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Fall 12-15-2017

## **Without a Caveat: How an Ethiopian Immigrant Deconstructs Race in America**

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## **Without a Caveat: How an Ethiopian Immigrant Deconstructs Race in America**

By Priscilla Alabi

It was the end of the school day when seventh grader Mariya Abudukaf and her classmates hurried on the school bus. The “cheese bus”, as they call it, packed several dozen students as they escaped the confines of education, all excited to go home.

Abdukaf said a boy on whom she had a crush - sat behind her on the bus with his friend. While on their ride home, Abdukaf recalls an exchange in which it was clear that her crush had discovered that she liked him. The boy told his friends that he also liked her and thought she was pretty. And then her crush’s friend replied back to him and said, “but she’s black.”

Abdukaf’s crush and his friend were white.

Now 26, Abdukaf sat cozily in an armless tan loveseat opposite her crackle-free electric fireplace in the 3-bedroom East-Williamsburg apartment she shares with two other women. She conjured that memory on the bus in middle school with a mix of confusion and sadness. Even as a middle school student, she said the statement “was so odd” to her back then.

From that moment to now, well into adulthood, that memory from the school bus remains salient for her. She said she believes the statement to be a product of discriminatory and racist views “parents obviously pass onto their kids.” And it was one of many instances where she said she was made to feel she was unworthy of inclusion simply because of the color of her skin.

Similarly, there was that first time in sixth grade when she played the maid in her Austin, Texas elementary school’s production of *Annie*, and the woman who did her makeup told her she had great bone structure “for a black girl” and she should be a model. Or various other moments when the parents of her classmates and friends would be “floored by” her intellect in “very strange ways” she said, and they’d tell her “you’re so well spoken for a black girl.”

Although, when she was a child growing up in Ethiopia’s capital city of Addis Ababa in the 90s, Abdukaf remembered happily running around the neighborhood with her older brother Feysel. The pair would sing Celine Dion songs like *I’m Your Angel* to anyone they could find to entertain. “The idea of people not liking me for who I am, was not a thing in Ethiopia,” Abdukaf said with full confidence. In Ethiopia, even though her six-year-old self didn’t need to put it into words, she said she knew she owned the space and she belonged.

However, after her family moved to Austin, Texas because her parents won the Diversity Visa Lottery, Abdukaf said she felt her blackness constantly overshadowed whatever acceptance she received from white people in America. “I was never going to be fully accepted without a caveat,” she said.

To be fully accepted in the larger American culture remains a complicated idea for Abdukaf to sort out. A little over a year ago, she got into heated debate about what “systemic racism in

America looks like” with a friend from her church. At the end of the conversation, she realized she needed to educate her closest friends about something that “is so integral to [her] experience as a black woman in this country.” So she created a group - ‘The Social Justice Reading Group’- where she said “everyone is welcomed” to delve deeply into discussions of issues of social and racial inequality in America.

Abdulkaf is one of many women of color who continue to educate and awaken the communities to which they belong. In a social climate where, according to [a study](#) done by the Pew Research Center, 60 percent of Americans believe race relations have worsened a year into the Trump Administration; and groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and others [assert](#) that women of color are “bearing the brunt of a mass of harmful policies” from the Trump Administration, many women of color, like Abdulkaf have decided to address these issues head on as they continue to find solutions to how to belong and thrive in America.

### **The Social Justice Reading Group**

In East Williamsburg on a brisk fall Tuesday night, a dozen people trickle in, one after another, into the second floor walk-up apartment Abdulkaf calls home. The tungsten bulb that lit the room paled in comparison to the lights from the aromatic Christmas tree Abdulkaf painstakingly spent over half an hour to select and purchase just two days before.

The night’s topic is gentrification. In previous weeks, the group discussed issues such as: mass incarceration, the death penalty, how race was constructed in America, and even international issues like the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The group, comprised of men and women in their 20s and 30s - many of whom are New York City transplants. They crowded around Abdulkaf’s coffee table filled with slices of homemade pumpkin spiced bread, candied raisin bread, and sparkling water. 90 percent of the group is made up entirely of friends and friends of friends who attend Trinity Grace Church Williamsburg, a predominantly white congregation, alongside Abdulkaf.

For homework before they arrived at the meeting, they were asked to read or listen to five pieces, one of which is a piece from the New Yorker titled “Is Gentrification Really A Problem.” And another, an episode from the podcast *There Goes the Neighborhood* titled “Williamsburg, What’s Good?” They talk about the historical context of gentrification, which according to Merriam Webster is “the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents.”

According to Rebecca Carroll, the producers of the podcast *There Goes the Neighborhood*, discussions about gentrification often ignore the racial aspect of the issue. “It’s a cycle of migration for black and brown people always moving according to when white people, who are largely the group with money decide that they want to reclaim a neighborhood or a space,” she said at the beginning of the podcast. Carroll, a black woman had lived in Williamsburg with her

husband and son for over a decade when she felt the effects of gentrification. She and her neighbors were asked to vacate their apartment building to make way for a new high-rise to be built on the same plot of land.

Relatively, Abdulkaf's current apartment in East-Williamsburg is located in a new building which replaced an older one on the same plot of land. She said she is "deeply conflicted knowing that it was most likely poorer people of color who lived in this space my apartment is now located and were probably displaced."

Abdulkaf, who herself is a young professional, is quick to admit that she is a gentrifier in East-Williamsburg. She urged the group to examine what role they play, as white young professionals to whom housing developers cater, in the displacement of poorer people of color that once lived in the housing complexes in the neighborhood they now reside. "It is important for us to recognize what people with our income levels do to a neighborhood when we decide to leave after a year," said Abdulkaf. "We're all complicit in this system," she said to the group.

Cara Thurman, one of the regular attendees of the group said the most important thing she has learned in the time she has spent in the group is how to listen. Thurman, 27, who is a caucasian American woman said she wasn't aware of the issues unique to communities of color before she started to meet with Abdulkaf and the 'Social Justice Reading Group'. As a result of her involvement with the group, she now regularly volunteers with a community organization that works to preserve the cultural vibrancy of neighborhoods.

Meagan Choi, Abdulkaf's close friend who is a member of the reading group, but who was not present at the meeting that Tuesday night, said participating in the group has "made [her] more aware of those who don't have a voice in our society." Choi met Abdulkaf through a mutual friend soon after the 2016 election of Donald Trump. She said she found that being in the Social Justice Reading Group was precisely the kind of space she needed to sort out her shock and horror that a man who, "ran such a racially divisive campaign that left communities of color feeling more marginalized" became President of the United States.

Prior to the election, Choi whose father immigrated to the US from South Korea and whose mother is a caucasian American woman, never before identified herself as a person of color; Choi conceived of herself as American alone. After the election and through the bi-weekly meetings with Abdulkaf and the Social Justice Reading group, she said began to take ownership of her identity as a person of color because she "was able to see the communal marginalization of all people of color in this country."

For Abdulkaf, she opened her home to the group because "it's important for different minds to come to a consciousness to reconcile not only with their communities, but with themselves in terms of guilt or complicity they may have in this deeply racist social structure."

**Where are you really from?**

Abdulkaf's experiences with racism and feelings of being "other" are not unique to her. Many people of color report hearing "odd" things as they go through their everyday lives in America. In fact, a former writer and current co-host of BuzzFeed's Podcast Another Round, Heben Nigatu - who is also an Ethiopian immigrant, [compiled a list](#) of comments people of color hear everyday. Such as:

"You don't act like a 'regular' black person, you know?"

Or "why do you sound white?"

Or "do you see slanted?" to an Asian person.

Or "I never see you as a {person of color}"

Or "you're so articulate"

Or "can I touch your hair?"

Or "what are you?"

Or "you're so pretty for a black girl."

Or "no, where are you really from?"

Or "you speak such good english."

These statements are the "not-quite-racism" that anyone who miss-fits a marginal identity across America understands well. These statements are what Columbia University Professor of Psychology, Derald Sue termed "microaggressions." They are "commonplace, daily, verbal behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people from a non-dominant-group," - in essence non-white or people of color.

According to experts who study microaggression in the field of psychology, all the above statements and many more like them have negative cumulative physical and mental health effects on the people they are directed toward.

"When someone continually hears these messages, it can lead them to question their place in the world," said New York City-based Clinical Psychologist Jennifer Chen. According to Chen, anyone with a minority status living in America has experienced microaggressions whether or not they realize it.

Chen also co-facilitated a social justice discussion workshop for people from her church earlier this year called 'A Seat at the Table.' She said it was her response in the wake of the election of Donald Trump and the division and fear she said his campaign sowed across America and in communities of color. Chen said she wanted to create a space where people of color and their allies can have respite from an overtly hostile socio-political environment.

Many who have had "where are you really from" posed to them say the question comes loaded with presumptions about their background.

One woman, journalist Victoria Edwards who currently lives in McDonough, Georgia but has lived all over the country said “it sucks because if you’re white, you’re American. But everyone who is not white can’t be American and always have to answer this question.” She was born to a white mother and black father.

Edwards noted that though her white mother immigrated to the US from Hungary when she was seven years old, she never gets the question. However, her father who is black and whose family has been “here for centuries” still gets asked “where is he really from.”

Another woman, France Sola-Santiago, a graduate student from Puerto-Rico who attends the City University of New York’s Graduate School of Journalism said “people always assume that my parents are wealthy.” Although she is a citizen of the United States because Puerto Rico is still a territory of the US, she said being categorized as an immigrant when she moved to the mainland caught her by surprise.

Sola-Santiago, 23, who reports stories mainly in the fashion industry said, to her it is evident that Americans think “so low” of those from Puerto Rico because they are often surprised to learn that she is a graduate student. Although back home on her Island in Puerto Rico, Sola-Santiago is considered a white person, being part of the fashion industry, she said she is keenly aware of a pressure to “blend in and not be so ethnic” in order to get the approval of her white counterparts.

However, all of that changed for her the night of the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. She had a vivid nightmare that the Ku Klux Klan openly roamed the streets of New York in search of non-white, ethnic people to terrorize. When she awoke, rather than cower and continue the pursuit to blend in, she actively sought ways to “perform” her Puerto Rican identity. She bought a black leather jacket with a large Puerto Rican flag on the backside that she wears as often as she likes.

Before Trump’s election, and especially since Hurricane Maria ravaged her Island, Sola-Santiago said she was a “tourist ad” for Puerto Rico because of her strong desire to be accepted by her white counterparts who presume she is from a wealthy family. For her the question “where are you really from?” is an opportunity to educate people on “what is really going on and how the US keeps messing up my Island.” Whereas Sola-Santiago said she only cared about fashion news before Trump, she now pays close attention to politics.

Although Sola-Santiago, now 23, has the clarity of mind to embrace her immigrant identity and reject micro-aggressions directed toward her, young Mariya Abdulkaf took the microaggressions she experienced as a sign that she was fitting in, - a sign that she was assimilating well. Years later, these comments would infuriate her and she would do her best to block them out of her mind.

Abdulkaf admitted that, given the racism and microaggressions she experienced as a child, she has had “really complicated views on what it means to be a respected person.” However she said her reading group has helped her “deconstruct those things.”

“It’s a miracle that I didn’t kill myself,” she said.