

An excerpt from Chapter 36 of AMERICANAH by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking About Blackness

Dear American Non-Black, if an American Black person is telling you about an experience about being black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life. Don't say "It's just like when I ..." You have suffered. Everyone in the world has suffered. But you have not suffered precisely because you are an American Black. Don't be quick to find alternative explanations for what happened. Don't say "Oh, it's not really race, it's class. Oh, it's not race, it's gender. Oh, it's not race, it's the cookie monster." You see, American Blacks actually don't WANT it to be race. They would rather not have racist shit happen. So maybe when they say something is about race, it's maybe because it actually is? Don't say "I'm color-blind," because if you are color-blind, then you need to see a doctor and it means that when a black man is shown on TV as a crime suspect in your neighborhood, all you see is a blurry purplish- grayish-creamish figure. Don't say "We're tired of talking about race" or "The only race is the human race."

American Blacks, too, are tired of talking about race. They wish they didn't have to. But shit keeps happening. Don't preface your response with "One of my best friends is black" because it makes no difference and nobody cares and you can have a black best friend and still do racist shit and it's probably not true anyway, the "best" part,

not the "friend" part. Don't say your grandfather was Mexican so you can't be racist (please click here for more on There Is No United League of the Oppressed). Don't bring up your Irish great-grandparents' suffering. Of course they got a lot of shit from established America. So did the Italians. So did the Eastern Europeans. But there was a hierarchy. A hundred years ago, the white ethnics hated being hated, but it was sort of tolerable because at least black people were below them on the ladder. Don't say your grandfather was a serf in Russia when slavery happened because what matters is you are American now and being American means you take the whole shebang, America's assets and America's debts, and Jim Crow is a big-ass debt. Don't say it's just like antisemitism. It's not. In the hatred of Jews, there is also the possibility of envy—they are so clever, these Jews, they control everything, these Jews—and one must concede that a certain respect, however grudging, accompanies envy. In the hatred of American Blacks, there is no possibility of envy—they are so lazy, these blacks, they are so unintelligent, these blacks.

Don't say "Oh, racism is over, slavery was so long ago." We are talking about problems from the 1960s, not the 1860s. If you meet an elderly American black man from Alabama, he probably remembers when he had to step off the curb because a white person was walking past. I bought a dress from a vintage shop on eBay the other day, made in 1960, in perfect shape, and I wear it a lot. When the original owner wore it, black Americans could not vote because they were black. (And maybe the original owner was one of those

women, in the famous sepia photographs, standing by in hordes outside schools shouting “Ape!” at young black children because they did not want them to go to school with their young white children. Where are those women now? Do they sleep well? Do they think about shouting “Ape”?) Finally, don’t put on a Let’s Be Fair tone and say “But black people are racist too.” Because of course we’re all prejudiced (I can’t even stand some of my blood relatives, grasping, selfish folks), but racism is about the power of a group and in America it’s white folks who have that power. How? Well, white folks don’t get treated like shit in upper-class African-American communities and white folks don’t get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don’t give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don’t stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don’t choose not to hire somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don’t tell white kids that they’re not smart enough to be doctors and black politicians don’t try some tricks to reduce the voting power of white folks through gerrymandering and advertising agencies don’t say they can’t use white models to advertise glamorous products because they are not considered “aspirational” by the “mainstream.”

So after this listing of don’ts, what’s the do? I’m not sure. Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it’s not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is. If you don’t understand, ask questions. If you’re uncomfortable about asking questions, say

you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway. It’s easy to tell when a question is coming from a good place. Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here’s to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding.

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