Katrina Spencer: Hi, this is Katrina Spencer, the Literature and Cultures Librarian at Middlebury College. I'm seated in the Davis Family Library. Today is March 19th, 2018 and I'm with-

Pele Voncujovi: I'm Pele Voncujovi, I'm a junior at Middlebury College. I study economics and environmental science here, and thank you for having me.

Katrina Spencer: Thank you for being here Pele. You've already told me your name, and you've told me a little bit about your role on campus. Just to introduce to our listeners, this is part of the In Your Own Words project, originally designed as part of the Black History Month celebrations on the Middlebury College campus. We want to continue the interviews because we have some unique stories that are very provocative and compelling, and I'm hoping that Pele will share his with us.

So, Pele why don't you tell me, where do you come from?

Pele Voncujovi: My mother's from Japan. She's from the Gunma province of Japan, and my father's from Ghana in West Africa, or from Hohoe in Ghana, and so I'm from both countries. I was born in Japan, and when we were 9 months old, my family moved to Ghana, and I've been there ever since. I was there for 16 years. So I grew up there. Culturally, I am mostly Ghanaian, but I am still also kind of Japanese, in terms of culture, although, I don't feel very accepted from the Japanese side. Not in terms of family but culturally I think Japanese people are a little less open to people who are not fully Japanese. So as a half kid, I feel a lot more Ghanaian also because I've lived there my whole life. I usually tell people I'm from Ghana and Japan. But when I don't feel like I'm really investing in them, I say I'm from Ghana.

Katrina Spencer: I enjoyed that phraseology. Racially and ethnically, how do you identify?

Pele Voncujovi: Racially I just say like I'm mixed. I remember we used to call ourselves like “half-caste,” because in Ghana they called us “half-caste,” you know? Until one day my art teacher was like, "“Caste” is a bad word," and I was like, "Okay, I guess."

But yeah, I'm Ghanaian, Japanese, I'm brown. Yeah I guess in American-well, so racially how do I identify? When I'm in Ghana I identify as mixed, because it's very obvious, everyone can see that I'm different. In Ghana we have a word called "obruni" or in other words it means “foreigner,” and when I'm walking on the streets some people would just say “obruni,” or kids scream out “obruni,” or sometimes even people tell
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me "ching chang chong" you know. So they can see the Asian with me, they can see that I'm not like everyone else.

So far I don't fully feel like, I mean I don't look like the masses there. So over there, I'm more half, but when I go to places like Japan, I become the black guy. So then over there I'm kind of more black. In Japan yeah.

Katrina Spencer: How did you first realize your racial and ethnic identities?

Pele Voncujovi: I always noticed I was different from every, like there's nowhere I go where I look like everyone. Except to maybe like Cuba, which I went to for the first time two years ago. Because in Ghana I'm kind of white. I'm not white but then they categorize within the not black side. I always knew because my mother is Japanese, she's fully Japanese and in school, like whenever she'd come, like everyone would be like "oh is that your mom?" Or the food that I'd bring sometimes Japanese snacks or I speak Japanese, so I always knew that I don't look like everyone there so I had to be different. And I was okay.

In Japan, in Japanese schools some kids are a little mean. I was also pretty aware of race in Japan because that was like one of the main reasons my family moved back to Ghana, because my parents didn't want to raise us in Japan because they're a bit racist there. It's not very easy, a lot of half black, half Asian kids, or half Japanese kids have a hard time in school, because Japanese kids are bullies in school, they can be savage.

So they moved us back, so we kind of always knew that Japan there's something there. We used to go every summer. Once I went to a Japanese school, for six months while my mom was sick. And over there I'd get into fights and arguments, because we were like, my brother and I were the only two black kids in the entire school. Probably in the whole town, there wasn't really black people there, so we were pretty aware that "whoa" like we are the only non-white Japanese people there.

For example, even my brother once taught this activity, where you know like the parents come with you to the school, and then they're like, they say "akai" which means red, and you got to touch something red, and "aoi" where you touch something blue. And in Japan there's this color called "hadaido", and hadaido is, "hada" is skin, and "ido" is color, so they say “hadaido” and then everyone touches your skin. Apparently my brother touched it too, and some kid was like, "Yo, that's not hadaido,” but it technically means skin color. But it's pink, it's pinkish-peach.
So things like that, and just listening or knowing stories of how a lot of other kids were bullied, we were kind of aware that we’re different from Japanese. In Ghana, I don't look like everyone you know. In the Ghanaian context I was a Japanese guy within the group, but I was still very much Ghanaian, and they accepted me as that.

Katrina Spencer: What it is that you just recounted reminds me of some discussions that we're having in the United States about, for example, flesh-colored bandaids. Like whose flesh do the bandaids reflect? And also in the beauty industry there's a thing called "nude lipstick" or "nude underwear" but the nude is usually beige, it's not brown. So who is the standard exactly, right? Is what that reminds me of.

Question. How has your understanding of racial and ethnic identity evolved over time?

Pele Voncujovi: Well my understanding I think has evolved a lot, when I came to the U.S., I guess. But over time like I mentioned earlier, because I switched between the two identities, because in Ghana I'm categorized a little bit more under the white side, so then I get some of the white privilege, and people treat you nicer. And also because whiteness is associated with more money in general in Ghana, so you get some good treatment in many place. Like for example the clubs, and I don't know if I'll go on to say if it's racism or it's like classism, but at the club sometimes if you're black, they'll just let you wait there. It's like if a white person comes they're just like- through the crowd, and goes right in, and I always thought that was pretty bad.

Or when I'm in Japan, Japanese people are not like explicitly racist, but then for example, if you go to a place like Turkey, and stuff in the airports, it's like a bunch of people just say something, you know, shit and so- I've seen both sides of the discrimination, and also Japanese school is not necessarily a stroll in the park anyways.

When I came to America I started to notice, and I don't know if this is necessarily a racial thing or ethnicity, but I noticed the difference between Africans and African Americans, and the divide is pretty solid. I initially came because I had never been to America before, before I came to Middlebury. When I was in high school, and kind of Black Lives Matter was becoming a bigger movement, and I started to read more about it. I was like “Oh wow, these are like our brothers and sisters, you know we're all one, we're all black.”
I used to, I'd say I kind of had a fantasized view of blackness, and I never really thought about blackness, because in Ghana I didn't think about it. Everyone is black so we don't really talk about race, because everyone is black. We're taught maybe more about like what, I don't want to say tribe, but what region you're from. But then when you go out of America, I mean out of Ghana, then race or whatever plays in. In America, I came in thinking “Yeah, we're all black,” and I came and just noticed the culture is pretty different, we're just very different. I can't relate as much to an African American just because we are black on campus. There is some level to which, yeah, but it doesn't really just naturally go beyond that.

So I notice we're pretty different, and I used to try to kind of get closer before, but it's just a social scene in which I don't necessarily thrive. And I wasn't- not that I didn't feel welcome but I just didn't feel it was my scene. There were times where, and this was going a little bit off of race and ethnicity but there were times we had debates about hair, like “What does hair mean to you?” I think American history is so different, so the way they view blackness and the concept of black identity is very different, it's like at the forefront of their identities. Whereas for me it wasn't.

And so for example, me I used to have an Afro. People liked touching it, and as much like yes, I get it- the personal space aspect I get it, like I'm not too crazy about it. But if some random person's just reaching out I'm like, "Yo, why are you touching me?" But I'm okay if my friends touch my hair and stuff, and everyone else is having this discussion with this African America girl- she's not African, well anyways she's African American.

And she was telling me that when a white person touches your hair, it means- she showed me a whole poem- it means that they feel some ownership over your body and they own you. I was like, "Well, I don't see it that way." And she was like, "well that's how it is." And I was like, "Well, I don't see it that way." And we just had this argument, or it wasn't an argument, I was trying to debate it because I didn't mind debating it, but then she was all of a sudden like, "You know I'm too tired of talking about this, we've been talking, I'm too tired," and I was like, "well then if you can't even talk about it with another black person who sees it differently, well then I guess..."

So I kind of stopped engaging in that sense because I felt like she didn't really try to listen to my side of things when it comes to things like cultural appropriation or whatever, they didn't want to hear a different perspective, you know?
And so I kind of just stopped engaging with those kinds of debates regarding race and, I don't know, even now I think the African community and the African American community is getting even more divided I'd say. I think before it might have been, it was never close, but right now I feel it's even more divided. I know a lot of Africans who are feeling, I don't want to say neglected but I just feel the spread is getting bigger. Even after watching *Black Panther* it's kind of sad.

**Katrina Spencer:** How do notions of race and ethnicity change based on where you are and who you're with? I think you've addressed that a little bit, but if you have any additional response.

**Pele Voncujovi:** Yeah, I think it's crazy. I took a semester off. I took a semester off last fall. I've lived outside of Ghana for about four years now. I was in Costa Rica for two years, I was the epitome of a Ghanaian. I was the Ghanaian, I mean there was no other Ghanaians, it was me.

I come to Middlebury, I'm also African. I'm like a Ghanaian. So I started to feel so Ghanaian and I loved it. And then I went back, and I was there for like six months. I was so foreign in my terms of thinking, I was just so different I think, and I didn't fit in as well as I used to back in the day. I became like no more the epitome of being Ghanaian. Everyone else was a Ghanaian, a bit more Ghanaian than me, and that was weird. That was an identity crisis. I was like, "Damn, where do I belong?" And I didn't feel like I didn't belong, but it was different to be back where you're from especially when you're out there being like ambassador for the place, and then you come back and everyone's that, and you've kind of lost touch.

So yeah that's something. And it's kind of it makes me think about going back because ultimately I want to go back to Ghana. And work there and live there and grow my kids there. And so I'm starting to think of like, when should I go back, you know how long can I be out and still be able to integrate and still be in good touch.

**Katrina Spencer:** This question isn't on the sheet, but what do you miss?

**Pele Voncujovi:** About Ghana? The first thing I miss is the food, because I love the food. I've been learning how to make a bit of it but it's just not the same. I miss the food, I miss the people who...yesterday night I was just thinking of like why I'm here in terms of- and I think it's like a good exercise to kind of keep you grounded when you think things are going kind of shitty. But then I went to the African Leadership University in J-term, and [Francois Nica 00:13:35] the founder was telling us that society doesn't owe us anything. We are in the top 1% of privileged people who have been able to
get an education, to live past the age of five, just be able to eat food every
day, and we are just so lucky to be in the place where we are that we owe
it to society that we are not here because of our merit. A lot of it is just
luck. A lot of it is just luck and the people who have worked hard for you
to get here.

So just thinking back to all the people who were in the house, like for
example the gate man, the security guard who opens our gate every day or
someone who drives us, or someone who makes food for us every single
day. They wake up and they make food for you to eat. I was just thinking
about all of those people. It made me really nostalgic and I really wanted
to kind of go home. Because not a lot of them are with us right now, and
so I was just kind of thinking back to all the people whose hard work has
helped me get here. And it's humbling because sometimes you can be in
such a cutthroat place and you think "Yeah, I guess I am that good." But
then I really don't think I'm here because I was so good at whatever, you
know? A lot of it is luck. And people's efforts that get you here, so I miss
those people. I miss my parents and my family.

Katrina Spencer: What do you wish others knew about race and ethnicity?

Pele Voncujovi: What others knew? It's a lot more complicated than people try to make it
to be. I feel, like even I've been questioning my racial identity in that like
with my hair for example. I used to have pretty curly hair, and now I have
dreads. So I want to have the big Afro at some point, I just couldn't bother
to keep brushing it, so I just stopped.

And I have like the back of my hair is pretty hard. So then the back all
basically started turning into locks, and I said okay well I guess at this
point it's already half locks and half like a weird Afro, I might as well go
to the salon and let the guy do it. So the guy made it all locks for me, and
come here and some African American kids would be like, kind of thing. My hair isn't-
you know what's crazy?

I'm going back to the notion of race, but then before I used to have hair
that was like softer, and a lot of people in Ghana were like would always
say, "Your hair's so nice, hair's so nice," you know? And it's easier to
maintain than the super kinky one, and I always thought that was nice. I
was like, yeah I have nice hair.
But then you come to do like a hairstyle that is more black, which is like
dreads, which requires dreads or locks is like a contentious way, I don't
know. But with locks, if you have harder hair, it's easier for it to look nice.
Right now my hair is soft, so like at the roots and it grows so fast, so then
the roots come apart real fast. I've been wishing that I had kinkier hair at
times. So that's something where you want a different, but it doesn't make
me any less black because my hair is softer, you know?

I am half black, so...I don't really know where I was going with it. It's just
something about hair, I think hair is very much tied with racial identity
and the kind of I don't want to say the looks you can pull off, but definitely
just the way you think about yourself at different times. And I've been
questioning like should I- I guess I'm not black enough to do locks at
times, because my hair is just not coming together the way I want it to, but
then again when you start to think of it like, “Wait a second, this came out
of my body. And all the things I’ve been through, this is me and this is my
hair. You’re not going tell me anything about what my hair should look
like or how I should do my”- and you know, things like that make you
think like, shit it doesn't matter what other people say regarding how they
think about race or whatever, like it's my hair.

I personally don't really have a problem if anyone does like locks. Like I
know some people think of them as spiritual, dadada... but I just think that
if it's your hair, it's your hair. And someone can tell you what to do, but
the hair came out of your body, it's not for anyone to try and impose what
you can and cannot do with your body. Yeah I don't know if that answers
your question.

Katrina Spencer: Sure.

Pele Voncujovi: But yeah people should know it's a lot of- it's complicated stuff, right?
You just kind of know by looking.

Katrina Spencer: What library resources would you recommend to people at Middlebury
who want to learn more about these topics?

Pele Voncujovi: What I can speak on, one resource I know, I'm not necessarily the best at
resources here, but one resource I know the library has is a documentary
called "Hafu". It's H-A-F-U. And Hafu is a documentary about mixed race
people in Japan. I think yeah and there, like a growing demographic in
Japan a lot of kids now are being born half, and they're just examining the
half identity and this conception of “Japanese homogeneity,” which isn't
necessarily very true, because we're get- Japan's getting pretty diverse.
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Yeah it's a very interesting movie that looks at the dynamics of being a half kid. There's like halfs that half Japanese, half American, for example, which is seen in a better light because Japanese people love America. And then there's like a half Japanese, half black, or like half African or something. It's a different experience, so then there is no one half experience. Some have it easier than others. And then it gets even more interesting, they didn't touch on it in the movie, but there's like if you're half black, half Japanese, like is your mother Japanese or is your father Japanese? Because that really changes the way you're brought up, and how you're socialized and how you're able to assimilate in society, so it's really interesting stuff to get into. Like being a “blasian,” or being half in Japan. So I recommend that you guys check out the video. It's really good.

Katrina Spencer: Do you know the album called "Malibu"?

Pele Voncujovi: By who?

Katrina Spencer: Let me see if I can look it up quickly. I think it's by somebody who is blasian. One of the students recommended it to me. Album...Malibu...Mikaela Chang recommended it to me. The artist's name is Anderson .Paak.


Katrina Spencer: Yeah. And the cover of the album looks like this. I'm not really sure like if he actually sings, or if he sings about you know, racial identity, but speaking of the “blasian” identity being black and Asian at once, he's one of the I guess you could say the public figures who has that background. But anyway.

Pele Voncujovi: Oh I think I've seen him, yeah.

Katrina Spencer: Okay so we also have that in our collection, for example.

Pele Voncujovi: Okay.

Katrina Spencer: He's a rapper, songwriter, drummer, singer, and record producer.

Pele Voncujovi: From where and where is he from?

Katrina Spencer: I'm just going to scroll through the Wikipedia page and maybe find out some more. But I should- it looks like, we can look at this after we stop the recording.
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Pele Voncuøjvi: Yeah.

Katrina Spencer: Which is my fault, because I brought it up. But are there any other thoughts that you would like to share?

Pele Voncuøjvi: I think that's- are there any other questions?

Katrina Spencer: No, I think that is sufficient, and I want to thank you for sharing your story with us.

Pele Voncuøjvi: Yeah, thanks for having me. It was really fun. Yeah, thank you.

Katrina Spencer: Catch you next time.