

everyday feminism

WORK THROUGH ISSUES. STAND UP FOR YOURSELF. LIVE YOUR TRUTH.

Hi, everyone. So, there's no Rosi Answers today because I wanted to talk instead about something that has really been on my mind for the past few days since I heard about it and since I got really angry when I first heard about it.

The university from which I graduated this summer, the University of Exeter, has its annual Safer Sex ball, and this is a ball every single year where people go along in their underwear, and their underwear is kind of themed to a specific theme—things like “circus,” and “fantasy” and that sort of stuff. It's a big event: I think it's one of the biggest student events in the UK and it raises a lot of money for World AIDS Day, AIDS awareness, AIDS prevention, and also just safer sex awareness.

This year, however, the people in charge of the event have chosen “tribal” as their theme which, just, I can't believe was even an option.

Now, I loved a lot about that university, but there were some times when any time you raised a concern about what people were doing, such as blackface—some people were blacking out for parties, which is something that people did with surprising and terrifying frequency—that it was “just banter,” and that I should chill out and, you know, “political correctness gone mad,” to quote Russell Howard a little bit.

And this has happened again on a larger scale. There have been students who are really unhappy with the theme and are saying that it is a racist theme, and then immediately you get larger groups of students thinking that racial discussions are a popularity contest and contingent on how many people like a Facebook page saying, “Oh, well you're just being stupid. This is common sense that this is not a racist theme. We are not racist.”

The hardest thing that I've experienced when talking to people about race is this immediate defensiveness. This idea that anything *you* do is okay, because you're in your head and you don't mean to hurt anyone and so everything's fine and everyone else will see it that way. That seems like a really nice mental place to come from, but I fully accept that a lot of the things that I do nowadays without even thinking about it, are going to be things that future generations are going to be in shock that we even do and that we could even think certain ways and that we could even do certain things.

So I'm not saying that my actions and my thoughts and my words are, in any way, immune to criticism in some sort of universe time spanning post-racial, post-discrimination world. Like, that's not the world in which we live and people are just completely denying that.

Contextually as well, it's a massive issue because the University of Exeter is a predominantly white university. It has had situations in the past where students have been made to feel

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extremely unhappy about the racial comments that they are overhearing. But worst of all, it is a petri dish of that common excuse, “It’s just a bit of banter.”

So, if you’ll bear with me for a second, let’s go back to 18th century Enlightenment Europe.

At that time, obviously people were exploring around the world and there was a big move to classify everything. When I studied this, it always reminded me of that bit in Adam and Eve when Adam names all the animals. Naming something gives you a power over it, immediately—that gives you power over it because you’re naming it, you’re calling it something. And it was this language that was used to classify people, as well as animals.

Further than that, it was a project of homogeneity; it was lumping people together. And it was also not just saying that these other people, these other cultures that were being counted were not us—they were also less than us, and they could be grouped together in certain ways. Their behavior was similarly violent, or similarly uncivilized, blah blah blah.

The term “tribal” itself reminds me a lot of the way in which people use the word “Africa.” People talk about Africa as though it’s a country in itself and have no care for the specific countries within it, and the fact that it is a very diverse continent with lots of extremely different cultures within it. It’s kind of because people don’t take the time to think about it and just use these stereotypes that already exist and perpetuate them.

Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon is a thing that comes in a lot with race theory and I do recommend reading up on the Panopticon, and then also reading on Foucault’s writings about it as well because it’s kind of important, in a way.

So, in this predominantly white space, a person of color in the University of Exeter is already going to become “hypervisible” they call it in race theory. It’s a lot like Bentham, and Foucault as well picks up on saying “disciplining the body without touching the body.” That sense of sight and how powerful sight is in disciplining people and ordering people and making them function in certain ways that work to promote this dominant ideology.

It’s not just a fact of how many people from whatever background, the university’s accepting or not accepting, or not taking into account, et cetera. It’s also the fact that “tribal,” whatever that’s supposed to mean, has become something spectacular, has become something weirdly fetishized as well, and also has fit into this very marketable stereotype that we see in television, and film, and literature, and Halloween costumes. A way of talking about other people that actively fetishizes and homogenizes multiple cultures. It plays back into this idea that whiteness is normative and “tribal,” and everything associated with that term is other, and it’s just so frustrating that people don’t get it, but further than that, that people are being dismissed by it. I just can’t understand what group of people would think that this is an okay thing to do.

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Anyway, so basically I've just been really disappointed about that and it's got to me because I feel a little powerless in this situation and it reminds me of how I felt on certain occasions when I was at university and the same sort of thing would happen and I just don't get it. I don't understand why you think this is okay.

But I realized that I wasn't powerless because I have my voice, and my voice, as Laci Green said, gives me power. And that's why I have video blogs.

Anyway, so now I've kind of got that off my chest and spoken about it a little bit, I am going to go and enjoy my Fakesgiving, my flat Thanksgiving. We've made lots of yummy food and my friends are all coming around and it will be a really good time. So I'm just going to say bye. Bye, guys!