

Jeneba Bah

Professor Chris McCarthy

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Reflections in a Mirror

I looked in the mirror every day wishing something would change. I would pray for lighter skin, but, of course none of those prayers came true. Growing up in an African household there were lots of talk of bleaching. Bleaching culture has been around for a long time and has mentally affected people with darker and deeper complexions. There is a joke that is used among African kids on how much bleaching has affected the older generation. Caro white demons we call them. They are usually the aunts and uncles who use products such as Caro White, which is promoted to bleach skin with chemicals. They only work when you consistently use the products. Ideology like this has been pushed from western culture. At the age of eight, I should not have to worry about wearing my natural hair, and someone says the words “crazy hair day” or me getting harassed for being “too dark to see when the lights are off,” followed by my classmates' laughter - adding a poisonous taste to my mouth. When I was younger, the worst thing to do was go to the doll sections in stores. I looked at the huge walls of the same doll over and over, she was white, blonde, blue eyed and skinny. Every Barbie I had was white. The first time I felt represented was Disney's *Princess and the Frog*. Back then, I thought the coolest thing was that she was a frog. Now, I am older I noticed for more than 85% of the movie she was a frog. Growing up as a black

girl in a society where whiteness has pushed a narrative that hurts people who are culturally the same as us, people who do not share the same religion or ethnic background. Racism has conditioned us to center whiteness as the highest currency but living as a black woman has taught me to be proud, sensitive because I am allowed to and love myself.

I have suffered from body dysmorphia, acts of racism towards me, and continued to feel devalued as a person. Attending a white elementary school was my norm, and my friends came from diverse backgrounds unlike mine, and the significance of this experience is sometimes disregarded. The racism from kids voicing horrible nicknames like "African Booty Scratcher," which was an extremely popular during the Ebola crisis. I had to endear this time with a few of my fellow African kids. During elementary school, we had a talent show. As a kid, I was such a big extrovert and class clown. I wanted to be heard or seen by people in any way possible, I especially liked public speaking. When I was in second grade, I was looking for people who wanted to sing the clean version of "Tik Tok" by Kesha. I went up to a group of girls, but they ignored me I just walked away. The next day at school, I felt like such a loser, almost unworthy. The same group of girls would constantly walk next to the square four game I would play. They would laugh and snick about the way I jumped or hit the ball. My friends soon told me that the girls from lunch called me fat. In fifth grade, I again wanted to do the talent show. I nervously prepared for the talent show, eager to show off my skills. However, as I was excitedly anticipating my involvement in a group routine given by the fifth graders, the same group of girls made a cruel remark about my appearance. Implying that I was too "big and dark" to be a part of the show. Despite my efforts to ignore their remarks, their words persisted, and I quickly found

myself the subject of bullying. It was difficult to mix my excitement for the talent show with the harsh insults hurled my way, but I continued, determined not to let their negativity cloud my enthusiasm. I tried to talk to the principal on multiple occasions about the constant torment I faced from those girls whether it was in the lunchroom or out playing recess or even in class. I was never taken seriously because I was told I was being too dramatic, or an excuse that girls are mean.

I was new at my middle school, so I did not really sit by anyone. I sat down in the same spot in the lunchroom for 6 months. I could hear a yell being projected towards me. I continued to look at *The Office* on my brand-new iPhone 8. The second time I hear it, I look up to see an older white woman point at me and cried “Latonya” in my direction. I ignore her again thinking she is simply confused on who I was. She walked up to me with an angry look on her face and was shocked when I said my name was Jeneba and not the one, she spewed at me. She then knew her mistake and just walked away. I brushed off the scene that happened in the lunchroom that day and told my sister about it. I laughed thinking how she never apologized just leaving as if this was a common mistake. The feeling when she called me by another name that is not the one given to you. They still constantly mistaking me as another “black girl who looks like you.” and never corrected themselves. It is disheartening to continuously be misidentified as someone else based solely on my race. Individual identities must be recognized and respected rather than assumed similarity based merely on skin tone. This feeling turned into a discomfiture was the thought of everyone around me thinking I am this strong and intimidating black woman.

The older I got, I noticed that my body was different. I first noticed hyperpigmentation as a kid. My body bore the burden of hyperpigmentation, with patches of skin that were visibly darker than the surrounding skin. These discolored spots were a visible reminder of an excess of melanin, which was frequently triggered by sun exposure. I was very insecure about my appearance, especially during middle school. Wearing only baggy clothes was the only way I knew how to hide my insecurities. The summer was even worse for me. I refused to wear anything that came above my knee. During the summers in Colorado, it gets dry and hot, so everyone goes to our community pool. You can hear joyful screams from the distance. The loud music they played for pool parties, which were almost every day. The sweet sound of the ice cream truck music and the yelling from the Paletero man giving kids mangos and tajin. The thought of swimming in a public pool with people I did not know made me uneasy. I was so self-conscious about how people perceive me. I refused to go swimming every summer. The thought consumed people judging me. The comments made about me as a young kid being fat or dark years later still affected me. Who knew words could hurt more than sticks and stones.

After moving to Minnesota, I felt as if I needed to “change my image” or mindset. I was obsessed with the infatuation of wanting to fit the construct of the white person’s ideology as a black woman. I still went to a white-influenced school, but I found people who are like me. As a woman of color, bonding with others who shared my racial identity became an important experience of my academic journey. I discovered support and connection with other women of color within school. We created a unique sisterhood as we faced comparable experiences and problems due to our common racial origin. There were unsaid glances of understanding in the

halls or during group tasks, a silent acknowledgement of our common adventures. We exchanged stories about ethnic traditions, beauty suggestions tailored to our skin tones, and offered support in the face of discrimination or stereotyping. These relationships went beyond friendship; they were founded on a profound knowledge of one another's struggles and a celebration of our common heritage. The summer leading up to 9th grade was a life changing summer. I started to reflect on my life and started journaling. Journaling has helped me because I can reflect on myself and my feelings without being embarrassed. I began to heal my inner child. My experience as a black girl who has taught herself to love herself. To have the same body as me, the same smile, face, and skin color. Wanting to see only the best in me and for me to be happy with what I achieve. The definition of a black woman can be changed and manipulated, but it will not tie me to one interpretation. Now, when I look in the mirror, I see someone who has grown from being bullied and accepted who she is. I am proud of the girl in the mirror.