Brittany DeJohn


For fear of sounding terribly clichéd, I will avoid opening up this cultural investigation by saying that ‘in order to know who you are today, you must look at who you’ve been.’ Although clichés like this are overworked and tired, there is generally truth in triteness. My past and societal influences have all done a great deal in contributing to my current person. With that being said, however, I alone have had the power to choose what type of contribution and manifestation that would be. Only by recognizing what impacts us, are we able to wield authority over the influential.

Both sets of my great-grandparents migrated to America from Italy. After arriving at Ellis Island, my original surname of DiGiovanni was forever altered by processing officials to DeJohn, in order to make the name more American sounding and easier to pronounce. My great-grandmother was an avid writer and recorded her initial experiences in America in a bound journal that I have in my possession currently. The journal was recorded largely in Italian, with interspersed commentary in newly learned English. Due to the language inaccessibility, I was prompted to study Italian both scholastically and independently in order to unlock the journal’s coded voice. After becoming fairly fluent, I read the journal excitedly and uncovered how wounded my great-grandparents were when they were forced to change their surname. Their history was depleted in an instant by a white man with a stamper. My great-grandmother writes that she could not be who she was. Assimilation is key. Blending with a white majority is key. This learned sense of cultural suppression has remained prevalent in my family with each generation.
When my grandfather started penmanship activities in grade school, and discovered that he was naturally left-handed, his teachers became alarmed and rapped his knuckles with rulers until they bled. At a young age, his malleable mind was being told at school that it was not acceptable for him to be in public what he naturally was—left-handed. At home, he was told by both parents that he could not be in public what he naturally was—Italian speaking. This hidden sense of identity has been an enduring theme, until my current generation. I have often wondered why neither of my parents ever attempted decoding my great-grandmother’s Italian journal. Are they still suppressing their heritage? I became zealously determined after the journal revelation to learn as much about Italian thinkers as was possible. Every night, I flipped through original Italian versions of Boccaccio and Alighieri, hoping to learn more about who I actually was.

I originally grew up in a pleasant home towards the South side of Syracuse. We had a large backyard with a fence that divided our yard from a black family’s yard. My brother and I used to constantly interact with the black boy and girl that lived on the other side of this fence. My parents were always skeptical about this friendship and made implicit remarks that suggested to me a sense of disapproval in the bonding. I was terribly confused by this attitude. My experiences with the black children were fulfilling, creative, humorous and loving. One day, my parents informed my brother and me that we would be moving to the suburbs because “Syracuse was getting bad.” When I asked them what they meant by “bad,” they were quick to defend themselves by saying the crime rate was rapidly increasing. I wasn’t convinced. I immediately made the correlation that because more black families were inhabiting the area, we were leaving in order to go to a place where primarily white people resided. Dinner table discussions were equally significant in demonstrating this racism. My grandfather would openly use the “n” word and explicit jokes were told at the expense of racial minorities. My young ears absorbed this
chatter and wondered how someone could slander the two black children whom I loved playing with. We were superior. We were separate. We weren’t Italian. We were white. It wasn’t hard for me, even at a young age, to see injustice in this behavior.

My parents were extremely dogmatic in their Christianity, and my brother and I were forced to attend church three times a week and spend time nightly in Biblical devotions and prayer. The pressure we received to be morally excellent in “order to glorify God” was intense. We were extremely isolated from the thriving, diverse world around us. My immediate circle consisted of people who were identical to me. The people we associated with at church were the same people we were allowed to have friendships with. This homogenous community stifled my natural curiosity about various types of people. I fulfilled this lack of diversity through reading. My parents, along with pushing us in moral excellence, also pushed us in educational development and consistently brought us to museums and libraries in order to catalyze our thirst for knowledge. Although physically my parents created a bubble of White, Christian Americans around us, they let me independently select literature that opened me up to multiple perspectives of voices that I had never heard in reality.

Even from a young age I was constantly praised for my intelligence and skill in writing. I was expected to go far and accomplish great things. Every adult in my life thumped me on the back with a wide grin and expressed the utmost assurance and confidence in my future performance. I was conflicted by this praise. I wanted to tell them that most of my skillful writing came from direct observation and voluminous interaction with the writing of a wide range of individuals, representative of many different social classes and ethnic groups. I wanted to tell them that I loved that little black boy and girl from my childhood. I wished I knew whether they were receiving the same amount of praise from the adults in their life.
Due to my parents’ regard for religious saturation, I was enrolled in a K-12 private Christian academy which was extremely small and rather expensive. When I graduated, there were only 26 students in my entire class. 99% of the school consisted of white students with a handful of Black and Latino students. The largest minority present was the influx of South Korean foreign exchange students who had heard of our school through an online Christian academy database. Everything we studied was through a White, Christian lens. Our English literature selections were written by White men and were classical texts with outdated language. Contemporary young adult literature was strictly forbidden as themes of sexuality and secularism were generally discussed. The school was an island of thought-control and singularity. Classes were rigidly serious and extremely high standards were demanded of all students. I instantly arose as a type of “golden child” and received the adoration of all teachers and peers. I was head of the debate team, captain of my Varsity volleyball team, and eventually class valedictorian. My ego was inflated daily, which made it hard for me to think about issues of power divisions or unfairness in education. Why would I bother myself and my current glorified position with wondering about such controversial topics when none of it was affecting me negatively? The school’s hidden and outright curriculum enforced active segregation on a basis of religious beliefs. We were instructed to “keep ourselves separate” from members outside of our faith. We were the elite.

My saving grace was literature. I could have continued in a path of elitism, ego-enforcement, segregation and prejudice if not for my love of diverse writing. When I was 14 years old, I compiled a list of 100 novels that I wanted to read within the next couple of years. I specifically was on a quest to dissect texts with diverse opinions, opinions that I had never heard before. I intentionally included novels on my list that represented atheism, differing religions, the
Black community, the Latino community, the Arab community, people with disabilities, and people with interesting thoughts about life and how we should live. Through my genuine love of reading and alertness to writing styles, I was able to experience voices from people I had never heard. As I connected with the literary characters on an emotional and intimate basis, I began to feel empathy and caring for these individuals in real life. I began to step out from behind the concrete walls that were erected around me and look at my colorful world through a critical lens.

I am proud of who I am today but not complete nor finished in my equity development. I was raised in an environment that could have allowed me to be an extremely ignorant and insensitive individual. I shudder to think of how narrow-minded I could have turned out if not for the changing power of books and the meaningful interactions I experienced in my freshman year of college with diverse personalities. I realize that I have been blessed with an abundance of support, both academically and personally, and have had natural power and respect bestowed upon me since I was very young. Initially, I began to think my power was a curse and something to be ashamed of. Now, I embrace the natural power I exert and use it towards developing relationships and empowering individuals from at-risk backgrounds. I force myself out of my comfort zone and am always pleasantly surprised by the verbal and emotional exchange that ensues. I am sensitive to the plights of various cultural groups, and this can only occur if authentic relationships and connections are being pursued.

Self-growth and professional development are always at the forefront of my priorities. In order to grow culturally, I will continue to read literature that represents diverse perspectives. I am the most adamant proponent of books as a tool of softening hard hearts and widening the eyes of the isolated and repressed. Even today, I still must remind myself to remain objective and open-minded in any interaction with a person of difference. Prejudice and racism are not things
that can be overcome overnight. They are issues that must be constantly recognized, analyzed, and fought against. I am eternally looking inward for signs of inequity and alerting myself at the presence of that dark stain. That being said, I have truly grown to love the various incarnations of humanity and revel in the opportunity to expand my horizons through the different experience of another. Culture greatly shapes you and, to some extent, determines how you will experience this life. However, I believe my account to be a direct testimony that although culture is influential, it doesn’t necessarily dictate who you must be. Our culture and upbringing can be overridden and utilized for the good of all if we can only harness the incredible power of knowledge and learning.

Assignment: EDU 380  Dr. Fairbrother

“Who Am I?” Critical Cultural Autobiography

The purpose of this assignment is for you to gain a deeper understanding of who you are culturally (in the broadest sense of the word), and as a teacher or prospective teacher: how you came to develop your values and beliefs and what is significant about your life experiences, particularly your educational experiences. These experiences constitute the screens through which you view the world. This assignment is designed to help you understand and address any biases or assumptions you may take into the classroom with you. To this end you are being asked to write a Critical Cultural Autobiography.

Submitted by Dr. Fairbrother for ADOLESCENCE EDUCATION Award – the prize being awarded jointly for TWO pieces of her work, this and the piece of the Teacher Work Sample (TWS)