

Growing Past Home

By Tracey Hueston

In the short twelve weeks that I have been away from home and at college, I have been able to begin dissect who I am as a person and better learn the “what’s” and “why’s” of who I am and what I have been taught. The answer: there is no simple answer. I can now see that the world is not so black and white and that certain teachings of my family and hometown may be closed-minded. I have begun discovering what ways of thinking I have been taught could help me succeed and which ones I will need to leave behind so I can grow as a human being. Being a black woman comes with many layers and rules that a lot of people in academic settings such as large universities do not have to face. It is up to me to decide that if what I have learned at home will aid or be detrimental to my success.

The first layer of me that everyone sees is the fact that I am black. There is no denying it or covering it up, I will always be this color. Being black in America comes with many negative stereotypes that come from colonial times, so what most black people do in academic settings is to be the exact opposite of what the world thinks of us as. Black people change things like the way they speak, dress, and even wear their hair in order to conform and feel like they belong in academia. When we decide to not conform to society, we get ridiculed and gaslighted no matter what the quality of content is in our head. I have noticed that I often conform by changing the way I speak in academic settings. Since I was a kid, my mother and father engrained it in my brain that my black southern accent and using words such as “y’all” and “gonna” were going to cause people in college to discard what I have to say because of the way I sound on top of the way I look. In their eyes, not speaking “properly” equates to not being educated and even being ignorant. Even recently, I have returned home and one of the compliments my mother gave me

was that I did not “sound country” and “spoke well” in a recent media interview I did. She commented that “when you sound like that people want to listen to you and hear what you want to say.” I did not take comments like this seriously until college when I realized that unlike everyone at home, no one here sounded like me except for my teammates from similar places like me. When I returned home and my mom said this, I was hurt at first, but questioned if it was true. I asked myself, “do people really not want to listen to me when I am truly being me?” I quickly realized that my parents may be right, and that I must conform to be accepted in my white peers' eyes. It is hard constantly avoiding the way that I naturally speak in professional and academic settings while maintaining my identity of who I am and where I am from. It is a callous and dismal reality that many black people face, but we are forced to bow to fate and accept that this is just the way things are and it will tough to ever change.

When choosing where I wanted to go to school, I considered places with a higher black population because I wanted to feel as though I had more people to relate to. Predominantly white institutes (PWIs) such as Pitt, encourage black people to strip away parts of life while keeping the values that we have learned. The ability to conceal is the key to succeeding in many higher class and educational settings. Stating common black phrases that are grammatically incorrect are highly frowned upon when writing essays and delivering speeches. Author, writer and cultural critic bell hooks, in her essay *Keeping Close to Home* when talking about black people in academics states, “It is as though a mythical contract had been signed somewhere which demanded of us black folks that once we entered these spheres we would immediately give up all vestiges of our underprivileged past” (7). It is up to each black individual to decide if they want to comply with this contract or possibly not make it as far because of their refusal to conform. The sad reality is that even though I hate it, I sense that I need to keep this value that

my parents have taught me throughout my academic career and maybe life. I easily could have chosen to go to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) where I could have shared my similarities with other black people, but many of those places do not have the resources that I could get at a PWI. At a HBCU there is less of a need to conform because almost everyone looks and acts just like you. At an HBCU girls can wear long colored wigs and long acrylic nails and not get called “ghetto.” There is no problem of waking up and going to class with a head wrap or durag on because our natural hair was not cooperating and fearing that our professor will call us “unprofessional.” There black people embrace their culture and do not have to face the possibility of being taunted by their white peers for doing things that are not a problem at home. Though HBCUs sound great culturally, they just are not funded like PWIs. The sole fact that I need to explain what a HBCU or PWI is just shows the lack of respect from academia in general towards HBCUs and what they stand for. In high school, for example, none of the guidance counselors mentioned that there were plenty of HBCUs close by because they did not see them as a respectable option. Many black students in my area were robbed of opportunities to connect with other black people because HBCUs do not get the recognition and praise like Ivy League and State Universities. This goes back to the contract; either I can embrace my blackness at a HBCU and miss out on opportunities from a well-known PWI, or I can conceal parts of my identity and go further at an institute where a lot of people do not look like me. I have hopes that I and other black people will one day be able to fully let our guard down when attending PWIs because they are more inclusive and further diversified and do not exist as PWIs anymore, but I do not feel that day will be soon. Until then black people must continue to choose to abide by the contract and listen to our parents on how to conceal the right parts of ourselves.

The next largest part of my identity would be how I was raised morally. Though I cannot quite relate to hooks's essay in the aspect of her coming from a poor family, her experiences as a black woman reverberate in my head because they are so similar. Growing up, I was raised to always be respectful to parents, as was she. Being respectful to parents could either make or break the rest of your day. Disrespect came in different forms than just saying rude things and not following what my parents said. Education was such a controversial topic with my mom, who never went to college and instead got a government job. When hooks converses about her parents and home life, she mentions, "Like many working-class folks, they feared what college education might do to their children's minds even as they unenthusiastically acknowledged its importance" (Keeping Close to Home²). This meant that my mother feared that I would become too smart for her, as hooks implied, but she knew that as a parent, she must root for my success. To this day, when I prove that I know more about a topic than her, she gets angry. I did not understand her anger until I got to high school and realized that knowing I had more knowledge than her was a sign that I was outgrowing her authority. I was now able to form my own educated opinions and decipher what parts of what I learned at home I want to keep and start to become my own person who could not be controlled. Because my mother raised me on the premise that respect was everything, it was as if her parental skills were not enough. She always called me "smart ass" or "know it all" when I would question if what she was yelling at me about was logical. I have since been able to realize that these are just the premises she was raised on, but I hope to stop the tradition of making children feel guilty for being more knowledgeable than their parents. This ideal is something that I will leave behind and feel that could detriment my future success as a parent. Having children be more knowledgeable than the parent should be embraced and not shunned. I still love and respect my mother in every way possible, but

sometimes it is important to outgrow the teachings of those around us and expand our knowledge beyond what is taught at home. The core of what my mother taught me still stands--respect is important; everyone deserves respect, and it is an ideal that should be ingrained into our minds from a young age.

Since leaving, I have outgrown the ideals and ways of my "home." I have always seen my family and morals as my home and not my small town. Family and morals are what will keep me grounded in this trying world that is built from so much hate and discrimination. When the world gives me an obstacle, I will look to my past to help my future. This may not be the case for everyone, but I feel it is healthy to outgrow the teachings of where we are born because this means that we are able to advance and expand our knowledge and help to mold our own personal futures. Outgrowing home can be controversial, but it is important to learn the "why's" of what has been ingrained in our minds and challenge if they are correct. For me, it comes in challenging the ways I conform to what is normal at my school and unraveling what respect means to me. I must decide on whether to accept the scorn from family and peers or move on and leave these people behind in order to fully flourish. I also must ask myself if turning my blackness on and off is worth doing and if my parents are correct in thinking that change is a part of success and if so, is the success worth it.

Work Cited

Hooks, Bell. "Keeping Close to Home: Class and Education." *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory*. Ed. Michelle Tokarczyk and Elizabeth Fay. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1993 (99-111).