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Mixed Speak

Moussa Toni Cisse

Abstract

This short piece addresses the challenges of being biracial and finding your own voice while listening to the conflicting voices of others: parents, grandparents, friends, mentors, teachers, coaches. I had two constraints while writing this: one, I had to emulate Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl," where a mother teaches her daughter how to be a respectable girl and not "the slut you are so bent on becoming"; and two, I had to develop this for a high school literature assignment while studying remotely during New York's pandemic lockdown. I had no "in-person" communication other than with my immediate family, which made it even harder to find one's own voice: you need the voices of others in order to distinguish yours from theirs. I wondered: what is sound – music? vibrations? noise? everyday sounds? silence? Will silence always protect you?

Don't sag, you are not a gangster, well, you are black but not so much; don't curse, don't wear jewelry, don't be fascinated by tattoos like the thug you are so bent on becoming; don't crease your shoes; here's how you walk: bend your knees a bit, put your feet apart, so you don't use the ball of your feet at all, or you will crease the shoes and these shoes cost money; don't call the police ever: they are your enemies; don't hang with those white kids because you are their token black friend, don't hang with those black kids because they don't see you as one of them anyways unless you keep your white mother away at all costs, if they don't see your white mother, you are safe with the black kids – otherwise they will see you as an Oreo and they will think you are very rich; be articulate but only around the white kids, because they will appreciate it to a certain extent; don't hang with the black kids because you will pick up bad habits, watch your language and your slang no matter where you are; don't listen to rap or hip hop because you pick up bad tendencies; you are black, so don't listen to rock and country; don't be freestyling, it is not really in your roots: you are only half-black; don't go telling people what you really think: being silent is the best option for black men: keep silent to be accepted and to stay alive; don't go joining them protests thinking you are so slick, yelling with the rest of them: you have nothing to complain about, aren't you free enough; in silence you hear the most important things; if you want to be heard, make music; if you want to play an instrument, go for the saxophone because there are many great black saxophone players; don't match colors and don't wear gang attire because you will look like the thug you are so bent on becoming; here's what to do with your hair: always get a hairline to look neat; always go to the same barber; if you ever change barbers, prepare a great excuse if your old barber runs into you; calm down with your hair: it is neither here nor there, it is not quite white and not quite black, you have good hair so don't do anything to it; don't you dare get dreads because white people think you are dirty and a pothead and a menace to society that you are so bent on becoming; don't talk back to your mother – it is what white kids do; a black mother will beat the black out of you if you talk back to her; stop shooting the basketball from way deep – you are not white; how are you so athletic anyways, you are only half-black, if you want to get far in basketball, don't go play in the hood; wear basketball shoes you are ok with losing, same with the basketball; better play basketball than just wander the streets like the thug you are so bent on becoming; when you cook, add a lot of seasoning, you are black, ain't you; when you cook, use

a little bit of salt and a little bit of pepper – that’s enough for us white folk; speak your mind but only when told to; after all of this, you mean to tell me that you are going to become a man who is not only mixed but also mixed up?

About the author

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Moussa Toni Cisse is a high schooler at the Institute for Collaborative Education in New York City. Email: moussacisse@iceeducate.org.