

My Summer of Truth

AN OPEN LETTER

“I don’t see you as Black,” they said. My friends. To them, it was an innocuous comment coming from a place of good intention. It wasn’t the slap in the face it should have been, after all, it was a “compliment” I had heard many times before.

I corrected them and we moved on; I didn’t want to rock the boat any more than I already had by calling attention to a misguided and unintentionally hurtful, cruel comment.

Without realizing it, I had lost a piece of myself.

As a person of colour, I grew up hearing that as a Black woman living in a White world, I needed to be stronger and better than my White counterparts.

So, I tried to assimilate, tried to efface my Blackness for the comfort of others. Tried to be less me.

And, in doing so, it hit me. I was ashamed of being Black.

Despite the global media coverage surrounding the death of George Floyd, I didn’t care to pay attention. Except, as a Black woman, when something so violent, heart-breaking, and public happens in the Black community, there is no such thing as ostriching.

I couldn’t ignore, hide, or run away from my community. It was all too easy for me and many other Black people to see ourselves in Floyd’s position. After all, too many have been—Elijah McClain and Breonna Taylor and Regis Korchinski-Paquet and Duante Wright and Atatiana Jefferson and Daniel Prude and and and

George Floyd's death was tragic and senseless. It took a tragic and senseless death for the social movement Black Lives Matter, founded in 2013, to get traction. It took a tragic and senseless death for people to realize that there is something fundamentally wrong with the lives they've been living, and I was no exception.

Being Black means that we don't have the choice to walk away, to put down racism and say, "not for me today."

As children, people of colour are warned by their parents about the unfairness of the world, the pain, the suffering, and the fear we will experience throughout our lives. They want to prepare us because they understand what we have yet to find out: we are going to grow up in a world that sees us as ugly, as different, as to-be-feared.

I'm not discounting the experiences of White people, but your White experience at eight years old does not carry with it the intensely visceral and centuries-old pain that comes with being called a Nigger.

I was ashamed of facing myself. Ashamed that accepting my Blackness arrived at the expense of someone else's death.

When discussing racism with my friends of ten years, I was not expecting such powerful resistance and hostility, or the intense three-day debate that followed.

Every time I was alerted to a new notification, I would start shaking, wondering what rebuttal they would hurl at me next. I couldn't sleep or eat. Cold sweats and anxiety were constant companions. I was on edge every day; three days felt like months.

They said, my friends, that White people experience individual racism. They said racism was a topic we could agree to disagree on, while still maintaining a friendship. They said there are different definitions and avenues to racism.

I began to doubt my experiences with racism; they were being distorted through the lens of White privilege.

But here's the issue with using definitions to debate racism. Most people don't understand the differences between racism, discrimination, and prejudice. These definitions are often used synonymously. But racism, discrimination, and prejudice are not synonyms. And here's why—

Racism is systemic. It is the systemic oppression of a group of people. So, this means the foundation of our society— from our government to our education systems— is inherently racist.

Prejudice is pre-judging. As a Black person, if I lump all White people together as bad, that thinking stems from personal or historical experience. Is it true that all White people are bad? No. But hypothetically, do I care? No.

Discrimination is acting on that prejudice. How I treat you as a White person stems from my opinion—maybe my belief—that all White people are terrible people.

These definitions are not interchangeable but connected. As a White person, you can experience prejudice and discrimination from people of colour. But let's remember White is seen—and has been written—as “superior.” Whiteness has held systemic power for centuries. What you have experienced, then, is not racism.

As the summer went on, I transitioned from anxiousness to anger.

And I wanted my anger seen. I wanted my anger heard.

And I got angrier and angrier as I was asked if this "unpleasantness" could be put behind us, if we could "stop bickering," if I could supply a solution that went beyond negating the existence of racism against Whites. I was even asked if there was a particular cause they could support.

I wanted to break down and cry. I wanted to scream: ME! SUPPORT ME! HEAR ME! SEE ME! I wanted to finally just BE. me.

I felt like I was talking to a wall. No matter what I said or how I said it, they couldn't understand where I was coming from.

I am coming from my Blackness. A Blackness that does not want to be placated. A Blackness that wants them to actively listen to the words I am saying, to the experiences I am sharing, to the me standing before them.

I was left shattered and shell-shocked.

It was during this time that I picked up Ijeoma Oluo's book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, and what she wrote resonated within me. She said, "I had started to see myself, and once you start to see yourself, you cannot pretend anymore."

I, too, cannot pretend anymore.

I can no longer assimilate or efface myself for the comfort of others.

I have started to see myself. I see myself, and I want to be seen.

I look around; so much White surrounds me. It feels suffocating.

With every microaggressive comment or act I let slide, I allowed pieces of my Blackness to be chipped away, scattered across the years, until I felt incredibly lost and alone. I had distanced myself from my Blackness and from the Black community.

There is a loneliness and grief in knowing that I am on a different path than the one previously travelled together.

Now, on this re-discovered path, I want to gather all the pieces I displaced throughout the years and recreate a me I can be proud of. But I have to start. I have started. I am coming from misplaced Blackness and going-to-for-toward my being. My Blackness. To justBE.

While in this liminal space, I am learning to accept my role in how I had allowed others to view me as "less than."

I am learning to accept how I had viewed myself and those in the Black community as "less than."

I am learning to accept how—and why—I had tried to hide the biggest part of myself even though it was in plain sight.

I am learning how to build a community of wonderful Black women who are kind enough to show me myself, my history, my truth. Black women who mentor and gently nudge me when I stray, and who celebrate my growth.

I am embracing the **me** that is Black and unashamed. And, I have found people who are willing to walk beside me on this journey. I am no longer alone. I am no longer grieving what was lost because what is to come is rich, textured, colourful, endless.

And now, this story is mine; this story is **me**: **my story is Black**.

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