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Take My People to the Top

Nadejiah Z. Towns
Gettysburg College

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Take My People to the Top

Abstract

“...but what I really want to do is help the black people, especially the young black girls...” Did she just say that? Wait, can she say that? Is she wrong for feeling that way? I wonder how other people would feel if they knew she felt this way? So many questions began to run through my mind, but my reaction? I just sat there, nodding. Her body language told me even she knew there was something controversial about what she was saying. Not to mention that she whispered it, you know, the old hand over the mouth gesture. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, minorities, African Americans, privilege, oppression, discrimination, black power

Disciplines

African American Studies | Inequality and Stratification | Politics and Social Change | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

TAKE MY PEOPLE TO THE TOP

June 19, 2013

“...but what I really want to do is help the black people, especially the young black girls...”

Did she just say that? Wait, can she say that? Is she wrong for feeling that way? I wonder how other people would feel if they knew she felt this way? So many questions began to run through my mind, but my reaction? I just sat there, nodding. Her body language told me even she knew there was something controversial about what she was saying. Not to mention that she whispered it, you know, the old hand over the mouth gesture.

I also wondered if this would have been an acceptable remark if the shoe was on the other foot. What if she was a white woman saying she really wanted to help white people? Then everyone's panties would be in a bunch. People would go on rampages about racism, oppression of African Americans, white privilege, black power and all of the other heated discussions that come up when a white person is accused of abusing their privilege and power.

But this woman wasn't white, and she wasn't privileged. Sitting having that conversation, one black woman to another, there was an automatic feeling of camaraderie and confidentiality. It was okay for her to tell me what she really thought, but I still wondered to myself, is it okay for an African American to prioritize helping “her” people over everyone else? Especially when it is clear that other people needed her help just as much?

It gets tricky. Here you have a woman of color taking the initiative to tackle the injustices in her community through her job in social work. She feels justified in using her power to help other African Americans get ahead. True, there are countless systematic issues when it comes to government policies, but in addressing the problems faced by those in poverty, doesn't the issue of race fade, and class become dominant? If this is the case, everybody should be allotted the same opportunities.

At the same time though, regardless of the similarities among persons in a particular class, we live in a society where the color of one's skin still holds a great deal of significance in determining opportunity. You may have



heard that last week was the 50th Anniversary of the Equal Pay Act. [Despite this milestone](#) though, black women still make only [68 cents](#) to every dollar a white man makes, while white women make 77. And that is if they can get a job. This August is also the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington For Jobs and Freedom, the goal of which was to change the fact that the unemployment rate in 1963 was twice as high for blacks as it was for whites. However, that has not changed in the 50 years since the march – with the unemployment rate for blacks (14%) still [more than two times greater](#) than that of whites (6.6%) . Why can't African Americans get jobs at the same rate as whites? There is plenty of evidence to suggest that both [overt discrimination](#), as well as [white people helping white people](#), are ongoing factors contributing to this problem.

I'm not sure exactly what the woman was thinking when she made the comment, but think I can make a fairly accurate guess. Something along the lines of:

I need to look out for my people. Whites already have a leg up in this world. It doesn't matter if they are piss poor. They have white skin, and that is the ultimate advantage. What do my people have? Nothing but ourselves.

I can also honestly say that I sensed a bit of obligation on this woman's behalf. There was some logic behind her reasoning. The facts were there. Regardless, is that acceptable? Is it okay to consciously prioritize the success of your race over others, even if it's a minority? Doesn't that just create more barriers, divisions, and grudges?

Think about this...

The director of human resources at a major corporation has interviewed a series of outstanding applicants for an opening position. As she goes over her notes, she has narrowed the candidate pool down to two (one black, one white) who are equally qualified. While both excellent candidates, neither distinguishes herself from the other, so she isn't exactly certain how she wants to make her final decision. She picks the white woman. She admires her potential and would like to give her this opportunity to excel in the business world. Not much thought goes into her reasoning for the final decision. She simply figures that the other woman has an amazing resume, great experience and will very easily receive an opportunity from someone else in no time.

How do you feel? Good? Bad? Stumped? Is it wrong to want to help your race get ahead? But what if it's more like playing "catch up" than "getting ahead"?

Nadejiah Towns '15
Staff Writer

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