

Let me tell you how I'd get those white devil convicts and the guards, too, to do anything I wanted. I'd whisper to them, "If you don't, I'll start a rumor that you're really a light Negro just passing as white." That shows you what the white devil thinks about the black man. He'd rather die than be thought a Negro!

Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

When I was an undergraduate minoring in medieval and Renaissance musicology, I worked with a fellow music student—white—in the music library. I remember his reaction when I relayed to him an article I'd recently read arguing that Beethoven had African ancestry. Beethoven was one of his heroes, and his vehement derision was completely out of proportion to the scholarly worth of the hypothesis. But when I suggested that he wouldn't be so skeptical if the claim were that Beethoven had some Danish ancestry, he fell silent. In those days we were very conscious of covert racism, as our campus was exploding all around us because of it. More recently I premiered at a gallery a video installation exploring the issue of African ancestry among white Americans. A white male viewer commenced to kick the furniture, mutter audibly that he was white and was going to stay that way, and start a fistfight with my dealer. Either we are less conscious of covert racism twenty years later, or we care less to contain it.

Among politically committed and enlightened whites, the inability to acknowledge their probable African ancestry is the last outpost of racism. It is the litmus test that separates those who have the courage of their convictions from those who merely subscribe to them and that measures the depth of our dependence on a presumed superiority (of any kind, anything will do) to other human beings—anyone, anywhere—to bolster our fragile self-worth. Many blacks are equally unwilling to explore their white ancestry—approximately 25 percent on average for the majority of blacks—for this reason. For some, of course, acknowledgment of this fact evokes only bitter reminders of rape, disinheritance, enslavement, and exploitation, and their distaste is justifiable. But for others, it is the mere idea of blackness as an essentialized source of self-worth and self-affirmation that forecloses the acknowledgment of mixed ancestry. This, too, is understandable: having struggled so long and hard to carve a sense of wholeness and value for ourselves out of our ancient connection with Africa after having been actively denied any in America, many of us are extremely resistant to once again casting ourselves into the same chaos of ethnic and psychological ambiguity that our diaspora to this country originally inflicted on us.



Plate 11: *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Shouts Out Her Poem*
First performed at Just Above Midtown Gallery, June 1980
Lorraine O'Grady
Photo: Coreen Simpson
Courtesy of the artist

In the early 80s, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, wearing a gown of white gloves, attended gallery openings unannounced and shouted poems with punch lines such as "Black art must take more risks!" and "NOW is the time for an invasion," to make an equal-opportunity critique of the then still-separate white and black art worlds.

Thus blacks and whites alike seem to be unable to accord worth to others outside their in-group affiliations without feeling that they are taking it away from themselves. We may have the concept of intrinsic self-worth, but by and large we do not understand what it means. We need someone else whom we can regard as inferior, to whom we can compare ourselves favorably, and if no such individual or group exists, we invent one. For without this, we seem to have no basis, no standard of comparison, for conceiving of ourselves favorably at all. We seem, for example, truly unable to grasp or take seriously the alternative possibility of measuring ourselves or our performances against our own past novicehood at one end and our own future potential at the other. I think this is in part the result of our collective fear of memory as a nation, our profound unwillingness to confront the painful truths about our history and our origins, and in part the result of our individual fear of the memory of our own pasts—not only of our individual origins and the traumas of socialization we each suffered before we could control what was done to us, but the pasts of our own adult behavior—the painful truths of our own derelictions, betrayals, and failures to respect our individual ideals and convictions.

When I turned forty a few years ago, I gave myself the present of re-reading the personal journals I have been keeping since age eleven. I was astounded at the chasm between my present conception of my own past, which is being continually revised and updated to suit present circumstances, and the actual past events, behavior, and emotions I recorded as faithfully as I could as they happened. My derelictions, mistakes, and failures of responsibility are much more evident in those journals than they are in my present, sanitized, and virtually blameless image of my past behavior. It was quite a shock to encounter in those pages the person I actually have been rather than the person I now conceive myself to have been. My memory is always under the control of the person I now want and strive to be, and so rarely under the control of the facts. If the personal facts of one's past are this difficult for other people to face too, then perhaps it is no wonder that we must cast about outside ourselves for someone to feel superior to, even though there are so many blunders and misdeeds in our own personal histories that might serve that function.

For whites to acknowledge their blackness is, then, much the same as for men to acknowledge their femininity and for Christians to acknowledge their Judaic heritage. It is to reinternalize the external scapegoat through attention to which they have sought to escape their own sense of inferiority.

Now the white man leaned in the window, looking at the impenetrable face with its definite strain of white blood, the same blood which ran in his own veins, which had not only come to the negro through male descent while it had come to him from a woman, but had reached the negro a generation sooner—a face composed, inscrutable, even a little haughty, shaped even in expression in the pattern of his great-grandfather McCaslin's face. . . . He thought, and not for the first time: I am not only looking at a face older than mine and which has seen and winnowed more, but at a man most of whose blood was pure ten thousand years when my own anonymous beginnings became mixed enough to produce me.

—William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*.

I said . . . that the guilt of American whites included their knowledge that in hating Negroes, they were hating, they were rejecting, they were denying, their own blood.

—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

It is to bring ourselves face to face with our obliterated collective past, and to confront the continuities of responsibility that link the criminal acts of extermination and enslavement committed by our forefathers with our own personal crimes of avoidance, neglect, disengagement, passive complicity, and active exploitation of the inherited injustices from which we have profited. Uppermost among these is that covert sense of superiority a white person feels over a black person which buttresses his enjoyment of those unjust benefits as being no more or less than he deserves. To be deprived of that sense of superiority to the extent that acknowledgment of common ancestry would effect is clearly difficult for most white people. But to lose the social regard and respect that accompanies it is practically unbearable. I know—not only because of what I have read and observed of the pathology of racism in white people, but because I have often experienced the withdrawal of that social regard firsthand.

For most of my life I did not understand that I needed to identify my racial identity publicly and that if I did not I would be inevitably mistaken

for white. I simply didn't think about it. But since I also made no special effort to hide my racial identity, I often experienced the shocked and/or hostile reactions of whites who discovered it after the fact. I always knew when it had happened, even when the person declined to confront me directly: the startled look, the searching stare that would fix itself on my facial features, one by one, looking for the telltale "negroid" feature, the sudden, sometimes permanent withdrawal of good feeling or regular contact—all alerted me to what had transpired. Uh-oh, I would think to myself helplessly, and watch another blossoming friendship wilt.

In thus traveling about through the country I was sometimes amused on arriving at some little railroad-station town to be taken for and treated as a white man, and six hours later, when it was learned that I was stopping at the house of the coloured preacher or school-teacher, to note the attitude of the whole town changed.

—Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*

Sometimes this revelation would elicit a response of the most twisted and punitive sort: for example, from the colleague who glared at me and hissed, "Oh, so you want to be black, do you? Good! Then we'll treat you like one!" The ensuing harassment had a furious, retaliatory quality that I find difficult to understand even now: as though I'd delivered a deliberate and crushing insult to her self-esteem by choosing not to identify with her racial group.

You feel lost, sick at heart before such unmasked hatred, not so much because it threatens you as because it shows humans in such an inhuman light. You see a kind of insanity, something so obscene the very obscenity of it (rather than its threat) terrifies you.

—Griffin, *Black Like Me*

And I experienced that same groundless shame not only in response to those who accused me of passing for black, but also in response to those who accused me of passing for white. This was the shame caused by people who conveyed to me that I was underhanded or manipulative, trying to hide something, pretending to be something I was not by not telling them I was black—like the art critic in the early 1970s who had treated me with the respect she gave emerging white women artists in the early days of second-wave feminism until my work turned to issues of racial identity; she then

Hope, I had a friend named Karl who was sixteen and came from the boys' camp air
egs the lake. He played catch and volleyball with me and took care of me and I
loved him. I told someone that he was my big brother (I'm the only child) and she
said But that's impossible; Karl's white and you're colored. She said Colored. I
didn't know what she meant. Karl and I were pretty much the same color except th
at he had blue eyes. A few years later my mom thought it was time I started goin
g to and from school by myself instead of her taking me on the bus. The school w
as far away because it was not a local public school but rather an expensive pro
gressive prep school called New Lincoln where there were lots of rich mediocre w
hite kids and a few poor smart white kids and even fewer, poorer, even smarter b
lack kids. But all I knew then was that there sure was a difference between wher
e most of them lived (Fifth Avenue) and where I lived (Harlem). Anyway I started
going to school by myself and the neighborhood kids would waylay me as I was wal
king the two blocks from the bus stop to my house and would pull my braids and t
ease me and call me Paleface. By then I knew what they meant. No one at school e
ver called me Paleface. Once I was visiting one of my white classmates at her bi
g fancy apartment house on Central Park West where there were four doors into th
e house with a doorman standing at each and two separate elevators with an eleva
tor man for each and only one apartment on a floor and a cook and a maid and a c
leaning woman and a governess (!!!). She said to her little brother I bet you can
't guess whether Adrian is white or colored. He looked at me for a long time and
very searchingly and said White. And she said You lose, she's colored, isn't tha
t a scream? I thought it was really a scream. I was afraid of the black kids on
my block because they bullied me and I was afraid of the black kids at school be
cause they made cutting remarks about my acting too white. But I wasn't afraid o
f the white kids because they were so stupid. Later when I was in fifth grade an
d getting sick alot and hating school I had a teacher named Nancy Modiano who re
ally bullied me! Once we all went on a hike and I became very thirsty and she wo
uldn't let me get any water. Then we went back to school and she forced me to fo
llow her around the school for four hours while she did her errands but wouldn't
let me stop at a water fountain for some water. When my mom came to pick me up I
was almost fainting. In conference with my parents she once asked them Does Adri
an know she's colored? I guess she must have thought I was too fresh and uppity
for a little colored girl. My folks were very upset and wanted to transfer me in
to another class but it was too near the end of the term. Nancy Modiano was one
of the few whites who overtly bullied me because of my color. The only others we
re white philosophy students later on in college who hated me and said You
don't have to worry about grad school because a black woman can get in anywhere,
even if she looks like you. But she was a very nice and prettier white people general
ly got nicer and nicer, especially if they were very relieved when my folks m
oved out of Harlem when I was thirteen, to a mixed neighborhood on River
side Drive because there were so many nice people besides the boys in my old
neighborhood were no longer around. I was just moving out when I passed them on the str
eet. In my new neighborhood I was hanging out with a white kid who was in a
pretty well and taught me Spanish. I see New Lincoln people v
ery much because they are the only ones who are not exotic people and were real
ly getting into being white. I made other friends when I started going to the
Art Students' League and the Village I met all my friends were w
hite and that I didn't mix in with the children of my parents' very
light-skinned, middle class, do-do black relatives seemed to have a ver
y determined self-consciousness about being colored (said Colored) that I d
idn't share. They and their relatives thought it was a scandal that I went out
with white men. I felt isolated from them, but whites made
me feel good about my color. I was more than apologetic about my color. Some
one asked me why I looked so exotic I would say I'm West Indian (Jamaican) or if
they looked really interested I would go on about my family tree: how
my mother's family is English and my father's family is from India and how there's a
dispute about my father's ancestry which my grandmother has argued about before she d
ied because there are now two branches of the family tree, one which ones who no
w live in Chicago and founded the Pipers, the poor ones, i.e.
us; how they were originally from the South but
t at some point split up and moved to the North (the rich ones) because the poor ones
d the poor ones) because the poor ones were partly descend
ed from the slaves who worked the fields and the rich ones didn't want
to acknowledge any African blood in their families. In some ones it was
a matter of honor after the Civil War. I would never s
imply say Black because I felt that was a thing, i.e.
the Black Experience, which I had no part in. Also I
felt guilty about unjustified accusations of guilt
t. But I would never deny that I had a matter of pride and honor for my color and I
don't want to deny a part of myself. I feel under wh
y I should be caught in this bind. I feel
dishonest regardless of whether I'm white or I
my family, and all such hybrids are
gy. I feel essentially alien and alienating identity that ar
bitarily as a result of the past. I have a sense of duty
(black) black in a certain way that segment of the population and ta
ke over the reins of power. I feel a sense of power through the de f
act since I am a part of the system which we are all products and victims
When I realize that I realize that reality I've been bullied by whites as
well as blacks in the last three years. And there's



Political Self-Portrait #2

© Adrian Piper June 1978

Plate 12: Political Self-Portrait #2 (race), 1978
Poster 24 x 36"
Adrian Piper
Courtesy of the artist and John Weber Gallery, New York

called me to verify that I was black, reproached me for not telling her, and finally disappeared from my professional life altogether. And there were the colleagues who discovered after hiring me for my first job that I was black, and revised their evaluations of my work accordingly. It was the groundless shame caused by people who, having discovered my racial identity, let me know that I was not comporting myself as befitted their conception of a black person: the grammar school teacher who called my parents to inquire whether I was aware that I was black, and made a special effort to put me in my place by restricting me from participating in certain class activities and assigning me to remedial classes in anticipation of low achievement; and the graduate school classmate who complimented me on my English; and the potential employer who, having offered me a tenure-track job in an outstanding graduate department (which I declined) when he thought I was white, called me back much later after I'd received tenure and he'd found out I was black to offer me a two-year visiting position teaching undergraduates only, explaining to a colleague of mine that he was being pressured by his university administration to integrate his department. And the art critic who made elaborate suggestions in print about the kind of art it would be appropriate for someone with my concerns to make; and the colleague who journeyed from another university and interviewed me for four and a half hours in order to ascertain that I was smart enough to hold the position I had, and actually congratulated me afterwards on my performance. And there was the colleague who, when I begged to differ with his views, shouted (in a crowded restaurant) that if I wasn't going to take his advice, why was I wasting his time?

I looked up to see the frowns of disapproval that can speak so plainly and so loudly without words. The Negro learns this silent language fluently. He knows by the white man's look of disapproval and petulance that he is being told to get on his way, that he is "stepping out of line."

—Griffin, *Black Like Me*

When such contacts occurred, the interaction had to follow a strict pattern of interracial etiquette. The white person had to be clearly in charge at all times, and the black person clearly subordinate, so that each kept his or her place. It was a master-servant etiquette, in which blacks had to act out their inferior social position, much the way slaves had done. The black had to be deferential in

tone and body language, . . . and never bring up a delicate topic or contradict the white. . . . this master-servant ritual had to be acted out carefully lest the black person be accused of “getting” out of his or her subordinate “place.” Especially for violations of the etiquette, but also for challenges to other aspects of the system, blacks were warned, threatened, and finally subjected to extralegal violence.

—Davis, *Who Is Black?*

In a way this abbreviated history of occasions on which whites have tried to “put me in my place” upon discovering my racial identity was the legacy of my father who, despite his own similar experiences as a youth, refused to submit to such treatment. He grew up in a Southern city where his family was well known and highly respected. When he was thirteen, he went to a movie theater and bought a seat in the orchestra section. In the middle of the feature, the projectionist stopped the film and turned up the lights. The manager strode onto the stage and, in front of the entire audience, called out my father’s name, loudly reprimanded him for sitting in the orchestra, and ordered him up to the balcony, where he “belonged.” My father fled the theater, and, not long after, the South. My grandmother then sent him to a private prep school up North, but it was no better. In his senior year of high school, after having distinguished himself academically and in sports, he invited a white girl classmate on a date. She refused, and her parents complained to the principal, who publicly rebuked him. He was ostracized by his classmates for the rest of the year and made no effort to speak to any of them.

My mother, being upper-middle-class Jamaican, had no experience of this kind of thing. When she first got a job in this country in the 1930s, she chastised her white supervisor for failing to say, “Thank you,” after she’d graciously brought him back a soda from her lunch hour. He was properly apologetic. And when her brother first came to this country, he sat in a restaurant in Manhattan for an hour waiting to be served, it simply not occurring to him that he was being ignored because of his color, until a waitress came up to him and said, “I can see you’re not from these parts. We don’t serve colored people here.” My father, who had plenty of experience of this sort, knew that I would have them, too. But he declined to accustom me to them in advance. He never hit me, disparaged me, or pulled rank in our frequent intellectual and philosophical disagreements. Trained as a Jesuit and a lawyer, he argued for the joy of it, and felt proud rather than insulted when I made my point well. “Fresh,” he’d murmur to my mother

with mock annoyance, indicating me with his thumb, when I used his own assumptions to trounce him in argument. It is because of his refusal to prepare me for my subordinate role as a black woman in a racist and misogynistic society that my instinctive reaction to such insults is not resignation, depression, or passive aggression, but rather the disbelief, outrage, sense of injustice, and impulse to fight back actively that white males often exhibit as unexpected affronts to their dignity. Blacks who manifest these responses to white racism reveal their caregivers' generationally transmitted underground resistance to schooling them for victimhood.

A benefit and a disadvantage of looking white is that most people treat you as though you were white. And so, because of how you've been treated, you come to expect this sort of treatment, not perhaps, realizing that you're being treated this way because people think you're white, but rather falsely supposing that you're being treated this way because people think you are a valuable person. So, for example, you come to expect a certain level of respect, a certain degree of attention to your voice and opinions, certain liberties of action and self-expression to which you falsely suppose yourself to be entitled because your voice, your opinion, and your conduct are valuable in themselves. To those who in fact believe (even though they would never voice this belief to themselves) that black people are not entitled to this degree of respect, attention, and liberty, the sight of a black person behaving as though she were can, indeed, look very much like arrogance. It may not occur to them that she simply does not realize that her blackness should make any difference.

Only one-sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show. . . . Her complexion was very fair, with the rosy glow of vigorous health in the cheeks, . . . her eyes were brown and liquid, and she had a heavy suit of fine soft hair which was also brown. . . . She had an easy, independent carriage—when she was among her own caste—and a high and “sassy” way, withal; but of course she was meek and humble enough where white people were.

—Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

But there may be more involved than this. I've been thinking about Ida B. Wells, who had the temerity to suggest in print that white males who worried about preserving the purity of Southern white womanhood were really worried about the sexual attraction of Southern white womanhood to handsome and virile black men; and Rosa Parks, who refused to move

to the back of the bus; and Eartha Kitt, who scolded President Lyndon Johnson about the Vietnam War when he received her at a White House dinner; and Mrs. Alice Frazier, who gave the queen of England a big hug and invited her to stay for lunch when the queen came to tour Mrs. Frazier's housing project on a recent visit to the United States; and Congresswoman Maxine Waters, who, after the L.A. rebellion, showed up at the White House uninvited, and gave George Bush her unsolicited recommendations as to how he should handle the plight of the inner cities. I've also been thinking about the legions of African-American women whose survival has depended on their submission to the intimate interpersonal roles, traditional for black women in this culture, of nursemaid, housekeeper, concubine, cleaning lady, cook; and what they have been required to witness of the whites they have served in those capacities. And I've been thinking about the many white people I've admired and respected, who have lost my admiration and respect by revealing in personal interactions a side of themselves that other whites rarely get a chance to see: the brand of racism that surfaces only in one-on-one or intimate interpersonal circumstances, the kind a white person lets you see because he doesn't care what you think and knows you are powerless to do anything about it.

When we shined their shoes we talked. The whites, especially the tourists, had no reticence before us, and no shame since we were Negroes. Some wanted to know where they could find girls, wanted us to get Negro girls for them. . . . Though not all, by any means, were so open about their purposes, all of them showed us how they felt about the Negro, the idea that we were people of such low morality that nothing could offend us. . . . In these matters, the Negro has seen the backside of the white man too long to be shocked. He feels an indulgent superiority whenever he sees these evidences of the white man's frailty. This is one of the sources of his chafing at being considered inferior. He cannot understand how the white man can show the most demeaning aspects of his nature and at the same time delude himself into thinking he is inherently superior.

—Griffin, *Black Like Me*

It may indeed be that we African-American women as a group have special difficulties in learning our place and observing the proprieties because of that particular side of white America to which, because of our traditional roles, we have had special access—a side of white America that

hardly commands one's respect and could not possibly command one's deference.

To someone like myself, who was raised to think that my racial identity was, in fact, irrelevant to the way I should be treated, there are few revelations more painful than the experience of social metamorphosis that transforms former friends, colleagues, or teachers who have extended their trust, good will, and support into accusers or strangers who withdraw them when they discover that I am black. To look visibly black, or always to announce in advance that one is black is, I submit, never to experience this kind of camaraderie with white people—the relaxed, unguarded, but respectful camaraderie that white people reserve for those whom they believe are like them—those who can be trusted, who are intrinsically worthy of value, respect, and attention. Eddie Murphy portrays this in comic form in a wonderful routine in which he disguises himself in whiteface, then boards a bus on which there is only one visibly black passenger. As long as that passenger is on the bus, all of them sit silently and impersonally ignoring one another. But as soon as the visibly black passenger gets off, the other passengers get up and turn to one another, engaging in friendly banter, and the driver breaks open a bottle of champagne for a party. A joke, perhaps, but not entirely. A visibly black person may, in time, experience something very much like this unguarded friendship with a white person, if the black person has proven herself trustworthy and worthy of respect, or has been a friend since long before either was taught that vigilance between the races was appropriate. But I have only rarely met adult whites who have extended this degree of trust and acceptance at the outset to a new acquaintance they knew to be black. And to have extended it to someone who then *turns out* to be black is instinctively felt as a betrayal, a violation. It is as though one had been seduced into dropping one's drawers in the presence of an enemy. So a white person who accused me of deceit for not having alerted her that *I am black is not merely complaining that I have been hiding something about myself that is important for her to know. The complaint goes much deeper. It is that she has been lured under false pretenses into dropping her guard with me, into revealing certain intimacies and vulnerabilities that are simply unthinkable to expose in the presence of someone of another race (that's why it's important for her to know my race). She feels betrayed because I have failed to warn her to present the face she thinks she needs to present to someone who might choose to take advantage of the weaknesses that lie behind that public face. She may feel it merely a matter of luck that I have not taken advantage of those weaknesses already.*

As the accused, I feel as though a trusted friend has just turned on me. I experience the social reality that previously defined our relationship as having metamorphosed into something ugly and threatening, in which the accusation is not that I have *done* something wrong, but that I *am* wrong for being who I am: for having aped the white person she thought I was, and for being the devalued black person she discovers I am. I feel a withdrawal of good will, a psychological distancing, a new wariness and suspicion, a care in choosing words, and—worst of all—a denial that anything has changed. This last injects an element of insensitivity—or bad faith—that makes our previous relationship extremely difficult to recapture. It forces me either to name unpleasant realities that the white person is clearly unable to confront or to comply with the fiction that there are no such realities, which renders our interactions systematically inauthentic. This is why I always feel discouraged when well-intentioned white people deny to me that a person's race makes any difference to them, even though I understand that this is part of the public face whites instinctively believe they need to present; I know, firsthand, how white people behave toward me when they believe racial difference is absent. And there are very few white people who are able to behave that way toward me once they know it is present.

But there are risks that accompany that unguarded camaraderie among whites who believe they are among themselves, and ultimately those risks proved too much for me. I have found that often a concomitant of that unguarded camaraderie is explicit and unadorned verbal racism of a kind that is violently at odds with the gentility and cultivation of the social setting, and that would never appear if that setting were visibly integrated.

I will tell you that, without any question, the most bitter anti-white diatribes that I have ever heard have come from “passing” Negroes, living as whites, among whites, exposed every day to what white people say among themselves regarding Negroes—things that a recognized Negro never would hear. Why, if there was a racial showdown, these Negroes “passing” within white circles would become the black side's most valuable “spy” and ally.

—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

I have heard an educated white woman refer to her husband's black physical education student as a “big, black buck”; I have heard university professors refer to black working-class music as “jungle music”; and I have heard

a respected museum director refer to an actress as a “big, black momma.” These remarks are different in kind from those uttered in expressions of black racism toward whites. When we are among ourselves we may vent our frustration by castigating whites as ignorant, stupid, dishonest, or vicious. That is, we deploy stereotyped white *attitudes* and *motives*. We do not, as these remarks do, dehumanize and animalize whites themselves. From these cases and others like them I have learned that the side of themselves some whites reveal when they believe themselves to be among themselves is just as demeaning as the side of themselves they reveal privately to blacks. This is, I suspect, the weakness whites rightly want concealed behind the public face; and the possibility that I might witness—or might have witnessed—it is the source of their anger at me for having “tricked” them. For part of the tragedy is that the racism I witness when their guard is down is often behavior they genuinely do not understand to be racist. So the revelation is not only of racism but of ignorance and insensitivity. The point of adopting the public face when whites are warned that a black person is among them is to suppress any nonneutral expression of the self that might be interpreted as racist.

Of course this brand of self monitoring damage control cannot possibly work, since it cannot eliminate those very manifestations of racism that the person sees, rather, as neutral or innocuous. No one person can transcend the constraints of his own assumptions about what constitutes respectful behavior in order to identify and critique his own racism from an objective, “politically correct” standpoint when it appears. We need trusted others, before whom we can acknowledge our insufficiencies without fear of ridicule or retaliation, to do that for us, so as to genuinely extend our conceptions of ourselves and our understanding of what constitutes appropriate behavior toward another who is different. The fact of the matter is that if racism is present—which it is in *all* of us, black as well as white, who have been acculturated into this racist society—it will emerge despite our best efforts at concealment. The question should not be whether any individual is racist; that we all are to some extent should be a given. The question should be, rather, how we handle it once it appears. I believe our energy would be better spent on creating structured, personalized community forums for naming, confronting, owning, and resolving these feelings rather than trying to evade, deny, or suppress them. But there are many whites who believe that these matters are best left in silence, in the hope that they will die out of their own accord, and that we must focus on right actions, not the character or motivations behind them. To my way of

thinking, this is a conceptual impossibility. But relative to this agenda, my involuntary snooping thwarts their good intentions.

My instinctive revulsion at these unsought revelations is undergirded by strong role modeling from my parents. I never heard my parents utter a prejudicial remark against any group. But my paternal grandmother was of that generation of very light-skinned, upper-middle-class blacks who believed themselves superior both to whites and to darker-skinned blacks. When I was young I wore my hair in two long braids, but I recall my mother once braiding it into three or four, in a simplified cornrow style. When my grandmother visited, she took one look at my new hairstyle and immediately began berating my mother for making me look like a “little nigger pickaninny.” When my father heard her say these words he silently grasped her by the shoulders, picked her up, put her outside the front door, and closed it firmly in her face. Having passed for white during the Great Depression to get a job, and during World War II to see combat, his exposure to and intolerance for racist language was so complete that no benefits were worth the offense to his sensibilities, and he saw to it that he never knowingly placed himself in that situation again.

“Doctor, were I your wife, . . . mistaken for a white woman, I should hear things alleged against the race at which my blood would boil. No, Doctor, I am not willing to live under a shadow of concealment which I thoroughly hate as if the blood in my veins were an undetected crime of my soul.”

—Harper, *Iola Leroy*

My father is a very tough act to follow. But ultimately I did, because I had to. I finally came to the same point of finding these sudden and unwanted revelations intolerable. Although I valued the unguarded camaraderie and closeness I’d experienced with whites, it was ultimately not worth the risk that racist behavior might surface. I seem to have become more thin-skinned about this with age. But for years I’d wrestled with different ways of forestalling these unwanted discoveries. When I was younger I was too flustered to say anything (which still sometimes happens when my guard is down), and would be left feeling compromised and cowardly for not standing up for myself. Or I’d express my objections in an abstract form, without making reference to my own racial identity, and watch the discussion degenerate into an academic squabble about the meaning of certain words,

whether a certain epithet is really racist, the role of good intentions, whether to refer to someone as a “jungle bunny” might not be a back-handed compliment, and so forth. Or I’d express my objections in a personal form, using that most unfortunate moment to let the speaker know I was black, thus traumatizing myself and everyone else present and ruining the occasion. Finally I felt I had no choice but to do everything I could, either verbally or through trusted friends or through my work, to confront this matter head-on and issue advance warning to new white acquaintances, both actual and potential, that I identify myself as black—in effect, to “proclaim that fact from the house-top” (forgive me, Malcolm, for blowing my cover).

“I tell Mr. Leroy,” said Miss Delany, “that . . . he must put a label on himself, saying ‘I am a colored man,’ to prevent annoyance.”
—Harper, *Iola Leroy*

Of course this method is not foolproof. Among its benefits is that it puts the burden of vigilance on the white person rather than on me—the same vigilance she exercises in the presence of a visible black person (but even this doesn’t always work: some whites simply can’t take my avowed racial affiliation at face value, and react to what they see rather than what I say). And because my public avowal of my racial identity almost invariably elicits all the stereotypically racist behavior that black people always confront, some blacks feel less of a need to administer the Suffering Test of blackness. Among the cost is that I’ve lost other white friends who are antagonized by what they see as my manipulating their liberal guilt or good will, or turning my racial identity into an exploitable profession, or advertising myself in an unseemly manner, or making a big to-do about nothing. They are among those who would prefer to leave the whole matter of race—and, by implication, the racism of their own behavior—shrouded in silence.

But I’ve learned that there is no “right” way of managing the issue of my racial identity, no way that will not offend or alienate someone, because my designated racial identity itself exposes the very concept of racial classification as the offensive and irrational instrument of racism it is. We see this in the history of the classifying terms variously used to designate those brought as slaves to this country and their offspring: first “blacks,” then “darkies,” then “Negroes,” then “colored people,” then “blacks” again, then “Afro-Americans,” then “people of color,” now “African-Americans.”

Why is it that we can't seem to get it right, once and for all? The reason, I think, is that it doesn't really matter what term we use to designate those who have inferior and disadvantaged status, because whatever term is used will eventually turn into a term of derision and disparagement by virtue of its reference to those who are derided and disparaged, and so will need to be discarded for an unsullied one. My personal favorite is "colored" because of its syntactical simplicity and aesthetic connotations. But cooking up new ways to classify those whom we degrade ultimately changes nothing but the vocabulary of degradation.

What joins me to other blacks, then, and other blacks to another, is not a set of shared physical characteristics, for there is none that all blacks share. Rather, it is the shared experience of being visually or cognitively *identified* as black by a white racist society, and the punitive and damaging effects of that identification. This is the shared experience the Suffering Test tries to, and often does, elicit.

But then, of course, I have white friends who fit the prevailing stereotype of a black person and have similar experiences, even though they insist they are "pure" white.

It cannot be so embarrassing for a coloured man to be taken for white as for a white man to be taken for coloured; and I have heard of several cases of the latter kind.

—Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*

The fact is that the racial categories that purport to designate any of us are too rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately. But then, accuracy was never their purpose. Since we are almost all in fact racial hybrids, the "one-drop" rule of black racial designation, if consistently applied, would either narrow the scope of ancestral legitimacy so far that it would exclude most of those so-called whites whose social power is most deeply entrenched, or widen it to include most of those who have been most severely disadvantaged by racism. Once we get clear about the subtleties of who in fact we are, we then may be better able to see just what our ancestral entitlements actually are, and whether or to what extent they may need to be supplemented with additional social and legal means for implementing a just distribution of rights and benefits for everyone. Not until that point, I think, when we have faced the full human and personal consequences of self-serving, historically entrenched social and legal conventions

that in fact undermine the privileged interest they were designed to protect, will we be in a position to decide whether the very idea of racial classification is a viable one in the first place.

She really thought everyone would be like her some day, neither black nor white, but something in between. It might take decades or even centuries, but it would happen. And sooner than that, racism and the concept of race itself would become completely obsolete.

—Perry, *Another Present Era*

Yet it was not that Lucas made capital of his white or even his McCaslin blood, but the contrary. It was as if he were not only impervious to that blood, he was indifferent to it. He didn't even need to strive with it. He didn't even have to bother to defy it. He resisted it simply by being the composite of the two races which made him, simply by possessing it. Instead of being at once the battleground and victim of the two strains, he was a vessel, durable, ancestryless, non-conductive, in which the toxin and its anti stalemated one another, seetheless, unrumored in the outside air.

—Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*

These are frightening suggestions for those whose self-worth depends on their racial and social status within the white community. But no more frightening, really, than the thought of welcoming long-lost relatives back into the family fold, and making adjustments for their well-being accordingly. One always has a choice as to whether to regard oneself as having lost something—status, if one's long-lost relatives are disreputable, or economic resources, if they are greedy; or as having gained something—status, if one's long-lost relatives are wise and interesting, or economic resources, if they are able-bodied and eager to work. Only for those whose self-worth strictly requires the exclusion of others viewed as inferior will these psychologically and emotionally difficult choices be impossible. This, I think, is part of why some whites feel so uneasy in my presence: condescension or disregard seems inappropriate in light of my demeanor, whereas a hearty invitation into the exclusive inner circle seems equally inappropriate in light of my designated race. Someone who has no further social resources for dealing with other people besides condescension or disregard on the one

hand and clubbish familiarity on the other is bound to feel at a loss when race provides no excuse for the former because of demeanor, whereas demeanor provides no excuse for the latter because of race. So no matter what I do or do not do about my racial identity, someone is bound to feel uncomfortable. But I have resolved that it is no longer going to be me.

Note

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TALKING VISIONS

Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age

Ella Shohat, editor

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Foreword by Marcia Tucker

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Plate 9: *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995
Detail, Cut paper and adhesive on wall
Kara Walker
Courtesy of the artist and Wooster Gardens, New York, Collection Jeffrey Deitch.