

## **On Being An American Black Student**

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I was a twenty-year-old black girl. It was spring in New York City. I had traveled by bus from southern Virginia. The colors were grey—the sky, the buildings, the sidewalks, the trees. It was Sunday morning. Only a few people were on the streets. I hoped I wouldn't get lost. My knuckles and jaws were tight.

I knocked on a door inside a small but well-kept midtown hotel. A young woman not much older than me peeped out. Thin and plain looking, she had blonde hair and blue eyes. She smiled and said, "Come in. You're just in time." There were several rooms. Leading me into one of them she said, "Make yourself comfortable," then left and returned with a guy who was about my age. She told me his name and said they would interview me together for the international college student program. Their smiles did nothing to allay my fear or my nervous stomach.

"What is your opinion on American –Russian policy...?" they began. I never heard the entire question. I knew I was in trouble. My mind began to flash newspaper headlines. I racked my brain trying to piece together a coherent stream of ideas. None would come. Despite patient smiles, their eyes told me my performance was disappointing. Their reality was not mine. I could not debate or discuss it. We clumsily made a few more nonconnecting exchanges before I went back to the streets of Manhattan.

Anger and disappointment welled up. I walked in a daze. I had traveled ten hours to get there. In five minutes I learned what I had suspected all my life: that my education had prepared me to live only in an American "Negro world," not "the world." I felt my first great doubt about why I was studying so hard. If all that diligence was not going to pay off, why do it? Feeling alone with the humiliation and shame of that experience, I felt a new kind of fear and anxiety begin to take root. I was terrified that each succeeding encounter would reveal more of my vast ignorance of the white man's world. This is a story about how I was trained to take my American Negro female place.

We lived in a state that was racially segregated by law. My parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles often spoke quietly about events. They were afraid something awful would happen to us kids even before we grew up. As a young black child, before I could even think, I was told how bad things are out there in the world, how there's no place for us, how people don't like us.

Speaking my mind could get me killed. My own thoughts and feelings were secondary. My questions, curiosity, and enthusiasm had to be bridled. Learning this would help me survive. I was often told: "Shut up!"; "Who asked you your opinion?"; "Who said so?"; "You don't know what you're talking about!"; "Mind your own business!"

They felt that the sooner I learned to speak only when spoken to and to say no more than I had to, the better it was going to be for me. It was a fear, a silence put into me—and most black kids – to prepare us, to toughen us up for the real world like soldiers for war. I learned to respond with words that had double meanings and a rhythm and pace that could change or modify any message I was trying to get across.

Yet my parents had hopes that adulthood would be better for us than it had been for them. I was sent to kindergarten at age five. The teacher, a friend of my parents, made learning and school seem like a lot of fun. Because of that I looked forward to attending elementary school, but what I found was incredibly boring. At age six I knew that the teacher, who was black, did not care about most of us. I can't remember her ever showing delight in anything I did. So much had to do with just sitting there, just serving time.

Our first "lesson" was to sit down and be quiet. Our second lesson was to memorize the pledge of allegiance to the flag. We did not understand what any of the words meant. Being taught to perform like trained dogs, we were given stars and A's when we were good; if we could not perform, we were ridiculed and punished. When the teacher's punishment did not work, our parents were called in. We were learning to behave, not to question or to think.

Most of what I was taught in school seemed foreign to my life at home. Learning to read from Dick-and-Jane readers I thought, *This must be how white children play*. These standard American public school readers were published from 1935 to 1965. They presented the American family as well-to-do, northern European Caucasian Christians leading trouble-free lives. Along with the mythical ideals of owning-class European culture, the message I got from my black teachers was that something was wrong with us if we were too different: skin too dark, hair too short or too kinky, dress too colorful, talk too loud.

I learned to be ashamed of who I was. Slowly and laboriously we read each word in *Little Black Sambo*, a book still being published today. Even though we were six and seven years old, we knew the story made fun of us in a cruel and demeaning way. *Is this supposed to be some kind of joke?* I thought as I examined the teacher's face to get a clue. I could see she was seriously trying to teach us to read.

In fourth fifth, and sixth-grade history and geography classes, we learned about the bravery of American whites and about European imperialism, slavery, and the "dark continent." One week a year, pictures of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver were brought out. This was supposed to make us feel proud, but we either fell asleep or tuned out. Elementary school had additional pitfalls. Fights often began on the playground and on the way home from school. I now see that those fights were dramatizations of feelings of jealousy, indignation, frustration, rage, and despair. I was glad I was not the teacher's pet, though none of us really escaped. As victims of invalidation we acted out our distress patterns on one another in the only "safe" place we had; in the schoolyard, we practiced turning on ourselves and our schoolmates. The seeds of internalized racism sprouted as we learned to hate, fear, and mistrust one another.

When it was time to go to junior high school, I rode on a school bus past neat and well-equipped white schools to a small, dilapidated black school. My older brothers had been sent away to a better school. I felt my parents did not care much about my education because I was a girl. I didn't like going there at all, and although we never spoke of it, the other black kids didn't like it either. The bus trips were often tense and unruly. We knew ours was the worst school in the county. During the ride, a handful of kids dominated the rest of us by playing "the dozens" – talking about everybody's mother in a negative way and putting one another down. This was part of learning how to

survive. If you could not do it, you had to fight or silently withstand humiliation. You also learned to hide your feelings by being “cool” or to disguise them by being “tough.”

Inside the classroom the teachers urged us to study. Most of us felt it wasn't going to make a difference in our lives. We had learned that our way of talking, which expressed our experiences, was not a legitimate language, that our way of singing and playing music was not a legitimate musical expression, and that our way of being in the world was seen as uncouth. We saw how our people had to behave and talk differently “out there” to “smile and shuffle” in order to “get over.” We did not know the smiles were meant to hide the fear.

Those of us who showed ability coupled with willingness to pay attention were pushed by our teachers. They preached that we owed it to our race to prepare ourselves to go to college. They guided us into courses that would prepare us for technical jobs in fields with worker shortages. It was a test of memory, of concentration, and of willingness to study and repeat the ideas from the textbooks and teachers without debate or discussion. To them it did not matter what we might want to do. We were told they knew what was best for us.

It wasn't easy to decide to be a good student, but my mother always threatened that if I didn't study and get a scholarship to college, I would end up working in a white woman's kitchen. She was a domestic worker and dreaded this possibility. However, I had to be very careful to try not to be too smart. It was just one more thing to isolate me further from the other students. Being from a poor family, I could not afford the new clothes, junk jewelry, and junk food most of the students felt were important. They were trying to have fun *now*: life after high school seemed hard for black people, an end to the freedom we enjoyed at the moment.

At the same time, I learned from my father that being a black female was more problematic than being a black male. I longed to grow up and be on my own. Before that was to happen, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling that “separate but equal” schools were unconstitutional was to change our lives and test us even more. Some black parents immediately tried to enroll their children in white schools but were turned away. Almost overnight, however, our rundown school was painted. A gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria, and chemistry lab were added, and a new principle with a crew of young black teachers brought in. Students who could not see the handwriting on the wall were suspended from school, most of them never to return.

Every few months we were tested, and our test scores were published and discussed by everyone. The county board of education said it showed we would never survive in white schools and that we were better off where we were. But our parents knew our separate facilities were not equal and would not give up their efforts. When black kids integrated the white schools, black parents and teachers told us we would have to work really hard to prove ourselves. The white teachers didn't say anything to us or about us; it seemed nothing was good enough for them. When we did something we thought was better they tried to act as though it hadn't happened. We quickly arrived at an understanding of the fact that there was no room for us inside white schools. Our blackness – the thing that had always made us so visible—now made us disappear.

But our parents were determined that we would stay. To them, abuse was just taken for granted. They would tell us that if we got the same training as white students

and worked twice as hard, the world would see our talents and opportunities would open up.

However, our white classmates picked up our white teachers' cues. They tried not to see what was going on. As our isolation mounted, we could not name what was happening to us, but we knew how it felt. When we tried to speak of it, we were asked, "What are you talking about?" and by our silence we hid our anger at the distortion of our identity and the exclusion of our reality. We didn't realize it at the time, but in order to cope, we searched for new ways of being in the world, began to draw on new sources of strength. Those of us who couldn't make the shift fast enough failed a number of times, but those who kept trying became almost unstoppable.

My first college was a black school in southern Virginia. I got a scholarship to major in the sciences but yearned to be in a student in the art department. I had difficulty appreciating the administration's efforts to "civilize" us. Gloves, dresses, and hats were a Sunday requirement. We even had lessons in how to behave at an afternoon tea. We were required to attend ballet and classical music performances given by white groups brought in from elsewhere. Only slowly did this school become a little more relaxed.

Years later in art school I painted my white models red, blue, or green. Usually my white instructors said nothing, but occasionally one would say, "That's not the way you do it!"— meaning that was not the way to make art. But for me, art had to express how I saw, felt, and thought.

It was only much later that I began to understand what it meant to grow up in a culture where you learn to see yourself through the eyes of people who are different from you. I hadn't realized that my efforts to hide behind the façade of an educated person did a lot of damage to the young black girl I was. When people refuse to see you, who you are begins to slip away and you start to feel you don't exist. I find that trying to express my real voice in my work often causes tremendous conflict, not only within other people's expectations, but within myself as well.

Despite the difficulties, the terrible silence of isolation forces me to continue to try to connect with others. Sometimes white people say to me, "You must be very exceptional!" I have learned this is a way of rationalizing that somehow I must not really be black. I know this is no acceptance at all. When I try to point this out, the response is usually, "What are you talking about?" There we go making nonconnecting exchanges again. This time I know it is not caused by some failing on my part.

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