

5.13 White Passing: What Does That Mean? with Dr. Gabriel Cr...

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SPEAKERS

Gabriel Cruz, Jasmine Bradshaw

- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:00
You're listening to the First Name Basis podcast, Season Five, Episode 13: "White Passing: What Does That Mean? with Dr. Gabriel Cruz."
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:17
Teaching our children to be inclusive and anti-racist starts with us within the sacred walls of our home. First Name Basis is designed to empower you with the confidence you need to be a leader in your family and a change maker in your community. Together, we will wrestle with hard questions and use the answers to create the world we want: a world that reflects our values of inclusion, compassion, and courage. I'm your host, Jasmine Bradshaw, and I am so excited to be on this journey with you.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:53
Hello, First Name Basis fam. I am so glad you are here. And I am so excited to share this interview with you. Because oh my goodness, I learned so much from Dr. Cruz. So let me tell you about him. And let me share a little bit about what we talked about today. Dr. Cruz is a lecturer in the Communication Studies Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. And his research interests really include critical race analysis of popular culture, which he talks about on his own podcast. And he specifically talks a lot about superheroes and Marvel, as well as white nationalist rhetoric. So basically, he keeps up with what those white nationalists are doing, and shares that information with us so that we don't have to be on those yucky parts of the internet. And he is going to tell us all about that today.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 01:45

Now you'll hear me reference this on the episode, but I have been following Dr. Cruz for a while. And I finally got the guts to reach out to him to be on the podcast because he shared this video from Tik Tok. And I will link it in the show notes. It's this girl, and she is white presenting. And then it's this TikTok sound about how people, like, laugh, and she basically says when she tells people that she's Mexican people laugh at her. And it immediately made me think of my sweet girls. Because if you've been here for any amount of time, you probably know that I am Black biracial, which means that my mom is white, and my dad is Black. And my husband is white. So my girls have Black ancestry. And one of them presents as white, and the other one presents as a person of color. So on his Tiktok and on his Instagram, Dr. Cruz breaks down this video and how hard it is for kiddos who are multiracial and are presenting in different ways, and what that looks like and what that means. And so I was like, "I know we have so many multiracial families in our First Name Basis community who would really benefit from this conversation," because we are all navigating what it means to have some kiddos who present differently than others, and what that means for how we're raising them, and how we're speaking to them, and how we're teaching them to use the privilege that they have, and all of those different types of things.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:11

So I feel like every time I listen to this interview and I have a couple different times, because I was editing it I just learned something new from him. There's something different that sticks out to me every time. So I really hope that you'll put your thinking caps on and maybe hit rewind and play it again if there's something that kind of stumps you, because he shares so many critical messages. And it really feels like I'm sitting in his college classroom but even better, because I get to ask him the questions as they pop into my head, instead of having to raise my hand and wait.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:47

So one of my favorite things about this work is when there is someone who can speak to both the research and the lived experience of it. And as you'll hear, Dr. Cruz is also a multiracial person himself. And so he talks about what it's like to be someone who is sometimes perceived as white, and how he uses his privilege in different ways, and how we can teach that to our children. So I hope that you already know this, but if you are a person who is not multiracial or a person who doesn't have multiracial children, I really think that it's important that you also listen to this interview, because you probably know people who are. But outside of that, it's so important for us to teach our children how to interact with different people and not make assumptions about their ethnicity, about their race, without getting to know them or talking to them first. So if you identify as white or hold white privilege, and have a white family, you might have some things that come up for you in this episode, where you're like, "Oh, wow, I've never thought about that before, but I've definitely interacted with people in that way before, and maybe I want to change some things about how I approach different people in different situations."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 05:04

So before we jump into this episode, of course, I have to tell you, the most exciting thing that is going on over here at First Name Basis right now is that we are opening the doors to Ally

Elementary and Ally Elementary Jr. on Tuesday, March 29. So we had our first round of Ally Elementary, and it was amazing. And now we are launching the program that goes right along with that, Ally Elementary Jr., because we heard from so many of you that you have young kiddos, and you want to teach them about allyship and you need some guidance.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 05:04

So let me tell you about Ally Elementary. It really is your roadmap for raising the courageous, anti-racist allies that our communities need. We take you through five different modules, starting with melanin and working our way all the way through what is race? What is racism? What does it look like? How do you spot it? What do you do about it? And then at the very end, you work together with your children to create an anti-racist family pledge. Now Ally Elementary was created for kiddos who are a little bit older. So we usually suggest third grade and up from there. And so last time when we opened the doors to Ally Elementary, so many of you said, "I have a second grader," or, "I have a preschooler, and I still want to talk about this in my home." So that's why we've created Ally Elementary Jr., which is for preschoolers through second grade. And it's not meant to completely take you on the journey through allyship like Ally Elementary is. Ally Elementary Jr. is just getting their feet wet. It's really introducing allyship to them. We talk about culture, ethnicity, and biases and how to bust our biases. And then we finish with talking about the characteristics of an ally and how you are doing: whether you feel like there are some characteristics that you're doing really well at and others that you want to improve on. So Ally Elementary and Ally Elementary Jr. will be available on March 29 for you to enroll. I'm so excited to share these programs with you once again. And if you want to get on the waitlist, just go to firstnamebasis.org/allyelementary, and you can enter your email and you will be first to know when it's available. And of course have access to a coupon code. So go to firstnamebasis.org/allyelementary, and you can also click the link in the show notes. Of course, it will always be there for you to click sign up for the waitlist. And if you're listening to this after the fact, make sure you still sign up for the waitlist because we will definitely be opening the doors again in the future. But for those of you who are listening to it day of, March 29 is the day. Mark your calendars, set up those confetti cannons, because I am so excited for this journey together.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 05:04

Alright, let's jump into our interview with Dr. Gabriel Cruz.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 05:04

Okay. Hi, Dr. Cruz. Thank you so much for coming on First Name Basis.

G Gabriel Cruz 05:58

Hi, Jasmine, how you doing today?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 08:09

Jasmine Bradshaw 08:00

I'm so good. Will you start by telling us about what you do and kind of where you are in the space.

G

Gabriel Cruz 08:15

Sure. So my name is Gabriel Cruz, and I have a PhD in Media and Communication Studies. I did my PhD at Bowling Green, Ohio and Northwest, I'm sorry, yeah, Bowling Green, Ohio and Northwest Ohio. So I am a full-time lecturer, which means that I am forever on the job hunt for that tenure track job. But I really enjoy what I do. And I do it in part because I like lecturing, because I like teaching full time. I research a little but my research tends to be in pop culture analysis, specifically superhero narratives. I'm a huge comic book fan. I wrote my dissertation on some Marvel comic book characters. And I tend to use an intersectional race, class, and gender analysis approach to that. That being said, I also study white nationalist rhetoric and discourse, because it's a real problem, in particular the propaganda efforts. So

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 09:03

[Laughs] Sorry, it's not funny. It's just like, yeah, it's a huge problem.

G

Gabriel Cruz 09:07

Yeah, it's a huge problem. It is a little funny because a lot of them are just really, really dumb. And I hate that part of my job is now having to pay attention to really, really dumb racists, but it is. So anyway, I teach at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the Communication Studies Department, which is also where I did some of my education as well. And I love that department so much. On a personal note, I am a husband and father. I'm an older brother as well. I'm a Chicano from the American South. My background is Mexican American, and I'm from and local to North Carolina. So yeah, that's a bit about me, I guess.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 09:44

I love that. Thank you for sharing, and we're so grateful for the work that you do. And so you made a video on Instagram that really...well, I've watched so many of your videos, but the one that made me ask you on the podcast is you made one about someone who showed that they were white presenting, and then she was getting laughed at, basically a TikTok trend sound about her being Mexican. And I was like, "Okay, I need to invite him on the podcast, because this is going to be my children." And I need some guidance, like will you just start by helping us understand where the term "white passing" came from?

G

Gabriel Cruz 10:20

Yeah, so in in that video, the the person talking, she's very fair skinned, appears white by all metrics, and would be what we would consider "white passing." I have not been able to find a satisfactory answer to the term white passing specifically in terms of its origin. But what I have

been able to find is I know that there was a book, published in 1970. It was titled, I have the notes right here, "Passing for White: A Study of Racial Assimilation in a South African School." So looking at social mobility within the classroom in South Africa, and their apartheid state, and the implications for the color categories that they use with white, folks of color, and being Black and that kind of thing. And white passing being a variation of that term "passing for white." But what has been clear is that this concept has been with us for almost as long as we've had an idea of race, certainly in the modern sense. Race, going back to the social categorization, going back to the early to mid-to-late 15th century, so like 1480, somewhere in there, and then sort of being really codified in a pseudo-scientific way in the 18th century. And, and as far as we've had rules for this, we've needed to know who was, who did and did not count, according to, again, this very arbitrary and pseudo-scientific method of categorizing people. So it also sort of, I think, traces back a little bit to the idea of like the "one drop rule," right? Which became a legal principle in the United States in like the the late 1800s, early 1900s, in cases codified law, that kind of thing. Or, as I heard one scholar put it, "the legislation of, or the codification of invisible Blackness," which I thought was a really interesting term. And so because there's always tried to be, there's always ways of describing people that don't fit neatly into these predetermined categories for race, we get terms like white passing, or passing for white, or any of the other unfortunate terms terms like, you know, "mulatto" or "Quadroon," that reference specific, you know, ratios of DNA and that kind of thing.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 12:29

Yeah, when you were talking, it reminded me of the Spanish caste system and how in that system, people could really, like, turn their family into having more power by who they married, because people were able to kind of change caste based on their skin color.

G

Gabriel Cruz 12:45

Absolutely. And we still see that somewhat in, unfortunately, in some Latine and Hispanic cultures with the idea of, like, "la mejorar la raza," so the idea of bettering the race, which is effectively anti-Blackness within and anti-indigeneity in, in these sort of spaces. So it's unfortunate, but it is an idea that even if we don't still have those codified systems as clearly defined as they were at one point, a lot of that mentality has still survived.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 13:14

Yeah, yeah. And I can sense that too, sometimes. And I mean, I worry about like, if my dad, who is Black, takes my daughter, who is white presenting to the park, like what could happen? Speaking of the term white presenting, can you talk a little bit about the difference between white passing and white presenting?

G

Gabriel Cruz 13:33

Absolutely. So I've been doing a little bit of reading about this, and in reference to the Instagram video that you pointed out earlier, that was probably the first time in the comment section where I actually started to hear the term white presenting. one of the downsides of

teaching four classes or this semester, five classes, which is 125 students, is that I don't always get to stay up to date on everything. But doing some reading on white presenting, what it means is it appears to be a way to get away from some of the stigma associated with white passing. So white passing can be used in a variety of ways. And some scholars suggest it indicates an intentionality, that if you are passing as white, we acknowledge that there's a threshold of what it looks like to be white, which, on some level helps to recreate a Black and white binary, which is something that a lot of race studies related to race and culture have to struggle with, because there's obviously more than just Black and white to consider. But the idea being that if you could pass as white, that you are doing so as a sort of intention in order to achieve sociopolitical or economic advantage. In one case, there was a study that was done by the National Bureau of Economic Research out of Cambridge, Massachusetts that found that from 1880 to 1940, roughly 19% of Black men intentionally passed as white at some point in their life. And this was done mostly in northern states. Basically, they would move to white areas and then pass themselves off as white. What was interesting was that this was done from the perspective of trying to acquire more sociopolitical or economic opportunities. And at some point, roughly 10% of these men of that 19%, roughly 10% of these men reverted back to identifying as Black.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 15:16
Oh, wow.

G Gabriel Cruz 15:17
Which is fascinating as well, because again, we're talking about from 1880 to 1940. And actually that tells us something much related to the census. If I can keep my mind on that for a second, but I'll get to that in a bit. The other thing though, about white passing is that white presenting recontextualizes this from like, it's not an intention. It is a collective of qualities, right? The same way that we consider things like masculine or feminine qualities. Like masculine or feminine or androgynous presenting. So we're helping to in this case, reduce the idea of intentionality because, like, I can pass as a white. I like to joke that I'm something of like a Rorschach test. Like when those inkblot tests, "tell me what you see." Because I've been profiled overtly to my face as being Native American or Pacific Islander. I got Maori one time, some other form of Aboriginal. On occasion, a new kind of white guy we just haven't seen before. Once in a while, Mexican. Like other other Latinos, no. But that's about it. So that being said, it might be more appropriate to say, white or ambiguous presenting, because that sort of puts it down to the appearance and the behavior was devoid of intention, necessarily. But there was some other terms that I came across as well that were interesting. And that was "white assumed," oh, and "white adjacent."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 16:48
Oh! I've never heard those.

G Gabriel Cruz 16:51
I hadn't either until I until I was preparing for this podcast. So I found an interesting scholarly

I hadn't either until I didn't was preparing for this podcast. So I found an interesting scholarly article where there was someone who was talking to their students, and they were using the interviews with their students to discuss this sort of stuff. And as a class, the students also developed the terms white assumed and white adjacent, and white assumed relocates the appearance from the person, from the body that is observed, to the person that is observing the body.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 17:18

Oh, wow, I really like that.

G Gabriel Cruz 17:20

Yeah. So it's like, I don't think I'm white, but you do. So you are assuming that I'm white, and that's the...and that also helps us to further connect to like the, the contextual nature of this. Because going back to the idea of, like, being sort of ambiguous and a bit of a Rorschach test, I find that it's often based off of what is someone's point of reference? For someone that has my through typical features? Right? The other thing was white adjacent was for people who could be dark skinned or light skinned, who identified as people of color, but by virtue of their circumstances had to operate within whitespaces. Yeah, right. So I think one example to use was a Brazilian woman who did not appear white, and didn't think of herself as white. But she had to learn white affectations, white mannerisms, white speech, patterns, behaviors, that kind of thing, because that was the environment she grew up in, and so she considered herself white adjacent. On the one hand, that does recognize the sort of prominence of white American cultures, because there is no such thing as white culture, but white American cultures do exist. And but at the same time, I do worry that that might center it in a way unduly but, um, that's a larger discussion to have.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 18:36

Yeah, yeah. I when you were talking, so I usually use the word, the term white presenting for my daughter, because I want her to be able to choose. So I feel like if I said she's white passing, I don't want her to necessarily internalize that. And, you know, I just, it's so complicated, but the term white assumed, I think, is even better, because then it kind of really gives her that freedom. But white adjacent is something that I relate to, but I feel like I would even feel more comfortable just saying, "I grew up in a predominantly white area," and I feel like that gives people an understanding of kind of where I'm coming from. So thank you for breaking all that down, because I learned two new terms that are actually really helpful.

G Gabriel Cruz 19:17

Sure. Sure. Sure. Oh, the other thing about the census that came to mind was, so you probably heard and a lot of folks have heard by this point about the shift in like a marked decrease in white folks in the census, right? I forget exactly what the percentage was, but there was a percentage shift in in the decrease of white Americans, and an increase in certain folks of color and different groups that does not reflect the birth rates or death rates or things like that. Like we can't even attribute this to like COVID or anything like that, right? And the best leading idea

is that it's because there are people who are, like I talked about before, going back to identifying as non-white. Maybe up until this point, up until whatever age, they decided that they had identified as white and then decided, "No, maybe that's just not the best term for me. Maybe there's something else." And I have a very rough relationship with the census. I don't like it. I don't like it at all, in large part because of the issue with like labeling, because like I'm, I am Mexican American, the Mexicans I come from are mostly indigenous, but you can't check indigenous unless you have a tribal affiliation.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 20:31

And yes, that is a whole nother like three hour conversation, because oh, it is so frustrating. I just got summoned to jury duty. And I went on there and my options are Black, white, Native American, like, Hawaiian or Other. And I'm like, "Can I check two boxes?" "No." So I have to check "other?" That is so dehumanizing. It is so infuriating.

G Gabriel Cruz 20:54

Yeah, yeah. I want to write in in those those times, like, "You tell me." White assumed is now the new box. Yeah. So it's frustrating.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 21:07

So Wow. Yeah. Sorry, did I interrupt your thought? Oh, no, no,

G Gabriel Cruz 21:11

I just, that's the point that I wanted to make. It's, there's so much. And I think what I always tell people, whenever they ask about like, "Well, how should I identify? Should I identify as X, Y, or Z? White passing, white presenting anything like that?" I think at the core of it is what adds the most value to your life, and what helps you situate yourself. Because all identities are very much rooted in the time and place that they happen. The example I use with my students is that, you know, if you consider yourself Black, or white, or whatever, if you go back a couple hundred years, what that means is completely different from what it means now. If you go back far enough, sometimes it doesn't exist. So recognizing that all of our identities are context based means that we have some freedom to define ourselves in a way that adds meaning, moreso than necessarily being beholden or restrained by other systems at play.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 22:09

So when you were talking about the census, I was thinking about how you were saying that you study, like, white supremacist rhetoric? Have you seen them responding? Because I saw a lot of, you know, articles and studies that were saying, "Okay, now over half the country is identifying as people of color." Have you seen them kind of say anything back to that?

G Gabriel Cruz 22:28

Oh, yeah. So for as long as there have been this projection about, you know, at some point, we're going to hit a majority-minority country, which is a weird thing to say, because

J Jasmine Bradshaw 22:39

How can we be a minority if it's the majority?

G 22:42

There's that, but also, that's not how math works, unless, if you have, if you have 40%, of the United States being a white American, and then 60% being the other. First of all, the single majority ethnic group is still white American. And also, that only works if all the other brown and Black people are the same. If we're willing to reduce everyone down into the same group, then maybe, but also, I'd point out that apartheid South Africa, at its height, had like maybe 10%, white Americans not white Americans white people, folks of European descent, and they were still in charge. Like, it's not just a matter of numbers, it's a matter of resources and power and that kind of thing. So from a white nationalist perspective, they have for years, and this has always been the case. In the ramped up in the last you know, maybe decade or so since we've been projecting about the the gradual browning of America, so to speak, that like there's a, the extermination of white people as eminent, that kind of thing. And this is really just, this is more propaganda for them to manipulate because they have a talent for taking stats that are not even accurate, but look accurate enough to someone who doesn't do research to twist that into something that is a perverse reflection of reality. And so this is one more thing in their way. The good news is by that same token that this evidence would suggest they're losing. Unfortunately, the other thing about that, though, is that like, there's always been a lot of them recently in the last couple generations, those numbers haven't dramatically grown, but they do seem to be rather consistent, if that makes any sense. Right. So like activities go up the last five or six years have gone up a lot in recruiting efforts, particularly starting in I think, like 2015

J Jasmine Bradshaw 24:41

Hmm...I wonder what was happening at that time...

G Gabriel Cruz 24:46

It is like a one-to-one as soon as like Trump got into the race like you started to see a lot of stuff going on that was uh, directly correlated to that. Them taking his talking points and repurposing them and not even having to do much to them to use them as recruiting. It was a whole thing. And so it's like, it was like the whole Charlottesville thing, right? From a few years ago. Bodies on the ground? Not a whole lot. But, you know, it was like two or three people responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing. Right? Yeah. So yeah. Anyway, that's a whole other thing.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 25:22

I'll have to have you back for sure. Okay, so continuing our conversation about these terms and such. I, like I mentioned, I'm Black biracial, so my mom is white, and my dad is Black. And I even struggle with that term, because I feel like if I say, Black biracial, I'm naming my Blackness, but not that my mom is white. And then it leaves you to assume and all of those things. I almost feel like it centers whiteness by not saying white. It's like saying American and then having everyone else be hyphenated. But that is the term that I use right now. So my husband is white. And we have two daughters, one is white presenting, and one is brown, very visibly brown, and she looks multicultural. People, are usually confused about what she is, but they can see that she's brown. So I'm wondering if you have any advice about how I can support them and steer them in finding their footing when it comes to Black culture?

G Gabriel Cruz 26:15

Sure. So if I might tie this a little bit to my own experiences that sort of intersect with this. So I mentioned earlier, I'm Mexican American, my father is a Mexican immigrant. And who is, I describe him as just "aggressively Mexican-looking." He looks like a younger version of Danny Trejo on some level. And my mom is a white American woman from North Carolina. And I'm the oldest of five. It's me and two sets of twins.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 26:48

Oh, my gosh, your mother, that's amazing.

G Gabriel Cruz 26:52

It's me, two 19-year-olds, and then two seven-year-olds. And for those at home, I'm 33, about to be 34. My parents were young. And so what's interesting is that I and my sisters, because it's a boy and girl in each set of twins. I and my sisters are what we sort of joke about being the brown babies. And my sisters are darker skin than I am. And so it's interesting, because their twins, who are white males, we've seen differences in how they relate to the world around them in especially with like the 19-year-olds, because my sister has faced the racism and the misogyny that is geared towards brown women. And my brother has dealt with the issue of being very much identifying as having a Mexican father and having that kind of background, but hearing the kind of things that folks say about Mexicans not knowing that he is one, right. And so there's there can be a lot of guilt that goes along with that, because every interaction is like a "Do I say something? Do I fight This? Is my survival justification enough to not assuage the guilt that comes from not saying anything?" Right? And those kinds of things. Whereas my sister, it's all the fights, every fight, the fights that aren't even hers, a few times.

G Gabriel Cruz 28:16

But as far as connecting to this, I think there's a couple of things to keep in mind. And one is that Blackness, as with any other cultural identity, whether we're talking about Latinidad, or indigeneity, or the variety of Asian cultures and identities, are not monolithic, right? There's no

single defining Black experience. There are a lot of different ones, certainly that create this sort of tapestry of lived experiences. And some people will have maybe even most of them, but I don't know that anyone has all of them for that matter, right? So the first is that understanding that our racial identity is not monolithic. It is, it is contextual, and that the culture that goes along with it is also not monolithic. Cultures can't be monolithic if they're going to survive, because the change that happens within cultural groups and sub cultural groups—take for example, blackness in Atlanta versus blackness in Indiana versus blackness in Detroit, or Michigan, places like that—has to change to fit its surroundings and its environment. Otherwise, like culture that doesn't change dies, right? And it goes away. Because the people who maintain it die off eventually. So, you know, reminding your children or for that matter, my daughter who is a little white, blond haired, blue eyed little girl who has an unapologetically mass Mexican name, like this child is not going to, not like Jennifer or anything like that, no one's gonna read her name and think, "Hmm..." Like every generation is a new step in the culture. Every new generation is a recontextualizing and a remixing of the things that came before and is, in some cases like a distillation, because in a, in a good situation, you take the things that were good about the culture that you come from, and you save them, and then you reject the things that you don't want. But it's also, it's also bearing in mind that, like, your Blackness is different, probably from your father's, probably different from your grandparents, that doesn't make you any less, right? My Latinidad is rooted in a very particular space and time and region, particularly where in North Carolina, where we didn't, I was, we didn't have Mexicans prior to like my father's generation coming in. So there wasn't like a pre-existing culture to kind of fall back on, right? So part of that is, you know, explaining to kids like, you know, there is no, there is no enough. And if you want to connect, that also means you can do it. And that gets to this idea of Stuart Hall's idea of suturing. Stuart Hall was credited with being like the forefather of modern cultural studies. And he was interesting because he was, I think, coming to prominence in the 1970s and 80s, a part of the British new left, and what was interesting about him was, he was in this collection of, of intellectuals of labour left-oriented intellectuals in Britain, he was like the only Black man, because he was Jamaican. And he had thoughts. Britain was doing things related to race, and in some cases was like the only person advocating it. And now, his perspectives are pretty well understood to be like, generally accurate, and has withstood the test of time. But he has this idea of suturing, because he says, an identity is not immutable, and identity is not eternal. Right? It is context-bound. And so if you think of your life, as the intersection of a variety of cultures, then you understand that every life is a intersection of a lot of different cultures. And so we get away from this idea of like legitimacy, quote, unquote, right? Because it's all the process of making and unmaking suturing, in this case being like stitching together something, right? This also means that we're sort of recognizing when you have two children like this, one who can present as white and another one who does not, there are some lines there, unfortunately, positive and negative, right?

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 32:41

Yes. Which leads me perfectly into the next question. I really want to help my daughter who is white presenting understand her privilege. And so how do we talk to our children about their privilege, while also affirming their identity, and the struggle that it is to be someone who is multiracial in a very mono racial prioritizing space.

G

Gabriel Cruz 33:08

So on the note of privilege, I think this is a conversation I think everyone should have with their children, because we all have some aspect of privilege. On some level, even if we're born into very marginalized circumstances, we may have something, if you will. For example, even if you experienced something like houselessness, right, if you are able-bodied, that is a kind of privilege. So this is the thing that we should have with with all of our children, for that matter, and I will be having with mine. And that is that there is a system in place. That it's like a game, and there are rules. And there are certain advantages and disadvantages. And that's going to change based on what room you walk into. And you have an ethical responsibility to help people. That doesn't mean that you always have to pick every fight, it doesn't mean that you always have to risk everything in every situation. What it means is, if you can, then you probably should. And that also means acknowledging that what that does is it gets someone involved in a very physical, eminent visceral way, that there are going to be things that are outside of their control that will affect them and affect other people. And that I think goes a long way towards empathy. So that while you're, while your daughter, while your child who is white presenting won't have the experience of her sibling, she can better relate, right? To know where that line is of how far our own ability to empathize that same cultural reference point goes. And we're hitting the wall and saying, "Yeah, there's a wall here and I just don't understand, but I don't have to have had that experience to know that this is hard." Right? And that helps with, that helps with solidarity not just within families but within a cultural groups as well. We don't have to have had each other's experiences to recognize cognitively like "Oh, okay, no, that's tough." I, this is much more removed but I think still so good point, like I am, I'm about six foot tall, broad shoulders and I have a deep voice and I am unmistakably male masculine. I do not get any of the grief that my colleagues who are women do, not the white women, not the women of color, any of them. No one has ever commented on the way that I dress in an evaluation, right? Students do that all the time.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 35:34

Like in their eval to the teacher? The professor? Oh, my goodness.

G Gabriel Cruz 35:38

It is very common. I have some colleagues who, every semester for as long as they've been teaching, someone says something about the way they dress. The most someone, I had a friend who watched my class was like, "Hey, man, maybe don't teach in hoodies." That's about as far as it got. Right? But typically speaking, they don't. And by virtue of me looking the way that I do and sounding the way that I do, students don't fight with me. Like they don't argue with my point. Closest was I had an older gentleman who was at that point, about 20 years older than me who fought with me about something. But that was probably my mistake for indulging him. But the point is, like, if I recognize that this is the case, and by the way, I have sat in on a couple of colleagues who were women that were teaching, I've sat in on their classes where they were experiencing problems, and my presence eliminated them.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 36:25

Wow. I mean, it's not that shocking, but it's frustrating.

G

Gabriel Cruz 36:31

Right. I had a friend who was an international student, she is now a PhD, and she was doing the teaching thing that we were all doing, which was a teaching system, like we all were in grad school, and she was from India, and she had been speaking English her entire life, right? English is a very common language to speak in India, folks were up speaking their entire lives. But there is a stigma that if someone speaks English with a foreign accent, often students report that they can't understand them. Which is interesting, because like that, there is some work and I forget how they exactly they explained it, but basically, it's like, "No, you do, it's just that your perception of it being a different kind of English is what's getting in the way." And she had a student who was consistently bothering her. But when I showed up and sat in and observed, I added legitimacy to this classroom environment, and so the problems went away. Right? So what I say that to say this, I will never have that experience of a woman who's teaching a class with a bunch of idiots who feel the authority and audacity to comment on the way that they appear, but by entrenching myself in those moments of trying to help, I can see and understand and then lend further support when those problems do arise.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 37:50

Yeah, so what I hear you saying is helping our kids see how they can show up physically, specifically, so that they can be in solidarity.

G

Gabriel Cruz 37:58

Yeah. Yeah. And also, again, helping them to understand and situate themselves in their own environments where like, "Okay, well, this is, here's how the system benefits me. Here's how it disadvantages me. And just like it works for me, it's gonna work for other people." So yeah, if that makes any sense.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 38:14

Yeah. No, it makes complete sense. And I think it's a really good point. It's, but I think, too, I mean, that's why it's called First Name Basis, is that you have to have people in your life that you can show up for. I think that's what people have struggled with is that they come to me, and they're like, "Yeah, but I don't know anybody who I can even spend my privilege to, to be in solidarity with." And I'm like, "Well, that's the problem!"

G

Gabriel Cruz 38:37

Yes, no, absolutely. And that's the other thing is, if you don't know anybody, then I would suggest that speaks larger about your environment, and the social situation you've cultivated for yourself.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 38:48

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So the last thing I want to ask you is something that I'm really, really curious to hear your answer about. And I know that this is not Black and white, haha. But where do white presenting children fit into the conversation about cultural appropriation?

G

Gabriel Cruz 39:11

This is messy. I think, you know, someone asked me on Instagram the other day about how I felt about this. This individual had a, she was a Black woman, and she had a niece who was white presenting and was saying things that she felt was inappropriate for a white appearing person to say. I don't know if that involves particular racial slurs. Let's say it does. I think you know, it's like in that case, we are very much talking about a one-on-one interpersonal relationship. That is absolutely what defines so much of our communication what is and is not acceptable. But also like we do have to take inventory of our own proximity to whiteness. Whiteness exists on a spectrum for folks and white presenting children and people are no different in that regard. We all exist in proximity to the system that is operating our society. And so acknowledging that like, well, "If I look a certain way, maybe there are certain things that I can't say to strangers, because the visual shorthand of my appearance does not communicate my lived experience." Right? So this gets to the idea also of authenticity. To what extent is this cultural experience, this practice, this ritual, this behavior, whatever it is, authentic to my life? I mentioned a few minutes ago, so I'm Mexican American. The Mexicans come I from are largely indigenous. I have a broad idea of what groups I may be descended from, but I don't have a tribal identity. I don't have a cultural identity that connects to that. And for me, to start doing those things out of the blue would be disingenuous. That I share some DNA is not enough. And if we assume that sharing DNA, or even having a certain level of melanin entitles us to certain things, then we run the risk of being essentialist about race. And that's a, that's a movement backwards.

G

Gabriel Cruz 41:15

Going back to the idea of what we talked about before with culture having to evolve and you know, Blackness and Latinidad not being monolithic, my experience as a Mexican American is not all Mexican American experiences, and nor does it entitle me to all others. I talked about this with a friend of mine recently, who is to Texano, who are you know, Mexicans in Texas and have been there for generations. Our experiences are much more closely tied to a particular kind of Mexican culture of rancho culture, of like farmhand agricultural kind of stuff. My old man's a cowboy, in the honest-to-god sense of the word. My kid too, and she's already ridden her first horse, and it terrifies me. It terrifies me not because of the danger, she's safe with him. But because horses are expensive. And, and she might have to just rely on her granddaddy having a horse if she wants a horse. But, but that's very different from like the sort of archetypal or even stereotypical representations of Latinidad in, like, California, or Southern California or East LA in particular. Like if I start dressing or talking like that, that's disingenuous to who I am. Right?

G

Gabriel Cruz 42:30

So I would say, first and foremost, it's less about what does your skin look like and what does that entitle you to—although there is some room for conversation in that—but also, is this who you have been? Is this your lived experience? And if it's not, why does it bother you if you

...don't have access to it? I think that question is worth unpacking. Right? But furthermore, if you want it to be, are you prepared to do the things that are required? I did a video about a year ago and on TikTok about Dia de los Muertos. And we do a little thing around the house, we make an ofrenda, which is, for those not familiar, a little altar of remembrance. Think Coco, for those not familiar, like, if you've seen the movie. Remembering those who passed on. And someone asked like, "Can if I'm not Mexican, or if I'm not Latino at all, can I do an ofrenda?" It's like, well, I would say that, if you want to, if you want to be a part of Dia de los Muertos, not just the religious aspect that goes along with that, or the spiritual aspect, but also just the cultural and community aspect of it, find some Mexicans. We're everywhere, I promise. But like, are you involved in the community? Because if you're not, then why are you trying? If you think it's nice and pretty, that's great. But there's also a lot of grief and gravity behind the celebrations. So if you really do care about it, and you really do are interested, I would encourage anyone to go get immersed, become involved, and see that it isn't just that we light candles for the dead. It's also understanding maybe what killed them. It's maybe understanding how they live their lives. And so if you're not willing to do those things, then be honest about it. Then, like, I can't stop—this is gonna sound kind of heavy handed, but it's only because it's my lived experience—I can't stop white women from getting the candy mask skulls, the Catrinas, tattooed on their skin, I can't stop it. I can't stop them from tattooing, from tattooing, or painting their faces that way. But I can ask uncomfortable questions. And if you aren't willing to do the work, then we need to have some, you know, some honest dialogue.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 44:44

Yes, and you can always tell the people who are truly trying to be invested in the community for the right reasons when...Well, okay, let me start that over. You can tell the people who are not there for the right reasons when they tell you stuff like "Well, I'm an honorary Black person," and you're like, "Cringe! If you were really around us, you would know that you can't say stuff like that!"

G Gabriel Cruz 45:08

Yeah, no. And it's similarly, when you think about like aspects of Blackness that you want your daughters to have, to what extent or what perspectives? Or what iteration of that that happens to be, then it is it is a refining process, just like it is for everybody else of like, "Well, these are the things I want. These are the things that I don't want. And these are the things I'm going to give cultural access to to my own children." And if nothing else, if nothing else, it helps to increase intercultural competency and literacy. But as far as appropriation goes, I mean, there's also that whole issue of like commerce and capitalism and that kind of thing. And with Blackness in particular, like, what version of Blackness is being sold to white audiences?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 45:50

Yeah, yes, yes. Oh, my gosh, I was thinking specifically about this company that...she is a white presenting woman. And it took me a long time to figure out that she does have indigenous ancestry. I didn't even know when I first started talking about her. But she creates moccasins for babies. And the thing is, they're they don't look like moccasins like, they have, like they call them moccasins. But they have like Mickey Mouse on them or army print or all of those things.

And so those are the kinds of things where people ask me, "Is it okay for me as someone who was white presenting, but my great grandma is Black? Can I like, I don't even know, rap? Or can I make money off of the culture basically."

G

Gabriel Cruz 46:38

So this is gonna sound like it's a bit far afield, but it connects directly. To your point. I have seen a lot of discourse about whether or not, obviously there's they might, you know, white folks can be racist to folks of color. And I've seen a lot of discourse about whether or not folks of color can be racist to white folks. And the answer to that is for anyone curious, from a institutional systemic perspective, no. Anyone can be prejudiced. Anyone can be mean. Yes. But like, from an institutional perspective? No. But can I think it's a warm question to ask, can folks of color be racist towards folks of color? Yes. The unfortunate answer is yes. There is a long history of colonialism, of colonial powers placing people original to those communities in positions of power to perpetuate the systems that kept them oppressed to begin with. The British savants at it. A large part of the reason that Africa has, that the nations of Africa have, the governance issues that they do, the ones that do have those issues, are because the British people played favorites with different indigenous groups and identities and that kind of thing and pitted them against each other. So going back to this issue of like cultural appropriation, and like the moccasin thing, and that kind of stuff, I guess my questions will be, "Okay, you have an ancestry, what does that mean in real time and space? What does that mean for the proceeds?" One of the most frustrating things I feel like people don't understand about cultural appropriation that should be obvious, is that our American government and our American system, rewards intellectual property. It rewards if you have the idea, and you follow the patent, that is your idea, and you're entitled to the proceeds from it. But we do not act that way when it comes to the cultures of indigenous groups or marginalized communities, right? In she giving money to the folks who developed the idea? Let's say that her grandmother was Cherokee, or Choctaw or one of the southeastern tribes, and I'm assuming that whether or not they wore moccasins, like, is she giving money back to those tribes? Because that's where the intellectual property for those ideas came from? Is she doing anything to help with veganism and murdered indigenous women? Or the causes for that, or the pipeline stuff or the water protectors? Like, that's so much a part of this. I think it's personally, I think it's fine for people outside of a culture to wear the clothing of a cultural group, if you put money in the hands of someone from that group, right? I don't mind if someone wore a serape, a very traditional Mexican garb, a lot of folks call them ponchos, but they're a little more involved, or was like a chato suit, or one of the Western outfits or something like that, like, that's fine. Did you put money in the hands of some abeula who stitched it together? You are engaging in an unfortunate practice. Right? So yeah.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 49:53

Well, thank you for echoing that because I've been saying that for a long time. And you know, people don't love to hear it. So thank you. Well, I could truly talk to you for so long keep you. But I just want to say thank you so much. And I'm wondering if you can share where can people connect with you find you follow you?

G

Gabriel Cruz 50:10

Sure. So people can, they can email me at gacruzphd@gmail.com. I'm on Twitter and Instagram @GACruz_PhD. I'm on TikTok at DrBot_C. And I have a podcast called Office Hours with Dr. C, where we talk about pop culture and that kind of thing. My life's mission is to ruin things that people love, because I've done it to myself and, no. But we talk about pop culture, a lot of comic book-related stuff and superheroes, but also fantasy and science fiction, that kind of thing. And I have some guests on that we talk about stuff. But like I said, that's, that's my podcast, Office Hours with Dr. C. You can find it on Google podcasts, Spotify and Apple podcasts. Yeah, that big one. Goodness gracious. So yeah, that's where folks can find me.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 51:04

Oh, amazing. Thank you. Did I tell ya, or did I tell ya? I mean, he's just brilliant. And I feel like first of all, I told you at the beginning, I learned so much. But the number one thing that I'm taking away from this conversation, is that the context that we're living our lives in matters. When we're thinking about how we identify and helping our children decide how they identify, we have to really look at the cultural context in which we're situated and what that means for ourselves and the things that we should embrace and maybe some things that we should leave behind based on that. And of course, I'm so happy to have learned that term, white assumed, because oh, man, I feel like it is the best way to explain what my kiddo goes through. Maybe she won't agree maybe she'll choose a different term, but for now, I feel like that's what I can use to really say you're assuming she's white, but she's not.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 52:04

Alright, y'all I hope you will share this episode was someone who loves learning about new things, especially when it comes to anti-racism. And I hope you will sign up for the waitlist for Ally Elementary or Ally Elementary Jr., which releases on March 29. Just go to firstnamebasis.org/allyelementary, or go to the link in the show notes.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 52:28

My friends, thank you for being here. I hope you can feel how much I believe in you, and how deeply I know that when we work together, we can make real change in our communities. Any of the books, podcasts, or articles that I reference will be linked in the show notes. If you are looking for more detailed notes, be sure to head over to our Patreon community. On our Patreon site. I provide all of the outlines that I use to make the episodes and everything is linked there. So you don't have to take furious notes while you are listening. And don't forget to join us over on Instagram at [firstname.basis](https://www.instagram.com/firstname.basis). If you're interested in partnering with First Name Basis or doing some kind of collaboration, please email us at hello@firstnamebasis.org. All right, have a great week my friends, and I will talk to you again soon.