

A Bridge for When Walls are Torn Down

Through four painful, terrible, wonderful years at Duke University, I've realized that I exist at the nexus of many opposing identities. I am gay yet I am Christian, I am black yet I am white, I am an advocate for compassion and peace yet a member of the military. In the face of this beautiful complexity, however, I have often felt pressured by professors, student groups, and friends to choose one side of the narrative and abandon the other; to renounce my religion, erase my whiteness, shun and demonize my military calling... Yet, I have been blessed that Duke's focus on developing individuals that can accept and understand the world in all its ambiguous complexity has allowed me to reject the culture that relentlessly pushes us all to do the opposite.

I choose everything. I choose all of me. I choose to accept the conflicts and dissonance inherent to my identity at the confluence of many, and I accept all the pain and blessings that come with it. I've challenged the powers that be both here and in the world at-large by simply existing, and forging my own identity when so often I have been pushed to mold it in the likeness of others. My journey to understanding and celebrating my unique claim to these three cornerstones of my identity are three complicated, beautiful stories, but perhaps the most counter-cultural within my native Duke bubble is my journey to becoming Black and White.

I am bi-racial: my father is white Pennsylvania Dutch, and my mother is Afro-Caribbean from the U.K. Growing up, I never took any notice of my identity as a black boy in a country with a very salient history of conflict between black and white people – I was simply myself. But my entire world changed when I enrolled at Duke and was shaken awake to reality. I relished in laying claim to my newfound blackness. So often, I heard that the right thing for us POC to do is to look inward and strengthen our own community, critique the white supremacist power structures that dominate our culture, and relentlessly call out our white peers for their oppressive actions, in the name of justice for all. I took it all to heart, and still do. My family was strained because of it, and still is. Duke woke me up to this valiant fight for the triumph of good in the world, but it also taught me an incomplete story. A story that didn't really have a place for students like me, who are both white and black, who cannot choose their communities of color and shun white America because white America is their father and their cousins and their grandparents. I began to crave something more: the need for critique and for grace, for unapologetic rejection of oppression while still maintaining compassion for all, for the celebration of our minority identities while still acknowledging our commonalities as humans. Where was the enduring message that to move forward we all must move forward together? The only place I heard that message, the other half of this incomplete story, was from within.

In rejecting the prevailing norm at Duke that you can be black but only black, I laid claim to my identity as something new and powerful – not black, not white, but fully and unapologetically both. I realized that I am a bridge between these timelessly divided peoples, and a symbolic reconciliation of these two conflicting histories. I will never give that up. And as I continue to tear down the age-old structures of oppression that ravage and divide us as a person living out my full, complex, conflict-inherent humanity, I will never forget about the need for bridges to lead us back together.

I cannot, because I am one.