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Essay 1 – Final Revision

Intraracial Racism

Racism. African-Americans and “Whites”, African-Americans and Hispanics, Asian Americans and “Whites”, Asian Americans and Hispanics. Think of racism, and thoughts of clashes and conflicts between one of these ethnic groups and another predominate. The idea of racism is seldom associated with two groups of the same ethnicity.

However, another type of racism exists, one not necessarily rooted in ethnic differences, but rather on cultural and demographic differences, as well as location and economic status. It is expressed between communities or sectors within a racial group, and works to further partition them. *Intraracial* racism fragments communities already struggling with interracial racism. Being internal to an ethnic group, this notion is rarely considered by outsiders to the group.

In recent years, I have experienced two examples of internal racism within a racial group. The first one deals directly with my identity as a Puerto Rican. Puerto Ricans living in the Island have a general view of those who have migrated and now live in the United States. In most cases, individuals have moved to the US searching for wider economic opportunities, mainly during the first half of the 20th century, when the Island was shifting from a mainly agricultural to a predominantly industrial economy. Emigrants were looked at as inferior, as they represented the lower end of the economic spectrum. Additionally, most of them did not have a high level of education. Similar to

many immigrant groups nowadays, they were financially hard-hit and could only obtain the lowest jobs when moving to the United States, which in turn led to the formation of a specific type of community. They were constrained to housing in poor sectors, both socially and economically. This housing segregation resulted in the formation of poor, homogeneous communities in New York.

The discrimination from those living on the Island towards those now living in the US is a situation seldom discussed but nevertheless concrete. A possible cause for this attitude might lie in the North American stereotypical branding of all Puerto Ricans based on their views of such immigrants. Moreover, the overall change of environment over several decades generated key cultural differences that distanced the two groups. Additionally, immigrants in New York slowly experienced the process of acculturation, as they were inevitably exposed to different cultures in their everyday lives. This contrasts to the situation experienced by Islanders, who remained mostly isolated and “protected” by their shores. For them, inter-cultural interactions were infrequent by comparison.

The idea was explored in the creation of the popular musical *West Side Story*, which introduced the vibrant, colorful, and often explosive world of the Puerto Rican immigrant community in New York. One of the side plots of *West Side Story* was focused on the discontent of the Puerto Rican men. Disillusioned by the lure of the American Dream, holding third-rate jobs and employed for manual labor, these men are a contrast to the optimism and persistence of the Puerto Rican women, who, although aware of the difficulties facing Puerto Ricans in America, prefer to think of their current situation as the lesser evil. The memorable musical and dance number “America” is a

celebration of the best and worst features of the welcome mat America rolls out to its brown-skinned neighbors. While the women sing about the dream of a “new washing machine” and a “terrace apartment”, the men moan about “washing shoes” and a “terrible time in America.” Both sentiments are found in immigrant Puerto Ricans, the pride of moving up, getting out, and moving up in the world, and the longing for the familiar, the old, and the traditional. The struggle within this homogenous community to redefine a strong sense of cultural, ethnic, and racial identity in this new place is often the source of intraracial racism. They are aware of their past and origin, but the shifts in their environment trigger the development of a new group psyche that necessarily differs from the original. These individuals are faced with changes in several levels. They come from a place where they speak Spanish, which is mainly an agricultural setting and tropical weather dominates, and they move to a place where they need to speak English (which many do not know), to an urban setting with Northern weather and harsh winters.

Intraracial racism is not limited to a distinct racial group. While some individuals from one Hispanic group differentiate primarily on vast cultural differences caused by differing backgrounds, individuals from another racial group – African-Americans – sometimes utilize a different marker: *shades* of skin color. In this case, the lightness or darkness of one’s skin color is the differentiating marker.

A second example of the concept of internal racism is seen between Africans and African-Americans, or even among African-Americans themselves. In Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, Geraldine tries to teach her son, Junior, about the existence – at least in her view – of differences between “niggers” and “colored people”:

... his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to their former group. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and the watch had to be constant. [Morrison, 87]

Economic disparities are not the only agents that work towards perpetuating this intraracial racism. Another subtle point regarding Geraldine's character lies in her statement, a concept of the different 'shades' of a color associated with a given racial group. She emphasizes the importance of being light, and works to conserve her son's lighter skin color by preventing him from "ashing" into a darker shade. As seen in the previous excerpt, those who have been discriminated against because of their skin color use this very marker in order to differentiate themselves at an even more specific level. Generally, this practice goes unnoticed by outsiders, but nevertheless plays an essential role in that particular ethnic group's interactions, not only among themselves, but also with individuals of other racial identities.

It can be argued that these concepts can be traced back to the dominant racist ideas that developed in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries. The concept of the superiority of white over black seems to have permeated even the black communities, such that lighter blacks are considered superior. A lighter black will then be considered to have more white blood in his ancestry, and consequently be "superior" than a darker skinned black.

Racism is a socially learned behavior. I would consider myself a one-person experiment with regards to this matter. I grew up in a country where nationality rather than race was the leading differentiator between groups, and it was not until I came to the

US that I faced the reality of racism as an active, powerful, and destructive behavior. I am neither stating that I did not know what racism was, nor that it did not exist at all in Puerto Rico. There, however, race is not such a powerful social divide as it is in the United States; racism is not a behavior that molds society, and the existence of a largely homogenous ethnic community was helpful in that respect. Moreover, I have experienced how this specific socially learned behavior could have a powerful effect on both the discriminated and the discriminator.

In the summer after junior year in high school, I participated in MIT's Minority Introduction to Engineering, Entrepreneurship and Science (MITE²S) program. It was my first significant, direct interaction with minority students from the U.S. During our writing course, the issue of race consistently emerged. I observed a sharp contrast in the attitude and perception of the associated obstacles towards a college education and a subsequent career between an African-American in the U.S. and a dark-skinned Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico. While both are considered "colored people", generally the former one perceived a long struggle to achieve these goals, whereas the latter one did not feel this significant disadvantage.

A testament to this effect is also observed in Jane Elliot's Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes experiment presented in PBS Frontline's program "A Class Divided". In April of 1968, Elliot - a 3rd grade teacher in an all-white, small Iowa town - divided her class into two distinct groups: brown-eyed and blue-eyed children. The children took objective examinations, such as arithmetic tests, that produced alarming results. A child's score dropped significantly when he or she was discriminated against, and increased (to a

higher level than before the experiment) after the discriminatory behavior was terminated.

As a socially learned behavior, racism's principles can permeate even those groups that are not benefited from its practice. There have been a myriad of examples of Hispanics discriminating against dark-skinned Hispanics or lighter-skinned Blacks discriminating against darker-skinned Blacks.

Trina Jones, a Professor at Duke University's Law School, affirms in an article in the Duke Law Magazine that *colorism* is the discrimination of individuals within the same racial group based on skin color. The excerpt from Morrison's novel directly reflects this concept: Geraldine's concerns about her son's "ashing" (skin darkening). In this case, a member of a racial community distinguishes among members of the *same* race based on skin color. Jones establishes that it is not a practice seen only with Blacks, but also with Whites, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanics. Additionally, its importance is often overlooked – as it might be overshadowed by interracial racism – or not noticed.

Skin color is tightly bound to race. In essence it is the basis for the racism that developed throughout this country's history. These ideologies affect both inter-group and intra-group dynamics. As Jones states, "to the extent that people of color have been socialized to accept these racist norms, they may also unconsciously view lighter-skinned Blacks as being racially superior." She adds that the statement can also be analyzed from the opposite perspective, and it can reverse itself, since a "Black person might view a light-skinned person as inferior to darker Blacks because of her mixed ancestry." These views, when accepted, inevitably lead to conflicts among the subdivisions of the racial

group. In the end, it develops into another form of racism that permeates the United States

It is important to note that it is impossible to completely segregate skin color and economic status. Race and demographics have historically gone hand in hand, especially here in the United States. The effects of social and economic segregation still exist today.

As interracial relations improve – as compared to the beginning of the 20th century, at least – it is important to start considering and resolving this problem of intraracism. As a society, the United States is far from treating individuals of different races equally; but this goal is harder to attain if the dividing ideals are perpetuated within the same group.

Intraracial racism's basis can be physical traits. As in the African-Americans' case, the colorism issue is a true example of how learned social behavior can lead members of a racial group to differentiate among each other by the *shade* of their skin color. In addition to physical traits, this kind of racism can also be class-based, as in the case of Puerto Ricans.

Racism within a racial group is a problem that is not as readily addressed as interracial racism. However, it is a concrete problem that needs to be tackled as much as any other form of racism. Despite this, it remains an issue not thoroughly explored, and consequently not sufficiently dealt with. Maybe it roots in and feeds on racism between racial groups, and one cannot have one without the other.

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