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Writing for Catharsis

In order to interact in society, we all have to act a certain way. There are unwritten rules that vary by the city, state, or country that a person is in. When it comes to America, some people with European ancestry act and see things differently. If a person has dark skin or speaks any language other than English, they’re seen as an outsider who they fear or don’t want anything to do with. Brent Staples and Judith Ortiz Cofer found this out the hard way. They wrote about growing up in a time where Caucasians didn’t accept people of color as equals. Staples paints a picture of African-Americans back in 1986’ Chicago in “Black Men and Public Space”. Black men were seen as dangerous muggers, rapists, or even killers when seen out at night by Caucasians. Doing his best to submit to their fears, Staples depicts how he had to change his behavior while on his walks around the streets of Chicago. Then there is Judith Ortiz Cofer, who writes about wanting to “belong.” Growing up in a Spanish neighborhood she was always raised to dress in a way that was never too loud in color nor have too many accessories to go along with her dress. At the same time, she perceives Latin women as being “put in their place” by the higher class society. Cofer recalls practicing reserve and cool when faced with enraging stereotypes. These oversimplified socially formed constructs subject men and women that have immigrated from all over the world to America into a racial profile. Doing what they had to do on numerous occasions, I agree with their actions. Both writers released their anger in their writings of perceived social identity. Having helped shed light on some of these issues to those who don’t always see them. These writings are needed, if nothing is done then the problem continues.

As a Hispanic male who has been to other countries, I have seen how people treat others of different race. What I don’t agree with is how people treat others just because their ancestors thrived in a different part of the world. This racial profiling and hatred isn’t only in America as I’ve learned. In my travels to Kuwait, I met a man who perceived Indian people as “less than dirt”. In Italy I saw an Italian man spit on a tourist who was of Arabic descent. What has been a constant throughout my travels is how people treat those that are not from their country. Media doesn’t always help with these issues either. Not until recently, media has only shown white males as the successful businessman that all others should see as the dominant male in America. Cofer shows the female side of the Hispanic stereotype but the male Hispanic has minor differences. My perspective of my stereotype has been altered by Staples’ and Cofer’s essays. At first I was angry, angry about how others perceived me as a mere laborer or lazy drunk. That I was incapable of sharpening my mind with intellectual novels and texts. Then I realized, like Cofer, that I could change that feebleminded image of my stereotype. After culling my rage, I focused my attention to literature. Growing ever so curious of books that portrayed topics regarding the human brain and psyche. Finding difficult words and learning their meanings also became entertaining. Though this satisfied me for a while, I received a great sense of joy when I used my new found knowledge in everyday conversation. Like Cofer, I felt empowered after breaking the stereotype that was imposed on me.

That empowering feeling doesn’t last that long though. Due to the everyday struggle of having to prove one’s self these constant judgements can wear one down. Learning to see past the color of our skin, the gender we’ve been given through natures process, ancestral backgrounds and so many other stereotypes is a challenge for the majority of the human race. Cofer wrote “We cannot change this by legislating the way people look at us. The transformation, as I see it, has to occur at a much more individual level.” As an individual who’s seen and almost been a part of this world wide hatred, I’ve learned to not see disgust or hostility when meeting new people. In return I have received nothing but kindness and hospitality.

Works Cited

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Ortiz Cofer, Judith “The myth of the Latin woman” *The Latin Deli*. 1993