

SHARI NARINE

# SOMEDAY “AWKWARD” CONVERSATIONS WON’T BE NEEDED

*But not today*



PHOTO CREDIT: RHONDA ARNDT LEMOINE

Jesse Lipscomb, a Black actor and activist in Edmonton, started a movement five years ago called Make It Awkward. It is about confronting racism in a way that leads to conversation and not hurtful words.

Earlier this year, after submitting my usual 2,500 words to my writing critique group, I made the difficult decision to embrace Lipscomb’s philosophy and challenge racism after I mulled over members’ feedback.

I joined the group shortly after my novel *Oil Change at Rath’s Garage* was published in 2017. While our numbers have varied over the years, I have remained the only person of colour. I’m South Asian. At first, it wasn’t an issue. But in the last few years, I’ve had a personal awakening. “Awakening” doesn’t mean racism is new to me. Awakening means permitting myself to acknowledge by name what happened/happens to me.

COVID-19, being out of work for a couple of months, and tuning into CBC News Network all day played into this awareness. But by this point, it wasn’t just my awakening. It was happening across Canada and the United States. Black Lives Matter, Every Child Matters,

reconciliation, Black, Indigenous and People Of Colour (BIPOC), inclusivity and diversity became buzzwords. It felt like we were on the cusp of real change.

I reflected on growing up on the prairies, one of less than a handful of racialized families in my tiny town. I tried to write about my experience in an essay but found it difficult to express these feelings in “I” sentences.

The response I received from my writing group astonished me. The pages I submitted focussed on Rose, the South Asian proprietor of the small-town bed and breakfast. In one incident, a white guest asks Rose about her nationality. “Cliché,” remarked a group member. I can’t count the number of times I’ve been asked that question, gritting my teeth and stubbornly responding, “Canadian.”

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At the time, I was into the next draft of a novel. I changed some of my characters—both to represent the discrimination that racialized Canadians face regularly and the racism I had experienced growing up.

In another scene, Rose reminisces about her youth and how the hairdressers in town said they could do nothing to make her too-curly hair “respectable.” An older Rose prepares for the day by looking at

the hair products she needs to tame her hair. One member said, “boring.”

I let it go. But in my next month’s submission. I tackled Rose’s depression. Group members commented on Rose’s failing business, failing marriage, inability to have children, and inability to fit into the small town. Not one person mentioned the subtle racism she lived with that seeped into her soul and informed almost everything she did.

Had my writing been so poor that I had failed to bring this aspect of Rose’s life to my pages? I had written about Rose’s desire to slide through her high school days without being noticed. How Rose found the word “exotic” to be othering. How Rose felt “pigeon-holed” in the small town. How she didn’t dare expand her tearoom menu to include South Asian delicacies.

I employed Lipscomb’s *Make It Awkward* over a Zoom call (COVID precautions) with the group. I asked: Why didn’t anybody talk about racism in this passage? But there were so many other issues Rose faced, they said. I tried to make them understand that racism is like abuse and colours (no pun intended) everything you do. That racism made Rose self-conscious, and led to her lack of self-confidence, was underpinning her depression.

A couple of my fellow writers said they weren’t comfortable commenting on the racism Rose experienced because they were not people of colour. I explained all they had to do was acknowledge it.

Some members got defensive.

After this difficult exchange, I contemplated how to move forward. That’s not something Lipscomb covered. I felt brushed aside by my members. I felt dismissed. I felt they said, “We don’t believe you.”

Before our next meeting, I learned a white writer requested to join the group. The idea of having to defend—because that was how I thought of it—my characters, their lives, their experiences to another

white writer was exhausting. But I gave my nod of approval. When we Zoomed before the new writer joined, I requested that our next member be BIPOC. I received excuses why this was unlikely to happen. They made no efforts to brainstorm.

Once the lid is off the box, you can’t put it back on. Not that I wanted to. I emailed the members, saying I was bowing out.

Should I have quit? No. It’s a conversation that needs to happen repeatedly. It was a stark reminder that I, like many BIPOC, was naïve in thinking that the battle for

change would get easier. It disheartened me to understand that this fight that was personal for me had not created the allies (another buzzword) that I thought had come from the last two years of widespread racial struggles.

The sad reality is this—something I reminded my group about—white voices carry weight. Black, Indigenous and People of Colour know that. ■

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