

My name is Ama. I am currently studying a degree in BA Fine Art.

I recall my first memorable experience of racism occurring at the age of 11, when a white peer had proceeded to insult and mock me for having brown skin. It was something that upset me obviously, but at my young and uninformed age, I couldn't quite understand what about his comment had triggered unexperienced emotions of upset.

Due to being in a predominately white area, having no black friends and only one person of colour friend, the topic of race and racism was something I hadn't been aware about. Shockingly it had never really clicked in my head that I was not seen the same as the other children in my school, that I was not a little white child. Up until that point no one had treated me in such a way that segregated me from the rest of my peers. I had never had such negative connotations attached to an uncontrollable and unchangeable physical difference, a physical difference that I had never even considered could be perceived as a negative attribute to others.

Although I have since had other instances of racism throughout my youth and early adulthood, my limited understanding regarding racism in my childhood and early teenage years, meant that it wasn't till years later I realised that what someone had said or done was racist. It was something I had simply categorised as general bullying or teasing. My initial experience was something that stuck with me because I guess it was an event that broke my reality and put me in the category of 'other'.

I would be lying if I said my own experiences of racism and racial isolation have not contributed to the creative path I am on today. This is partly because I have the unhealthy need to try and educate people that have no intention of listening to me, but also because the discussion of racism and racial injustice is something that I believe is necessary to discuss in the art world.

It is important to understand and acknowledge the societal power and influence of the creative industry. The topics touched on and messages conveyed in creative formats can play a huge role in the way people behave or perceive things in everyday life. For example, racist stereotypes surrounding Black people were strengthened by the multitude of racist animations produced by Disney and Warner Bros. The animations depicted black people in a variation of negative ways, implicating that we are lazy or unintelligent. They mocked our physical features, exaggerating the size of black peoples typically large lips, drawing Afro hair textured hair in a way that conveyed it as being 'unnatural' and emphasising the unacceptability of having a dark skin complexion. The subsequent result being that these stereotypes still exist within our culture and are still used to dehumanise and mistreat black people.

I think it is important for people within the creative industry and art world to acknowledge, learn and understand the current racial injustice that is happening to Black people across the globe. To be in a position of power and influence, whilst being unaware or misinformed on such serious and sensitive situations, means that there is the risk of causing further harm by spreading potential racist rhetoric, or denouncing the causes/ purpose of movements without a clear understanding such as the 'Black Lives Matter' Movement.

I am fortunate that I haven't experienced instances of racism or racist rhetoric stemming from blatant hatred of my ethnic origin. I have had a few experiences where people have said questionable things, but it appears that it comes from a place of non-malicious ignorance. The people I surround myself with seem open to learning and understanding when they have done or said something that is insensitive or has racial connotations.

A key aspect surrounding race, that continues to loom over me regarding the art world, is the knowledge that my presence within an institution or establishment may be related to the fact there is the necessity to have some small percentage of diversity. It can make you question your value and whether you have been accepted based on your appearance and not your skill and talents.

However, there's also the concern of whether racial bias will hinder my ability to be successful. It is well known that race can play a huge role in employment. Given that most applications require you to state your ethnicity, there's the concern that my applications can just be tossed aside regardless of whether I'm qualified. Due to this there's the constant feeling of needing to learn how to do multiple things so that I am more employable.

I am aware that to many the topic of racism is uncomfortable and often daunting, but it would be strange if such a sensitive topic was something that didn't make you uncomfortable. The additional knowledge of ancestor's historical contribution to such injustice will make you uncomfortable. To know that you are complicit to and benefiting from a system that is oppressive and harming others will understandably make you uncomfortable. However, it is crucial to not allow that feeling of uncomfortableness to deter one from learning, unlearning, understanding and actively contributing to positive change that will dismantle a system that has inflicted so much death and pain onto others.

I think that the key thing that people should keep in mind is that if a black person or a person of colour discloses to you about an experience of racism, it is important to listen and not invalidate their feelings. A common phrase I've heard is, "Oh, well I'm sure they didn't mean it that way". Whilst it may not have been a person's intention to cause hurt, their non-racist intent does not diminish the harm that has been caused.