

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Race and Luxury

Carl Louisville · Wednesday, February 5th, 2014

I have been asked to cut my hair. To tone down my dress. Not to draw so much attention to myself.

I was asked “Why are you here?”, or I read the lips of someone at the table mouthing that question.

It always seemed funny that my mere presence commanded attention, cuz almost always I was the only one, without exception.

I have been a rarity – a black executive in the luxury fashion business.

Our country was built on the backs of African slaves on land stolen from the American Indians by white European settlers. Everything that we all are, believe, have become, and will be is influenced from this beginning. How we all allow this history to permeate our daily lives is individual, and can be whatever we chose; racism is a part of our culture. How we process this reality is up to us as individuals.

It would be natural, therefore, that we are all most comfortable in the company of people who look like us. It's safe, and our beliefs are not challenged, or questioned in any way that would cause us discomfort. This does not mean we cannot be in mixed company, but we rarely are. How many dinner parties, board meetings, birthday parties, picnics, have you been to, that are truly ethnically diverse, where that diversity was not legally orchestrated? In our everyday lives, we don't have to care about real diversity.

These considerations simply need to be acknowledged, absorbed, and processed, before an honest conversation about race relating to anything could even begin.

I have never been confused when something was happening to me because of my race, although on occasion I've had the experience of *OMG, that was not really a smile with love and consideration, that was a racist smile.*

I'm also never sure why we all try to call it something else, when to me it's obvious. I don't see Barack Obama's struggles as President with the guys in Congress, any differently than I see than Trayvon Martin's struggle for his life that night with George Zimmerman, except that President Obama has survived, and diminishes conversation about race. Part of the struggle for all of us is not to be reduced only to the color of our skin, although I've always favored the occasional angry black man moment. It's why I love Michelle Obama. She will get pissed and be pissed and she will tell you and you will know. And really, what about that sales lady in Switzerland: Oprah, the big,

black woman who “couldn’t possibly” afford that handbag. That wasn’t about race? It’s everywhere. Let’s all own it, so we can change it.

I have had the great fortune to travel all over the world in my career in the luxury fashion business. There’s nothing like traveling to open one’s mind and broaden one’s life experiences; to truly be in the world does worldly things for one’s racial perspective at home. Imagine sitting at a fabulous dinner party in an Italian villa, and a white invited guest saying to you, “So tell me how did you end up here, from a dirt poor upbringing to this?”

I have become accustomed to being the only person at the table that looked like me. I’ve heard everything from, “You are the first black person to ever be in my home” to “You are not black, you transcend race” (I’m not sure I’ve ever understood what that means). I’ve also had people not speak to me for months, because “I don’t get why he is here.”

Mind you, part of even getting invited to the table as a brown person is that everything about you must be exceptional. Although I admit it wears on you. Fortunately, I never stopped believing what my mother and grandmother always told me: You can be anything and do anything you want, and you are perfect just the way you are.

I understand the condition of the people in skin different from mine, I understand the way they see themselves in the world, and I’ve always understood their place at the table.

At some point in my life I realized the vision that what had been enthroned in my heart and mind from my mother and grandmother was never about fitting in or acceptance. It was always about creating my own reality, about building my own table because I can.

Luxury is experiential, luxury is relational, luxury can happen anywhere regardless of where you came from, the color of your skin. Luxury is for everyone to experience and enjoy.

Photo by Adam Leipzig.

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