

SUMMARY

THIS WILL BE MY UNDOING

MORGAN JERKINS



Summary of “This Will Be My Undoing” by Morgan Jerkins

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn about the danger of existing as a Black feminist in White America.

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“I don’t see color.” “All lives matter.”

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Introduction

“I don’t see color.”

“All lives matter.”

“Color blind is color kind.”

These problematic but often well-intentioned statements are heavily prevalent in America’s discourse on race. And although many people might intend to simply assert that all lives have value, they fail to understand that saying, “All lives matter” is the equivalent of saying, “All houses matter” to someone whose house is burning down. That’s because Black people’s lives have been under attack for centuries and they continue to suffer from systemic racism and racist hate crimes in America today.

To say, “All lives matter,” is therefore to contribute to the problem and to be complicit in the continuation of racism. But author Morgan Jerkins believes that education is the answer. By documenting her own experience with racism in America and linking it with the critical work of other renowned Black feminists, Jerkins crafts a scathing expose that demonstrates the struggles of Black women in America and the steps we can take to eradicate racism.



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Meet Morgan

Have you ever felt pressured to be someone you're not? To act, look, or dress a certain way in order to fit in or win the approval of others? Maybe you've noticed that everyone around you is privileging a certain style of dress or a certain set of features. As a result, you might feel the need to style your hair a certain way, for example, or buy the latest iPhone, or wear the newest fashion in order to be accepted. And if you're surrounded, day in and day out, by the message that something is the best or coolest thing ever, you read the message loud and clear: everything that doesn't fall into that category is weird, different, or bad. Now, if you're human, there's a pretty good chance that you've been subjected to this pressure at one time or another. But most of us generally encounter it in high-school with the pressure to conform to the standards of the cool kids. And because this is a standard-- albeit painful-- facet of the adolescent experience, most of us outgrow this pressure and insecurity as we grow into our own identities.

But that's because most of us don't encounter this pressure in the context of institutionalized racism. Morgan Jerkins, however, experienced it in both contexts. As a teenager, Morgan often felt conflicted about her identity as a Black girl. Although she wasn't yet able to articulate what she was experiencing, Morgan could see that white femininity was privileged and manifestations of Black identity were devalued, especially when it came to Black women. As a result, she internalized the not-so-subtle message that if she wanted to succeed in life, she needed to appear more "white." So, she straightened her hair to make it look more like white women's hair. She copied the trends of her white classmates. And she distanced herself from her fellow Black students who were unapologetic about their engagement with Black culture and heritage.

Over time, she learned that this practice allowed her to walk a fine line between two worlds. She learned, for example, that adhering to white standards of femininity could often be advantageous for her. But she eventually learned that this was only profitable because many people fail to

treat Black people as fully human. Morgan understood that this was the result of extremely toxic and racist stereotypes, particularly the stereotypes that attach themselves to perceptions of Black femininity. For example, in a worldview that is limited by racist stereotypes, there is only one way for a Black woman to exist: as the caricatured, cartoonish definition of a “sassy Black woman” that white people have invented. So, because Morgan is well-educated, accomplished, and presents as such, and therefore defies their conceptualization of a Black woman, many racists have remarked to her that she “seems so white,” as if it’s a compliment.

For Morgan, this reaffirms two things: firstly, that many people view “Black” and “human” as being mutually exclusive. And secondly, as a result, those people refuse to acknowledge her Blackness as an intrinsic part of her identity because she doesn’t align with their racist stereotypes. How does that work? Well, if you start from the racist assumption that Black people are inherently uneducated and underachieving, then people assume that any Black person who is intelligent, well-educated, and successful must not really be “Black.” This is, of course, extremely presumptuous because it puts you in a position to determine someone else’s identity and culture when you do not have that right!

This is also an extremely racist assumption and so is the act of treating a Black person with more respect if they behave in a way you believe to be more “white.” And given that the previously mentioned (and highly racist) standard is still widely prevalent in American culture, it’s easy to see why many young Black people like Morgan might be confused or embarrassed to proudly embody their Blackness. And that’s exactly why this attitude needs to be stopped.



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Color Blind is NOT Color Kind

Have you ever heard that statement uttered by a well-intentioned liberal white person? It's usually said without the "not" that I've inserted in this chapter title because many people believe that they are being kind. Because they recognize that the racism we explored in the previous chapter is toxic and problematic, some well-intentioned crusaders for equality attempt to take things in the opposite direction. They think that by saying they "don't see color," they are stating that they see all people as equals and that they are avoiding the racist behavior of those who treat people differently because of the color of their skin. As a result, many liberal people who care about social justice feel that they are promoting a healthy and progressive worldview.

Unfortunately, however, nothing could be farther from the truth. Why? Well, for starters, the freedom to say that you "don't see color" is already an example of white privilege. Those who have never been judged by the color of their skin can afford to say they "don't see color"; they've never had to worry about it. But because racism is so prevalent, Black people can't escape the negative experiences that are a part of their reality as people of color. So, when you say you "don't see color," you're not actually helping and you're not promoting an idea that contributes to a positive solution. Instead, you're invalidating the experiences of people of color and ignoring their struggle with systemic racism.

However, Morgan acknowledges that this statement is problematic in other ways as well because it also erases the positive aspect of Black culture. Although we should absolutely be concerned about racism and we should definitely work to end it, it's important to remember that being Black isn't bad and it isn't limited to negative social experiences. Being Black is something to be proud of and Black heritage includes a rich and beautiful cultural history that should be celebrated. So, the important take-away from this chapter is that you're not being kind when you say you're "color blind." Instead, it's better to adopt a worldview that considers both the

positive and negative experiences of people of color. This perspective will enable you to celebrate cultural differences while working to create a better and more inclusive future.



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The Hyper-Sexualization of Black Women

You have only to turn on the television-- to pretty much any channel!-- to see that women are overly sexualized in every context. It's also common knowledge that little girls are increasingly sexualized at younger and younger ages. But although this is a universal female problem, studies show that Black girls experience this type of objectification and discrimination at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts. Rebecca Epstein, executive director of the Georgetown University Law Center's Center on Poverty and Inequality, conducted a study on this topic and discovered that "...black girls face even greater skepticism by the figures that wield such authority over their lives than other victims of sexual violence." Epstein also co-authored a 2017 study with leading female academics Jamilia J. Blake and Thalia González which revealed that Black girls are viewed by adults as being more sexually mature-- and therefore, less innocent-- than white girls.

This has a number of alarming implications for Black girls growing up in our society. For starters, this pervasive prejudice means that although social crusaders are likely to campaign against the sexualization of children, their sympathy is often withheld from Black survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Because even well-intentioned reformers can hold the belief that Black girls are less innocent and more sexually mature, Black victims are less likely to receive the help they need. They are also less likely to be believed when they do report cases of sexual assault. Epstein aptly sums this up by affirming, "Black girls face unique forms of bias that need to be addressed and that requires different consideration than the racism faced by boys. Hypersexualization is the epitome of that difference."

But sadly, this is just one form of discrimination that innocent little Black girls face. Many other negative experiences abound, including white people's fetishization of Black bodies. Jerkins observes that this attitude is a relic of the slavery era and it needs to go! Because the bodies of Black women legally belonged to their white "masters" during this time, white

people assumed that they had the right to objectify and sexualize their “property” as they pleased. During the time of slavery, this meant that white people were free to rape and assault Black women with impunity. And unfortunately, it remains a deplorable fact that even though slavery has been abolished, white people are still likely to get away with sexually assaulting a Black woman. But the rise of the modern era has also generated new microaggressions against Black women.

For example, how many times have you heard or seen a white person ask a Black woman if they can touch her hair? Or, as is perhaps more common, how often does a white person simply invade Black privacy without asking in the first place? Jerkins observes that, whether you ask permission or not, touching a Black woman’s hair is not only offensive, it is a violating form of fetishization. It is an act that invokes the blatant fetishization of the slavery era, when Black bodies were put on display for white people to gawk at. So, when you touch a Black woman’s hair as though she and her hair are mysterious and alien to you, you are behaving as though that woman is an exhibit in a freak show or a circus animal. You are literally communicating to another human being that she is an animal for you to pet or a freak for you to marvel at.

Many people might resist that idea, however. “But I really just think her hair is so pretty!” some might say. Or, “I just wanted to touch it because it’s so different from my hair; I just want to know how it feels.” That doesn’t matter. Why? Because, quite simply, it’s not your hair. And the behavior you’re exhibiting is also something that, as a white person, you would be unlikely to encounter yourself. Sure, you may have fond childhood memories of braiding a female friend’s hair or patting a friend’s head as they fall asleep beside you on a long drive home from a school field trip. But both of those examples are different. In each of those cases, you touched your friend’s hair as a loving gesture of equality. You both knew that you were on an equal playing field; if you were touching each other, it was as a gesture of love or assistance. Under no circumstances were you communicating, “You’re weird and different to me and I want to touch you

to see how you feel.” When you frame the situation in that light, anybody can see how that comes across as creepy. So, just don’t be creepy!

It’s also important to remember that, in addition to violating someone’s sense of agency and personal space, you’re also making a political statement. How? Well, Jerkins reminds readers that Black hair-- much like Black female bodies-- has been fetishized, legislated, and discriminated against for centuries. Because white has been viewed as the default for far too long, Black hair in its natural state has been vilified as being “unprofessional” or “inappropriate.” As a result, many Black women have been pressured and intimidated into making their hair conform to white beauty standards. Controlling someone’s body in this manner should never be a part of holding any job! But when Black women dare to go against the grain and wear their hair in its natural state, it’s a political statement, a way of saying that they refuse to bow to white oppressors. So, if you try to treat that hair as an exhibit in a freakshow, you’re not only violating someone’s personal space, you’re invalidating their expression of their personal identity and their political protest.



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Black Women Break Down Barriers

As we've established in the previous chapter, our society is founded on an intrinsic cycle of racial and gender inequality. And despite our progress through the years, sadly, we haven't really come as far as we think. Sure, we might have mostly abolished slavery and segregation, but that should have been the bare minimum anyway! A truly equal society would also be working to eradicate racism, police brutality, and discrimination in any form. But unfortunately, we're a long way from a society that genuinely promotes equal rights for all.

However, social movements such as feminism seek to remedy this inequality. Feminists have fought for decades to make equality a reality for women everywhere and secure essential rights such as voting, reproductive rights, and the right for a woman to own her own body. Given this, one might assume that feminists everywhere would be speaking up for Black women and using their voices to demolish racism. But unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Because racism is so prevalent in every aspect of our society, feminism-- originally a white female movement-- was also founded on racial inequality. And although modern feminists have made strides to rectify this tragedy, feminism is still too exclusive.

For example, when feminists fight for equality, they are still primarily focused on issues that exclusively affect white women. Little effort is made to fight for representation by providing Black girls with dolls that look like them or advocating for change in the media. Likewise, many white feminists are silent on important issues that we have previously discussed, like the fetishization of Black bodies or the perception that Black girls are more sexually mature and less innocent. So, from these examples, we can see that, even in spaces that should be inclusive, the deck is still stacked against Black women and this absolutely has to change. However, as Jerkins observes, this is only part of the problem. Because the prevalence of blatant discrimination and exclusivity in seemingly inclusive spaces has

also conditioned Black women to adopt a certain school of thought in order to survive. We'll call it the "crabs in a barrel" theory.

To unpack the meaning of this term, we'll start by taking a close look at the name. If you think about crabs in a barrel, what do you think of? You might, for example, observe that it would be really, really difficult for a crab to claw its way out of a barrel. In fact, it might be almost impossible for them to find something to grab onto. Therefore, if a crab does make its way out, it would be almost miraculous. Unfortunately, however, few ever do. That's because studies of animal behavior have shown time and time again that, if a crab tries to make its way out of the barrel, so far from helping him, his fellow crabs will band together to pull him back down again! They don't realize that, if they just left well enough alone, two wonderful things could happen.

For one thing, if they simply altered their perspective, they might realize that they could all climb out! And furthermore, if they helped the first crab who tried to climb out, he could reach back down and help them in turn! Sadly, this mentality often affects Black women who attempt to revolutionize the system. While certain parts of this theory don't apply-- for example, it is not true that Black people try to oppress each other or contribute to their own discrimination-- some aspects are relevant. Specifically, many Black women have found that when they try to rise above the discrimination that has kept them in a "barrel" of sorts, others advise them to rise to the top and never look back. This advice is given in the interest of self-preservation because many fear that if a Black woman turns back to elevate other Black women, she may lose the momentum of her escape and be dragged down again. As a result, this well-intentioned advice is often used to discourage Black women from lifting each other up.

However, Jerkins wisely recognizes this for the problematic ideology it is and believes that we must work to dismantle this perception so that more Black women can succeed. Rather than concerning ourselves with the barrel and what will happen if someone tries to climb out of it, Jerkins argues that we need to focus our efforts on dismantling the barrel

altogether. She asserts that we can do this by recognizing that a win for one Black woman is a win for all Black women. And if we celebrate the success of Black women everywhere, pointing it out to our children, sharing it on our social media, and showing young girls that these women are positive role-models, we can break down the “crabs in a barrel” mentality. So, when we celebrate one success story, let’s remember that it’s not about the success of that one person. Rather, it’s about celebrating the victory of the entire Black community.



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Final Summary

Although we might like to think that modern America has made great strides in its pursuit of equality, the experiences of Black women tell a very different story. Morgan Jerkins has seen firsthand that Black women are devalued, discriminated against, and objectified on a daily basis. And as she has learned from her own experience, this has a significant impact on the psychology and self-esteem of Black girls growing up in our society today. That's why Jerkins uses her voice to shed light on these social issues and argue for solutions that can bring about positive change.



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