

The Color of an Awkward Conversation

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By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
Sunday, June 8, 2008

I was annoyed the first time an African American man called me "sister." It was in a Brooklyn store, and I had recently arrived from Nigeria, a country where, thanks to the mosquitoes that kept British colonizers from settling, my skin color did not determine my identity, did not limit my dreams or my confidence. And so, although I grew up reading books about the baffling places where black people were treated badly for being black, race remained an exotic abstraction: It was Kunta Kinte.

Until that day in Brooklyn. To be called "sister" was to be black, and blackness was the very bottom of America's pecking order. I did not want to be black.

In college I babysat for a Jewish family, and once I went to pick up first-grader Stephen from his play date's home. The lovely house had an American flag hanging from a colonnade. The mother of Stephen's play date greeted me warmly. Stephen hugged me and went to look for his shoes. His play date ran down the stairs and stopped halfway. "She's black," he said to his mother and stared silently at me before going back upstairs. I laughed stupidly, perhaps to deflate the tension, but I was angry.

I was angry that this child did not merely think that black was different but had been taught that black was not a good thing. I was angry that his behavior left Stephen bewildered, and for a long time I half-expected something similar to happen in other homes that displayed American flags.

"That kid's mother is so ignorant," one friend said. "Ignorant" suggested that an affluent, educated American living in a Philadelphia suburb in 1999 did not realize that black people are human beings. "It was just a kid being a kid. It wasn't racist," another said. "Racist" suggested it was no big deal, since neither the child nor his mother had burned a cross in my yard. I called the first friend a Diminisher and the second a Denier and came to discover that both represented how mainstream America talks about blackness.

Diminishers have a subtle intellectual superiority and depend on the word "ignorant." They believe that black people still encounter unpleasantness related to blackness but in benign forms and from unhappy people or crazy people or people with good intentions that are bungled in execution. Diminishers think that people can be "ignorant" but not "racist" because these people have black friends, supported the civil rights movements or had abolitionist forebears.

Deniers believe that black people stopped encountering unpleasantness related to their blackness when Martin Luther King Jr. died. They are "colorblind" and use expressions like "white, black or purple, we're all the same" -- as though race were a biological rather than a social identity. Incidents that black people attribute to blackness are really about other factors, such as having too many children or driving too fast, but if deniers are compelled to accept that an incident was indeed about blackness, they launch into stories of Irish or Native American oppression, as though to deny the legitimacy of one story by generalizing about others. Deniers use "racist" as one would use "dinosaur," to refer to a phenomenon that no longer exists.

Although the way that blackness manifests itself in America has changed since 1965, the way that it is talked about has not. I have a great and complicated affection for this country -- America is like my distant uncle who does not always remember my name but occasionally gives me pocket money -- and what I admire most

is its ability to create enduring myths. The myth of blackness is this: "Once upon a time, black towns were destroyed, black Americans were massacred and barred from voting, etc. All this happened because of racists. Today, these things no longer happen, and therefore racists no longer exist."

The word "racist" should be banned. It is like a sweater wrung completely out of shape; it has lost its usefulness. It makes honest debate impossible, whether about small realities such as little boys who won't say hello to black babysitters or large realities such as who is more likely to get the death penalty. In place of "racist," descriptive, albeit unwieldy, expressions might be used, such as "incidents that negatively affect black people, which, although possibly complicated by class and other factors, would not have occurred if the affected people were not black." Perhaps qualifiers would be added: "These incidents do not implicate all non-black people."

There are many stories like mine of Africans discovering blackness in America; of people who are consequently amused, resentful or puzzled by Americans being afraid of them or assuming they play sports or reacting to their intelligence with surprise. Still, what is most striking to me are the strange ways in which blackness is talked about. Ten years after first being called a "sister," I think of Don Cheadle as a talented brother, but I have never stopped being aware of the relative privilege of having had those West African mosquitoes.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a novelist, is the author of "Half of a Yellow Sun."

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