression directed towards people of color."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in Root's terminology, I recognized the hierarchy of racial/cultural groups and based upon this recognition, choose to identify with the highest group in the hierarchy that I could.

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<sup>1</sup> Root M.P.P., "Resolving 'Other' Status: Identity Development of Biracial Individuals," The Culture and Psychology Reader. New York University Press, 1995; 577.

My brothers attitude difference can also be explained by considering the amount of access that we each had to Filipino culture. My maternal grandparents both passed away around the time I finished middle school (c. 1992), whereas my brother was about to finish college. Just by the numbers you can see that my brother had about 50% more time to learn what he desired about Filipino culture than I did. Additionally, my brother had access to my grandparents while he was in high school and college, which seems to be a favorite time for people to seriously begin learning about their culture. In contrast, now that I'm in college and am becoming increasingly more interested in learning about Filipino culture, I find I don't have the available resources to pursue my interest.

The next part of this paper will continue with my experiences with Filipino culture and how I now identify with my biracial identity. I will draw on the paper by LaFromboise on biculturalism and Berry's paper on acculturation to describe my bicultural incompetence:

Let me again start with some background; I was born in 1978, and soon afterwards my family moved away from the racist old lady across the street and to Sebastopol. Though still an almost wholly Caucasian town, people there were significantly more racially tolerant. While growing up, I had all white friends; not surprising considering there were not any non-white kids for me to make friends with. My entire experience growing up consisted almost completely with functioning in a white upper-middle classed society. Inside the home, my white upper-middle classed lifestyle continued. American culture was the only culture I experienced; my mother brought in nothing from her native culture. Referring to the variables in LaFromboise's paper, while my mother was still accepted by Filipinos, she had abandoned the culture to attempt to

embrace American culture. Her obvious Asian features prevented her from being accepted by the society though, and therefore LaFromboise would describe her using the acculturation model of second-culture acquisition.

Because my mother did not bring her native culture into the home, my exposure to Filipino culture was minimal. Aside from visits by my grandparents, there would be a gathering of the entire extended family on all major holidays (Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve) and other various events (random birthdays, etc.), averaging a gathering every other month. I should note that all of my mom's extended family lived in the Bay Area. My entire life, up through high school, I always looked forward to these gatherings. I had fun with my cousins; in general, they were all much cooler than the white people I usually was surrounded by. In particular I looked up to my one cousin that is the same age as me; he always had the trendiest clothes, he DJs professionally, he's has his black belt in karate, and he always has a hot Filipino girlfriend (it was actually more like that was the limiting factor on his girlfriends though; they had to be hot Filipinos). The cousins I were closest with lived in Hercules, which has a high Filipino concentration. My cousins had high contact with Filipino culture. They spoke Tagalog, strongly identified with their Filipino culture and participated frequently in culturally centered activities. For example, one of my older cousins went to San Jose State and decided along with some other Filipino guys to found the first Filipino fraternity at their school. All of my older cousins that went to U.C. Berkeley participated in PASAE (Philipino Association of Scientists, Architects and Engineers). They're also all practicing Catholics and attend church regularly. In general, I would describe all of my cousins as biculturally competent. Using LaFromboise's framework, they would all fall into the Alternation model of second-

culture acquisition, adding that they all highly associate with American culture and are accepted in the culture.

I on the other hand would not fall into the alternation model nor am I biculturally competent. While I was growing up, I was very conscious of the fact that I was half Filipino. Not because it was how other people perceived me; quite the opposite. I choose to perceive myself that way because it was something I could draw strength from. During family gatherings I would be surrounded by Filipino language, Filipino food; my aunts would play mahjong, my uncles would play Filipino card games. I felt like I was experiencing something unique that set me apart from my white peers. In Root's paper, she describes this time as the beginning of my awareness of "otherness." Contrary to Root's hypothesis, I never reached a stage where I felt that my otherness was "undesirable or wrong."<sup>2</sup> I hypothesize that I never reached a transition regarding how I perceived my otherness because I never had the opportunity to receive negative attention due to my Filipino heritage. Those people that might have given me negative attention never had the opportunity to know I was Filipino in the first place.

Instead of gaining a negative awareness of my otherness, when I came to college, I gained a negative awareness of not having enough "otherness." Being here at Berkeley has made me realize just how un-Filipino I am. This class in particular has super-sensitized me to my "whiteness," and now I feel uncomfortable laying any claim to my Filipino heritage due to my extreme lack of Filipino culture. When I first came to Berkeley, I rightly perceived that there was a lot of self-segregation among my peers. I naïvely thought that during this whole "sticking together" process that I could freely move between the white cliques and the Filipino cliques. Root describes it accurately

when she writes, “Although it appears that the biracial person may have the best of both worlds, this is a naïve assumption which presumes that she or he has unopposed freedom to choose how she or he wishes to be perceived.”<sup>3</sup> I was readily accepted by my white peers. However when I encountered Filipinos and announced that I was half Filipino, after they got past their initial doubts, I felt I was always being perceived like I was some white-washed freak. Admittedly though, their perceptions were correct. I’ve effectively chosen to identify with a single racial group. If asked, I would still respond by saying that I’m half Filipino, but I’ve accepted the fact now that I’m actually 100% white and that my Filipino blood doesn’t mean much any longer. Root describes my choice as “a positive strategy if the individual does not feel marginal to their proclaimed racial reference group and does not deny the other part of their racial heritage.”<sup>4</sup> I describe my choice as being the only available option.

Now that I’ve come to the resolution to perceive myself as white, I’m finding family gatherings difficult for the first time. When I was younger, I remember distinctly thinking of myself as fully Filipino, and that I would look at the few random white people that would be there and think of them as weird anomalies. When I would be around groups of Caucasians, I would think of myself as half Filipino. Now when I’m around Caucasians, I think of myself as white and when I’m with my extended family, I feel like I’m now one of the anomalies. I definitely don’t think of myself as fully Filipino, but I’m having trouble with identifying myself as half Filipino due to my complete lack of Filipino culture, especially compared to my cousins. I believe my acceptance of “whiteness” is more apparent to my cousins too. While I am accepted by my family, I

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<sup>2</sup> See [1] above; 579.

<sup>3</sup> See [1] above; 591.



have begun noticing a hesitation by my cousins when introducing me to their Filipino friends or taking me out when their friends are along. I interpret it as embarrassment in my cousins when they have to admit to their friends that this white guy is related to them.

According to LaFromboise, I fall into the multicultural model of second-culture acquisition, where American culture would be my culture of origin. Falling in line with his model, I have high contact, loyalty, involvement, and acceptance with my culture of origin. I have moderate with contact with Filipino culture, but low affiliation and acceptance by Filipinos.<sup>5</sup> LaFromboise states that there are four choices that an individual can choose among when adapting within plural societies: assimilate, integrate, separate and marginalize.<sup>6</sup> When in white company, I choose to assimilate and function as if I were fully Caucasian. When in Filipino company at my family gatherings, I feel marginalized. Berry describes marginalization as “when there is little possibility of interest in cultural maintenance... and little interest in relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination).”<sup>7</sup> When in Filipino society, I am an outsider. Regardless of how I may truly be perceived, I feel like a social pariah around other Filipinos. Using LaFromboise’s definition of cultural competence, I am completely incompetent in Filipino culture since I have no knowledge of Filipino culture, I don’t speak Tagalog, and I don’t maintain social relations with Filipinos.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in Filipino culture, I am marginalized due to my bicultural incompetence, and this stems from my inability to be perceived as anything other than white.

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<sup>4</sup> See [1] above; 589.

<sup>5</sup> LaFromboise T., et al., “Psychological Impact of Biculturalism: Evidence and Theory,” The Culture and Psychology Reader. New York University Press, 1995; 507.

<sup>6</sup> See [5] above; 505.

<sup>7</sup> Berry J.W., “Psychology of Acculturation,” The Culture and Psychology Reader. New York University Press, 1995; 473.

<sup>8</sup> See [5] above; 492.