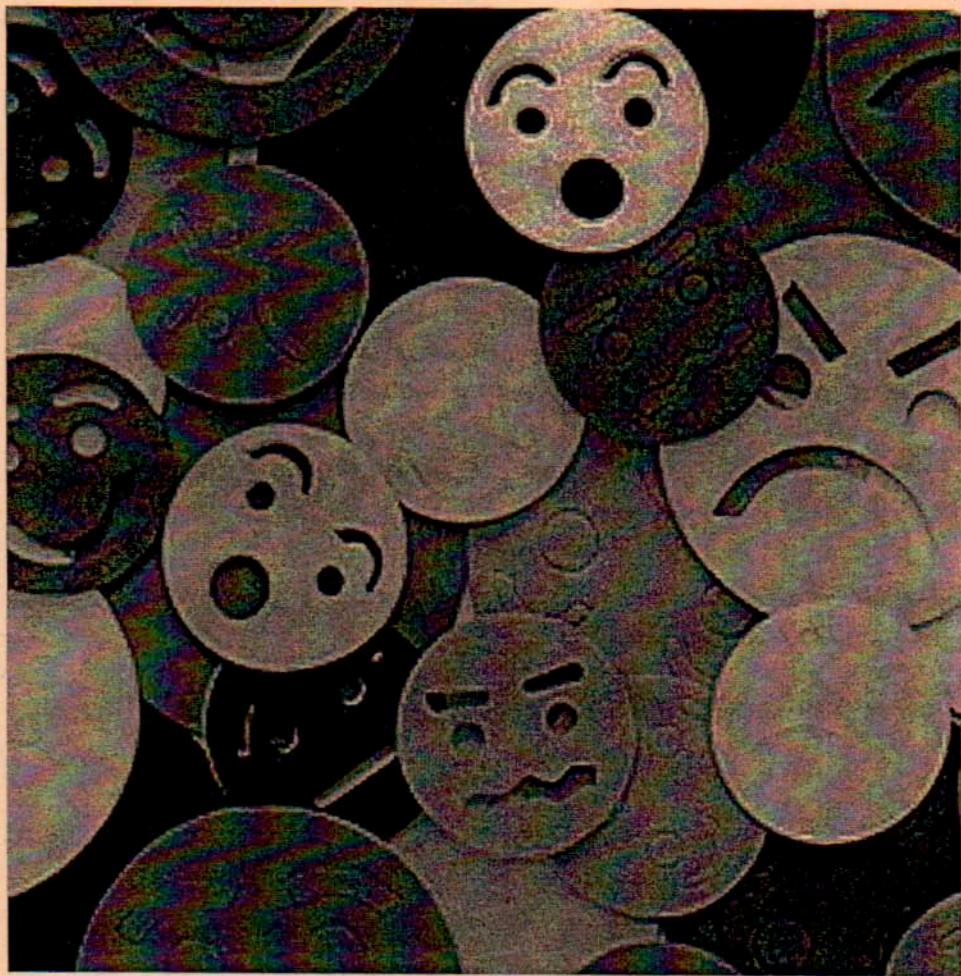


Ungrateful Black-White Girl

- clean + articulate -



by Nia

Black-White Girl, how did you get to be so angry?

I've lived my whole life among white folks and known almost nobody that could understand or identify with my experiences as a mixed-race person of color. That's reason enough to be angry, and it's the reason I'm writing this zine.

This is above all, a zine about race, but since I experience the world not only as a mixed-race person, but a mixed-race queer woman with an inconsistent gender presentation, you will find experiences pertaining to all those identities in this zine.

At the time I am writing this, I am a recent transfer to yet another college in yet another state trying to figure out where I fit in and process my interactions with some new and old people in some new and old situations.

What's it like to be a mixed-race? That sounds fascinating!

Well, before I got to be an angry Black-white girl, I got to be an insecure Black-white girl. Sometimes I still do.

Being mixed comes with constant pressure to prove "which side I'm on."

(Angry Black-White Girl)

I wrote in AB-WG #1 that constantly talking about race and my racial background is the only way not to allow my identity as a person of color to be erased. This talk vindicates me and my experiences with racism, vents the righteous anger I need to keep my sanity and signifies to POCs that I am one of them. But talking constantly out of a desperate need to prove myself is exhausting, both for me and for those listening. My white friends mostly tolerate it and even validate it, though I imagine they hope hating on Whitey in order to redeem myself is just a phase I'll grow out of. I often wonder if friends of color will be put off, see me as taking up too much space, (wouldn't that be just like a white girl?) self-indulgent, or insincerely attempting to prove how down I am and win their trust to boost my own ego.

Sometimes I wish I could just shut up. But talking about race, for me, is like treading water, and to stop is to drown, to assimilate. Assimilating, or "passing" *might* be easy for me if it weren't so unconscionable. I was raised to believe assimilation was not an option.

It means having to ask yourself questions like "does the way I identify" make me a race traitor?

I learned only recently that identifying as mixed is not good enough for a lot of people. Historically, mixed folks who are half-white have been treated and regarded as people of color. Whiteness, unlike other racial groupings, needed protecting, and not just anybody could get in, lest the power maintained by the white minority somehow leak out to lesser echelons on the racial food chain. Since if you're mixed and can't pass as "pure" white, you've been deemed a POC, to assert your mixedness then is to assert your whiteness, which means you think you're better than other POCs, the ones that likely took you in when white folks wouldn't have you. There have existed all kinds of words for this in the Black community; high yellow, uppity, house nigger (rather than field nigger.) None of the terms are complimentary. My dad even got called "Chinaman" when he was coming up, because of his complexion, despite clearly being of African and not Asian descent. At the same time, light skin is prized within Black communities. 9 out of 10 Black models you find in a magazine are no darker than caramel, or even honey. Skin bleaching creams are still widely used across the world, not only in Black communities.

But I've digressed, my point was that my story creates a jarring disturbance in the dominant mixed narrative and models of "racial identity development" I was taught in school (when having the privilege to learn about those like me at all.) I am light-skinned enough that people mistake me for white, though I was raised to identify as Black. Because in the community where I grew up people refused to accept me as Black, I began identify as mixed, and for me that was still a declaration of Blackness, as it was certainly a declaration of not being white: not having the desire to pass, not thinking I was better than anybody, not forgetting where I came from. And yet, I have to understand that most of these things were in the cards before I was even born. My dad married a white woman. He knew that his kids would likely not experience the discrimination he experienced based

on his color. It wasn't an accident. Our parents moved my sister and I out to a lily-white suburb when we were very young. We gained middle-class values, access to a "good" school system, relative safety from violent crime and were denied immersion in our culture, Black community and thus the opportunity to develop a positive self-image as Black women. The decision was made for us. I was raised on James Brown, Al Green, Tina Turner, Ray Charles, Bill Cosby, and later Richard Pryor, Salt 'n' Pepa, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. We were given Black names and celebrated Kwanzaa, but we had no Black community. I hope that anyone who thinks celebrating one's mixed heritage is selling out will consider cultural contexts like mine.

Being mixed means never fitting in where I belong and struggling every day to be seen for what I am.

In *Angry Black-White Girl*, I aggressively asserted my identity as a person of color. My self-identification as a mixed-race queer Black woman has not changed, but I often struggle with insecurity that I have no right to identify as Black or as someone oppressed by racism because the ways in which I experience racism are often different than those of my darker-skinned sisters. I cannot enter Black spaces with the expectation of acceptance or often don't even feel entitled to be there. I expect to have to defend my identity against assumptions that am invading 'safe space' as a self-proclaimed white ally who thinks they are down enough to hang in (appropriate) POC spaces or some sort of cultural tourist. I sometimes think that because I was raised 'white' or 'assimilated' that I have no right to speak on matters of race and racism. My friend Yvonne offered some memorable words of validation, "People think that to have had an 'authentic' experience as a person of color, you had to grow up in the hood. But I think, if you were raised around white people, if you were raised in the suburbs, and you survived that shit, then you're just as tough," you're just as hard."

It is absurd for me to try and assert my authenticity as a person of color by denying the privileges I was given growing up light-skinned and middle-class, but it feels good to hear someone acknowledge that "movin' on up" entails moving into hostile environments in isolation, having Black folks assert that you forgot where you came from, and knowing white folks are quietly (or vocally) wishing you would just 3

disappear, deny your people and your culture and just become one of them, because shouldn't you be honored that you even have that opportunity? If I don't fit in POC settings and don't trust white folks, then where do I go? Where do I belong?

Days in the life...

Thursday, August 14, 2008

**Passing
Massachusetts**

When I was young I had long, kinky hair. My mom tried her best with it, but she's a white woman and I was her first Black kid. What did she know about Black hair? We bought a big-ass paddle brush and it took nearly an hour every day to get it to slide through my locks without catching on a snarl. I hated having my hair brushed.

She took me to a white stylist and I hated her too. I dreaded going to the hairdresser like going to the dentist, cause having my hair brushed was painful and tedious, and I was an antsy little kid. She didn't have no patience for me either. I didn't understand why my hair took so much more work to manage than all the white women at the salon. It made me feel bad.

When I got to middle school the kids gave me hell about my frizz and the long braid I was never seen without. One day I wore my hair down and the kids started calling me Mufasa. My mom took me to a Black salon when I decided I wanted to get it relaxed (chemically straightened) so I could fit in, be beautiful even, and though I didn't realize this was part of it at the time, so I could be white. The chemical straightening process took hours, and the stylist had to put Vaseline around my roots so the chemicals didn't burn my skin, but she got some on my ears anyway. When I started to tell her that my ears were burning she berated me for being "tender-headed." After another hour under the drying chair and my mom shelling out \$100, my hair was no straighter.

Eventually I cut my hair short so it was easier to manage and started to wear it natural, proudly even. I cut my own hair and wouldn't let any one else touch it for years. My mom still always offers to buy me haircuts, and this past summer I gave in. She has a new stylist now, in the

town that she works in, a part of the North Shore my dad refused to move to because he didn't feel safe there. Everyone else in the salon is white, except for me and my sister.

After the stylist washes my hair, she asks me, "Who has curly hair in your family? Your dad?" I realize she must not know my dad is Black, my mom must not have told her. I guess there is no real reason it would have come up, but I felt betrayed. Like her silence had pushed me into the closet.

"Yes, my dad." He's Black and I'm Black too. I'm supposed to have curly hair. I am not an anomaly in my family. "My sister has curly hair too."

She didn't believe me. My sister was right there. She says, "Even when I wash your sister's hair it doesn't curl this much." I felt like I had outed my sister, like maybe I should stop talking. But really I wanted her to tell the stylist the truth. I was getting angry. I found myself wanting to shout and throw things and let everyone in the salon know that they were not looking at three white women but a race traitor and her half-breed kids. I will not be made to feel ashamed of my race. I will not. I will **not**.

It really kind of breaks my heart that my sister has straightened her hair for so long that its will to be curly has broken. She told the stylist, "Yah, it's curly. It was curly." The stylist replied, "How come I never see it curl?" "I dunno, it's long, it's wet, it's weighed down." She went back to reading her magazine.

My mom dyes her hair to cover up the grey too. In the beginning she died it dark brown, close to her natural color. But lately it seems like she dyes it lighter and lighter each time. Why are women as light-skinned as us trying so hard to be even whiter?

It probably seems like being so angry and taking things so personally is making a mountain out of a molehill, but feeling like my Blackness was being treated as a shameful secret made me want to scream. Because it's not just about today. I am realizing that feeling unable to proudly proclaim parts of who I am is not an isolated event of discrimination or bout of narcissistic paranoia. I've been living in this little bubble where being queer and of color were celebrated and now I'm being confronted with the real world and it's an ugly. I have walked through life believing that being middle-class and light-skinned protected me from the "real oppression" that other POCs experience. I've gotten to spend big chunks of time in spaces where I could freely be my whole self, and now that I'm not I realize that I was living with a false sense of security. I have always lived on this narrow line between the oppressors and the oppressed, white and POC, straight and queer, never feeling able to claim the oppression of the latter as my own because I thought I experienced privileges of the former. I was wrong.

I am trying to imagine what it must be like to never feel shame around any aspect of your identity. Not much luck so far.



Saturday, August 16, 2008

Who do I have to flash to be addressed as "Miss" around here?

Logan Airport

Yesterday was a long day, but ultimately a good one, because it got me where I wanted to be. It didn't start off great. I had to be up at 6:30 to catch a plane to LA, and I can be pretty surly when I don't get my beauty rest. And naturally, nothing puts me in a good mood like waiting in line at security checkpoints.

I got heated because the guy who checked my ID (which reads Sex: F) and the woman standing behind that beeping gate thing you have to walk through both referred to me as "sir." Even after I had to remove my sweater and had cleavage spilling all up out the low-cut tank top I was wearing underneath, no one apologized for the mistake. The first guy I don't blame so much, because he was talking to some other woman while checking my ID and never even looked at me. He was distracted. But the other woman was looking right in my face! It freaks me out when people can look me right the eye and think I'm a dude. I'm like, "How is it possible that you are seeing something so different from both what I know I am and how I am trying to present myself?" I've tried to pass as a dude on many occasions, but this was not one of them. And usually when someone has called me "sir" or "son", I've just let it pass. Sometimes I find it funny or convenient. I also used to think that if I corrected people who mistook my gender I would be asserting cissexual privilege. But I definitely wonder if she said it just to be a dick, just to tell me she thought I was an inadequate female. Lately, I have been trying to pass as femme, and I think that's why it upset me so much, even if I wasn't femmed-up or even slightly fly at the airport that morning. I couldn't believe that two differently TSA agents addressed me as sir one right after the other without standing within earshot of each other.

It's kind of like in Kaftka's "Metamorphosis," when the protagonist wakes up as a bug, except if he didn't know he was a bug, and just walked through the world as thinking he was one thing while everyone else treated him and saw him as something else.

Friday, August 22, 2008

Family time

California

Time spent with extended family is not time spent in safe space. My maternal grandmother disowned my mom for marrying my dad, and even though she reclaimed my mom when my grandfather died, there is this irreparable rift in the family psyche. I don't know how to explain it, other than to say all is not forgiven and forgotten, but my mom's side of the family sort of pretends it all never happened, and the rest of us keep quiet. Sort of.

Today my grandmother asked me what I was planning to major in at Mills and I told her Ethnic Studies, slightly afraid of what kind of response this answer might evoke. My grandmother is very opinionated/right about everything and there is NO point in arguing with her, regardless of how absurd, some of the things she says are. The answer "ethnic studies" did not provoke a tirade on why it was a waste of time or why non-European cultures are not worth studying, but how she knows about racial injustice because she lived through it, "it" being the Holocaust, and it made her sympathetic to the plight of the Negroes and "colored people" in the States when she came here from Hungary. This is, in fact, the same woman who disowned my mom. Where was her sympathy then? How can she not see the massive disconnect between her words and her past actions? My dad said she once told him that he would disown his daughter too if she married a Black man. She went on to say that she's not free of prejudice, and that she wished the US had dropped the atom bomb on Germany instead of Japan, because she hates Germans. Not a big fan of the Arabs either. My grandmother's capacity for cognitive dissonance is both mind-blowing and sort of awe-inspiring. If my powers of denial were that strong, I might be invincible. Or a sociopath.

Sometimes I try and reach out to my dad. Today I tried to tell him that it is getting harder and harder to be closeted around my family. I am slowly (and simultaneously) abruptly, if you can imagine that, being made aware of my own internalized homophobia (as well as racism.) I figured I could just quietly be gay on my own time and stay sort of in the closet until the family members that wouldn't be accepting die off. I don't have a partner so it didn't feel urgent for family I only see once or

twice a year to know. Plus, the little homophobe in my head thought, it's not like you're one to "flaunt" your sexuality, unlike some people, you can keep it under wraps. Horrible, right? Well, after putting this Queer Zine Archive Project sticker on my laptop, my days as a "stealth gay" seem increasingly numbered. I never realized what a big deal it was gonna turn out to be, but every time I can't take out my computer without outing myself it's a little reminder that I am in unsafe space, and lately that's been mostly family space. Even little un-ostentatious old me is starting to see a problem. I owe an apology to all those people I quietly judged for not repressing their sexuality, and am starting to come out of my own denial about the oppression I experience. And it still makes me feel a little crazy. I'm not there yet (free of internalized oppression,) but I am starting to come out of the cloud again that I thought I came out of when I became a queer activist. I was really only seeing the oppression of queers are kicked out of their homes or gay-bashed, but that's only a fraction of what oppression against the queer community looks like. Apologies to anyone else I may have hurt while preoccupied subconsciously hating myself.

Anyway, I was telling my dad that being closeted in the family is stressing me out because I wanted him to say that if I came out he would stand by me, support me, but I was afraid that if I asked him I would start crying, and that I didn't even know or have the energy to teach him what supporting me appropriately would look like. So I just listened to him go on about how there have been gays in the family before me (most of them dead of AIDS now though) and nobody turned their backs on them. At least my parents aren't anti-gay, they just don't really know what being a good ally looks like.

Wednesday, August 27, 2008

I could get used to this.

California, at my new school

This morning I went to the Ethnic Studies library, and they lent me 6 of the 7 books I need for my classes for FREE to use until the end of the semester. Then the Ethnic Studies librarian, took me across the hall to the Women of Color Resource Center, and said "This is your space. Welcome to Mills."

I feel like I have been waiting my whole life for someone to recognize me and welcome me as a woman of color without me having to try and prove anything.

Thursday, August 28, 2008

Awkward first day of school stories.

My day wasn't that bad overall, I just had this one drawn-out really awkward moment. I'm taking a class called Research Methods in Ethnic Studies about how historically research has served the dominant powers at the expense of the researched, often marginalized people (and how to conduct ethical, non-exploitative research.) Our first reading is about the US Army testing chemical warfare agents on state prisoners in the 60s. Anyway, in class today the professor asked all the students to go around and say their name, why they chose the class, if they have prior research experience and one fear they have, something a little deeper than fear of spiders. So I put myself out there and said I was afraid of not being accepted as a woman of color. (I was called on first.) And then everyone else said things like "I'm afraid I won't be able to keep up with the coursework," or "I'm afraid of graduating." Awkward.

My fear of not being accepted as a WOC has come up a lot since I've been here, in part because there are so many rad WOC here (the girl sitting next to me was named Nubia, which translates loosely to "Blackness") and I want them to like me, but also because when establish myself in a new place the pressure to assert my racial authenticity is stronger than ever. Coming from a history of racially segregated environments and being a mixed-race person there has

always been this intense pressure to prove "which side you are on," and if I don't align myself with students of color now, I feel they will be less trusting of me later. I guess I don't have to play the game, but I see it as just one (or several) of the hoops that a mixed girl's gotta go through to have her identity validated, at the end, hopefully.

The faculty and staff in the Ethnic Studies department got me right away without me having to pull out the dashiki, which might be because I have a Black name or because I am enrolled in "Mixed Race Descent in the Americas." (Can I just say how cool it is to be taking a class about people like me? Everyone should get to take courses whose curriculum reflects their experience, but I never thought of the fact that I never even expected to as lacking privilege. Huh.)

My experience with students has been a little different. I keep waiting for someone to tell me I'm not Black. It's a recurring theme in my life. No one has said it here so far, but when I met my RA at the Women of Color Reception she introduced herself and then turned to the two women next to me to invite them to the Black Women's Collective Meeting, totally ignoring me. I can't really blame her, people who recognize mixed girls as light as me as Black sure don't grow on trees, but it still broke my heart a little bit.

Friday, September 5th, 2008

This is what self-care looks like.

I was supposed to be interviewed for somebody's thesis on queer women of color's coming out stories today for the chance to win \$25, but I blew it off because if I have to explain or defend my racial identity to one more person today, that person is getting punched in the face.

Sunday, September 7, 2008
Letter to a White Researcher

Dear Researcher-

I am currently taking an Ethnic Studies course on anti-oppressive research methods in which we've been studying how historically white researchers have exploited communities of color in "researching" them, taken knowledge from them to benefit themselves and given little back. I challenge you to think about your intentions, conscious and subconscious in researching women of color's coming out stories as an outsider, to consider how much we are giving of ourselves to share these personal and sometimes painful experiences and to what degree you are giving back or making yourself anywhere near as vulnerable as your subjects. When I signed up for the interview, I had assumed that I would be interviewed by another women of color, and thus would not have to speak from a defensive place of trying to disprove the pervasive stereotype that communities of color are more homophobic than white communities. Ultimately, I didn't feel like the chance to win \$25 was enough to sell my story or my trust to a stranger who was likely to have an agenda (whether knowingly or not) based on her cultural context as a person who has been taught her culture is superior to others. This is not meant to be a character assassination, I know nothing about how hard you may have worked to develop an anti-racist framework or analysis. I just want you to understand why I did not feel comfortable going through with this interview. — NIA

I feel like part of being mixed is constantly being turned into someone else's research project. Conversations almost always become interrogations when my ethnicity comes up. That's sort of the theme of this issue. The first half addresses frequently asked questions, and the second explains why you should stop asking them.

Tuesday, September 9, 2008

Mixed Revelation

"White and Negroes are two distinct species, and mulattoes seem to be of the mule-kind." -Edward Long (1774)

Today I learned that "mulatto" comes from the word "mule," the infertile offspring of a horse and a donkey.

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

From tonight's assigned reading for "Mixed Race Descent in the Americas"

"The amalgamation of the races is not only unnatural, but is *always* productive of deplorable results. Our daily observation shows us, that the offspring of these unnatural connections are generally sickly and effeminate, and that they are inferior in physical development and strength, to the full blood of either race." (Sickels, 1972, p. 48 of Race, Marriage and the Law)

-Judge ruling against an interracial marriage in 1896.

On one hand it is really cool to get to study things that seem so relevant to my life and my history. On the other hand, I am having an awful lot information dumped on me every day that makes me feel less able to handle the world and how f'ed up it is, without enough time, space or community to process it and come to some sort of resolution before having even more hella depressing information loaded onto me.

Tuesday, September 23, 2008
Two roads diverged...

I got an email today from an old friend calling me out. The last few times we chatted I have been curt and cold. She has given me plenty of opportunities to get the reason why off my chest, and I have instead insisted on pretending like everything was cool. This was in part because I thought I did not have the words to explain why I have been angry with her, and in part because I didn't think the reasons for my anger were valid. Being called out on this has forced me to clarify my thoughts. It's a good thing, albeit a painful one.

The elephant in the room is that I'm jealous that she never seemed to have to struggle with so many of the things I struggle with. Specifically, that for her, as a white dyke, finding acceptance and community seemed to be simply a matter of cutting her hair. Viola, instant visibility. For conforming to that model she received approval and validity in the eyes of her peers. I, on the other hand, struggled endlessly to figure out where I fit in as a mixed-race queer woman who seems to be/often feels like neither the right kind of queer, nor the right kind of POC. This one friend and I were so tight that I just couldn't deal when she was let into the club and I still had all these hurdles to jump over, these challenges to forego alone before I could find community who understood and accepted me as a whole person.

The queer organization on campus has a public head-shaving event for National Coming Out Day. Sounds cultish, right? No one is made to do anything they don't want to do, but a lot of people feel marginalized by the use of short hair as a litmus test for queerness. For me, my hair is one of the few things which marks me as a person of color. Given how few of these markers there are, I cling to them like they are the only thing keeping me a float in a sea of whiteness. I could cut my hair hella short and probably pass as a white dyke, but to do so would be to assimilate. It would be to prioritize acceptance as a queer person over acceptance as a whole person. For me, this is unacceptable.

I am angry at the fact that white people get to set the standards of what queer is supposed to look like, and that it leaves me out or makes me choose between aspects of my identity. This is not my friend's fault, but I can't help but resent her for joining the club and leaving me to fend for myself. It's not as if anything she could do would single-handedly dismantle this paradigm, or help me find my way to acceptance, and so I have no real right to be angry with her about it. Unfortunately, that doesn't make my anger any more well-directed.



Saturday, October 4, 2008
Master's House, Master's Tools

Have you ever read something, or heard somebody say something, and thought "Yes! That is what I have been thinking/saying/trying to explain for so long, but articulated so much better?" That is how I felt when I read the most recent assigned reading for my anti-oppressive Research Methods class, "Black Feminist Epistemology," by Patricia Hill Collins.

A few years back, my friend Trouble tried to explain to me something very similar to what Collins talks about in her essay, but I didn't really get it. Trouble told me that it is essentially patriarchy that makes us feel crazy and irrational for having emotional responses to sexism that we can't always articulate logically enough to convince others that the oppression we experience is real and that the emotional responses we have are justified and valid. It is a product of sexism that one must be "logical" and "objective" (associated with masculinity) to be taken seriously, and that emotions and subjectivity (associated with femininity) are devalued and get you written off. Because those in power (white men) get to decide what logic is and who is objective, if we don't learn to speak their language and appropriate their tools to dismantle oppression (or even get them to acknowledge a.) it exists and b.) they are perpetrating it,) then they discount the things we do and say.

In her essay, Collins talks about how Black women have created their own ways of creating and validating knowledge, because the dominant/academic ways of doing so have rendered them invisible and invalid.

The historical/dominant way of creating and validation knowledge is referred to, at least in academia, as positivism. Positivists believe that for something to be true, it must be investigated by people who are unbiased (which in their minds, has usually meant from the dominant culture,) substantiated by quantitative data (have numbers and stats to back it up,) and be tested by conducting the same experiment many times and always getting the same results. In this way of thinking, what you experience is basically irrelevant unless you can prove that you experienced it, unless many other people have experienced it too, and unless you can explain it in an "objective,"

emotionally detached manner. Anything which fails to meet these criteria is not considered real knowledge. Can you start to see the ways in which this can be/has been used to marginalize people's experiences with oppression?

Now think about how many times this has happened to you. How many times have you had your experiences with racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, etc. invalidated because you were too upset and heated to be able to break it down for someone who has not experienced it or is invested in denying it? How many times have you been made to feel irrational or at fault for the oppression that you face? How many times have you been told, "I don't understand why you are upset about that," or "That's not racism," because your way of explaining it did not meet the listener's criteria of what constitutes oppression. It ain't right. And now you know why.

Collins breaks it down. "For most African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts [though they cannot be "objective"] are more believable than those who have merely read or thought much about such experiences." Should be common fucking sense, right? But people, particularly white academics, still make careers out of researching and telling the stories of people of color and other marginalized communities while we, the researched, continue to receive little prestige, reward or validation when we tell our own. (On that note, where is my research grant to study white people? I have lived among them for years, observing them in their natural habitats. I should have a PhD in White Studies after 21 years of field research.) They are considered logical, objective and removed while we are illogical, emotional and biased by our identities as marginalized people. We are biased (and so are they) and hopefully our agenda is liberation, but that threatens the established system and thus must be invalidated and suppressed.

To sum up that last point: in the Black feminist epistemology, or way of deciding what is and what isn't valid knowledge, "personal experience is considered very good evidence," but the positivists/haters say what our own experiences teach us is somehow less than their "empirical evidence." And therein lays the problem.

Sunday, October 12, 2008
On Whiteness

I kind of see whiteness and white privilege as this impenetrable force field/unconquerable monster. Hear me out.

If you are white and someone calls you out on doing something racist, because you have institutional power, white privilege or whatever you want to call it, you have two pretty good options. You *might* feel bad, guilty or even self-hating for a while, but you don't *have* to. You could also: a.) ignore it, invalidating the accuser by deciding that they are just crazy, stupid, wrong, drunk or whatever (the forcefield) OR b.) you can use it as a learning opportunity (the monster.)

This is what good anti-racists do, right? They hear out your accusations, contemplate them and then perhaps ask you what they should be doing differently, or if they are really advanced white people, take it upon themselves to figure out how to become less racist and more "accountable to people and communities of color." I put accountability in quotes because it's one of those super ambiguous words that activists throw around all the time that means something sometimes and is really empty other times.

Anyway, my point is that every time a white person who is really invested in being a better anti-racist is called out, it is a chance for them to rise above the natural inclination to react defensively or discredit their accuser and prove how good an anti-racist they are. They might not see it this way, because getting called out sucks. Especially when we are invested in proving that we are down. But you get to give yourself little anti-racist points for every time you don't flip out or break down crying when someone calls you a racist, whether it's blatant or sugar-coated. You get to a little merit badge and to move on to the next level. That's the monster part. If you are the POC who is doing the calling out, you are throwing your defenses at the monster and it is just eating them and getting stronger. You can't win, because ultimately your accusations actually benefit them.

I'm not too shy or even discerning about when and who I talk to about my distrust of white people, even hatred sometimes. Or so I thought. But then I realized I may be more verbose on the matter with white folks than with POCs. *Why?* Because POCs, I assume sometimes, will see right through me. They may think," this girl has something to

prove. She hates on white folks relentlessly to distance herself from them, because she is half-white, and it makes her feel better about herself and proves she's on the right side. But it's not really that interesting to listen to."

When I talk to white people about distrusting white people I think they kind of get off on it. They think, a.) she's not talking about me (or at best, I can learn from this,) and b.) the fact that she's telling me this means she trusts me, which means I am a *good* white person. Power up. The trust of a POC is kind of like a trophy to a white person. If you are white and don't think of it that way, maybe you should, because trusting y'all is like playing Russian Roulette sometimes.

So where did all this come from? These aren't new thoughts, but I was at Mangos with Chilis last night, and Leah Lakshmi read this dope fucking poem, which I will proceed to mangle in paraphrasing. It was something about how "down" white boys used to find her non-threatening, but then were scared of her, but now want to fuck her, because fucking angry brown girls is a much desired piece of proof as to just how down they are, that they can put on their shelves next to their bell hooks collection. And then she said something about making white boys give her head for 19 hours as reparations and the crowd went fucking wild.

For Allies

Sunday, October 12, 2008

How to be a better white ally

Actions speak louder than words. If you tell me that you are a good ally I will roll my eyes at you, but if you continually show me that you are a good ally then you will earn my trust and appreciation.

Some white people ~~who~~ jump at the opportunity to validate my experiences with racism when I don't need validation. I know that they are real. I know that my anger is justified. I don't need you to hold my hand and tell me that experiencing racism is hard. Another annoyance is people being so sympathetic when I talk to them about the oppression that I face that it comes off as insincere. Don't be that guy. You don't have to groan in frustration when I talk about perpetrators to prove that you are not like them, you are a good white person who knows it is not ok to do shit like that. You don't have to exclaim, "That's fucked up!" every time I tell you one of these stories. You don't have to interject with little sympathy noises and make me feel like a charity case, you just have to listen.

And lastly, when I tell you a story about my oppression, don't make it about you and your oppression. I know it might be difficult for you to sit still and let me bash a dominant group that you are a member of, and it might be tempting to try and make the story about a kind of oppression that you face, such as homophobia, in order to draw parallels and prove you can relate. But maybe you can't, and you need to be ok with that. And don't ever, ever assume that being marginalized in one aspect of your identity makes you an expert on someone else's oppression. Being white and gay is not like being Black, it does not give you insight into the Black experience or inherently make you less racist than your straight white counterparts. The similarities in the oppression we face are a bond upon which to build solidarity, but let us never forget the differences and their importance. When you assume to know somebody else's experience you silence them, often in the interest of proving how good an ally you are. You're not, so shut up and listen.

Sunday, October 12, 2008

Giving Credit Where It's Due: more on good white allies

One of the things that my white friends do, which I really appreciate but sometimes take for granted, is *not defend white people*. This is fucking crucial, but is something that beginner allies or unreliable allies sometimes falter on. When I vent to friends about some racist shit I experience, they don't ask me to explain or justify my anger or sadness. They don't say "maybe [the perpetrator] didn't know you were a person of color," or "maybe they were well-intentioned, but didn't know better." They don't say "is that really racist?" or "maybe that's not what they meant." When I tell you somebody did something that was triggering, you might think to yourself "oh shit, that sounds like something I would do" or "I've done that," but don't defend it. Defending other white people's actions is makes you feel better at my expense. You cannot defend the white people who perpetrate racism against me without invalidating my feelings and experiences. When you do this you perpetuate oppressive messages of the dominant culture: You're just crazy, the oppression you experience is not real, you are just blaming other people for your own insecurities.

You don't have to agree with everything I say. You can think I am being unreasonable sometimes. You are allowed to not understand. You can ask for clarification and even (probably should) use my sharing my pain as an opportunity to learn how *not* to hurt people. But understand that it took me a lifetime to be able to understand and identify my experiences as racism, and I will not be made to revert to blaming myself for the racism I experience. Understand that if you make me feel like my experiences with racism aren't valid, you are giving power to my own internalized racism, which says "You are not really a POC. You are full of shit. You get off on talking about how oppressed you are. This is all just a way of denying and hiding from your privilege. Other people of color have it way harder than you. Shut the fuck up." Of course I didn't create this voice, it is an internalization of externally imposed racism, which crept in to me like a parasite or virus and set up shop. Don't feed the hater, be an ally. Be a friend.

Monday, October 13, 2008

A Beginner's Guide to Responsible Interactions With Mixed-Race People (PART 1)

1.) Do not ask "What are you?" (or "Where are you from? No, where are you really from?")

"Though this question is often innocently intended, it reveals an awareness of unfamiliarity due to variances in physical features; underlying this question is the assumption of *foreignness or nonbelonging*... This increased attention to physical appearance is expressed in such labels as exotic, beautiful or fascinating [so not ok] (the Beauty)... Regardless of physical attractiveness, a person's awareness of his or her racial ambiguity contributes to a sense of vulnerability and feeling of being an outsider in some situations. Obstacles to claiming racial belonging unambiguously leave the individual *constantly vulnerable to rejection and identification as 'the Other' (the Beast).*"

-Beauty and the Beast: On Racial Ambiguity, by Carla K. Bradshaw

I am tired and somewhat traumatized by how many times I been asked this question, but I am even more tired and traumatized by people not accepting my answer. Firstly, I think that after they find out that I am a secret Negro, they stop listening, and miss the Lebanese and Hungarian part. Secondly, the response to hearing my answer is often some manifestation of "You don't match my stereotypes of what Black people look/sound/act like, thus your answer is unacceptable.

Try again." (Optional: "How 'bout Spanish? You could be Spanish!") If I want to have a conversation about my ethnicity, I will initiate it, I promise. The introduction, just so you can tell, might sound something like this, "Fuck white people."

2.) Don't try to test my racial authenticity and allegiances.

Questions like "Where did you grow up, around mostly white folks or mostly folks or color?" might sound more innocent than asking to touch my hair, put are directed by the same purpose: to find out how Black *really* I am, and how much I am full of shit, trying to be something I'm "not". A friend once jokingly threatened to "take away my Black card" (symbolizing membership in the Black community.) But the joke is on her, cuz I never got a Black card! In fact I was flattered that she would even think I'd have one. I'm still on a waiting list for that somewhere, but it might be a while, 'cause I can't even figure out where the entrance exam ends.

Seriously though, if you find yourself wanting to ask a mixed or ethnically-ambiguous-to-you person tons of questions, or any question designed to help you determine their ethnicity, **check yourself**. Is this you learning at their expense and discomfort? (Probably!) Are you giving anything back to them in exchange for this learning opportunity? Reparations? 40 acres and a mule? A "get out of answering monoracial people's stupid questions for the rest of your life" free card? If not, then just **don't do it**.

The PREJUDICE+POWER Paradigm

I want to address this whole idea of prejudice + power = racism that liberal whites are so invested in. I believe the idea was constructed to defeat the argument of "reverse racism," which is the idea that people of color can be racist/oppress white people. With the aforementioned formula, whites who are trying to be anti-racist argue that people of color don't have the institutional power to really oppress anybody and thus POCs are off the hook and white people are the only people who can be racist/perpetuate racism. I understand that this argument was taken up to counteract the argument that if people of color can be or are racist then everybody is racist and *nobody* has to work on their shit. Part of the reason I'm not in this camp is that I require a base level of intelligence from people that I interact with. The bar isn't that high, the bar is that they don't believe in reverse racism and are never going to ask me stupid questions like, "Why is it OK for Black people to use the N-word and not me? It's not fair! Wahhhh!"

Another reason I don't support this argument is because giving white people the monopoly on racism gives them *more* power. There are white people who will argue with people of color who admit to being racist. "Oh no, you can't be racist, you can only be prejudiced, don't worry." In some bizarro way, I think "good" white people kind of enjoy thinking they have a monopoly on racism. I think that they actually enjoy feeling guilty and trying to show how accountable they are for their oppressive thoughts and behaviors, but that's another story.

Anyway, my last bone to pick with the prejudice plus power argument is that it minimizes the impact of racism perpetuated by people of color against other people of color. It's like they are trying to tell us, "You guys can shoot each other with Nerf guns, but all the heavy artillery belongs to us (because we control the institutions.)" It's true that the military, the corporations, academia and the scientific and medical establishments are controlled by white people (just to name a few) and that they pretty much have a monopoly on the ability to perpetuate racism with institutional power. But that doesn't make internalized racism any less hurtful. On an interpersonal level I think racism from POCs can be even more damaging, because I don't expect

it the way I anticipate racism from white folks. The insidiousness of such racism is that you let your guard down in POC spaces because you so badly want to be able to trust people you think are like you and when you realize sometimes shared experiences with racism aren't enough, it's like a slap in the face.

Sound Advice

"Whites who want to be allies to people of color: You can educate yourselves via research and observation rather than rigidly, arrogantly relying solely on interrogating POCs. Do not expect that POCs should teach you how to behave non-oppressively. Do not give into the pull to be lazy. Think, hard. Do not blame POCs for your frustration about racism, but do appreciate the fact that POCs will often help you get in touch with that frustration. Assume that your effort to be a good friend is appreciated, but don't expect or accept gratitude from POCs. Work on racism for your sake, not "their" sake. Assume that you are needed and capable of being a good ally. Know that you'll make mistakes and commit yourself to correcting them and continuing on as an ally, no matter what. Don't give up.

POCs, working through internalized racism: Remember always that you and others like you are completely worthy of respect, completely capable of achieving whatever you take a notion to do. Remember that the term "people of color" refers to a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These various groups have been oppressed in a variety of ways. Educate yourself about the ways different peoples have been oppressed and how they've resisted that oppression. Expect and insist that whites are capable of being good allies against racism. Don't give up. Resist the pull to give out the "POC seal of approval" to aspiring white allies. A moment of appreciation is fine, but more than that tends to be less than helpful. Celebrate yourself. Celebrate yourself. Celebrate the inevitable end of racism."

-From "Something about the Subject Makes It Hard to Name" by Gloria Yamato.

Sunday, October 12, 2008
My million dollar idea (TM)

I have this idea for a way to confront, or at least address, racism through conceptual art, in the tradition of Adrian Piper, Rent-a-negro.com, Blackpeopleloveus.com and Stuff White People Like. The concept is promoting the idea of rewarding white people for rising above opportunities to react to things in racist ways with like, a gold star, a cookie, It could
be a board game! The object would be to collect as many rewards as possible for good/anti-racist behavior.

"You landed in a 'called out' corner! How do you respond? Don't take it to heart and get on with your life (minus 3 cookies) or say "Thank you, POC! I'm sorry that I hurt you and will spend the rest of this evening brainstorming and researching how I can better check my white privilege and become more accountable to communities of color," (collect 3 cookies.) Extra cookies if you can a.) explain what being accountable to communities of color actually means and b.) give a concrete example."

Shit, if you can do that, you win the whole game.

Unfortunately, in the tradition of most great conceptual art, it will be misunderstood and thus fail to achieve its purpose, which is to get white people to think critically about...everything. (I totally see it spiraling out of control like the Day of Apology in Angry Black White Boy.)

So here is another idea that makes it less conceptual comedy and more educational tool.

At the end of the game you get one point for each cookie. If you finish the game with less than 5 cookies, you are a wannabe ally. You are well-intentioned, but mostly a nuisance, potentially more part of the problem than the solution. Don't give up hope, do your homework and try again. If you have 5-10 cookies by the time the game ends, you are a "good liberal," convinced *you* don't have a racist bone in your body. Revisit the game when you realize bumper stickers and preaching "tolerance" are not enough. If you finish the game with more than 10 cookies, you are an advanced white person. You should know that you are not off the hook. First get over yourself, then get back to educating your peers.

"People think that to have an 'authentic' experience as a person of color, you had to grow up in the hood. But I think, if you were raised around white people, if you were raised in the suburbs, and you survived that shit, then you're just as tough."

-Yvonne

Big ups to Lily, Dee, Trubz, Manish, Sheena, Sere, Ishmael, Chloe, Kruti and Khalil, Raquel and Eli for their support.

This zine was also inspired by Jay Smooth (illdoc.com,) Carmen Van Kerckhove (racialicious.com,) Adrian Piper, Jaime Hernandez (creator of Love and Rockets, which I stole the comics from) and Lauren Jade Martin of Quantify Zine.

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