

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference

Not Your Noire: I'm Not Going to Spend My Life Just Being Your Colour

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Abstract

Black people continue to move and operate in spaces where they are perceived as simply a colour that has neither been respected nor appreciated for years. Black people are often not seen past their skin colour to honour their value as humans. Through real-life experiences, this piece shares problematic narratives that ought to be dismantled.

Keywords: beyond Blackness, storytelling, poetry, racialized experiences, narratives

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Imagine a very cold winter night, and Ayeyi, a young Black woman, walks into a restaurant with her Christmas shopping bags. The host meets her at the restaurant entrance and says, "Sorry, no public washrooms here," before she can tell him she's only there to eat. Shocked for a minute but not surprised, she pries inside and doesn't see anyone like herself. Everyone's skin is as white as the snow outside. Her offense—standing out like a chocolate fondue against their snow.

Picture Ayeyi again, but this time she is doing her grocery shopping. The cashier asked to look into her little sack pack to ensure she did not have any items in there that she needed to pay for. She opened it up for the cashier to see because she was more amused than annoyed since she had nothing to hide. However, she could not entertain the fact that the cashier had not asked the person in front of her—who had a bag filled with things—whether they had any items hiding in there. You see, the cashier was white, and so was the person in front of Ayeyi. They were both white, and Ayeyi was Black. There was no other explanation because when Ayeyi went to speak to the manager about it, the manager apologized to her and said they had no policy where cashiers had to ask to look into someone's bag.

Ayeyi's experiences as an "other" were not her firsts, and they weren't going to be her last. Still, they seem very tiny compared to the stories of many Black people held in shackles, lynched, doused in gasoline and burned to death, or treated like contagious animals just because the colour of their skin was not white enough. In many instances, we have seen all too well boys and men shot to death or desperately beg to breathe just because they were born a colour that has been strangled and suffocated since slavery; Black.

One time in Ayeyi's Indigenous studies class, a white heterosexual male student asked the class, "What if colonialism was an accident and Christopher Columbus just got lost trying to find his way somewhere else?" *Just imagine*, she thought to herself. *What people eagerly raise their hands and say, "Please colonize us, please let us be your slaves." What people? No people. No one. No one says that.*

Imagine that Ayeyi is asked to speak on behalf of all Black people at a meeting, despite socially locating herself as someone from a small town in a certain African country. It is assumed that having melanin skin that appears baked by golden rays-of-the-sun meant she was the monolithic representative of all her people. Ayeyi wanted to say to them, *No, I am not your Noire* (French language for "Black"). *I'm not going to spend my life just being a colour to you.* Instead, to avoid being seen as an angry Black woman, she said firmly, "To acknowledge the struggles of Black people, we must be careful in this so-called diverse setting to not consciously or unconsciously promote tokenization under the false ideology of inclusion and amplifying voices of Black people."

When journaling in her diary, Ayeyi wrote,

The Blackness of my skin is like chocolate clay, on any given day, a thorough delight to marvel in. That Black is not darkness; it is not just a colour. It does not conform; it is a maverick existence of space, vast like the brazen length of the River Nile, breathtaking like laughter in a rolling calabash. Blackness is mesmerizing, like beats of movements at an African festival; Blackness is excellence, it is joy, it is

*magic, it is the essence of humanity.
Black lives should matter.*

Ayeyi further wrote,

*Colours are everywhere,
And privilege is in lighter colours,
Diversity is used everywhere;
But diversity is not welcomed just
anywhere.
It is as though for co-existence,
We must be "blindfolded"
When we first interact
Like, learn to be colour blind.
She wanted to be seen as a person.
The essence of all that she was,
Could not be subscribed to just a
colour.
She was so much more than that,
All of her, her greatness was beyond
a colour.
Her life mattered, like all other lives
of people who looked like her.
And people needed to treat her as a
human before anything else.*

Ayeyi's stories are based on real-life encounters in spaces and places that have continued to discriminate, dismiss Black people by default of their Blackness, and such thinking must be dismantled.