

**Kene Ejikeme:** I'm delighted to welcome Afua Hirsch, renowned writer, broadcaster, and bestselling author. Having originally trained as a barrister, Afua has been a journalist for over 20 years, using her platform to highlight injustice and racial inequity around the world.

Afua's debut book, *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity, and Belonging*, was awarded the Royal Society of Literature Jerwood Prize and was a *Times* bestseller. Afua, thank you for being here today.

**Afua Hirsch:** Thank you for that very generous introduction, Kene. It's great to be here.

**Kene Ejikeme:** I'm really excited for this session. I kind of want to begin from the start, as they say. You grew up as a mixed-race child in Wimbledon. You were born in Norway. And you spoke of trying to work out who you were. And you actually dedicate a big portion of your book to this subject. Can you talk a little bit more about this time growing up in, let's be frank, in relative privilege in a predominantly sort of white neighborhood and white world? Can you walk us through what that was like for you?

**Afua Hirsch:** Sure. I think you're right to identify it as having been a privileged childhood, and I think that for a lot of my life people actually perceived having privilege or being middle class as antithetical to being Black. And it always was one of the first ways in which I started to encounter the narratives about race in Britain, that people perceive those as mutually exclusive experiences.

I think if you were to try and characterize the things, the similarities in the different environments in which I grew up, I would say that affluence and relative privilege is one of them, but also a cultural pressure to assimilate into whiteness. I grew up in places that were not just predominantly white but in which there was no space to express difference. There was no space in which people were comfortable with the idea of talking about one's Blackness or that as something to be proud of. If anything, Blackness was something that was clearly seen. And I say that because while people often said they didn't see race, they at the same time racialized me often in subconscious ways but through constant comments about my origins, asking me where I was from, not accepting "British" as the answer even though I was never anything else.

Comments about my name, which is Ghanaian, my hair texture, my

skin color. As a child, you don't have a language about how racialized society we inhabit. But you perceive that people have a narrative about you based on you being visibly other. And so I really inhabited that dichotomy on the one hand, a place where people didn't feel it was polite or acceptable to talk about race. But where at the same time I experienced race as a very salient characteristic of daily life.

And when I started to try to understand that, I discovered other things. For example, the narratives about race that do exist and were spoken about were very negative. You only ever saw Black people being talked about as Black when it was in the context of crime or immigration. More recently, Ebola. These were things that very clearly loaded a certain ideology onto what it meant to be African or Black.

And I came from, well, a dual heritage, but my Black heritage is from Ghana. I have a large Ghanaian family who are incredibly proud of and versed in their heritage, their history, their culture, their civilization. So that was another thing that I had to reconcile why it was that the versions of Blackness that I was experiencing in Britain was so antithetical to what I knew of my Black culture and heritage.

And I think I spent my whole childhood and then my professional life through various different professions. As you said, I've been a journalist, a lawyer. I've worked in international development. Understanding the origins of these contradictions and things left unsaid and really making a deliberate effort to find ways and talking about and developing a language and a space for that discourse because, while this has been a lot of my professional work, on a very personal level, as a young Black girl growing up in these spaces, I really did experience them as an identity crisis. I couldn't inhabit my heritage in a way that was acceptable to other people and made sense to me.

**Kene Ejikeme:** Yeah, that's actually a great point because when I read your book, I actually listened to the Audible version, which you narrated. And it sounded like it was almost a very cathartic experience for you. Was it a cathartic experience for you? Or did it actually unearth more questions or more puzzles than it's actually solved?

**Afua Hirsch:** I would say it was cathartic and anxiety inducing in equal measure actually because, on the one hand, yes, it was very much a process of personal reconciliation. I learned a lot about my heritage on both sides of my family

through the research that I undertook for my book. I discovered, for example, that my sixth great-grandfather on my Ghanaian side was a Dutch slave trader. I also learned about my maternal grandmothers, Ghanaian grandmothers, whose lives really I felt a very deep connection with in my own life. And then on my father's side, I learned much more about the Nazi Jewish experience that my grandfather had fled. And that was all very personally fulfilling no matter how painful some of those stories were because I think it's just so important to know where you come from.

And no matter how far back you look, in my case to the 1750s, I discovered things that helped me make sense of my lived experience with my family and some of the idiosyncrasies of my family.

On the other hand, it was very stressful because I think it's quite hard to overstate how taboo these subjects are. And in the environment where I grew up, middle class, polite society, these are conversations that I never had with school friends, neighbors, even members of my family. It just wasn't spoken about. And it was very difficult as a young person to work out how, for example, could I speak about my Blackness in a way that didn't alienate my white relatives?

**Kene Ejikeme:** Yeah.

**Afua Hirsch:** Or how could I express the ways in which I felt racialized without people feeling I was accusing them of racism? I think these are still pitfalls that are very difficult to navigate today. You know, in the 1980s and '90s I found it almost impossible. And writing about it in my book was relieving that anxiety that I genuinely didn't know how it would be received and that people who I have had in my life might find it very alienating, might feel hostile towards it.

And given how much integrity I aspire to in the process that everything I said was grounded in fact or research or really careful analysis, I knew I believed in what I was saying. And therefore if people felt threatened by it, that would be really difficult because I knew I would stand by my work. So that was scary. And it almost felt like a nuclear option publishing these things. I hadn't even said them in private conversation, some of them. So to publish it was really, it felt very far out of my comfort zone.

And also I'm a journalist, so for most of my life I've been

writing other people's stories. That's really what I do. So to speak very personally of my own life -- and in my book I share things about my family and my relationship, my parenting. These are things that I would never usually speak about publicly. But the reason I did that was because I really did want to reach in a way my younger self. I wanted to make this book accessible to somebody who maybe wouldn't always read a book that was a narrative nonfiction by a journalist. And so I knew it was important to share things that just humanize these issues because I think the reaction has shown me that everybody relates to this in some way. But it's a question of how you reach people with the common human experiences that my story embodies.

**Kene Ejikeme:** The subjects you deal with in the book are very difficult, as you said. One that I think is particularly difficult to discuss that is very, very pertinent to Britain, to modern-day Britain, is this debate around statues. And, you know, we have all seen how vocal you've been on the subject. I remember an interview done by Marvin Rees, who's the mayor of Bristol -- I think it was LBC that was interviewing him -- and it was very, very impressive the way he talked about the subject of statues because obviously, you know, Bristol is a focal point of it.

And I find him in a very difficult position trying to talk about the human aspects of it but obviously trying to balance that with not condoning criminal activity. How do you feel about the subject of statues? What is your viewpoint? What is your position? And where do you think the conversation has gotten to right now in modern-day Britain?

**Afua Hirsch:** Well, I was just smiling as I listened to you explain how Marvin Rees couldn't condone criminal activity, which of course he can't. He's the mayor. He has to promote law and order. But these are statues to people who spent most of their lives engaged in criminal activity, so there's always an irony in the way in which we talk about this.

I think that the conversation about statues is more nuanced than it's often portrayed. So I found myself thrown into it because in 2017, when there was a huge focus on Confederate status in the US, I noticed people in other European countries, including Britain, feeling quite smug and suggesting that that's an American problem. You know, this terrible racism that exists in America. And they have statues to these people. How awful.

And I wanted British people to realize that the heroes they

deify on these huge plinths in London are people who are equally directly personally responsible in some cases for the murder, enslavement, oppression, destruction of lands, culture, and heritage of tens of thousands or millions of people of African and Asian heritage. And it was fascinating how fragile people were when presented with a set of historically agreed facts about people they have been told are victorious heroes.

And I think that fragility is really the thing that I wanted to expose because when I suggested, for example, that Nelson, who is rightly remembered for winning the Battle of Trafalgar but also is never remembered for the fact that the reason he spent almost all of his career in the Caribbean was because slavery-produced sugar in the Caribbean was foundational to Britain's economy at the time. And you can't remember Trafalgar without remembering the Caribbean in the 18th century. You can't have it both ways.

And nobody really questions the facts. What they did was attack me for raising them, as if to say it's not all right to talk about the truth about people we look up to because that goes to our identity. And our identity is predicated on a comfortable celebratory version of history rather than the truth. And I think that's incredibly unhealthy. That's something I expect of a dictatorship, of a society addicted to propaganda, not a society like Britain that considers itself intellectually curious and capable of academic and historical feats. A country that is obsessed with its history, actually, if you look at consumption of period dramas, *Downton Abbey*, visits to National Trust property, the fascination in the monarchy.

But yet presented with a set of facts they're not used to hearing, they really lashed out. And I think that it's not to say we should destroy the history of people who did bad things. It's to say we should actually embrace that history fully to understand Trafalgar but also to understand Jamaica. And I think that if we can't do that then we are setting ourselves up to be a nation that is incapable of engaging in a meaningful way with our own story or the reality of our society, our demographic reality today which is a direct result of that history.

And we're not equipping British people to actually navigate their contemporary reality, which to me is an absolutely profound act of neglect.

**Kene Ejikeme:** Why do you think this year in 2020 there's been

such an acute sensitivity and some would say willingness to discuss the subject about race and race inequity particularly in the UK? What's different?

**Afua Hirsch:** The Black Lives Matter movement may not have achieved this level of dominance until the murder of George Floyd. But had there not already been a movement that had mobilized people in the past, that had a name and an identity that people rallied around, I think it would have been harder to organize the response, the kind of response that we saw this year. So there has been this cumulative effect of the work that's been going on for years.

I think that the political climate in many nations, the sense of the right being very real, like, resurgent in an extreme manifestation I certainly haven't seen before. I'm hearing political rhetoric that not long ago would have been totally ostracized as having no place in mainstream politics now completely mainstreamed. And that I think has woken many people up out of their complacency, that this is a time in which you have to fight for our ideals all over again. That you can't take democracy or equality or antiracism for granted. You have to argue for it and fight for it and turn up for it. Otherwise, you can see it slipping away before your eyes.

And I think while I am noting no pleasure from that whatsoever, I think the one advantage is that people were a little complacent in the era of Obama or in the era of New Labour. They felt that things were basically drifting in the right direction. Not much action was required. And I think this has really shown us that everybody has a role to play if we're to protect the values that we aspire that that we frankly never achieved but that we seem to be reeling back from in this moment.

I also do think that the COVID pandemic has played a role because our distractions were taken away. You know, when George Floyd was murdered, people were watching it and they weren't watching sport and they weren't going to the pub and they weren't able to go to birthday parties or on holidays or to music festivals or any of the things that usually distract us from the already brutal reality that we inhabit. You know, this isn't new, as you said. So many lives have been lost. Inequality is so extreme.

But we have ways of pacifying ourselves or distracting ourselves. And those were taken away. And I think that one of

the very few positive consequences of that stripping back of our normal lives is that it's forced us to focus on the ways in which the Social Contract has never delivered on its promise. And I think that democracy only works if you engage actively in negotiating the Social Contract, renegotiating it, interrogating it, understanding what it could be like if our society distributed opportunities equally and how different a world we live in.

And I am optimistic by what's happened this year in the sense that I think it's shown me how much people do value those ideals and are beginning to recognize how far we've been from them. And I think that that is how change starts. It starts with that recognition, and it starts with that intolerance for the unfairness that we have been putting up with for so long.

**Kene Ejikeme:** I think we have to stop it there, so I just wanted to say thank you so much, Afua, for being so generous with your time.

**Afua Hirsch:** Thank you, Kene. Thank you very much.

*This transcript should not be copied, distributed, published or reproduced, in whole or in part, or disclosed by any recipient to any other person. The information contained in this transcript does not constitute a recommendation from any Goldman Sachs entity to the recipient. Neither Goldman Sachs nor any of its affiliates makes any representation or warranty, express or implied, as to the accuracy or completeness of the statements or any information contained in this transcript and any liability therefore (including in respect of direct, indirect or consequential loss or damage) is expressly disclaimed. The views expressed in this transcript are not necessarily those of Goldman Sachs, and Goldman Sachs is not providing any financial, economic, legal, accounting or tax advice or recommendations in this transcript. In addition, the receipt of this transcript by any recipient is not to be taken as constituting the giving of investment advice by Goldman Sachs to that recipient, nor to constitute such person a client of any Goldman Sachs entity.*

*This transcript is provided in conjunction with the associated video/audio content for convenience. The content of this transcript may differ from the associated video/audio, please consult the original content as the definitive source. Goldman Sachs is not responsible for*

*any errors in the transcript.*