

Can Minority Voices be Heard and do Their Stories Matter? ¹

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Abstract:

In a globalized world migratory movements are becoming widespread but success and wealth are not always the outcome. Alienation, displacement and dispossession are common feelings among those who endure this experience. In this paper I intend to look at the work of two women coming from two different backgrounds (Esmeralda Santiago and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie). They moved to the US, an inhospitable and unfriendly space for coloured women, in search of better opportunities, in search of their dignity and, in the end, of themselves. They want to tell their stories in their own words; they want to tell the world that girls with skin the colour of chocolate and kinky hair can also exist in literature.

Santiago's and Adichie's works render their worlds visible, the private and domestic become public and thus, they find ways to their voices, shattering down stereotypes, becoming the authors of their own stories.

Keywords: Esmeralda Santiago; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; minorities; coloured women; rewriting.

Resumo:

Num mundo cada vez mais globalizado, os movimentos migratórios têm-se disseminado, sem que, no entanto, sucesso e riqueza correspondam ao resultado final. De facto, sentimentos de desenraizamento, alienação e despojamento são muito frequentes entre aqueles que vivem esta experiência. No presente artigo, pretende-se analisar o trabalho de duas autoras provenientes de dois contextos diferentes (Esmeralda Santiago e Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie). Ambas se mudaram para os EUA, um espaço inóspito e muito pouco solidário com mulheres de cor, à procura de novas oportunidades, à procura da sua dignidade e, no fundo, à procura da sua própria identidade. Elas querem contar as suas histórias através das próprias palavras; elas querem dizer ao mundo que raparigas com pele cor de chocolate e carapinha também podem existir na literatura.

As obras de Santiago e Adichie deram a conhecer os seus mundos, o privado e o doméstico tornaram-se públicos e, assim, conseguiram encontrar espaço para as suas vozes, quebrando estereótipos e contando as suas histórias na primeira pessoa.

Palavras-chave: Esmeralda Santiago; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; minorias; mulheres de cor; reescrita.

¹Reference to Gayatri Spivak's renowned text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994), in which she discusses the situation of the subaltern (women) living in third world countries and the impossibility of having their voices heard. This essay is considered a reference to postcolonial studies, as well as to cultural and feminist studies.

Introduction

The world we live in is clearly changing. There is an African American president at the White House for the first time in the history of the U.S. *12 Years a Slave* won the Academy Award for best picture in 2013. Lupita Nyong'o, a Kenyan actress, not only won an Oscar for her performance in the movie, she was also considered, that same year, the most beautiful woman in the world by *People* magazine, something she had never even dreamed of. Beyoncé has been selected as the cover star for *Time* magazine's special most influential people issue. This year, Viola Davis, the star of *How to Get Away with Murder*, also made history when she became the first Black woman to win an Emmy for outstanding lead actress in a drama series. In her acceptance speech, she quoted Harriet Tubman,² the inspiring abolitionist from the 19th century who committed herself to the liberation and freedom of her people from the tyranny that was slavery, putting her own life on the line in order to do it. Davis quoted Tubman in order to underline the lack of diversity and opportunity on television, especially for women of colour.³ Yes, of course, there's also Oprah. Oprah Winfrey has lived the American dream, overcoming hardship and diversity to become one of the largest media figures in the world. So, it seems that minorities are finally getting to the top; they are finally being seen and heard. But does it affect the lives of common people from these minorities? Of those who live in the U.S. or those who arrive there every day?

In the globalized world we live these days, migratory movements are becoming more and more widespread, but fact is that success and wealth are not always the outcome. Alienation, displacement and dispossession are common feelings among those who endure this experience. In this paper, our focus will be on the work of two

² "I seemed to see a line, and on the other side of that line were green fields, and lovely flowers, and beautiful white ladies, who stretched out their arms to me over the line, but I couldn't reach them nohow. I always fell before I got to the line." (Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn: W. J. Moses, Printer, 1869): 16.

³In Viola Davis's words: "The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there." In: Soraya Nadia McDonald (2015), "'You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there': Viola Davis on her historic Emmys win", *Washington Post*, September 21, 2015. Available on <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/09/21/you-cannot-win-an-emmy-for-roles-that-are-simply-not-there-viola-davis-on-her-historic-emmys-win/>. Accessed on December 9, 2015.

women writers coming from two completely different backgrounds (Esmeralda Santiago, from Puerto Rico and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, from Nigeria). Both moved to the United States, an inhospitable and unfriendly space for coloured women, in search of better opportunities, in search of their dignity and, in the end, of themselves. As writers, they want to tell their stories in their own words; they want to tell the world that girls with chocolate coloured skin and kinky hair can also exist in literature.

But they need to know and understand this new country, this America, to understand what race means in this context: its codes, its nuances, its hypocrisies and its violence. A place of yearning and, at the same time, a place of exclusion. Their characters' experiences in America play into both the image of America as a place of freedom and independence, but also into the idea of migrancy as a paradox of opportunity and oppression. Through women's perspectives on migrant life, Santiago and Adichie's stories throw light and shade on the idea of America as an idealized destination for migration.

Writing is for both women a way to make ends meet, to point the finger at the indignities and exclusions of immigrant life, but also to reconcile with the past, to give voice to the yet unspoken, to remember and recollect the silent past from hegemonic oblivion. They have to write or rewrite and represent themselves in new ways, challenging exoticism, inscribing their own reflections on themselves. Writing can broaden horizons, set examples and enlighten new possibilities:

Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.⁴

⁴ Transcript of Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story". Available on https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript. Accessed on November 14, 2015.

Santiago and Adichie's works render their worlds visible, the private and domestic become public, after all, "the personal is political"⁵ and thus, they find ways to their voices, to transform private domains into public discourses, shattering down stereotypes, becoming authors of their own stories. In Adichie's words, in "The Danger of a Single Story", we read:

The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. [...] Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.

Both authors are committed to humanize their people and make them real, determined to reveal the discrimination they have endured and expose the injustices they have suffered due to prejudices and stereotypes. They write to prove others wrong, to say that prejudgments might be mistaken, and that viewing immigrants as second-class citizens, burdened with the associated negative stereotypes can even be dangerous. Santiago illustrates her own experience, in her memoirs:

I didn't report the time I was chased from the subway station to the door of the school by a woman waving an umbrella and screaming, "Dirty spick, dirty fucking spick, get off my street." I never told Mami that I was ashamed of where we lived, that in the Daily News and the Herald American, government officials called our neighborhood "the ghetto," our apartment building "a tenement." I swallowed the humiliation when those same newspapers, if they carried a story with the term "Puerto Rican" in it, were usually describing a criminal. I didn't tell Mami that although she had high expectations for us, outside our door, the expectations were lower, that the rest of New York viewed us as dirty spicks, potential muggers, drug dealers, prostitutes (Santiago: 1998, 88).

This paper will also address the ensuing complexities that led up to the creation of these authors' identity within their narratives. Although they are from two geographically different locations, their works demonstrate obvious similarities insofar as they revolve around notions of identity and how it has been shaped by an encounter with an "Other."

Writing back – the authors and their work

⁵This expression was popularized with the publication of a 1969 essay by the feminist Carol Hanisch, under the title "The Personal is Political", in 1970.

Esmeralda Santiago was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She came to the United States at thirteen, the eldest in a family that would eventually include eleven children. Santiago attended New York City's Performing Arts High School, where she majored in drama and dance. After eight years of part-time study at community colleges, she transferred to Harvard University with a full scholarship. She graduated magna cum laude in 1976.⁶

This Puerto Rican contemporary writer, born in 1948, dares questioning traditional values and beliefs. Santiago incorporates and reflects on the reality of her culture in her work, emphasizing colonialism and women issues as she does so. Female figures and left out voices dominate her narratives. Given their marginalized status both as women and as members of a minority, the women who populate Santiago's narrative have rarely received this kind of attention. This is especially true as they have been educated in the culture of silence. Santiago manages to shatter the stereotyped portraits of Latinas: either sexy and sensual, full of curves capable of driving any man crazy, or subservient maids who cook and clean for rich families. Negi, the main character of her memoirs, does not fit into this stereotyped image, she is beautiful but not stunningly beautiful and moreover she is intelligent, a fast learner who even manages to get to Harvard.

As for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, she was born in 1977, in Eastern Nigeria. She grew up in Nsukka, "a quaint university town in eastern Nigeria" (Adichie, 2003), which is the fictional town in her works. Her career has developed mainly in the U.S. where she attended college and graduate school. One of the most promising African writers of her generation, Adichie explores the complexities of human experience inspired by social and political events in her native country. Adichie struggles to give African women a proper place with dignity, denied by patriarchy and other forms of subjugation. She writes postcolonial stories of women living between worlds, struggling with identity, with mapping, navigating, and trespassing boundaries (Sajna, 2014: 181). In her narratives, women are wives, mothers, daughters or mistresses and these positions allow them to use the domestic space and the prescribed female

⁶ Esmeralda Santiago, *Biography*, "Esmeralda Santiago: Best-Selling Author, Award-Winning Screenwriter and Essayist". Available on <http://www.esmeraldasantiago.com/biography>. Accessed on November 15, 2015.

identity to contest male power. Characters in Adichie's novels are not acquiescent to exploitation but active in an effort to revolutionize their situation.

Women's writing is taken and understood as a process of challenging the dominating powers and creating oppositional discourse so as to engender change. Speaking to traditions and cultures that are suppressive, strong female characters, education for women and female bonding are identified as the strategies that women and female writers employ to fight oppression and exclusion.

In the previously mentioned "Danger of a Single Story", Adichie mentions how she experienced her racialised identity as a black woman from Nigeria for the first time when she came to America to attend university. Her roommates were startled by everything about her: that she wore what they called "American" clothes, that she spoke English, that she knew who Mariah Carey was. They also seemed disappointed, as if they had been expecting a real African and then she turned up.

The perspectives from which they write are shaped by their lives as diaspora women who straddle two worlds. In an interview, Adichie expressed sentiments about belonging similar to those of Santiago, or rather about the lack thereof: "I will always feel like I don't belong [in the USA] fully. Even though I also feel I'm an observer in Nigeria" (Blackburn, 2014). Feeling somewhere in between two worlds, not belonging to one place or to the other, their writing translates that ambivalence, duality and contradiction; it is a reflex of a split identity – we and they, here and there, inside and outside, new and old, familiar and different. As Mari Matsuda, professor of Law at UCLA, emphatically stated: "Those of us who are outsiders or who do not fit neatly within standard categories have various voices within ourselves. We speak partly with one voice and partly with another, going back and forth, a process that [...] can lead to genius or madness or both" (Matsuda, 1989: 8).

Being a Puerto Rican or a Black African immigrant in the U.S. can be quite complicated indeed. Puerto Ricans, colonized shortly after the U.S. invasion in 1898, are both American citizens and colonial subjects by birth, according to international law. There are massive social inequalities between the island and the mainland, which underscore their shared contemporary condition as racial outsiders. As for the African diaspora, a lot has been said and written. It is saying the obvious that Africans are leaving their motherland, on a daily basis, in great numbers. The motivation for their

leaving ranges from voluntary migration to forced displacement. They flee their countries in search of better educational opportunities, better economic conditions, political freedom and other opportunities. These subaltern communities have had a long and often contentious relationship with the U.S. In fact, immigrants have not been received with open borders, let alone open arms; instead, they have met racism, sexism, oppression, marginality and invisibility.

Santiago began writing to document the challenges she had to face, to make sense of her experiences and the suffering of her people. She was especially troubled by the suffering of women, who are most often forgotten in a patriarchal society, like the one she was brought up in, Puerto Rico, and this definitely influenced her work. Santiago's autobiographical work tells both her own story in her own terms and attempts to be representative of the experience of a displaced community of immigrants. She confronts the official versions and creates a new identity, built on the alterity of her history and culture, tired of being social and politically perceived and portrayed as subaltern. Santiago's writing also explores the difficulties of her integration into American society and her search for identity. In fact, she is among a group of writers who wanted to (re)write their collective history and see their lives validated and legitimated.

Writing allows Santiago to disrupt boundaries, to reconcile with the past, to think of herself as a complex and hybrid citizen, to construct "homes away from home," creating in the process a new nation. Most of her work, as memoir or autobiographical register, analyses the complex question of the Puerto Rican identity from the perspective and experience of a migrant woman. Santiago describes the rural atmosphere of the poor region where she grew up with her family in the 1950s. But despite poverty and many deprivations, little Negi - short for Negrita, a nickname her family gave her for being 'so black' - felt comfortable and secure in that familiar environment.

However, the descriptions of the places they live in in the U.S, improper and inadequate, unstable and threatening, leave the reader no doubt that for underprivileged subaltern families like hers, home can never be a site of comfort and safety. When they move to New York, everything is completely different from what Negi has known, and this makes her reevaluate herself. She has to learn a new

language, a new culture, a new lifestyle and a whole new set of indecipherable rules and expectations about a certain pattern of female behaviour. Her whole world is shaken to its structure, all her acquisitions and values are challenged, and her identity is questioned. Fear becomes part of her daily routine. This is a common problem, typical of a diasporic experience, mainly of women and their narratives of displacement, familiar to those who immigrate to the U.S. Female diasporic subjects feel threatened, homeless and excluded by their positions as women, poor, racial others and second-class citizens, “sit[ting] at the intersection of many categories” (Grillo, 2013:17). They are “simultaneously oppressed on the basis of gender, race, and class, in other words, [...] ‘at the intersection’ of all three systems of domination.” (West and Fenstermaker, 1995: 12)

Negi feels an outcast, dislocated and displaced, as if belonging nowhere. Because of her differences of cultural habits, skin colour, accent variations, and physical appearance from the dominant society, she is at the margins, making it an issue of conflict. She ends up becoming a ‘hybrid between this world and the other’, that is, Puerto Rican all right, but simultaneously, American. HomiBhabha calls this circumstance the ‘Third Space’: “neither the one [...] nor the other [...] but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both” (Bhabha, 1994: 41). In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Stuart Hall refers to “diaspora identities as those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.” (Hall, 1990: 235) Or, as Santiago puts it: “For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican jíbara who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting” (Santiago, 1993: 209). Hybridity, for Bhabha, comes through constant change and adaptation, and from being marginalised; hybridity is a condition, not a choice. This complex process involves not only “the crossing of geopolitical borders, but also the traversing of multiple boundaries and barriers in space, time, race, culture, language and history” (Zhang, 2008: 10).

Americanah is Adichie’s third and most ambitious novel. It crosses genres and nations (it takes us from Nigeria to America, to Britain and back). It is a book about identity, nationality, race, difference, loneliness, aspiration, and love, not as distinct

entities but in the complex, combinatorial relations they possess in real life. And it's also about how problematic some of these combinations can be, especially when race and gender come together: "Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1244). In fact, as Kimberle Crenshaw adds,

many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately (1991: 1244).

In 1986, Senegalese writer Awa Thiam called this intersectionality or simultaneity of oppressions the "threefold oppression" of the Black woman: "by virtue of her sex, she is dominated by man in a patriarchal society; by virtue of her class she is at the mercy of capitalist exploitation; by virtue of her race she suffers from the appropriation of her country by colonial or neo-colonial powers. Sexism, racism, class division; three plagues!" (Thiam, 1986: 118).

Americanah is also about America's fixed categories of race, about a discourse in which blackness becomes an undesirable and unhomely trait in the pursuit of the American dream. Adichie writes that "In America, racism exists but racists are all gone" (2013: 390). Present day racism has evolved into more subtle ways, it almost seems nonexistent but it is still there. People tend to be more politically correct and not so overtly aggressive, but, at times, prejudices and stereotypes come to the surface. This behaviour can even be non-intentionally hostile or simple unawareness of internalized prejudices but it is no less harmful. In a recent episode of the ABC series *Grey's Anatomy*, Shonda Rhimes brings this issue to prime time. Maggie, a Black woman doctor, feels outraged because when she enters a room with a male doctor, patients always look up to him to see if he agrees with her diagnosis. Amelia, a white doctor, is astonished and unsure whether this is due to her being a woman or Black. For her, racism is no longer an issue, it's long buried. Maggie makes it clear:

Well, it's not an issue for you. And it's not all of a sudden. I mean, it's not Mississippi Burning or anything, but it is all over. It's when people assume I'm a nurse. Or when I go to get on an airplane with my first class ticket and they tell me that they're not boarding coach yet. It's like a low buzz in

the background, and sometimes you don't even notice it, and sometimes it's loud and annoying, and sometimes it can get dangerous...⁷

Ifemelu, the main character in *Americanah*, is beautiful and daring; she goes to the U.S. to study, leaving behind not only the country of her dreams, but also her family and her love, Obinze. He is the one who dreams of going to the U.S. and is obsessed with it but, by the time Obinze applies for his own visa, times have changed – it's the tense post-9/11 years – and he is forced to try his luck as an illegal immigrant in Britain.

It is only when Ifemelu comes to America that it occurs to her to think about race at all. "I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie, 2013: 357). She informs and advises: "Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care" (Adichie, 2013: 218). Here, she finds it difficult even to get a part-time job. Her fellow students speak to her with painful slowness, as if she cannot comprehend basic English. In an effort to feel less like an outsider, Ifemelu begins faking an American accent. She feels triumphant when she can do it, and then feels ashamed and resolves to stop. In class, she is singled out as someone who will intuitively understand the plight of all African Americans just because she happens to be Black. Meanwhile, in Britain, Obinze, undocumented, lives with the constant fear of being apprehended by immigration authorities. And because he is "illegal," he is consigned to only the lowest paying jobs, envying others for their freedom: "You can work, you are legal, you are visible, and you don't even know how fortunate you are" (Adichie, 2013: 279).

Ifemelu begins writing a blog to make sense of her experiences in this country. A recurring theme in her blog is the politics of black hair – how women are expected to relax their natural curls with toxic chemicals or weave in bits of someone else's hair in order to conform to conventional white norms. Black hair is not just about hair; it is about identity. It is about the juxtaposition of hegemonic norms and black subjectivity (Thompson, 2009). So, this is also a book about hair: nappy, kinky, Afro hair versus long, straight, (i.e. white) hair; and the discreet tensions, not just between white

⁷*Grey's Anatomy*, Season 12, Episode 7, ABC series.

Americans and Nigerian immigrants, but between Africans and African Americans, between the light- and dark-skinned, between new and established immigrants.

Hair is not simply hair – it is also about larger questions: self-acceptance, insecurity and what the world tells you is beautiful. For many Black women, the idea of wearing their hair naturally is unbearable. According to Adichie, hair is political. In fact, “for young black girls, hair is not just something to play with, it is something that is laden with messages, and it has the power to dictate how others treat you, and in turn, how you feel about yourself” (Thompson, 2009). Ruth Smith, president and CEO of a hair salon, interviewed by Thompson, believes that women in large part see no option but to alter their hair because of the images of women in magazines, films, and popular culture whose hair is very long, silky, flowing and mostly blonde. In an interesting article focusing on African American women and their struggles with beauty, body image, and hair, Tracey Owens Patton argues that the continuance of hegemonically defined standards of beauty not only reify white European standards of beauty in the U.S., but also that the marginalization of certain types of beauty that deviate from the “norm” are devastating to all women (Patton, 2006). In a conversation on International Authors’ Stage, in Copenhagen, Adichie claims that if Michelle Obama had natural hair, Barack Obama would not have won! Even though we have a Black president, we can’t be too Black!

Ifemelu, like Adichie herself, is an “Americanah,” the nickname for born-and-bred Nigerians whose thoughts and behaviours have been influenced by years spent in the States. An Americanah is both Nigerian and not, both African and not, both American and not. It is a word evocative of colonial memory, recalling the violence of forced belonging and the continual rootlessness of unbelonging.

Thus, being outsiders, living in the margins, both Negi and Ifemelu continually cross the borders between America and their original cultural domains, as they attempt to define their place in the world beyond the confines of traditional communities. Negi manages to find her way; she is able to negotiate and combine the two cultures into a hybrid one, finding a balance. But for some of these outcasts, going back is the only way out when the inevitable, sustained, and intractable, even if sometimes subliminal, racism becomes unbearable. In the end, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria.

Conclusion

"There is a strange kind of enigma associated with the problem of racism. No one, or almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racists; still, racism persists, real and tenacious."(Albert Memmi, *Racism*, 3)

Back to the initial question, if minority voices can be heard, we are now able to say, contrarily to Spivak's lament,⁸ that perhaps they can. As for the second question, if they matter, we must conclude that they don't. America doesn't seem equally interested in all its citizens. The success of a few Latin or African Americans is important, they are fundamental role models but it does not change the fact that there is a Black president, but nearly one million coloured people in prison. Jay Z and Beyoncé don't represent the average black family, which has one-sixth the wealth of the average white family. A single Black American's success doesn't prove that impenetrable racial barriers no longer exist. As a matter of fact, this seems to be a widespread view, according to a study from 2014, published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, entitled "If He Can Do It, So Can They."⁹ This study found that exposure to a single African American in a high-performing position - any position outside stereotypical jobs in which Blacks "traditionally" excel, like Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, Brown University President Ruth Simmons, Fortune 75 CEO Kenneth Frazier, or American President Barack Obama - is enough to make whites more likely to deny the existence of systemic racism. Systemic biases against Black Americans are still very real. Another recent study concluded that employers may assume Black job applicants use illegal drugs more frequently than whites, and the unemployment rate for Black college graduates was nearly twice that of whites, in 2013 (Hiscott, 2014).

If, on the one hand, racism has gradually come to be seen by more and more people as a pervasive feature of modern societies and as something to be condemned, on the

⁸ In the end of her essay, Spivak sadly concludes that the "subaltern cannot speak" (104).

⁹ Clayton R. Critcher and Jane L. Risen (2014), "If He Can Do It, So Can They: Exposure to Counterstereotypically Successful Exemplars Prompts Automatic Inferences", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106, (3), 359–379. Available on http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/409296/23869768/1394510026817/Critcher_autoinf.pdf?token=agiOh6EkSu9YLExG%2B8I6yMMHiP8%3D. Accessed on December 5, 2015.

other hand, racial inequality is tremendous and still keeps Blacks and most minorities “at the bottom of the well”. This is evidence that writers, and particularly minority women writers, like Santiago and Adichie, have a very important task ahead. They need to continue their struggle, writing their views and versions, denouncing injustices, stereotyping and racism, showing the harsh reality that affects them and their people. The world needs these voices and visions. Because even though racists seem to have all disappeared, racism hasn’t..

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