The Same, Yet So Different

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“So what’s up with some pictures?” I inquired. “Oh I take plenty pictures; I got a gang of pictures” she said. “Let me get some of them; I need some of that beauty in my life. You was the Alicia Keys of the hood.” Her response was inquisitive, “what that mean?” “It mean you was the baddest redbone around.” “Boy I ain’t no redbone - I’m Puerto Rican.” I’m astonished, “for real?” came out my mouth.

This was part of a phone conversation I had with a childhood friend a few months ago. I never saw her as any other race. She talked, behaved, and even thought like the rest of us in the hood. Hell, she was hood (which is oftentimes associated with Black). So I always saw her as a light skinned ‘sista’ with good hair.

This reflection was triggered while reading the passage, “The Negro Art Hokum,” by George S. Schuyler. In this writing, Mr. Schuyler states, “Negroes and whites from the same localities in this country talk, think, and act about the same.” This thought asserts that a common environment produces similar people, despite race. The experience of my phone conversation above, inclined me to agree, but upon deeper contemplation, I don’t hold Mr. Schuyler’s statement to be completely accurate. As you continue reading, you’ll journey with me beyond the surface of his perspective.

“Any group under similar circumstances would have produced something similar.” The ‘something’ referred to in this quote, by Mr. Schuyler, is the negro spiritual hymns created by Black slaves. These are songs of faith and hope created to nourish one’s spirit with encouragement and inspiration that helped Blacks make it through those demoralizing times. The implication of this remark is that it’s not due to the significance of the people that this genre of music was produced, rather, the significance of the circumstances. In other words, it was a human trait, not a Black trait, to find something to motivate one to keep fighting in times of despair, and dream of better days.

It’s a matter of doing what needs to be done to get through your circumstances. Adapting does this also. You adapt to your environment in order to survive. In corroboration of his view, Mr. Schuyler points out that, “… the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indistinguishable from the mass of Americans of the older stock…” Essentially, the European American, African American, Latin American, and Asian American, after so long, becomes, just American.

I hold the perspective that the environment, or culture you were raised in is very influential in your behavior. For those that give in to these influences, it’s sort of training in how to behave; so whether that environment be the same ‘hood,’ or household, two, or multiple individuals of different races would get the same behavioral training.
Therefore, I agree with the author’s assertion that a common environment yields similar individuals. However, my assent is restricted to a surface level examination of the matter.

There’s more to life than the environment one has been reared in - that’s just one of many environments a person may encounter in life. Consider these same individuals of varied races, who, as Mr. Schuyler puts it, “... ‘talk’, ‘think’, and ‘act’ about the same” because they’re “...from the same localities in this country...”; when they venture outside their native environment, they may have totally different, even opposite, experiences - specifically the duo of a Black and a White.

It has been exposed through experiments in which multiple employers were given the option of hiring one of two prospects, in which both applicants were identically qualified in experience, education, and all other aspects of the application. The only difference was one applicant’s name was stereotypically African American, and the other’s name was more common of a white American. Therefore, under these circumstances, the employers were choosing based on the names of the applicants: needless to say, the ‘white sounding’ name was chosen the overwhelming majority of the time.

Another instance is within the law. How many times in this country have we seen a white officer escape conviction from a clear excessive or unnecessary use of punishment, sometimes multiple bullets (Sean Bell, in New York was killed on the eve of his wedding. Over 50 shots fired in the incident - all by police officers).

In one of our assigned readings for this class, “White Debt,” by Eula Biss, she highlights the racial difference when it comes to dispensing justice in this country. She compares “...white police officers who killed unarmed Black people and kept their jobs,” to Rachael Dolezal who “…surrendered her position in the N.A.A.C.P and lost her teaching job...” just for presenting herself as a Black woman when she was actually a white woman.

Something as simple as a routine traffic stop can result in a slap on the wrist, or a ticket, car impounded, plus a few hours in lock-up - depending on the color of the driver’s skin. This is because whites receive the benefit of the doubt, while Blacks get the suspicion of the doubt; whites are innocent until proven guilty, while Blacks are guilty until proven innocent; and the laws work for whites, while they’re used on Blacks.

As you can see, while race may not matter in the duo’s domestic environment, the color of their skin can garner, in some cases drastically, different treatment outside those borders. This discrepancy means the two experience life and the world differently. The non-beneficiary of these perks, for just reason, may build distrust, anger, or resentment at the country’s establishment, whites, or just in general. These feelings can cause one to be bitter, desperate, or even violent. On the other hand, this treatment can cause one to be determined, ambitious, enterprising, impassioned, or assertive.
All of these traits are from the inner-person; and since these traits are inspired and driven by the treatment our duo receive from the world, and that treatment being disparate, then it’s not far-fetched to say that our duo is actually of different character.

People who are multifaceted, so surface aspects alone, such as where they’re from, are inadequate to classify them as the same. A person is who they are from what’s inside them and what’s inside is made from how you experience the world.

Therefore, I agree that people from the same environment are similar, but only on the surface. A Black and a white are treated differently in this country, solely due to ethnicity; so they experience the world differently. Through this experience, character is shaped, in which is vital to who one truly is - the inner-person. So if experiencing the world differently forms different characters in people, and character being a defining aspect of who one is, then a duo of different races, but the same rearing, are as different as the treatment they receive from the world.