

The moment I became aware of my race as a black woman—and how it changed my life

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There comes a time in a person of color’s life when they realize their skin tone is “different”—and that this difference matters. While the experience is unique for everyone, it’s also inevitable.

I was in my early 20s when I discovered that race was not only a factor in my life, it also mattered in ways I didn’t want it to. Men judge me for it in romantic situations. Potential employers subconsciously or consciously consider it among my other qualifications. Random store owners offer service at the level they judge me worthy based on skin color alone.

As a darker-skinned black girl teased by little boys just as dark as me, I was somewhat conscious of race from an early age. It’s always been a factor in my life, though I never wanted it to be. Instead, I wanted to be accepted or rejected based

on who I was and what I had to offer, rather than on the color of my skin—something akin to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s [dream](#) realized. But that’s not the reality of the world in which we live.

When I first became aware of this reality, I wondered if I had spent my entire life blind to the facts. It was my first year of university, and I had just moved to a new (and very white) city alone. While living in residence, I realized there was something different in the way my floor-mates interacted with me. There was an uncertainty and tenseness I hadn’t experienced in the colorful city I called home. It wasn’t as easy to make friends or relate to people because to them, I was the “Other.” I couldn’t just approach them as myself. It was an embittering discovery.

The lead-up to my realization was gradual. It was a short lifetime of little things that didn’t seem significant in the moment, but ultimately culminated in a sudden awareness. Like the teaching assistant who expected me to shed light on the black experience in front of my tutorial group of white peers. I was shocked at being asked to explain the history of an entire race of people from my limited perspective, but I also realized that it wasn’t the first time something like this had happened. I looked at the world with new eyes after that year.

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Race, as any first-year anthropology student will tell you, is a social construct—something we as humans made up to separate those with power from those without.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, a journalist best known for his [award-winning cover story](#) on the case for reparations for black Americans, wrote in his latest book that “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world,” and out of that naturally comes racism, “the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them.” The National Book Award-winning work, *Between the World and Me*, is framed as a letter to his 15-year-old son.

My eventual understanding of race, and the ugliness that comes with it, is not a unique phenomenon. How we choose to respond to this ugliness, however,

speaks to our character and ambition. Coates investigates and challenges it in his work; others, like my younger self, waste time denying or overlooking it; and some—the Malcolm Xs of the world—act and try to change it.

Racial awareness is at the highest it's ever been in history. Yes, America has a black president, but it also has [Trayvon Martin](#), [Sandra Bland](#), and Renisha McBride, all of whom died—at least to some extent—because of the color of their skin. For black people, this fact rears its ugly head repeatedly throughout our lives, constantly reminding us of the moment when we first lost our racial blindness. The moment we knew we were less safe and less valued by society. Although this veil was only lifted in my 20s, I was 11 when a friend first tried to open my eyes to race. After school one day, while sitting outside on a small wooden ledge that jutted out from the side of our school's concrete facade, she asked me a question I still ask myself today.

“If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?” my friend, a Vietnamese girl, said. She peered at me expectantly.

“My nose,” I blurted out, certain my friend would understand. Wide, flat, and too big for my face, it was my greatest shame at the time.

“Only?” She seemed almost disappointed by my answer.

“What about you?” I challenged her.

My friend had obviously thought about this before. She looked at me, and said very simply, with no fear or shame: “I'd want to be born white.” To this day, the answer still shocks me. I couldn't fathom it. I would've never guessed it. I looked at my friend, with her dark brown eyes, full red lips, cute little nose, long hair, and small body. Everything about her screamed “perfect”—why would she want to change herself?

“Don't you think things would be easier if you had been born white?” she said in a tone that seemed to be meant only for me, as if a tomboyish black girl should automatically understand this yearning. “Don't you ever wonder what your life would have been like if you had?”

Then we were interrupted.

She and I never returned to that conversation, though the two of us remain friends today. I wouldn't understand what she meant until more than 10 years later.

My willful blindness to race as a child prevented the burden of my skin color—and the many prejudices attached to it—from weighing down on me during these years. But it also meant I would grow up without an asset that most children of color develop early in life: defense mechanisms to navigate those seemingly minor encounters that chip away at your sense of self. This made it difficult to go back to my younger, more easygoing days. I've seen kids who are well aware of their race and what that entails, and their eyes are far more serious than they should be.

Losing your racial blindness happens to everyone, even people born into white privilege. Coates describes this phenomenon as a “distance” that black American children become aware of in different ways. He says, “Sometimes it's subtle—the simple observation of who lives where and works what jobs and who does not. Sometimes it's all at once.”

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That awareness picks at you until one day you look up, and it's impossible to ignore it. It's waking up to a new consciousness—not just that “sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others,” as W.E.B. Du Bois describes, but also a hyper-awareness of that external scrutiny. For people of color, it means you're forced to navigate life knowing that this awareness will interfere with what should be simple interactions. It adds an extra layer of complexity to the process of becoming a fully realized and self-confident adult. It also helps make us who we are.

Although I was a slow learner, I'm better now for this knowledge. I'm no longer bitter, but empowered, and my late realization helped make it easy for me to decide not to let race matter. Because when you choose this path, while remaining aware, you approach the world with innocence and authenticity. You refuse to let the state of things define who you are and what you can be.

