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# *The Becoming of an Outsider: A Story of How the Molded Clay Was Shaped*

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It all started when I was five years old—a student at Star Christian Academy, a young, innocent mind. There I was, a young impressionable being; someone so gullible and naïve, the ways of the wind could influence me. At this point, I had little knowledge about the world surrounding me. The only thing I knew during this time was kindergarten, and the only thing I knew about kindergarten was naptime. This is where my first literacy sponsor imprinted on me. From the time I was dropped off and boohoo crying, because I didn't want my mom to leave me, to the time I was picked up, she was always around. My teacher, Ms. Clarke, was always there for me, and at an early age she encouraged me in every literate thing I did.

Ms. Clarke was a sweet and nurturing woman. Imagine an older lady in scrubs, the patterns always varied: a rounder face, the complexion of a pecan, painted in freckles. Atop her head sat numerous Jheri curls, a little past ear length. On the bridge of her nose sat prescription sunglasses that resembled the more famous aviator lenses. Her smile? Composed of the prettiest set of teeth, it could put positivity in anyone's day. In her hand was a church fan, because some days she did get a little hotter than normal. And on her hip usually rested a child; sometimes it was even me!

One day I was reading a book, but of course I was a five-year-old, so I didn't know what I was doing. She saw me telling the story based off the pictures because she knew I couldn't read. From over my shoulder, she saw what I saw: Zoe, from *Sesame Street*, on a swing having a great time. Or at least that is how I had verbally described it, not knowing someone was paying attention. In that instant, Ms. Clarke sat me on her lap and helped me pronounce each word until I had read the entire book. We would work on this book often to improve my reading skills, and one day I no longer needed her help. From then on, I would always challenge myself to read above what I knew; I would take my time sounding out the words until the story made sense. Because of Ms. Clarke's diligence in helping me, I became diligent in my own studies from a younger age. Because of her, I was now able to speak more fluently and make sense of the literate world surrounding me that I never knew existed. From this point on, however, things would change. I had no knowledge of this oncoming change, but I sure had to adjust to it.

I was now in first grade, confident in both my speech and reading, and excelling in both areas. Because my mom is someone who works in education, she would push me to go above and beyond, even outside of the classroom. As a result, I often excelled and advanced past my peers, but I challenged them to follow my steps in order to read and speak more coherently. We all knew how to use proper English at this point, and it was safe to say that we all were a bunch of Harvard-bound youth. The vernacular that flowed from the mouths of us as children was like liquid gold, especially

considering our age. I feel I acted as more of a parent than a peer at times; I would push my fellow classmates in their reading assignments, helping them sound out their syllables and increase their vocabulary by successfully reading words they hadn't known prior to their encounter with me, which boosted their confidence and comfortability in the classroom. I would also try to recommend a lot of animal books to them, because at the time I was very infatuated with animals, but my classmates never took to this subject much. In short, I felt very obligated to help my peers with their lessons and further exposure to literature because I felt that, through my previous experiences with literature, I had a lot to offer. Through positive reinforcements during my time there, I learned to apply this appropriate grammar to every situation that I had to use language in; people were often shocked to hear a six-year-old speak in an orthodox manner. Because of the basis Ms. Clarke set, I was able to further develop my linguistic skills inside and outside of academia.

However, this new art I had learned would soon be lost as I transferred schools. Moving forward to second grade, I was now a new student at Duval Fine Arts Academy. A school centered in the *hood*, a school that was predominantly black, like my last one, but this black presence was different. This black presence alluded to the stereotypical image of the American black community at the time, the image that America often painted of the majority of black people; this image was often painted and perpetuated by white Americans who had very little knowledge on black community and culture. A great portion of the students lacked linguistic formality, but spoke fluently in slang, broken syllables, and improper syntax. At the start, I did not assimilate to the linguistic and behavioral patterns of my new school until I was bullied for not doing so. For me it was either catch up or get left behind, for me it was about fitting in—for me it was about being black. I began to pick up the slang, I began to use improper tenses, I began to blend in. To me, it was very conflicting, but what seven-year-old would want to be scrutinized for being different? The teachers no longer had an influence, for their opinions no longer mattered to me. For me, it was about conforming to survive.

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This conflict began to settle in the presence of my peers because they became my new literacy sponsors. As long as I acted and spoke in the manner they did, I was not second-guessed or made fun of. I was accepted as one of the group, like I had come from the same place they had. By doing this, I learned to appease my black side for a general acceptance with them. Although I had come from the high end of the middle class, by the age of eight, I was able to blend in as another kid off the block.

Carmen Fought's piece, "Are White People Ethnic?" proposes this idea of white English and its impact on other cultures very holistically. White English, as a concept, is defined as the more professional side of English; the side of English featured in most boardroom meetings, or something you would hear in a corporate office space—the type of English some deemed perfect simply because it was the most popular dialect that a lot of white people spoke. She uses her article, implementing alternative perspectives from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, to illustrate the positive and negative effects that talking white has on a particular demographic. As Fought highlights, there exist negatives that come with "talking white," and this is something I had the chance to witness at such a young age. My talking white existed not only in my formal speech, but my tone as well; I sounded polite, I sounded humble, I sounded timid. Nothing is wrong with those things, of course, but as a second-grader, I was already looked down on. As Fought suggests, "masculinity is more closely associated with 'blackness'" (118). I wasn't taken seriously because I was too soft; I wasn't aggressive enough to get the things I wanted because I hadn't demanded them yet. As a metaphor, I had asked instead of just taken. This is something that shaped my disposition

as well as my speech. Interacting with my elementary school peers heavily influenced me to become the multidialectal person I am today.

My elementary school peers impacted me in a way that still resonates with me today. For me, being comfortable is sometimes more feasible than being myself. This relates to my elementary school experience, middle school experience, high school experience, and even my life in general. But sometimes being comfortable not being myself is often very uncomfortable. It's not peaceful; it's a constant change in behaviors and language to appeal to standards and expectations. For me, middle school was a smaller scale of high school with the same culture, the same absence of black people as I was used to seeing, the same inability to be accepted as different. I learned to conform again, but this time I wasn't even sure what I wanted anymore. I was comfortable with the people I associated with, but, as I said before, I was uncomfortable being comfortable because I had neglected what I truly felt was right once, which were the past things I learned, once again. I say this because my attempt to conform to the accepted identity influenced the way I spoke; in a way, most of the people I saw were my literacy sponsors. My desire to fit in caused me to augment my identity through my linguistic approach every chance I got.

Buchholz High School was similar to Lincoln Middle School; however, these next four years were much harder. The duality that existed was unparalleled with any other experience for me. For starters, there was one rule at this predominantly white school. It wasn't written anywhere or explicitly voiced, but it was very evident that it existed. This rule was acting black is a no-no. . . only if you are black. The presence of black culture was rarely accepted by the white people of the school; those who embraced their culture while actually coming from it were deemed ghetto. On the other hand, the few white kids that "acted black" were praised and considered the popular ones, the class clowns, the spontaneous kids that captured everyone's attention.

The persistent attempt to imitate black culture was done in many ways by some of the white people at my school. The manner I would like to focus on is language; this trend of talking in African American Vernacular English was usually seen in the white male athletes. Their attempt to be hip and more relatable was embodied in their attempt to sound like the black males they were not. At times, you could even spot a handful of white girls trying to imitate the speech of a black woman they would deem ghetto. The addition of certain words, delivered in more dramatic, drawn out tones, with deeper pitches always signaled the presence of black cultural imitation to me. The use of the word "girl" with more "l"s than usual was always an easy depiction. To them, black culture was a muse—a costume that they could easily put on to spice things up and take off when they when they got tired of the spicy taste. This was a constant theme through my high school experience. Much like middle school, high school was very mentally dulling for me; I centered my efforts on suppressing my black culture in order to fit in. Truly, I had little exposure to black people, unfortunately, because all my classes were honors and APs. It was rare to pivot in a room and see another brown person from my race. But it was always a happy moment when I did see one—it was a relieving feeling.

Being uncomfortable existed in my formality. It was a good thing to speak "proper," but my "proper" speech was accompanied with a lighter tone. This took the eyes off me; this made me not stand out as the only black kid in the room; this made the other white kids become more comfortable around me. The "killing" of the true self I wanted to portray helped me to be befriended.

This made conforming to white social and linguistic standards easier. As Fought stated, "whiteness is also often associated with education and or intellectual orientation" (117). I could testify that this was very true; darkening my tone to appeal to my conscience and blackness didn't sit well with my peers. A "why are you talking like that" was sure to come my way when I felt like being myself. Lightening my tone was my way of seeing compromise, but it was unfortunately overtaken, and not only was my tone lighter, but it was completely Eurocentric. Now, from a black point of view, it is common for black people to use white tones for a telephone conversation to be

taken more seriously. This is why I used it—I wanted to be taken seriously by my peers. I wanted to be considered by them. For more perspective, a “white tone” is usually a lighter one, and they exist more frequently in white communities. From my experience, I have recognized that using a whiter tone aids in becoming a little more accepted than I would with my native tongue. Being legitimate to white people means being white or “whiter” in a sense; but, of course, I can only speak from my experiences. In a way, through the looking glass, acceptance was one of my literacy sponsors. Eventually, this took a toll on my identity.

As a senior of Buchholz High School, the search for myself, Chad Jones, was more concentrated. (Of course, my identity existed in the earlier years, but as a subject of mere existence; I didn’t attend to it enough for it to receive any speculation; I didn’t attend to it enough to mention it to anyone or in a paper like I am doing now). I spent more effort doing what I wanted instead of trying to do what I thought people would want me to do. In turn, I began to speak black once again,

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and I began to relay to my peers in the way I saw fit. Sometimes I dropped my tone, sometimes I used slang words, sometimes I talked white like my dad was the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. In doing this, I came to a realization: no one no longer cared who I was; it was who I cared to be. This realization caused me to resent my last three years. All my efforts to appease my peers to fit in no longer mattered; it was a matter of accepting me for who I was or going on about your life now as if you had never known me. John McWhorter’s article, “Straight Talk: What Harry Reid Gets about Black English,” examines the black vernacular. This examination exists as a perspective of Harry Reid. It simply suffices to say that Black English, as it relates to proper English, is seen as demeaning and unintelligent because of improper syntax, broken syllables, and the

usage of slang. McWhorter suggests that Reid “associates Black English with lack of polish and low intelligence” (126). I internalized this concept and took this with me to school every day over the course of three years. I was so worried about being perceived a certain way because I wanted to fit in. My fear of not being polished enough to fit in is what I attribute to neglecting myself the most.

Because of all the alterations in my character and speech during my four years of high school, high school proved a negative literacy sponsor rather than a positive one. I wanted to appeal to the positives of whiteness, like Fought suggests, while ignoring the total existence of Black English, like McWhorter suggests, because it settled my conscience—the white conscience I had developed.

My literacy sponsors did not know the toll that they had on me, but this did not negate the fact that their influence was prevalent in this life. Through careful observations, I was able to reinvent my language. I was able to speak in a tone that was “black”; it had respect, it had assertion, but it was not too black where it would be ignored by its audience. At times, this was difficult because I was deemed as ghetto, but when I didn’t talk like this and picked up the “proper” patterns observed during my middle school years, I was deemed white. I didn’t like either composition.

The negative connotation placed with “ghetto” is a misunderstanding on the part of the people who do not come from or have no experience with these said ghetto communities. This is another thing my literacy sponsors in high school taught me, something I count as a positive. Through forgetting to care about white standards and appealing to them, paired with my gained knowledge on what being black truly meant, I dropped my act, slowly but surely. This is another thing that I would say is a positive: high school taught me more about black culture than my elementary school. My absence from black culture and the ability to turn in a circle and see another

black face in a classroom made me crave more blackness. It made me search for it relentlessly. Once I found it, I was finally relieved. In my senior year of high school, I spent the majority of my time around other black people. I made more black friends, and I reverted to my black self (linguistically as well as behaviorally)—no longer did I care to appeal to anyone’s standards, no longer was I trying to fit in. I felt at home being myself; this is what mattered to me. As Gloria Anzaldua highlights in “How To Tame a Wild Tongue,” the way she spoke was contingent on who she was around. The pressures to be accepted made her condense her identity. Her life didn’t begin until she stopped being afraid to take pride in who she was. My experiences run parallel to those of Anzaldua, as she says, “[U]ntil I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (39). My life didn’t start, my stress didn’t stop, until I learned to neglect the opinions of others and take pride in my language. The ability for me to accept myself was engulfed in my ability to understand the gravity of who I wanted to be. The indirect positive impact that high school had on my literacy experiences shaped me to the eighteen-year-old black male I am proud to be today.

Through my experiences, I have been an outsider in most of them and have tried to conform to the respective formalities in order to survive, and in some cases be accepted. The way I have learned to use different linguistic practices remains the same from group to group, but the way these practices are applied varies depending on the context. As a result of senior year, I have learned when and who with to apply my literacy practices. High school, my most influential literacy sponsor, taught me this lesson very well.

Through the entirety of my secondary education, I have been shaping myself. I have ventured to neglect myself in multiple situations only to find that being myself was what I truly felt comfortable with. Through these experiences, I have learned that the only opinion worth something is mine. With that, the way I interact with people is contingent on how I see fit, but I remain black through it all. The way I speak with my family is the same way I would speak to my friends or in a classroom, but often with added respect. The way I engage in all social situations now is the same the majority of the time because I am truly tired of appealing to standards.

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## Chad Jones

Chad Jones is a first-year student at the University of Central Florida, originally from Gainesville, Florida. His major is Engineering; he is currently considering mechanical or electrical engineering. Although his major is engineering, his career interests stretch beyond that. He is also interested in the medical field (specifically dentistry, dermatology, or gastroenterology) and the world of entrepreneurship, business, and finance. He plans to implement all of these listed career elements into his future career path(s), with engineering as the base of them all. During his five years at UCF, he plans to graduate with a master's and a minor under his belt.