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Talking Black

Mojadesinuola Adejokun

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“Why do you talk so black?” The child asked so suddenly that it shocked me to silence. It was the first time I was asked this question and not the last time. However, at that moment all I could do was stand in the dimly lit school hall confused and pondering, “When did language don a skin color?”

I was a fourth grader when this moment happened. And thinking back this may not have been the first moment I had to deal with this. However, this moment shines the brightest when I think back to when color truly became a problem. This was a new experience since I went from a diverse area to a new area where my family was the only African Americans in town. Color never seemed to be an issue or anything to give a second thought to. However, the moment that question left the child’s mouth, the dam broke and the reminders that I was black came rushing down to drown me.

I was a first generation African American so my parents both were immigrants who came to America for an education. So I could understand why the phrases I used would be considered peculiar. However, it was not any worse that the “country slang” that was thrown around everyday. After the initial shock wore off I do not have much memory of what I said or did. All I know was that it was never brought up again and I changed the way I spoke to fit in.

Two years later I found myself moving once again to a different school unlike the last one there was a bit more diversity, however nothing worth bragging about. Once again I was the only African American in my class, but it took about a year or two for the ridiculous color issue to be brought up again. I cannot remember how it was started or who said it first, but my race was brought into

light with my language and this time with a twist.

“Mojade, no offense, but you talk like a white girl” a girl, I had assumed was a friend, boldly said without truly thinking about what was rudely coming out of her mouth.

“Excuse me what?” I said trying to pretend I missed what she said so she could just stop there.

“Well, I guess what I mean is you are the whitest black girl I have ever met. You talk white and all.” It took every ounce of control to not slap the smile off her face. Instead of causing something out of what I thought was nothing I laughed awkwardly and changed the subject. I was fuming and I still get a little heated when thinking that she would have the audacity to say something so rude. Who gave her the right to say what it meant to be black. She was white and had no way of knowing what it meant to be black. Did she not understand that not every black person acts the same as it is shown on television? Did she not realize that it is rude to assume that to be black you had to speak in a “ghetto way”? When did she gain the right to tell me that I was not black because I spoke proper English? However, this is a huge change to me speaking black. It seemed that I would never win. No matter how I spoke somebody was going to have a comment on whether I was black or not.

Thinking back to the beginning when the dreaded, “You are the whitest black girl I have ever met because you speak so white,” was uttered I know I should have stopped it then. I should have spoken my mind and told her that it was a racist comment and she should think before she talked instead of letting it slide. However, I let it slide and continued to let it slide until it became her comeback to anytime I stumped her at something. Constantly I would hear over and over and over again “You are the whitest black girl I have ever met.” Or, “You speak so white.” And my favorite, “You are like an Oreo, black on the outside white on the inside.” The classroom walls with their vocab words and typical quotes would spin around me as the words would spin around my head. I would see red and then try to see through tears of frustration and anger. I kept quiet each time. Allowing the words to chip at the confidence I had in my race and self. I allowed myself to take up the identity of an “Oreo” wishing in the back of my mind that maybe if I weren’t black I would

not have to be constantly reminded that I was different.

It must have been the heat of the summer a few years later or the people I was around but I refused to let it slide anymore. My youth group was at church camp. There were five girls, maybe, and we were combined with a group of girls from Chicago Heights. They were the complete opposite of us. They were all black with one white girl and we were all white with me, the only black girl. I fit in perfectly with the other group. It was no different than being at home or with family and not once was my way of speech questioned or brought up by the Chicago girls. However, that could not be said about my youth group. We were all sitting in the little, square building we would call home for the next week. We were talking about anything and everything when the Chicago girls were joking about something and were talking in the slang that they would use back home. I was laughing at what was being said when somebody said, "Mojade, you should take some notes."

The room became very quiet and the only thing heard was the loud air conditioner that was trying to create some cool air. Instead of stopping the girl continued, "You know Mojo you are really white compared to them. In fact Angel," the only white girl with the Chicago Heights group, "acts more black than you do." A part of me wanted me to let it go but a larger part of me was not having it. I was hot, tired, and not at all interested in letting it slide. I remember just looking at her thinking about what I should even say or do. The room became small and everything got a slight red twinge to it. I could feel the anger growing inside and I knew I was about to snap like pillars under high pressure. However, I never got the chance because the Chicago girls came swooping in to save me.

"That makes no sense." That was all that Kiki needed to say to make the girl realize her mistake. It was followed by a look of judgment from everybody in the room. I know she was trying to get laughs, but instead she caused everybody to either finally understand that, those words should not be said or to stick up for me and make sure it was addressed immediately. I finally realized that when I left that square, overheated box in the woods I would not let it happen anymore.

Just because I spoke like I was not raised in the ghetto did not mean I was not black; it just meant that I was not raised in the ghetto. And just because other people spoke like they were raised

in the ghetto did not mean they were black; it just meant they were raised in the ghetto. Language does not determine your race or who you are as a person. It is just one part of you that helps makes up who you are. You cannot be defined on your language and it never has been nor will it ever be okay to define a person by their skin color. That summer I learned that being black did not mean fitting into stereotypes. Instead it meant that I happened to be born black. It was something that I had always known, but now it was something that I started to truly understand and live out.

That school year, which was my junior year, I would hear people tell me some of the most racist things and look at them in pity because they assumed that since they said no offense it was not bad. I would go home and tell my mom about it and she would just laugh and laugh and then point out the humor in what had been said. My mom taught me to sometimes laugh it off and then set them straight. I learned to simply just look at the person that said something without much thought and just shake my head. They did not realize that the world was so much bigger than the town we lived in. I felt pity for their situation and hoped they would learn before they ended up looking foolish in front of a large group of people.

I knew there would come a time when I would truly have to stick up for myself and finally the perfect moment arose. I was ready and I was calm. I had been talking to people how it was rude for the comments and so they had started to stop. However, there was one girl that still had yet to learn. She was the one that had done it the most and she was the one I depicted the second time. She was the type of girl that would point out your flaws and tell you when you were wrong before ever pointing out something good that you have done. Then she would try and make everybody pity and notice her. I had let her get by with it because we were friends, but I realized friends do not do or say half the things she did and it was way past time to stop her.

She started with her typical, “You are so white,” comment yet everybody sitting around us at the lunch table knew things were different, “no offense but you act so white instead of black. You even talk white.”

My best friend looked up at me curious to see how I would handle the situation. The lunchroom seemed to quiet down as my head started to clear and the words started to form ready to destroy

the words that had been let out to destroy my identity.

“Can you honestly tell me what it means to be black? I mean since you seem to know better than I do. Please enlighten me to what it means to be black.” The words left and so did the anger that I had been holding back with every time that she or anybody else had questioned my “blackness”. The table stared at me in shock and then looked at her to see what she would say. She just stared at me and struggled to find words. She awkwardly laughed and continued to struggle to find words.

“Well I don’t know...”

“Okay then maybe you should try not saying anything like that since I would probably have a better idea what it means to be black since I happen to be black.” That shut her up and she changed the subject quickly so not to raise attention to the situation anymore.

I felt at that moment as though I had finally slain the dragon and won the war. No longer would I have to sit and question if I was speaking black enough or too black. Speaking black was not a real thing that I would even allow to bother me. It was a stereotype and stereotypes are not how I am going to allow people to define me.