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"Cocky" Pants

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Recommended Citation

Grey, Kalena, ""Cocky" Pants" (2020). *KUCC -- Kutztown University Composition Conference*. 12.
<https://research.library.kutztown.edu/comconf/2020/2020/12>

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Kalena Grey

Dr. Hartman

CMP 100

September 20, 2019

“Cocky” Pants

As soon as we entered the store my mom told me, “Lena, go ask one of the employees for some cocky pants.”

When I asked the employee for some “cocky pants” she scrunched up her eyebrows and tilted her head a little to the side, so I immediately corrected myself and asked her where the khaki pants were. I felt my heart skip a tiny beat and my face heat up in embarrassment at the fact that I just asked this lady where the “cocky” pants were. But there was also this part of me that was amused by it. It didn’t really hit me that my normal was different than her normal all by saying one simple word. Once I saw the look on the employee’s face, I realized I have been saying the word khaki wrong my entire life up until that point because of my mom.

My mom took both my brothers and I to our local mall, the Berkshire Mall, because we needed some new clothes for school. At the time, my dress code was any colored polo top and black, navy blue, or khaki pants. After visiting Hollister and Aeropostale, I decided that I wanted to check American Eagle as well for some pants. As we were walking to the American Eagle, a majority of the signs in the other store windows read “BACK TO SCHOOL SALE” in big blocky letters. On the other hand, American Eagle just had their normal “sale,” which was “BUY ONE PAIR OF PANTS, GET THE OTHER 50% OFF, ” in their store window. But I wanted to

give it a shot anyway, not knowing I would have one of the biggest epiphanies of my life about my heritage in an American Eagle.

Ever since I can remember, there has been the same beaded Jamaican flag rocking from side to side on the rearview mirror in each of the Honda Odysseys we've had over the years. It's been there on the countless road trips we had to Florida, all the rides to school, and it was definitely swinging vigorously when my dad was first teaching me how to drive. I have no idea when my parents got the flag, who bought it, or where it came from. At one point when I was younger, I thought all Honda Odysseys came with little beaded Jamaican flags because everytime my dad upgraded the car it was in the same spot. The flag has certainly faded in color and I think there may even be some coffee stains on it, but it certainly has withstood the test of time.

That little flag was important to me growing up in Reading and going to school in the Reading School District because I didn't encounter many Jamaican kids. The majority of my friends, peers, and neighbors I grew up with were Hispanic/Latino. There were times when I thought "What if I were Hispanic/Latino?" Maybe I would relate more to them and their family experiences. But looking back at it now, I added a new perspective. Being different gave us more to talk about and compare our nationalities amongst each other and figure out our similarities and differences, while learning new things about each other. Of course I would have loved to have had some Jamaican friends in school to relate to and talk about how crazy our families are, but that didn't deter the growth of my identity, it just made it stronger.

Growing up, I had found myself saying certain words, or my interpretation of certain words differently because I heard my mom say it a specific way, like the word "cocky" instead

of khaki or when my mom said “tiehead,” which is the Jamaican version to “headtie,” my five-year-old interpretation of that was “tired” for some reason. Since both of my parents are originally from Jamaica, I grew up listening to reggae music, smelling fried dumplings and plantains (plan-tins) in the kitchen, and hearing my mom talking, or more so yelling, in patois to her family members on the phone when she heard new gossip.

Eventually I started listening to, some, reggae on my own, frying plantains, and kneading/frying my own dumplings; however, don’t be fooled because I don’t know how to make a majority of Jamaican food on my own. Moreover, almost everything or if not everything Jamaican about me is from my parents and my two elder sisters. My two elder sisters were born in Jamaica and I think from hearing them call our mother “mummy” from a young age, I did the same. Unfortunately, I never really picked up a Jamaican accent, and I can’t really pretend to do one either because that is when the American part of myself takes over.

Being Jamaican-American is who I am, I don’t know how to be anything else. That is my culture, my nationality, that is what I would check off on those stupid questionnaires, if Jamaican-American was an option. It is very frustrating when a piece of paper, or a person, try to tell me what I can or can’t be because it always feels like they are hacking away a piece of myself. It’s almost like a majority of my identity just vanishes into thin air. Of course I consider myself Black, of African descent, and American, but that does not mean I have to identify as African-American. Sure it is a politically correct way of referring to Black Americans, but Jamaican-American, or “Jamerican” as my British cousins like to call us, is the way I would like to be referred to. Unfortunately, I, and many others, have to conform to the choices we have on those questionnaires and check the box “closest” to who we are, but never hitting the mark.

There have definitely been times in school when I refused to tell people I was Jamaican. It wasn't because I was embarrassed or ashamed of it, it was more so because that person would then proceed to make me cringe by doing the accent, so to avoid that, I would just tell them I was Black.

Fortunately, eighth grade was the last time I had a strict dress code at school. I still had to wear khaki pants for my internship senior year and other events, but it's impossible for me to ever fully call khaki pants, khaki. There are definitely times when I would call them "cocky" pants in my head or maybe slip up and call them "cocky" pants aloud. I know my mom will never call them khaki pants because "cocky" pants are a part of her vernacular and it probably is for all the other Jamaicans out there. So calling them "cocky" pants isn't technically wrong, it's just how someone with a Jamaican accent would pronounce it. However, I am proud of my heritage and the way I grew up, so maybe I am a "cocky" pants after all.

Kalena