

There's a Divide in Even the Closest Interracial Friendships, Including ours.

By Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman



Photo: Milan Zrnica

It was one of those perfect California nights, not too cold or too hot. Ann's backyard was strung with lights and punctuated with the cheerful buzz of conversation as people milled around with glasses of rosé in hand. She had offered up her patio as the venue for a friend's birthday party. And—even better—Aminatou happened to be in town. She was in Los Angeles for a work trip and had been looking forward to attending the backyard soiree because she knew and liked the birthday girl and many of the other guests.

When she showed up, the party was already in full swing. Aminatou found that the snacks were delicious and the mood lovely. But what should have been a fun night celebrating and catching up with friends turned sour when Aminatou noticed that she was the only Black person milling around Ann's back patio.

Aminatou was thrown off guard. It felt surreal to be at a gathering like this. She knew Ann didn't only have white friends, yet here Aminatou was, scanning the yard for the slightest hint of melanin. Nothing. Not even a racially ambiguous tan. Could this really be possible? After all these years of knowing Ann? Why was Aminatou the only Black person at this party? She was screaming inside: Where are your Black friends?

Surely the other guests could sense her panic. She felt a sinking sensation, like she was falling through the brick tiles of Ann's patio. The writer Wesley Morris calls this experience the trapdoor of racism. "For people of color, some aspect of friendship with white people involves an awareness that you could be dropped through a trapdoor of racism at any moment, by a slip of the tongue, or at a campus party, or in a legislative campaign," he wrote in 2015. "But it's not always anticipated." The trapdoor describes the limited level of comfort that Black people can feel around white people who are part of their lives in a meaningful way. Even if these white people decide they will confront racism every day, it's guaranteed they will sometimes screw up and disappoint the Black people they know.

Race plays out differently in every friendship. And not all interracial relationships involve a Black person and a white person, but ours does. Contrary to what pop culture would have us believe, most interracial friendships aren't actually rooted in deep conversations around racial difference. Not in the beginning, at least. Like all relationships, interracial friendships begin when two people bond over the things they have in common. In a conversation with us, Morris pointed out that in some interracial friendships, there are things both people instinctively know not to speak about. "There's a comfort that you have in these relationships that is somewhat contingent upon not going there. Everybody has a boundary, a place where the relationship just kind of tacitly knows not to go," he says. "But there will be some incident, and normally it is a thing that is beyond both parties' control, that forces you to go there." Aminatou and many of her Black friends know to dread this incident. The incident doesn't necessarily even have to be caused by the white friend. Morris says it can involve "the white friend's friends, or the white friend's family, or a circumstance in which you're experiencing racism or general unpleasantness that tips into racism, and the white friend is kind of like, 'Uh, I think you, nonwhite friend, are overreacting to whatever is happening right now.'" In a split second, Morris says, the

trapdoor opens. The Black friend is forced to reevaluate the friendship based on an incident that can, on the surface, seem relatively innocent.

This is different from the way Aminatou feels when she experiences more overt forms of racism. She's always on high alert for things strangers might say to her, but her guard is down when she's with people she knows. With strangers, it feels like bracing for impact while her plane crashes, but when it's an incident with someone she loves, like a white friend or intimate partner, it doesn't feel as dramatic. Morris says that in these cases, it's more like a drop of mustard falling on your pants. You notice and you feel uncomfortable about it, but the person who dropped the mustard does not even register what has happened. Now you have to decide whether to say something and call attention to the stain. Either way, there is awkwardness and discomfort. And pain never lurks too far behind racial discomfort.

For white people, being in all-white spaces is a choice they make, not something that accidentally happens when they don't double-check the guest list. The birthday party was exactly like that. Aminatou left early that night and didn't bring it up with Ann immediately. She waited to talk about it because she needed to sort out her feelings. It wasn't the first time she had been the only Black person in a room. It happened at work all the time, actually. It even happened at many smaller parties Ann had hosted over the years. (Listen, all of your brunches cannot look like a college-recruitment brochure.) But this felt different. After years of living far apart, Aminatou wasn't present at every gathering Ann hosted in LA, so it was jarring to drop in on one that looked like this. Do I even know you? she wondered. If this was how Ann's life was organized now, Aminatou wasn't sure of her place in it. She also wondered what other signs she had missed over the years.

Another reason Aminatou didn't bring it up right away is that, on its face, the incident itself seemed a little silly. It was just a birthday party! Someone else's birthday party, at that. Why was this such a big deal? But she knew it was not a small deal because of the feelings that came bubbling up to the surface for her. She felt uncomfortable, and she was struggling with the fact that she felt she couldn't talk to Ann about it just yet.

Aminatou believed that if one of their friends had come to her and Ann about a similar situation, Ann would have risen to the occasion. Ann would have asked the white person to take a long, critical look at the decisions that led them to have no Black friends present at such a large gathering. But it's always easier to dole out advice for someone else's problems. And when it comes to race, it's even easier for well-meaning white people to call out someone else's behavior while ignoring their own. They do it all the time.

We had discussed plenty of times how disgraceful it was for people to plan or participate in all-white panels at professional conferences. (All-male panels? Also not great!) A birthday party isn't a professional event, but the point still stands. If you're a white person and your weekend trips, baby showers, and dinner parties are all-white affairs, this signals a few things to your Black friends. At best it shows that your gatherings are places where only white people are welcome. At worst it leads them to assume that they're your only Black friend, a token you collected like a diversity Pokémon. Not actually a real friend. For white people, being in all-white spaces is a choice they make, not something that accidentally happens when they don't double-check the guest list.

Aminatou was disappointed when Ann didn't bring up the party incident first. Ann's silence had made Aminatou doubt herself about whether or not the incident was a big deal.

Aminatou felt that without making excuses, Ann should have acknowledged how messed up it was. Aminatou knew it wasn't Ann's party and she hadn't made the guest list, but Aminatou shouldn't be the only one paying attention to race. This was about so much more than a single unfortunate birthday party. It highlighted an unbridgeable gap between the two of us.

We share many of the same high-level ideas about race and the way it contributes to inequalities and injustices in our world. We are adept at talking about the way racism plays out in the news or culture. We feel comfortable discussing the racism Aminatou has experienced at work or out in the world, and racist incidents Ann has observed with other friends. But when Ann becomes the source of the pain that Aminatou is feeling? We have a much harder time talking about that.

Aminatou has no fear of calling out bigoted Twitter trolls or taking on strangers who use a racial slur. Where she's been disarmed is closer to home: the college friend's parents who never stop marveling at how "good" her English is, the friend who often confuses her Asian colleagues for one another, the boyfriend whose grandmother insisted on calling her "Tina Turner" (Aminatou still gets a full-body cringe when she thinks of that one).

The closer the relationship, the more awkward and sensitive it is to address the offense. Some people will act as if these incidents are just misdemeanors easily waved off, but Aminatou firmly believes that interracial intimacy is the only context in which "broken windows" theory is actually relevant: any visible signs of crime encourage further crime! You have to call it out or it will erode your relationship.

If racism exists on a scale—from the 1 or 2 of someone calling her another Black person's name to the full-blown 10 of Trump-style white nationalism—then for a time, Aminatou believed that dealing with a little bit of it (a 1 here, a 2 there) was the price you paid for having white folks in your life. But the older she got, the less flexible she became about this. A lot of her white friends were grandmothered in under a more lax regime. More often than not, she was their first and sometimes only Black friend. Today it would be impossible for her to befriend anyone who didn't already have significant relationships with Black people. Indeed, Aminatou had been introduced to Ann by a mutual friend, Dayo, who was a Black woman. Dayo and Aminatou did the thing where, without saying too many words, Black people assess their white homies. Dayo indicated that Ann was a white woman who wouldn't go out of her way to embarrass herself or either of them.

This explains why, as Aminatou wandered around the backyard party, she felt that the scene reflected poorly not just on Ann but on *her*. Aminatou knew that, fairly or unfairly, some people trusted Ann's racial politics because of Aminatou's relationship with her. She didn't want to be Ann's racial endorser, but that's often a side effect of interracial friendship. Ann committing a low-level racial "oops" wasn't just a momentary disappointment to Aminatou; it had larger ramifications. And, worst of all, Ann didn't seem to be aware of this.

Aminatou finally brought up the birthday party several months later, when she was with Ann in person and having dinner at the bar of a nice restaurant. Aminatou described what it was like for her to walk into Ann's backyard and see all those white guests. "I just didn't think that would ever happen at your house or an event you planned," she said. "It was disorienting and makes me feel like I am no longer welcome in your home. I also resent that I have to be the one to bring it up, because my hope is that you also noticed."

Ann felt defensive. “I hear you, but it wasn’t my party,” she said. “I didn’t make the guest list.” Ann had noticed that Aminatou left early that night. But, Ann said, “I thought you were just tired from traveling.” She took a breath and a sip of her cocktail and continued, “I did notice how white the party was, but I didn’t take responsibility for that fact.” She took a few more breaths. “I really regret that. I’m really sorry that I didn’t bring it up first. And I’m even more sorry that this made you feel unwelcome in my house. You are always welcome in my house.” Ann felt horrible that a situation in her own home had made one of her closest friends feel so alienated. She had let Aminatou down.

We kept talking and trying to express what this was bringing up for each of us, but there was no neat resolution. It was finally all on the table—or, at least, we weren’t actively holding anything back—but that wasn’t a relief at all. We sat side by side, searching each other’s faces for signs of understanding. Near the end of our conversation, the bartender sent us two free shots. “I don’t know what you two are talking about,” she said, “but you look like you need this.”

It’s telling that Ann’s first feeling in the conversation was defensiveness. It flared up so quickly—faster, even, than feelings of sorrow or even regret. Like a lot of white people, Ann was raised on a steady diet of “race doesn’t matter” and “treat everyone with equal respect.” Which sounds great and is preferable to overtly hateful messaging but is not a particularly meaningful thing to hear if you’re raised in an extremely segregated country with a long history of anti-Black racism.

All friendships require both people to work hard to understand the differences between them. But here’s a harsh reality of friendship that crosses big divides in privilege and identity: stretching to account for these differences usually doesn’t go both ways in equal measure. When it comes to interracial friendships that involve a white person, it’s likely that the nonwhite friend is going to feel more negatively stretched, while the white friend gets to have a “learning experience.”

For white people like Ann, who have close friends of other races, it can be a delicate line between constructively learning about injustice through your friends’ experiences and turning your friends into a personal racial-education service. There are things that Aminatou came to our friendship already understanding about Ann’s existence because Aminatou is steeped in white culture, and things Ann will never fully understand about Aminatou’s experience of the world. Aminatou has often been a foil for Ann to learn about difference.

Expressing anger also comes at a cost for women like Aminatou. Being labeled as angry ensures that Black women are not allowed to experience a full range of emotions: vulnerability, fear, hurt, or fragility. Brittney Cooper, historian and author of *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, told NPR, “Whenever someone weaponizes anger against black women, it is designed to silence them. It is designed to discredit them and to say that they are overreacting, that they are being hypersensitive, that their reaction is outsized.”

Ann was aware that Aminatou often felt she had to tread lightly to avoid being seen this way. But Ann also failed to see how Aminatou might also be treading lightly *with her*. She didn’t even consider that Aminatou might be holding back some emotion, that years of tiptoeing around a stereotype might limit how comfortable Aminatou felt in expressing to Ann that she was upset.

It is not Ann's fault that Aminatou is often reduced to racist stereotypes, but Aminatou wants Ann to acknowledge the work that comes with being friends with a white person. And to do more work herself: to not just recognize that racist stereotypes exist but account for them without Aminatou having to point out that they are present in our interactions. Pat Parker's poem "For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend" begins with two pieces of advice: "The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black. / Second, you must never forget that i'm Black." After years of feeling in sync with Aminatou about almost everything, Ann had grasped the first rule but neglected the second.

You don't get to pick your family of origin or the place you grow up. But you do get to choose your friends, and those choices say something about the kind of world you want for yourself. This is one of the many ways friendship is political. We're not just talking about whether you have people in your life who voted for the opposite party or whether you're carpooling to the protest march with your friends. We're talking about small-p politics, or "the total complex of relations between people living in society," as the dictionary puts it. White people can't be surprised that white supremacists are marching in the streets if their own lives are racially segregated. The choices that each of us makes every day about who we include in our lives end up shaping the larger world we live in.

For both of us, talking about race has been the only way to process its effect on our relationship and to make sense of the fact that racism is both personal and not personal at the same time. If friends don't discuss the racism that arises in their own friendship, it can ring hollow when the white friend tries to express dismay about, say, a white supremacist event that is all over the news. Why should a person of color trust that this white friend is truly invested in being the solution instead of the problem? In our friendships, we don't just say "don't be racist," we also say "racism exists and this is how we deal with it."

Race is not a challenge to overcome. It's something to be constantly aware of. As the great feminist Flo Kennedy once said, "Freedom is like taking a bath. You got to keep doing it every day." In other words, it's not just what you say or what you purport to believe. It's something you have to constantly reinforce with your actions. We don't share the birthday party story because it's a big dramatic, pivotal moment in our lives. We share it because it's the kind of thing we have had to contend with—and talk through.

In other words, being in an intimate relationship with someone of another race is a particular type of challenge within a friendship, and you're likely to be better at it if you are doing it in more than one relationship. It will never stop being a challenge, but you can improve. Get stronger. Interracial friendship requires different skills from each person. In our case, Aminatou has to remain flexible about when to educate and communicate. Ann has to own that her silences around racial issues have meaning and she has to push past moments of discomfort to stay accountable. Often, the accountability question Ann asks herself is: Would I be able to look my Black friends in the eye and describe how I handled this situation? If the answer is not "absolutely yes"—and, in all honesty, the answer is not always "absolutely yes"—that's how Ann knows she has to do better.

We know that we are never going to stop having hard conversations about race. The best we can hope for is that there's always a sympathetic bartender in the vicinity.

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