

Polite Society

This Facebook status update was written and posted by Kaity Parson on April 28, 2015.

We are taught from a young age how to behave in polite society. We create a dual image that allows us to present our "respectable" face to the world, and come home and relate to our family, friends, and community in a way that is natural and without pretense.

We code-switch for your comfort and for our survival, because we are taught that our colloquialisms are not OK for polite society.

In polite society there is no room for self-expression. Behave outside the norms of polite society and you are called hood, ghetto, ratchet, undesirable, uneducated, ignorant, worthless, violent, aggressive. That is, until polite society graciously decides that your "fringe behavior" is mainstream, and even then, it's still unacceptable for you to engage: Your blue hair is ratchet, but it is trendy on Katy Perry. You have a "ghetto booty," but Kim Kardashian's booty is the holy grail. Your speech pattern is "hood," but Reese Witherspoon's grammar mishaps are just a part of her southern charm. Your dark complexion is unacceptable if you were born with it, but totally acceptable if you tanned to get it. There are 10-minute beauty tutorials on how to achieve the perfect, messy, bed-head look like Karlie Kloss; but we are told to tame our nappy heads.

There are no proper nouns used to describe angry, white women; there are women who emote anger from time to time, and there are Angry Black Women who must own their occasional outbursts of anger as their whole identity. Young, Black boys in hoodies scare people, but a white boy in [a] hooded sweatshirt (it's not a "hoodie" when he wears it) goes unnoticed. Black boys are taught how to speak to, look at, and respond to law enforcement in order to stay alive. They are taught how to dumb down their confident demeanor, so as to appear unassuming enough to not scare polite society. They are beaten into submission as boys by terrified parents who don't want them to experience the vicious beating that polite society delivers so well, but it doesn't matter.

None of it matters.

We do what we can to fit in, survive, and thrive as "minorities" in polite society, and even then it is not good enough. And God help those who care not to even try to placate polite society; they may as well put a target on their backs.

What do you do when you do all that you can for the comfort of polite society and polite society still spits in your face and calls you names and disregards your life?

Depending on who you are, you may get angry, you may resort to violence; or maybe you keep trying to fit in, or if you're really brave you try to change what are considered the norms of polite society, knowing that your efforts may or may not be vindicated in your lifetime. Maybe the confines of polite society are so far removed from the poverty, violence, and oppression that is your everyday life that you can't even fathom being a part of it.

And maybe you just can't trust polite society because polite society doesn't trust you, but of course you are told that that relationship isn't supposed to be reciprocal.

I reflect on this duality and it brings me to tears. What is the effect on a young life that begins with crippled wings? What of the young one born with beautiful wings, only to have them clipped before ever having the opportunity to fly with them? What will become of that beautiful creature that no one will ever fully appreciate, because he's hidden his beautiful wings in order to fit in? And what do we do with the young one that's thrashing his wings with all of his might, but just can't escape the prison of his birdcage?

Polite society doesn't seek to understand, it only wants to be understood; and on a day-to-day basis, many of us have learned to be OK with that. But in times like these we have to make them understand in the best way that we know how and I stand in solidarity with those who are doing just that.

My prayers go out to the families that are burying their sons and daughters, and I pray that justice, understanding, progress, and change will come about through these protest[s]. The time is now; the time has always been right now.

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