

Being Content with Myself

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“Why don't you ‘act black’?”

Since my middle school years, I've been asked this question more than any other. It seems to me that too many people have let society program into their brains what should be expected of me, a black person, before ever interacting with me. But I believe in being who I am, not who others want me to be.

On my first day of high school, going into math class, two of my classmates pointed and laughed at me. I initially thought my fly was open, or that something was stuck in my teeth. But as I took my seat, I heard one of the students whisper, “Why is a black person taking Honors?” So my fly wasn't open. An honors level class had simply been joined by a student whose skin was an unsettling shade of brown.

Many people think my clothes should be big enough for me to live in, or expect me to listen exclusively to “black music.” In seventh grade, a group of my peers fixed their cold stares on my outfit: cargo shorts and a plain, fitting t-shirt. They called out to me, “Go get some ‘gangsta’ clothes, white boy.”

In one of my Spanish classes, as part of a review exercise, the teacher asked me, “¿Te gusta más la música de rap o rock?” “Do you like rap music or rock music more?” I replied, “La música de rock.” The look of shock on my classmates' faces made me feel profoundly alienated.

I am now in my junior year of high school. I still take all Honors courses. My wardrobe still consists solely of clothes that are appropriate to my proportions. My music library spans from rock to pop to techno, and almost everything in between. When it comes to choosing my friends, I am still colorblind. I continue to do my best work in school in order to reach my goals; and yet, when I look in the mirror, I still see skin of that same shade of brown.

My skin color has done nothing to change my personality, and my personality has done nothing to change my skin color.

I believe in being myself. I believe that I—not any stereotype—should define who I am and what actions I take in life. In high school, popularity often depends on your willingness to follow trends. And I've been told that it doesn't get much easier going into adulthood. But the only other option is to sacrifice my individuality for the satisfaction and approval of others. Sure, this can be appealing, since choosing to keep my self-respect intact has made me unpopular and disliked at times, with no end to that in sight. Others' being content with me, though, is not nearly as important as my being content with myself.

Kamaal Majeed is a high school student in Waltham, Mass. In addition to his studies, he works part-time at the local public library, and enjoys studying foreign languages and writing a personal journal. Majeed hopes to pursue a career in journalism.