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"When We Are Capable of Stopping, We Begin to See"

Being White, Seeing Whiteness

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Prologue

1. i was born, i will die, the end.[1]
2. ego loves to talk about itself.
3. but where is the way home?

"i" have been remade several times. Feminism remade "me." Recognition of the profound level of my coimplication with racism and imperialism remade "me." Migrations, across the UK and across the Atlantic, remade "me." Self-identification as lesbian remade "me." And a small yet infinite awakening to the vastness within which all these "me's" exist, is just now not only remaking "me" once again, but also asking *who* that "me" actually is.

i was born, i will die, ego loves to talk. And yet, the way home must be found. Increasingly, from a new (to me) vantage point that sharpens and reframes prior convictions, the unreality of "race" is evident. Of course it always was, and many people, among them a good number of race theorists, have asserted and clarified this point. Yet the challenge has remained that of how to, in Audre Lorde's terms, "dismantle the master's house" while, not only do we live in it but *it*, by some architectural trick, lives in *us*.[2] How to enter more deeply and self-consciously into one's racial identity in order to challenge it while making sure, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's terms, that any moves toward essentialism remain "strategic."[3] Not, in other words beyond a point of *identifying* with one's (small "i") identity. Indeed it may be that a spiritual path of disidentification from what *appears* to be, is in reality the way home.

Finding the way home, then, entails finding the way out—out of the master's house. This essay will ask, though, how I got *in*—into the master's house—in the first place. For asking how we got in—into this mess called racism—is, I believe, an important step toward getting *out*. Toward getting home.

Placing the "i" in quotes, changing its casing? Changing its garb, remembering its provisionality, non-sovereignty. Not "i"dentifying means knowing there is an infinity beyond history. And yet. We live in our version of reality, its conventions, its violence. So I plunge back into the "I," in order to examine the conditions of its making.

I

I have been performing whiteness, and having whiteness performed upon me, since—or actually before—the moment I was born. But the question is, what does that mean?

While the subjective meanings of my racial identity have changed considerably over time, the objective meanings of my being white have changed little or not at all from the moment of my birth until now. Here, I mean to underscore the material bedrock of race and class structuring, which have served to anchor race privilege in my existence in the two countries in which I have lived. Coming to consciousness about one's racial identity and/or race privilege as white is not, then, by any means the same as transforming it. Racial positioning and self-naming are contextual and thus their transformation must always entail collective processes, ones that take place, so to speak, within history, rather than as individual journeys. Racial identity is also relational, made through the claiming and the imposition of samenesses and othernesses: I realized early in the work for this essay that writing it would by no means entail speaking only about myself. This relationality also means that I cannot discuss racialization without also talking about racism and antiracism.

However, let me suppose that I am concerned here, at least in part, with my sense of self. And let me also suggest that, in living out a sense of self, I enact—or better, I act from within and/or against—an assemblage of elements, drawn in turn from diverse histories, all the way from the familial, to the local, to the national, to the global, and translated into (self)-expectations, (self)-images, forms of (self)-disciplining, desires, and so on. Let me then suggest that my identity is all of this, and that it is also usefully understood as practice or as an ongoing process of practic*ing*, rather as an entity or thing, whether stable or changing. Racial identity can, in short, be understood as the situated practicing of a multifariously marked self.

Let me begin with some basic socio-data: I was born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1957. I spent my childhood in the outskirts (as we say over there) of Manchester, England, one of two daughters in a single-parent household. Before my sixteenth birthday I left the nest by moving to a wild boarding school in Devon and then to a staid university in Cambridge. (Actually, however, certain conventionalisms—including unquestioned homophobia and a patronizing approach to class—sat alongside the liberatory pedagogy of the former; by the same token some of my early lessons in radicalism took place in context of the latter.) Finally, through what my dear friend Emma memorably described as "a whim that got out of hand," I found myself, in 1979, turning twenty-one years of age in Santa Cruz, California. Since 1984, I have lived mainly in Oakland, California, although with a three-year sojourn further up the west coast in Seattle, Washington.

Notice that I have been able to say all of the above without mentioning race, whether as defining feature, as impediment, or as benefit. And that, in fact, is part of the trick of whiteness, in this historical moment and in those parts of the world wherein I have been white. As I have frequently said to students in the past five or so years, race privilege is the (non)experience of not being slapped in the face. As expressed far more eloquently by a woman whom I unfortunately cannot name here, for us whiteness is "a privilege enjoyed but not acknowledged, a reality lived in but unknown."[4]

So, let me run that through again. I was born in Cardiff in what was, if my memory serves me correctly (and it should, for I continued to return to my grandmother's house there up into my teens), an entirely white part of that city. I now know that because of its status as a port, Cardiff has one of the longest-standing black communities in Britain as well as one of the longest histories of interracial marriage. But the black community was in the docklands area, very far from our

home. Of course, being under three, I did not ponder this question at the time. However, I obviously knew about blackness somehow, because I actually remember startling my great-aunt by pointing to the (white) man delivering coal to our house, who, as a result of his line of work was completely covered in soot, and asking whether "that man was black." Both he and my aunt laughed, and told me no, it was just the coal.

How did blackness enter my consciousness (if only to reappear as misrecognition) in an apparently all-white world? Perhaps from my favorite children's story character of the time. In a series of books, which I would beg to have read to me again and again, the main character was Epaminondas, a "picaninny" who was constantly in trouble and who, as his mother would tell him at the end of each story, "didn't have the sense he was born with." Epaminondas and his mother lived on a plantation, somewhere in a mythified Africa. She wore bright dresses and bandanas, and smiled all the time, despite the endless trouble Epaminondas gave her. I was, then, at less than three years old, already a child of the British Empire, already taught through no malice aforethought on my mother's part, the beginnings of racist love. *Racist* love. Racist *love.*

It is interesting that one can, in fact (re)tell a white life through a racial lens. One can begin showing how, in fact, the white subject's formation is marked in myriad ways by her positioning in the racial order, spatially and discursively. Note too that my *racialization was displaced onto a putative Other. Seeing blackness was not seeing whiteness, although logically, it must , at some level, have also been just that.*

At three, I moved with my parents to the north of England. We lived on a brand new housing development (housing "estate" in British parlance)—so new in fact that our street was mud rather than pavement for quite some time. To my clear memory, no one of color (or to use British English, no one Black, no one of African, Caribbean, or South Asian descent) lived on the housing estate. When I went to preschool, all the children were white except for one girl of Caribbean descent. I can still picture the two thick braids worn around her head, framing her dark brown face. Although I have no other memories of her as a person (and indeed this is true of all the other kids at my preschool, too), I do remember some kind of solidarity between my mother and her father, since, like my mother by that time, he was a single parent.

When I saw blackness, this must have meant that I had already computed whiteness, or that I did so in that same instant. But whiteness seemed not to be named, as far as memory tells me. Odd really, since there was so much of it about . . . Also, notice that racialness did not totally define my mother's sense of this child's father—other contingencies were also in play.

Although the suburbs were all white in Manchester, this was not true of the city as a whole. I remember clearly driving into the city center with my mother, and passing neighborhoods that were poorer, and differently colored, from our own. The cracked paving-stones, the second-hand furniture stores, the men on the streets with loose flowing shirts and trousers (now I'd say kurta-pajamas), the women with saris and ill-matched cardigans, made an impact on my consciousness: fear of the unknown, fear of the dishevelled, of the seeming disorder which I can now more easily name as poverty.

About whom am I speaking? "Them," or me? How did I become white? Here, we may note that my whiteness and their Asianness were in part marked by class. I was positioned, historically, to drive through this neighborhood and find it Other, through the culmination of an imperial history that began long before my birth, through a process that in fact invented race and "classed" it. That history positioned this small child, me, as a spectator behind the glass of a car window. And these are, indeed, components of my whiteness. But another component of my whiteness is, in fact, my seeming neutrality, my seeming unmarkedness. For why do we not, apparently, need to know what I was wearing, whether my clothes were in my view matched or ill-matched, whether my family's trousers were tight, or whether they flowed. One can name only a part of one's racialization by making a spectacle of an Other.

At elementary (or primary) school, the children were again white except for the three children of one Indian family. The middle child in that family, Shalini, was in my class. I remember at least some of our classmates making hostile comments, mostly behind Shalini's back, and also leaving notes on her desk, with comments about her dark skin. Shalini and I had a friend in common

(another classmate, also white), and the two of us were invited to tea. I was perhaps nine years old. Her family's house, just two doors from the Catholic church, smelled of spices unfamiliar to my nostrils (clichéd, but true). Her mother, when we went to tea, gave us snacks that at the time smelt and tasted completely different from anything I'd ever encountered—strange and therefore a little frightening, but not unpleasant. Now, of course, I'd recognize them, and be pleased to eat what I now know to be vegetable pakoras at anyone's house. Moreover, Britain is a different place now from how it was in the 1960s, and some version of Indian food has entered the white mainstream: white mothers are probably routinely picking up frozen pakoras at the supermarket and bringing them home to give to their white kids after school.

My connection with Shalini was such that she told me things—like her father's job; where her father was from; what her own middle name was, and what her sister's name meant (I still remember); what her father's full name was (long, complicated to my ears, and I forgot it immediately); how to pronounce her last name correctly, as opposed to how it was pronounced in England. I don't recall ever going back to Shalini's house, although I would play with her often in our other friend's backyard. Unlike most of our elementary school peers, Shalini and I ended up at the same high school (the selective one, for the supposedly "brainiest" kids), and we used to walk home together, braving the jeers of the kids coming out of the other school—what was at that time called a "secondary modern" or non-college preparatory school, on the way past.

In writing of Shalini, I was telling the truth (that is, I did not lie). But one may note that the burden of my narrative was one of redemption of my white self. I did not leave those racist notes. I did like the pakoras. I got to like them even better as an adult. I grew to love (the food of) the Other. In short, the narrative implies, I am a <u>good</u> *person, racially. I am, it claims, not racist. Shalini and I were united by class (or more precisely, by an educational stratification system that is generally class-marked). Therefore we were not divided. We were united. History made me, and had I been a few years younger, my story would have been different. I am telling what James Clifford, speaking of ethnographic practice, calls a "fable of rapport."*[5] *And as is true in general of fables of rapport, my narrative protests my own "innocence:" my innocence as in "not guilty," and my innocence as in "youthful, naive."*

Thus, this seemingly benign story, or rather, this story in which I appeared to <u>myself</u> *as benign—and here is the solipsism of racism—turned out to be rather less straightforward than it first appeared. It turned out, in fact, to have some quite sickening aspects. We are frequently complicit with racism even when we are absolutely confident that we are not. Why am I drawing attention to all of this? I could, after all, have simply re-edited my own story. But the way "out of the master's house," the way home, requires, I think, as great an honesty and clarity as the ego can muster in any given moment. I feel compelled, at* <u>this</u> *moment, to offer as much detail about my route "home" as ego will permit, as much of what is required of us as ego can, at any point, recognize and name. And I am drawing attention to this particular move, that of a narrative deployment of Others in such a way as to secure one's own "redemption," because it is a common one, a "wrong turn," taken frequently by antiracists and self-analysts of whiteness.*

As I said, I went to a new school. I was eleven. At this new school, out of about a thousand students, there were in addition to Shalini and her brother three others who were not white. It speaks to what Elizabeth Alexander has described as the "neon footsteps" effect of being a person of color in a primarily white environment that I can picture the three, and even remember two of their names.[6] But it is important to note that, while memorable as signs, by their sheer presence, this did not mean that there was a recognition of them, on my part, in terms of their personhood. For I did not know their personalities, their ethnicities, how they ended up in this school. It is true that there was perhaps no reason why I should remember or ever have known details about students who were not my age and therefore never my friends nor in classes with me. But in fact it was the unevenness of my recognition which makes it worth comment. For I cannot call to mind even the faces of any—truly—of the other perhaps three hundred white students who between them would have made up the cohorts of each of these black young people. As I said, then, these students were signs from my white standpoint, simul-

taneously over- and under-visible. Nor, I think, did their presence disturb the whiteness of this space, so much as it underscored it. For this was not an environment whose center of gravity was amenable to being moved away from its particular brand of northern English, middle-class, white conventionalism to accommodate even other varieties of whiteness, let alone any manner of non-whiteness.

Again, is the examination of my own racialization, my own whiteness, only to be achieved by this minute cataloguing of "Others I have encountered?" Indeed is it to be achieved at all by that means? What is whiteness? It is in part, I would suggest, a mere mirroring of a mirroring, a "not" of a "not." Whiteness comes to self-name, invents itself, by means of its declaration that it is not *that which it projects as Other. And there is thus a level at which whiteness has its own inbuilt complacency, a self-naming that functions simply through a triumphant "I am not that." But beyond a point, I fail to name my whiteness if all I do is shout "not that," point to those who occupied the space of* "almost," *(that is to say, almost nonexistent from a white purview) in my* "almost *all-white" school.*

To mark out whiteness beyond the "not," as an effect of its context-specific and historically formed disciplinary and cultural practices, is challenging since I write in one country, but about another. Whiteness, then, has both local and global resonances. Some of the terms and relationships through which *this* whiteness was articulated may be less than meaningful beyond their own context: that of a particular lower-to-middle middle class, northern English, Tory-voting, largely suburban, Cheshire-accented social conservatism. Although not a church-run school, the Church of England was much in evidence in it, with a religious assembly every day, and one religious knowledge class per week taught, as a matter of fact, by a master who was usually drunk. We called the teachers "Sir," if they were male, of course, or Mrs. So-and-So if they were female. They called the boys by their last names—"Thompson!" "Yes, Sir?"—and the girls by their first. We girls would be told off by the senior mistress for pushing the sleeves of our sweaters up to our elbows—"You're not a washer woman!" "Yes, Miss Greystone." We were told once by an angry Latin master to "Go home and dig potatoes! That's all you're good for!" One can, of course, note rather easily the class-coding of both insults, as well as the anti-Irish prejudice encoded in the latter.

We wore uniforms, which lagged stylistically about seven or ten years behind the world beyond. But we made them our own, turning school skirts into minis, school coats into midis or even maxis. We wore as many bangles as we could get away with on each arm (note that these were imported from India, and coincided with the "hippie trail" of our older white counterparts) and slouched around in a particular kind of shoe called "desert boots." Class, via the educational stratification system mentioned earlier, marked our bodies since all of Manchester, Stockport, and parts of Cheshire could tell, by uniform, which child went to which school, what that suggested about where she or he came from, and what it portended for her or his future. We were thus policed formally, and policed one another also, reading accent, musical taste, appearance, and translating all of these into the terms of class.

Is this, then, how I was taught to be white? Yes and no. No, since I was not born in the school, nor adopted into it from a childhood in the forest with wolves. I was, in other words, already thoroughly white before I arrived in that school. But what I can *point to is the imposition, in context of that school, of a particular form of whiteness marked, as I have said, by region, class and political orientation.*

There were clear markings of alterity within whiteness itself, and I learned these well. There was only one skinhead, for example, in the school. She dressed differently from the rest of us, and listened to soul and Motown music. All of this tagged her for the rest of us, and for herself, as working class. (Interestingly, though as no particular surprise, her taste in music did not connote any kind of connectedness to blackness, whether of the US or Britain.) There were, as I've said, only five students "of color" in the school.[7] There were also only three students with Germanic names (myself and my sister amongst them). And this too signalled Otherness or at

least accrued a status of suspectness on our part, given both simple ethnocentrism, and the sense that in the minds of those around us, World War II had ended only last week. (Were we spies? Or just foreigners?) It seemed that, endlessly, people would say, "Are you German?" And I'd say, "No. My father's family are Polish Jews." (Choosing between alterities? Partly. But also telling the truth as I knew it.) Coming from a Labor-voting family was a mark of outsiderness (we scored there, too). Coming from a one-parent family was unspeakable. Our first term, we were taught how to correctly address the envelopes in which we would take home our school reports: make sure that the flap of the envelope is on the right, not the left side, and address it to your parents, "Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Smith . . . " Mortified, I addressed mine to both parents, and then tried, unsuccessfully, to erase the traces of my father from the envelope on the way home, so as not to hurt my mother.

What I gained from four years at this institution: a schooling in English, French and Latin grammar, from which I continue to benefit daily, and a feeling, while I was there, of laboring under a burden of not-fitting—yes, of difference. At that school I was most at home as one among a rather sad tribe of rebels, most of whom lived in the run-down "boarding" wing of the school rather than just attending on a daily basis. From them I gained a sense that there was strength in oppositionality, and came out of the closet as the child of a single-parent home. (One source of shame ditched for good.) I also joined at that time a nationwide movement by school students to unionize ourselves and seek to have some impact on the conditions of our education, inspired by the National Union of [university] Students. At a certain point, when the only impact I seemed likely to have on my own education was that of expulsion, my father spent most of what he had inherited after the death of his mother, and sent me to what was known in educational circles as a "progressive" boarding school.

How does this naming of whiteness link to the marking of it by its "not not-ness." The two are, of course, simultaneous operations. Crudely, the two taken together say, "We are not <u>that</u>*, and within being 'not that,' we are* <u>this</u>*." To be 'that,' versus failing at one's designated task of being 'this,' were offences of a different order, of course. The Other without was largely, one might say, kept out. Or "happened" not to be there, having been already kept out by means of disciplinary practices external to the space of the school itself (immigration control, employment stratified by race, class-stratified education). The Other within, by contrast, was kept down, by punishment and/or by ridicule, and/or by the expectation of these. At times, the Other without was a resource for the Other within: bangles from India, music from black America.*

This way of naming whiteness is much harder work, for it entails the specification and historicization of an almost infinite number of cultural and disciplinary practices. For I have not even begun to name the content of our education, the literature we studied, the history. Nor have I spoken of TV watched after school, novels read.

How was I racialized? How was I made white? I was made white, in the same moment that the effort was made to teach me to be English (not British), to be of the north, of the suburbs, to be lower-middle-class, to be Church of England, to be politically conservative, to be (of course) heterosexual. To be white. Without ever naming it, to be white. To be English. There is at least one "not that" as counterpart to each of these characteristics. And each has a set of histories and practices embedded in it.

II

Memory, and one's sense of self, are continually (re)formed. Chains of events in a life are such that each moment seems both to lead to or even make the next, and to be remade by the moments that follow it. My childhood was then, if not literally relived, certainly reconceived in context of my adult life. In this way, we can say my memories, my self, are (re)formed. Thus in order to say how it was that my first steps towards self-consciousness about the racialization of my own childhood happened, not in Britain but in Santa Cruz, California, I need to say how I came to realize myself as answerable to a set of questions about racism, imperialism and my <u>own</u> *history and identity. And in order to explain how* <u>that</u> *happened, I need to explain how I got to Santa Cruz at all.*

I came to Santa Cruz and, more exactly, to graduate study in the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California, fresh from completion of a BA at Cambridge, fresh from three years of intense political activism, and in love with socialist feminism (or as it was named in Britain at that moment, Marxist feminism). I had come to the US against the better judgment of my peers, all of whom viewed this place as the "belly of the beast," and therefore best avoided. For myself, I was pulled by the rumor that in the United States there was something called "women's studies," and pushed by a lack of inspiration about what to do next in Britain, for the trajectories I saw before me seemed either unmanageable or uninviting.

I landed in New York, was dazzled by street names and locations thus far encountered only on TV—Broadway, Central Park—and, rather than flying westward, took a hippie version of the Greyhound bus across the country, so as to know where I was. Cultural difference began to hit as, standing shoulder-deep in the hot water of a mineral spring near Cheyenne, Wyoming (you know, that place from the cowboy movies), an elderly gentleman standing next to his wife and dressed only in a stetson hat, drawled, "Welcome to our country." Back on the Grey Rabbit my new friend Laura commented wryly, "He wouldn't have said that if you were Mexican." I had no idea what to make of this, and didn't ask.

Thus, Ms. English Marxist Feminist arrived in Santa Cruz. In my mind, I'd figured I wouldn't have a problem settling in—we all spoke English, there'd be a left community and a feminist community, and once I found both I'd be all set. But somehow the codes seemed entirely scrambled. Early on a woman told me she was impressed that anyone heterosexual could be a feminist—not the inverse, mind you. She said it was noble of me to take on the feminist struggle as a straight woman (which I was at that time). I found her comment both mystifying and insulting. I had come from a strong network of women who were heterosexual, leftist and feminist: none of them seemed to find that a contradiction, but rather were committed to reframing heterosexuality and their relations with men.

I was taken, in my first week, to hear Meg Christian who was dressed in a Fair Isle sweater and sensible shoes, and who performed to a room full of women of whom one or more would burst out weeping every five minutes, overcome by I knew not what. A far cry from the Patti Smith, Marianne Faithful, Bob Dylan, and Bob Marley who had structured my own and my friends' listening pleasure. "Wholesome" was *not* my middle name. Honesty forces me to admit that I too burst into tears at the Meg Christian show, overcome, finally, by homesickness and the enormity of being in a strange land. Looking back it strikes me now that all of this destabilization had its benefits, beginning to shake open a cultural solipsism and presumed universalism that I had, entirely unconsciously, been carrying with me unexamined, along with the rest of my luggage.

But I still had my political lines intact. At first. In this regard, a key moment for me—although I confess that others to whom I have tried to tell this story have been left puzzled and unmoved by it—had to do with my very strong commitment to campaigning for the provision of workplace daycare for working mothers. I'm not sure, looking back, why working fathers were not also in my mind, but at that point I viewed the provision of "daycare" for children as a key aspect of women's liberation. Some of my earliest experience of political organizing had taken place in context of a struggle with Cambridge University to provide childcare for the children of faculty, staff, and students. At this point I can't remember why and how the question of public- and corporate-funded childcare came up in a seminar room early in my time at UCSC. But I do remember being blown away when two older women, June and Estée, both mothers, both working-class, the former white and the latter a Puertorriqueña from the east coast, told me firmly and pointedly that, not only were they not convinced of the benefits of workplace childcare for women, they had serious concerns in general about placing childcare in the hands of the state or of corporations.

Ms. English Marxist Feminist was stunned, not so much from a feeling that my position was questionable, but from a sense of unreality, of perceiving an impossibility in hearing these two women challenging the position I held. How could it be wrong? How could they believe themselves to be right? Where I came from, the pressure against childcare that I had encountered came from the right wing. It entailed the kind of back-to-the-home patriarchy that had served, since the end of World War II, to justify ideologically women's unequal access to paid work. My point of view, in other words, was embedded in a particular (and I would now say, a partial) reading of history, and my sense of its "rightness" came out of that narrative.

With the hubris of youth, I told Estée I'd like to discuss this some more, and with a generosity of spirit plus, perhaps, some curiosity, she invited me over to her apartment the next morning. At her house, two things happened.

The first of these was that she explained to me her criticisms of the "daycare" idea. First, she said, she distrusted the content of childcare programs, given the role, historically, of state- and corporate-funded education and childcare in the "cultural genocide" of Native, African American, and Latino people in the US. (Although she did not say this, we can also add working-class European immigrants to this list.) Second, in her view, this notion of childcare tied it to wage labor. Thus, while ostensibly a kind of support for women as mothers, it in fact served to make women more effective cogs in a capitalist machine. And this in turn reinforced the imposition of a double shift on mothers. By contrast, in Estée's view, poor and working women needed support as parents in general, rather than as *wage-laboring* parents in particular.

Fifteen years' distance means that I can clarify further what was going on here. Crucially, our two sets of conclusions were rooted in different appropriations of history, mine lacking any knowledge of the blatantly enforced practices of cultural assimilation or domination so significant in US history. And in thinking it all over once again, I am also struck by the realization that our thinking and activism in Cambridge had also side-stepped key questions about culture, class and the care of children. Looking back, I remember clearly our analytical focus: to debunk, from the standpoint of a gender-focused feminism, the arguments of developmental psychologists who (in context of pushing women out of wage labor after World War II) had asserted the necessity of an exclusive mother-child bond as the guarantor of successful early childhood socialization. But we did not think to scrutinize the class and cultural politics of the content of childcare. And we could have done so. For, before and during our activism, discussions were underway in Britain about how working-class identities and communities had been reshaped as the result of state education.[8]

Second, our position was, I think, class-marked in another way—for, although we viewed women's wage labor as both a right and an economic necessity, women's *right* to work was the matter for emphasis. That in turn was unconsciously linked to a kind of "room-of-one's-own-ish" notion of skilled or professional labor perhaps more pleasurable in itself than the kinds of work that sprang to mind as Estée pondered poor women forced, for example, off AFDC and into unskilled, low-paid work through the hypothesized creation of childcare facilities, thus finding themselves doing twice the work for (if they were lucky) the same pay.

The point of this story is not, however, to determine who was right and who was wrong—June and Estée, or me. Nor is it to relativize. Rather, I want to use this story to talk about how knowledge is, indeed, situated, and theory- and strategy-building similarly so. What it makes clear is that one *cannot* think creatively much beyond one's own backyard without detailed information from the backyards of one's neighbors; that second-guessing what is going on someplace else, or simply presuming that what's going on there is the same as what's going on for oneself, will, quite simply, miss the mark. What I learned that morning was one instance of what white feminists have been learning repeatedly (and all too slowly) since the early 1980s, that theorizing and strategizing from narrow but putatively universal subject positions will be at best irrelevant, and at worst more damaging than doing nothing at all. What I was offered that morning, to put it

another way, was my first lesson about my own boundaries: the boundaries of my experience; the boundaries of my acquired knowledge; the boundaries of my imagination.

The second thing that happened that morning was this: when I arrived at Estée's, two other women were already there, each about Estée's age, both African Americans. All three were engaged in animated discussion about a younger woman, mother of two preschoolers, in a precarious process of recovery from heavy use of drugs and clearly in no place to take full care of her children. Over tears, coffee, and much discussion, a detailed plan was created whereby the young woman and her children would be helped through this difficult period. At no point did any possibility of recourse to the state come into the older women's plans except in the negative, for part of the concern of the women was to avoid these children being taken into the foster care system. I sat quietly through this discussion—what else, after all would have been appropriate? I was mesmerized, as I remember, as much by the newness to me of what the women had to say, as by the manner in which it was said, the triple-layered eloquences generated out of idiom, cadence, and emotional expression (remember, I was new to the US and even newer to Black English). As the women took their leave and headed downstairs to the door of the apartment, Estée turned to me and with a smile whose meaning my memory cannot quite interpret, said, "That's daycare." I took the point.

It is worth underscoring here that, with a very few exceptions, this was also the first time I had been in private space with women of color. Ever. In my life. This is, of course, not unexpected given the social segregation in play in all of the places I had lived to that date, including, I might add, these United States in which I had recently arrived. But, it took me some time, several months, to realize that something extraordinary had happened in my somehow being invited into that space and that conversation, if not as active participant then certainly as witness or observer.

III

I am not much of a journal writer. Rather, I am of the kind whose flurries of such activity signal periods of intense introspection, heightened emotionality, or a sense that something new is happening to me. The early eighties were a period unusually well documented by my standards.

Two journal entries, however, speak volumes by their very brevity and unfinished quality. The first, undated, but from its context somewhere in 1982 says, "The specific emotional work of being white is"—The rest of the page is blank, but for a single word, pencilled in parentheses at the end of the sentence, presumably at a later date: "(hard)." The second, from around the same time and equally telling, simply says, "I've been trying to write about racism all summer."

That period—1980, 1981, 1982, 1983—was both of the things expressed in the first statement, difficult to specify in the moment, and <u>hard</u>. *In preparation for writing this essay, I read and winced my way through a tortuous period, spotting the moments of insight and of eloquent unknowing, amid the youthful pain, the angst of two intermingled comings-out—coming out as a lesbian, and coming awake as an inheritor of particular raced, classed and national histories. In fact the more deeply I became conscious of whiteness, the harder it got . . . .*

Suspended within the two statements is a set of experiences difficult to make coherent then, and perhaps surprisingly, equally difficult now. As I remember it, even at the time I was struck by the ludicrousness of statement number two: the way it signaled so nakedly the privilege of "choice" about racism so fundamental to whiteness, and also the (ostensibly) displaced relationship to racism that, as a white person, I was able to enjoy. As a white person I needed only to write about racism, rather than experiencing it in any other way. And even if I could not achieve that, I still would not die of that failure.

This was of course a process rather than a matter of instantaneous "enlightenment." I remember, as one key experience, a feminist theory seminar which I attended in 1980, around the time of the

"daycare" incident. In it, Gloria, an African American fellow student, criticized the syllabus for its racism, in the sense of its exclusion both of writings by feminist women of color, and for its universalizing assumption that the "history of philosophy" might be fully covered by an examination of Western philosophy. My first thought, when this woman said that we ought, for instance, to examine African philosophy in addition to the more conventional canon, was "But there *isn't* any African philosophy!" My next thought, as Gloria continued to insist that feminism was racist, was that she'd obviously never heard of Marxist feminism, which "*certainly* wasn't racist." I spent the next several weeks trying, almost without conscious thought, to prove this woman "wrong" on any and every point she made in the seminar (about racism or anything else), hoping, I think, to undermine for myself more than for anyone else, the place from which she spoke.

The part that I cannot adequately account for is the next one: how it was that I did not stop there? How was it that I moved onward, so that certainties and firmly held political positions crumbled? Education made us ignorant, it seemed to me, by tying us more firmly into a mindset that seemed ever more compromised as the weeks went by. I remember walking into class one day and actually thinking "I don't know which is the floor, here, and which is the ceiling." I can say, and it would be true, that between the two locations of an untiring challenge and commentary in the seminar room from Gloria, and a deepening connection with Estée, the actuality of racism's impact, both in the feminism that I held so dear and in the world at large, was impressed upon me. But that simply displaces the question—how was it that I stayed friends with Estée (or she with me)? How was it that I didn't simply ignore Gloria until she and the seminar disappeared at the end of the quarter?[9]

I do not know, still, how Estée and I became friends and how it was, in fact, that I stuck to her like glue for the next several years. If that sounds passive on my part, it is not so much that I did not pursue a friendship but that it seems bizarre that she would have wanted one. I was twenty-one to her late thirties (which as I write looks hilariously young on paper—my age!—but which seemed *much* older then). I was childless in comparison with her parenthood of five kids, and middle-class and educated to the teeth in contrast with her poverty-raised, community-activist history of learning-through-surviving. Estée was now trying to make sense of another white institution, the university. As we explained it to one another at some point in an intense connection that lasted around four years, over time we developed a deal whereby I would teach her to write, and she would teach me about the United States. But actually, that was not even one tenth of it. To a degree I think that we were fascinated by our differentnesses, the racial ones made manageable by the national ones, since the latter meant that, in direct terms, we were not actors in one another's racial landscapes. I don't know for sure and I don't think it necessarily matters. It just *was*. I don't know at this point whether I *did* alter her relationship to writing. But what I do know is that, by going where Estée went, meeting who she met, part of the time living with whom she lived with and, I might add, raising all manner of questions from those around us—were we lovers? Was I brainwashed? What *were* we to each other?—my worldview, my sense of self and other, of history, identity, race, class, culture, were remade.

Is it wise to try to explain <u>everything</u>? *Can one really rationalize contingency? The point being that what happened to "me," "Ruth Frankenberg," in the context of that relationship radically transformed what I knew "Ruth Frankenberg" to be. "i" was remade, that's all. This was not a theoretical experience. Rather, it was visceral, though "i" and Estée theorized it at the time, and one may theorize again after the fact. Which as a matter of fact "i/I," am seeking to do right now. And let me say, it is still* <u>hard</u>.

Difference. The word has been so overused as to have become almost meaningless. What went on for me, what stunned me, often, into an outer silence and inner turmoil might, once again, be easiest to begin naming as a process of remapping. The ways my world was put together, and the ways Estée's was made, were different in a way that literally shattered the logics and certainties in which I had formerly, and unthinkingly, been ensconced. What I am struggling to express here

might be more easily named through some examples. But, as preamble let me note that what at that time I named to myself as all about racism might be more properly understood as an amalgam of issues of race, class, parenthood, culture, sexuality, *and* the idiosyncratic responses of individuals to particular situations.

OK. Let's take the "house" of racism and examine it, brick by brick. But will each brick show us enough to recognize much about the overall design?

Recognitions:

- the realization that while I tended to view the university as a benign institution that was in general my friend, Estée and women I met through her engaged it rather as one in an array of state institutions with which they had to negotiate—the welfare system, the juvenile justice system, Medi-Cal, DMV, the police—any one of whom one might have to deal with, more often with difficulty than with ease, in a given day. Relatedly, while studying was for me the primary focus of my life, for others I met it was one among many tasks to be juggled in any given day or week.
- slowly noticing that if in conversation someone named their friend, relative, husband, child, as being in jail, my instinctive first question—"Oh, what did he (or she) do?"—not only missed the point, but was offensive. Some of the points I missed were that if someone is in jail, that does not necessarily mean that, one, they actually broke the law; two, the crime was one with a victim besides the jailed person him- or herself; or, three, the overall life context and struggle of the jailed person and his/her family should be subordinated in one's attention to the fact of the state's decision to intervene in it. Taking this further, one might say that my subject position, in asking the question, "What did s/he do?" exposes itself as more closely allied with the state, its disciplinary functions, and the histories embedded within them, than with my interlocutor. As a friend set out to visit her son in Juvenile Hall, for example, her concern was not only with "what he had done" (although that was indeed cause for frustration and despair on her part), but also with whether the counsellor assigned to him would be "the racist one," or "the other one, you remember, he dealt with X's boy."

Mundane, daily examples:

- going into cafés in town with friends of color and being treated shoddily;
- talking to an African American friend who had moved with her teenaged sons from a much larger city to Santa Cruz. In this new place, with relatively fewer black youth than where they had previously lived, these young men, both close to six feet tall, found as they walked downtown that crowds would part and sidewalks empty, as white Santa Cruzans crossed the street to avoid them;

Moments when unequal histories met in the same room:

- meeting a woman who said she really didn't want to hear me talk about what I was doing in graduate school, she had never finished high school but had always wished she could go to college;
- being told by a seventeen-year-old friend about her ex-boyfriend, who'd bang his head against the wall, weeping and crying out "whitefolks, whitefolks, whitefolks, whitefolks . . . "

Will each brick described help clarify how I began to recognize the overall design? Who will believe me? Who will think I'm lying?

Difference. As I have noted, racialization is relational. There is a way in which I can only begin speaking about

my differentness, historically and experientially, from women friends who were working class and/or of color, by taking that same route through which I learned about it, *that is, by talking about* their *experiences as different from* mine. *But there's a risk here, of* still *not naming or specifying the self, seeming to act as though the center still holds. But it didn't.*

So what was *the specific emotional work of being white for me, in that period?*

My sense of the normalcy—the unmarkedness although I did not know that word—of my own life was destabilized by the relativizing of my experience on a daily and repeated basis. My life, for a range of reasons, had been different from these friends' lives and would continue to be so. Moreover those reasons were not just any old reasons, but rather, the ugliest of reasons. My racial and cultural privileges were made obvious again and again, not unkindly but as matters of fact, in context of what *wasn't* happening to me. I *had* finished high school. I *was* highly literate, *could* think easily of which word to put where, how to edit the sentence. My kid would probably not be in Juvenile Hall, nor (as it was once expressed to me in the most elegant euphemism) "stationed" at San Quentin. White people's racism was repeatedly made visible to me as daily, hourly, I heard talk that was effectively about the micropolitics of racism in individuals' behavior, about the micropractices of racism in institutions. And the micropolitics of privilege too ("I've been trying to write about racism all summer . . . .") It didn't take a rocket scientist . . . .

To recognize and continue looking rather than turn away. To see these as some of the violent outcomes of whiteness's assertion that "We are not that."

So . But what was the specific emotional *work of being white for me, in that period?*

Varied. Shame, pain. An inordinate, almost bodily discomfort, perhaps that of twisting and turning to try to get away from, to resist, what was. What is. (*And did not need to be. The injustice. The unnecessary injustice.*) What or who I was. (*And again, did not need to be. Yet, was,* is.)

I viewed my racial privilege as total. I remember months when I was terrified to speak in gatherings that were primarily of color, since I feared that anything I did say would be marked by my whiteness, my racial privilege (which in my mind meant the same). Example. People would be chatting about their mothers. I would not say a word, because by the time I was finished weighing up whether what I was about to say would expose me as race privileged, the conversation would have moved onto what people's favorite breakfast food was. And by the time I'd finished weighing up whether my favorite breakfast was a racist one, the topic would be somebody's new girlfriend.

The idea that to speak would expose me as race-privileged. Expose me as white. Joke! What did I think I was, invisible? That silence would protect me?

In that silence, I tried to "pass" (as what? as racially unmarked? as exceptional? as the one white girl who could "hang"?). One may note that, in this sense, I broke all the rules, written and unwritten, of feminist "unlearning racism" practice—"Speak! Make mistakes! That way you'll learn!" But I was a quick study, and could see plenty, learn plenty, from other white people's mistakes. (White people, that is, who were not trying to unlearn anything.) Why repeat others' offenses? If that sounds terrible, I'm sorry, that's just how it was. How I was. In my silence, I learned. I witnessed. And, as well, my silence was often broken, whether I wanted it to or not.

Acknowledging that racism exists is not so hard. Knowing what to do with it is the issue. I remember when I was sharing a house with Estée and two of her daughters, the youngest, perhaps ten, came into my bedroom as I was putting a new poster on my wall. My mother had sent it to me, a sepia design of the Albert Memorial, one of Manchester's prize landmarks. As this child asked me what it was, and I began to explain it, it dawned on me: the Albert Memorial, Prince Albert, consort to Queen Victoria, here represented atop a tall stone column, presided not only over Manchester but over the building of the British empire. Imperial reverence now

remade as imperialist nostalgia. And here I was trying to explain to a brown-skinned child why this image made me homesick . . . .

I have been performing whiteness, and having whiteness performed upon me, since before the day I was born.

IV

The micropolitics of racial cross-traffic. I watched, through those years, as an entire way of seeing crumbled apart (mine), and a whole new one opened up (whose? mine too? mine now? I didn't know). A bit like a kaleidoscope picture changing. Truthfully, "watching" is not really the correct term, or rather, not adequate alone. Watching an edifice collapse, and simultaneously *being* that edifice collapsing and, at the same time as both, being a new building under construction.

How was I made white? Certainly, more ways than I have named here. I have left out, for example, five years of my life between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. In that time I attended two more "almost all-white" institutions. I became involved in antiracist/antifascist activism in Cambridge, and still did not yet "get it" that racism was, among other things, about me. In Santa Cruz I have left undiscussed the writing, workshops, and discussions about "women's work in the capitalist state" undertaken by the multiracial collective of which June, Estée, and I were all a part. Let me state for the record, then, that this is an incomplete story.

So what has this all been about? The same imponderable relationships between structure and agency? What is *the way home?*

Being and seeing. There is something here that must be examined: being white, seeing whiteness. What are the mutual impacts of these upon each other? The focus of this essay has been on the particular articulations of whiteness that have come to be a part of "me" along with my inhabiting of this body—classed, gendered, nationally and sexually marked as well as raced—that which we might, in shorthand, call "my" whiteness.

This whiteness has emerged as static in some respects, changing in others, and always as contingent, not essential. I have shown that this whiteness, "my" whiteness, is a product of history. That history, here, means both the short and the long durée. That "my" whiteness is, in the forever invaluable phrasing of Antonio Gramsci, yet another case of history having "deposited in [me] an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."[10] The effort here has been, amongst other things, to recover parts of that inventory, to display their traces upon me, and also to lay open for reflection some of the circumstances in which that recovery process has taken place. This is, then, about my *seeing* whiteness. And simultaneously it is about documenting, passionately or dispassionately, what my *being*, as a white being, is like. It is about my performing whiteness, my having whiteness performed upon me.

The contigency of "my" whiteness (and by implication of course, of anyone else's) has been dramatized, in my life, by the ways its materiality has been reconstellated through my insertion into a national history—that of the US—different from the one into which I was born and raised. The contingency of my ways of seeing have been vastly more multiply refracted, as evidenced by the number of (re)viewing processes to which it has been possible for me to subject it, the number of reviewing processes to which I have been made subject. But these "seeings" have of course been shaped and limited by my "being," contingent as it is, by my ongoing performances of whiteness.

That which has motivated my political commitment for as long as I remember is the conviction that things do not need to be this way. *That conviction only deepens in me as time goes by. Contingency, and the gridlock of structure and subjecthood seem to have us in a stranglehold.* But it need not be this way.

I am, indeed, still white (surprise!). What *has* changed, then? What has changed is, in vary-

ing ways, my *relationships* to the items on the inventory. In some instances the change has entailed a refusal to go along with certain practices and expectations (performing whiteness). In other instances, the change is that of stepping back from an earlier way of seeing, so that it may be witnessed rather than practised unthinkingly (some of the certitudes of "Englishness" may serve as case in point here). However, other items are less malleable. For example, attitudes are one thing, but stepping back to witness my passport will not alter it, nor will it change the fact that a British passport gets one a long way towards entry into most countries in the world. (Is this fact an example of "having whiteness performed upon me?" Or is it that *and* an instance of being performed upon with which I will readily continue to cooperate?) Similarly, my class position has changed but slightly, and the circumstances of that stability are only minimally of my own making, and, of course, not unconnected with race.

If I have changed the meaning of my whiteness, it is inasmuch as I have refused, whenever possible, to perform certain versions of it. When does seeing tip over the edge into refusing to perform? And what are the circumstances wherein that refusal might be successfully achieved? And in what moments can this be an individual question, and in what moments must it be a collective one?

Alertness and compassion. Seeing what is. Asking how it came to be. Disidentifying and remaking self. "When we stop running away from what presents itself in each moment . . . ."[11]

Notes

1 "When we are capable of stopping, we begin to see," Thich Nhat Hanh, 1991. (Thich Nhat Hanh is a Zen master, and the author of numerous books including *Being Peace*, Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987 and *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

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2 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984, 110-113.

3 Spivak has discussed this concept in a number of places, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Introduction", "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 13.

4 Here I quote a woman interviewed by me for my book, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Since this quote also appears in the book, to identify the speaker by name here would in fact reveal her identity in the book, something which I do not wish to do since the book interviews were confidential. But I would like to take the opportunity, here, to thank this woman once again for her insight and eloquence.

5 James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," James Clifford and George Marcus, editors, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, 98-121.

6 Elizabeth Alexander, "Memory, Community, Voice," *Callaloo*, vol. 17, #2, 1994, 409.

7 I place "of color" in quotation marks, for it is not a term in play in Britain. There, black, or a specific national, regional, or ethnic term might more commonly be used. In fact, since I do not remember, as noted, their ethnic or national identities, nor do I know whether Black would have been a term acceptable to them, "of color" may be the most respectful option open to me in this moment.

8 For a discussion of this history, see Simon During, "Introduction," Simon During, editor, *The Cultural Studies Reader,* New York: Routledge, 1993, 1-25

9 Gloria, as a matter of fact, would not in any case have disappeared from sight. Gloria Watkins, or bell hooks, was at the point of completing graduate study in Santa Cruz at the time I arrived there. This seminar took place one year before the publication of bell hooks' first book, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism,* Boston: South End Press, 1981; see bell hooks' comments on this seminar and our interactions in it, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,* Boston: South End Press, 1984, 13.

10 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* tr. Q.Hoare and G.N. Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, 324.

11 "When we stop running away from what presents itself in each moment, our loving care for ourselves and one another can flow unimpeded," Jack Kornfield, undated. Jack Kornfield, a reknowned teacher of vipassana or insight meditation, is the author of a number of books including, most recently, *A Path With Heart: Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life,* New York: Bantam Books 1993.