

# **Commonalities: On Being Black and White, Different, and the Same.**

**Judy Scales-Trent**

Author's Note

Many in my family are various shades of brown, as is common in most black families. Many others of us, however, look white. I wrote these journal notes, and this essay, as a way of coming to terms with the dilemma of being black and looking white in a society which does not handle anomalies very well.

It is only recently that I have realized that the work that I do is deeply connected with my struggle to live within this dilemma. I am a lawyer and a professor of law. I write about the intersection of race and sex in American law, focusing on the status of black women in the law, that is, on the group which stands at the intersection of the race category and the sex category. I used to define my work in that way. Now that I have written this essay, I see my work differently. In this essay, I struggle to combine two statuses which our society says cannot be combined: black cannot be white, and white cannot be black. In my earlier work on race and sex, I argued that it did not make sense to try to maintain two distinct categories of race and sex in the law, when that separation ignored the very real existence of black women. There again, I argued that the categories seen as so pure, were not pure; that the boundaries thought impermeable were not impermeable. Looking at all of my work, I now understand that I have been working at the intersection of race and sex because I exist at the intersection of race and color, and because I understand, in a very profound way, that in order for me to exist, I must transgress boundaries.

I think this makes people profoundly uncomfortable. Categories make the world appear understandable and safe. Nonetheless, in this essay I ask you to experience my vision of the world—a world where the categories do not clarify, but confuse; a world where one must question the very existence of those categories in order to survive.

*Journal Entries: November 1978-December 1981**November 1978*

He sang out:

What did I do  
to be so black and blue?

And I wept:

What did I do  
to be so black,  
so white?

*November 26, 1978*

I wish I had a name to make my home in, to hide inside of. Maybe we should bring back the name "mulatto." For a woman, the French would say "mulâtresse." An identity. A group to belong to. You say "mulatto," and it conjures up meaning: a person despised by dark-skinned brothers and sisters.

("who does she think she is? she think she white, man.")

"Hey, you think you better than me, huh?!")

Cast out, cast out, always cast out from the only home, the only safe place, the only refuge in a terrifying, vicious land. Cast out, and alone.

No home. No home.

No place to belong.

No place to rest a frightened and lonely heart.

No place to hide.

White people would let me in, of course. They think that I belong with them. They smile at me. They welcome me. They think I'm their sister.

("Did you see the way that nigger drives? We shouldn't give them licenses!")

They think I'm on their team. And so I'm always waiting, waiting for them to say it. Please don't say it. Don't do that to me. Jesus God, cabbie, can't I even go across town in a cab without having my whole identity called into question? Always wary. Always fighting their silent thoughts, their safe assumptions. Fighting for control of who I am.

That's who I am. Cast out of my house.

And fighting for control.

And crying.

Missing the safe warmth of my childhood, a colored girl growing up in the protection of a strong family in the segregated South. Surrounded by their love and their strength and their definition of me and of themselves. We moved to New York City when I was very young. One of my warmest memories is of travelling back to North Carolina from New York every summer on the Jim Crow train. We children belonged to all the black adults on the train. Everyone talked and shared food . . . fried chicken and white bread, pimiento cheese sandwiches, deviled eggs: our shoe-box lunch.

Yes, I can see that. What I'm missing is the protection of the family.

But I lost something more when I grew up and moved out of the segregated South, out of the safety of my childhood home. Because the Jim Crow laws gave me an identity and a protection I couldn't give myself.

Suddenly, the world was opened to me: streets, movies, schools, restaurants. I put one foot into the world of white-Jewish-liberal-intellectuals when I was in the fifth grade, and I've been straddling two worlds ever since.

What do you do if you're rejected by one world,

    ("Oh, let's have Judy sit at the table with the white couple when they get here. She acts so white.")

and are constantly rejecting the other. I am perceived by some as white, by some as black, by yet others, as a black person but "really white," so (a) you can trust her and (b) you can't trust her.

And yet I'm me all the time.

Jerked back and forth by other people's needs and fears 'til it gets hard for me to figure out who I am in all this.

I'm glad I've started this writing.

These are the notes of a white black woman.

    ("Mommy, which water fountain should I drink out of, white or colored?")

*December 1, 1979*

Sometimes I feel like I'm black, passing for white.  
Sometimes I feel like I'm white, passing for black.  
On a good day, I just live my life.

*December 2, 1979*

I went to hear a chamber music recital last night at the Kennedy Center. This is the kind of music that filled my childhood . . . chamber music at the WQXR studio, symphony music at Tanglewood or Lewisohn Stadium, the Saturday afternoon opera on the radio when we were not allowed to make a sound in the apartment.

White music.

We were also exposed to black music—spirituals, “boogie-woogie,” and the “classical” black composers and musicians. But our father disapproved of the rhythm and blues records we brought home when we were teenagers. As an adult, I have spent a long time getting in touch with other kinds of black music. Bill introduced me to jazz. And I was almost thirty when I first heard the blues. I couldn't get over it then, and I still can't. It speaks so directly to me and for me. It pierces my heart with pain or joy, sometimes both. And gospel music I have loved since I was a child. I loved it when the men's choir at St. Catherine's AME Zion church went on summer vacation and took their tacky cantatas with them. For that's when the gospel choir came. And the church jumped and shook, and the music made you feel.

It is hard, but very important, to fit the black and white music pieces comfortably into who I am. I need to be able to accept the black and the white heritage with their own validity.

That is all true, and important. But getting a little too intellectual. A way of avoiding the anxiety of last night's chamber recital. For you see, color makes it all more complicated. The concert hall seats maybe eight hundred, a thousand people. It was almost full. And I didn't see anyone who was not white. I felt very anxious and frightened. I was losing control of my identity as a black person: it was slipping away. Wasn't this proof that I was white? By their perception, didn't I fit in just perfectly? and wasn't it obvious that I wouldn't have been there if I weren't white? (1. All people who go to hear chamber music are white. 2. I go to chamber music recitals. 3. Therefore, I am white.) But at intermission, I saw about half a dozen black people. The pendulum tilted back to center and I was steadied.

I must gain better control over who I am. I must learn to live squarely, steadily and surely in the middle of ambiguity, centered strongly in my own No-Name. I must define the No-Name and make it my home.

*December 15, 1979*

More and more, lately, I have been thinking of dating white men. I have been thinking I could now date white men. I just returned from a visit at Julie's house. One of their friends stopped by. I was attracted by his looks, his openness and enthusiasm, his excitement in learning. Sexy.

I think it would be difficult. But with some help, I could do my part. I think this means something good in terms of my defining and accepting who I am, a white black woman. My definition of who I am is much less at risk.

And it also feels sad, terribly sad. For I am, after all, a black woman, deep down where it counts, and where it hurts.

*December 19, 1979*

I remember having a startling thought several months ago. Someone gave me a standard line about how she had always wished she were tall. I started my standard response of how I wished I were short—when I suddenly realized that that just wasn't true. I liked being tall and looking good tall.

Then last week I saw "Death and the King's Horsemen," a play by the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka. I was watching the beautiful dark-skinned women dancing and started my standard thought of how I wished my skin were that color. But that thought was immediately replaced by: "That's not true. I like the way I look. I look just fine."

I was startled. Pleased.

Hopeful that the thought will return.

There is so much yet I have to tell you about.

About the silence, the lifelong silence of my family. Was it such a terrible secret that we dare not talk about it? what was the secret? and what would happen if we did reveal it?

And about the guilt of a survivor, always protected by a white-skin disguise.

Is it a disguise?

How am I to take the good things that come my way?  
would that cabbie have stopped if he had known?

would the doctor be civil if . . . ?

would the clerk have been so helpful?

would the real estate agent have rented me the apartment?

How can I say "no, don't be nice to me; I'm black?"

How can I try to keep from passing when all I'm trying to do is catch a fucking cab?

There is no way around it. I am passing all the time as I walk through the world. I can only correct the perceptions of those persons I deal with on a more than casual basis. And I feel like a fraud. And I hate it. I hate myself for not being able to solve the dilemma. And I hate black people and white people for putting me out there.

Catching a cab is just as hard for a white black person as for a black black person.

Or maybe not.

Maybe it has to be made hard to punish myself for my clever disguise.

I heap ashes upon my head and beg for forgiveness.

Sackcloth and ashes.

If I am forgiven,

perhaps I will be allowed back into the fold.

Will someone forgive me?

*January 24, 1981*

I am beginning to understand what they have done to us. The anger. All of the anger we can't show. And all of the men depressed. And the women, abandoned, un-cherished, un-beautiful . . . .

What will become of us? How can we save ourselves and each other? How do we raise the children? How do we protect the children? (another body found in Atlanta today). Tell me, how do I raise a black-man child? why am I raising a free child who knows what he is feeling? Maybe black men need to be depressed to stay alive. Feelings released create energy and potency: what can a black man do with those?

I am free to feel my aliveness, to stretch as far as I can—because I'm a woman, because I look white. Today, as Pat was getting off the elevator, a white man grabbed her and pushed her back, saying, "No nigger is going to get off this elevator before *me!*" I am spared that craziness by looking white. I am not pushed, abused, humiliated on a daily basis. I have my

own craziness from being white/black, but I am not damaged the same way. I get to meet the test of what is called “beautiful” because I look white.

And so I can be valued as a woman by black men. Because I am not so damaged by the racism that I hate them. Because, coming from a white/black family, my father was allowed to make a good living and give us so much—financial security, protection, an open door to the world. Because I can feel beautiful.

It is, I think, the ultimate betrayal, the ultimate irony. The crazy way that racism worked has allowed me to be free and potent. And it has kept the men I love locked in. And impotent. They are enraged at me for being able to take such joy in life and to feel the strength of being whole.

I feel enormous guilt at my whole-ness, at feeling potent, at my joy in life. Luckily, there is a built-in price I will have to pay. Being alone. I can't go back to being less than I am: I want to stand on my toes and reach my arms up as high as I can. But I haven't yet found a black man who can stand watching me do that.

I weep for their need.  
But I weep for me also.

“ . . . some dreams just hang in the air  
like smoke  
touching everything.”

*Plenipotentiary*

And the world said: "Yes.  
You may have everything.  
But you will have to be alone."  
"Well then,  
suppose I have a little less.  
Suppose my mind doesn't work so well,  
and my body too . . .  
then may I have someone?"  
The answer is still out.

*December 14, 1981*

Oddly enough, the last chapter is the hardest to write . . . not because it is painful, but because there is no demon driving me. I am writing now not as part of the learning, the exorcism, but writing to record what I have learned.

As I have moved into adulthood this year, as I have come to a strong sense of my own self-worth, I have learned to make my home within myself. My definition of who I am is steady, and is not shaken by the definition of others. I do not have to cut myself or stretch myself into one procrustean bed or another. I am content to be who I am, and leave to others the comfort of their own definitions. I claim only myself, and define myself by my own name.

This does not mean that there is not, will never be confusion or pain at being a white black woman. What it means is that it does not control me. It cannot claim me. It is a dilemma I live within. I center myself in myself, in the ambiguity of myself, and move on with life.

!Soy bi-lingue, bi-cultural,  
y orgulloso de mi raza!

The bright, bold poster says it for me:

I am bi-lingual, bi-cultural,  
and proud of my people!

There have been signposts this year which marked the journey. I remember reading the blatherings of a newspaper columnist who argued that his dark skin entitled him to a special position as spokesperson for black people. I remember being stunned, as I re-read *Black Rage* this year, at the authors' angry description of "fair-skinned dilettantes" who take out their self-hatred on those with darker skins. What I remember most is that it was immediately clear to me that the authors were not saying anything about me, but were saying worlds about themselves. And I remember the day I made a joke about the color of my skin. It was a *good* joke—free and cloudless! My friend and I laughed and felt good together.

And I have learned from good teachers this year. I remember especially Pauli Murray's autobiography, *Proud Shoes*, where she tells of her struggle to accept her white slaveholder ancestors as part of her family, where she tells of her struggle to accept herself. And Joel Williamson's book *New People: Mulattoes and Miscegenation*: what a revelation. If there is a

whole book on the unspeakable, it can't be taboo, but an issue capable of exploration and comprehension. Williamson described the history of a new group that has been created through the fusion of Africans and Europeans. He gave me a history, a context. He saw me, and validated my new sense of being.

And I have learned from the poetry of Chinese women and Native American women . . . women who felt the anguish of losing their unique ethnic identity, and who were determined not to lose it all, determined to fuse the two worlds through their poetry. A determination to be all one is, and for that "all" to be more and more, and not less and less. I will travel with Zora Neale Hurston, who has taught me with her life. And who said: "But I am not tragically colored . . . No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."

There is a phantom pain. It comes and goes. It will always come and go. But the pull toward self-hood, toward whole-ness is stronger. By being, I fuse the two worlds. I need do no more.

There she stood in her pink organdy dress,  
pink socks,  
pink ribbons,  
patent leather shoes.

She had rich brown skin  
Hair pulled back in braids so tight

bright eyes  
bright smile.

She was me when I was six  
getting ready for church on Sunday morning—  
organdy dress so starched  
it scratched,  
head tender from the curling iron  
Mommie wielded so fiercely:  
pressed hair for Jesus, Lord!

pink ribbons  
pink socks  
patent leather shoes.

So I smiled at her,  
seeing myself.

And she hid behind her mother's legs  
looked up at me  
and said

"I'm skeered of white people."

*Reflections: July 1989*

This is how the exploration started, with notes in a journal. It was time for exploring old wounds, a time for growth. I was newly divorced, a single parent head-of-household. And newly come to the world of therapy. It was a time for working on unfinished business. It was a time of rapid, often forced learning. I had been pushed out of one world—not a happy one, but a known one, and therefore, a safe one. And this must have pressed on the bruise of aloneness, of feeling pushed out and homeless because of being a white black woman.

I say unwanted, “forced learning,” but clearly it was learning that I wanted, because I went out looking for it. It was a time when I began to open up to the world in a new way, and began to be able to see all the resources and gifts the world made available to me. I began to see that although perhaps I did not see on the table the food that I wanted, there was enough on the table for me not to starve. And, as time went on, I began to see that indeed there was a feast on the table, and that it only took opening up to the feast, reaching out to the richness of life.

It was about this time that I began to hear echoes of my song in the songs of others, that I began to realize that I was not out in the world, a stranger and alone.

It was then that I began to see the many similarities between my feelings of sadness and strangeness and what others felt. How then could I be so sad when I was so much less alone. I was finally able to hear the stories and songs of my sisters, and I heard them say:

We are like you.

You are our sister.

We are with you.

You are not alone.

We feel the same pain.

We sing the same songs.

Let me tell you who spoke to me, and what I heard. Let me tell you how they answered my call. Let me tell you how we are the same in our differences.

\* \* \* \* \*

Listen to the song of my Indian sister Janet Campbell:

*Desmet, Idaho, March 1969*

At my father's wake  
The old people  
Knew me,  
Though I  
Knew them not,  
And spoke to me  
In our tribe's  
Ancient tongue,  
Ignoring  
The fact  
That I  
Don't speak  
The language,  
And so,  
I listened  
As if I understood  
What it was all about,  
And,  
Oh,  
How it  
Stirred me  
To hear again  
That strange,  
Softly  
Flowing  
Native Tongue,  
So  
Familiar to  
My childhood ear.<sup>1</sup>

How this song moved me! I heard then, and hear now, a deep and moving love for her people, a profound memory from childhood of belonging and being safe in the embrace of her family and her people. But I also hear a sadness at the not-belonging-anymore. The loss of her father, the loss of her language, the loss of her home.

I remember summers spent with our grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins in North Carolina. We played all day long, as we roamed from family home to family home, enjoying the freedom from the city streets, enjoying the sunshine. We ran through the grape arbor quickly, in hopes that the bees would not be able to catch us. We wriggled our bare feet in the grass, as we played "Simon Says" until it was too dark to see anymore. And then, the wonderful dusky evenings, when we sat on the front porch with our mother and grandparents, swinging and fanning, trying to keep cool. Sometimes my grandmother would let me water the petunias in the urns on the front steps (did they like that night watering?) But most of all, I remember it as a quiet, coming-together time. And I remember, like Janet Campbell, the murmurings of the grown-ups as they talked about whatever they talked about. I don't remember what they said. But I do remember the dark and quiet stealing over us all on the porch, enveloping us in quiet and safety. And I remember being embraced and comforted by their murmurings, sounds which lulled us to quiet and to rest.

Now I return to the South to visit my parents. And once again, as I go with them into the black southern community—the church, the bridge club meetings, the college convocation—I am transported back to my childhood, to the safe embrace of family and community and church.

("Lord, child, I can sure see your Aunt Estelle in your face. I would know you anywhere!")

"And, Oh, How it Stir[s] me To hear That strange, Softly Flowing Native Tongue So Familiar to My Childhood ear." And yet, and yet, I too have left home. And I hear the sounds of the language, but I am no longer of the language. One day, in church with my parents, I wept from the beauty and from sadness. Because although I was reminded of coming to church as a child, when I was safe in the embrace of my family, my church, my community, and my God, it was an embrace which I now returned to only rarely, and then, as an outsider. It was a borrowed embrace. And I wept at the loss of leaving home.

This is, of course, a loss all of us know. And we all try to recapture or re-create that embrace as best we know how as we grow older and leave home. But there is something about moving from the southern black community to the northern white community that adds to the sense of loss, of homelessness.

It makes me think of a story I heard about Dr. M., a resident in psychiatry. When I first met her, I felt her warmth and kindness. I noticed

her quiet competence, and her quite visible pregnancy! I saw her as a woman filled with life. When I mentioned her to a friend who was also a psychiatrist, he said, almost in passing, that he had not realized that she was an Indian until one evening, when they were both on duty at the emergency psychiatric clinic of a local hospital. At that time, an elderly Indian man was brought in for emergency treatment. I don't think he said why the man was there. What struck him was Dr. M.'s statement that this man had left the reservation. And that reservation Indians are particularly cruel to those who leave the reservation. I was immediately stunned by the thought that Dr. M. was talking not only about this man, but about herself. Had she also "left the reservation"? She was clearly successful in a white world. How much had she paid for that success? And it was clear also that she was talking about me. For there are so many reservations: geographical ones, cultural ones, and reservations of the mind. When one leaves to explore, to live in another world, are you leaving the reservation? How do those feel who don't leave the reservation? Do they want to leave? are they afraid to move into a hostile world? are they mad because the world off the reservation is more welcoming to me, a white black person? There is no doubt that the members of the white community in my northern home are more welcoming to me than the members of the black community. How painful that has been. And I can't tell if it is because I am so bi-lingual and bi-cultural that they are not clear that I am black. Or because I have left the reservation and must be made to pay for it. But I am clear that I miss the sweet language of my childhood. And I miss my home. My Indian sisters have helped me see that more clearly.

\* \* \* \* \*

And there was yet another poem which, years ago, led me to see my sameness in my difference. Listen to the song of my Chinese sister, Laureen Mar:

*CHINATOWN I*  
Seattle, Washington

She boards the bus at Chinatown,  
holding the brown paper shopping bag  
with twine handles that comes from  
San Francisco or Vancouver.

It is worn thin with creases.  
 An oil spot darkens one side  
 where juice dripped from warm  
 roast duck, another shopping trip.  
 Today there is fresh bok choy  
 wrapped in Chinese newspapers.  
 Grasping the rail with her right hand  
 she climbs the steps carefully,  
 smiling at the driver, looking down  
 to check her footing, glancing  
 at him again. She sways down the aisle  
 as if she still carried wood buckets  
 on a bamboo pole through the village,  
 from the well to her house.  
 Her gray silk pajamas are loose,  
 better than "pantsuits."  
 Sometimes there are two or three women,  
 chattering with the quick, sharp tongue  
 of the wren: dried mushrooms too  
 expensive, thirteen dollars a pound now.  
 She sits down and sets the bag between her knees.  
 Her shoulder is close to mine.  
 I want to touch it, tell her I can understand  
 Chinese. Instead, I stare at the silver  
 bar crossing her back, and hope she knows  
 this is an Express; it does not stop before Genesee.<sup>2</sup>

What do you see when you read this poem? I see the generations of Chinese women stretching back, from the old woman climbing the bus steps so carefully, to her mother, who "carried wood buckets on a bamboo pole through the village, from the well to her house." But has the line of Chinese women stopped? The writer knows she is a Chinese woman. She knows Chinese. She wants to touch the old woman, to let her know that she knows Chinese, that she is family. But she is prudent. She does not do so. But tell me: if others do not know you "know Chinese," if others do not know that you are family . . . are you family? are you Chinese? Who controls what is real: can you do it yourself, or do you need the corroboration of others? The writer wants to reach out, to help, to belong, but dares not. She is and is not family. She is the same, and not the same.

It reminds me of the girl in the pink organdy dress. I *knew* I was like her. I remembered being her. And I reached out with a smile. But she saw only the white part. And it frightened her. Her fear said, “no, you aren’t my family. Go away.” She didn’t know that I “knew Chinese.”

But my Chinese sister knows my song, and helps me see that I am not alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is not all mournful work. Some of the lessons I have learned have been through rowdy laughter. I have had funny teachers. Let me tell you about Dianna. We worked at the appellate division together. And one of the strange things about that office is that it was comprised of about twenty attorneys all in various stages of avoiding writing a brief. One day, when I was in the “walk-the-hall” stage of avoidance, I dropped into Dianna’s office and started complaining about the general run of men about town, and the general level of confusion and poverty in my life. “What I need,” I said to her, “is to find a prosperous, slightly boring dentist to settle down with.” “Oh, I know just what you mean,” she declared emphatically. “And if you find one, ask him if he has a sister!” We burst out laughing. And that’s how I learned that Dianna was a lesbian.

It wasn’t until years later that I realized that gay people, like me, are faced with the problem of “coming out” to people. Dianna has to decide when she should come out to someone, and how. She has to worry about how that person will respond. And as long as she keeps meeting new people, she will have to keep dealing with those issues of self-identification and exposure. These are issues I deal with also: when do I tell someone that I am black? and how? and how will they respond? And if I don’t tell people (the apartment rental agent, the cab driver), aren’t I “passing”? But Lord knows there’s no reason for me to get into self-revelation with someone who’s paid to drive me from home to the car shop.

“And why?” I think. “Why should my lesbian sisters have to come out to people? why are they not allowed to keep their sexual life private? why do they have to say: ‘this is who I am. I hope you can deal with it. Even if you can’t, I need for you to know who I am. I am a member of a despised group. If we are to know each other, you must know this.’” As I write the words, I know why they must come out. They must be clear about who they are, and one way to do this is to force other people to see who they are. As I do. This is also why I “come out.” And, with them, I

brace myself for the flinch, the startled look, the anxious intake of breath, the wary eye. I come out to white people to say to them: "Beware. I am Other. Proceed with caution." And I come out to black people (how painful it is to have to do it . . .) to say: "I am family. You are safe with me. I am you." But, of course, if you have to *say* that you are black, if your skin doesn't say it for you, then how safe are you, really? how can you be family? And again, I brace myself for not so much the startled look (black people are used to white black people), but for the wary eye. For I am still Other. Coming out only proclaims how I am different, not that I am the same.

I think sometimes how similar are the problems my lesbian sisters and I pose when we come out. Does the person who hears me come out have to confront the notion of black being white? Does the person who hears my lesbian sister come out have to confront the notion of female being male (that is, if one who loves women is a male)? How unsettling it must be to have someone announce to you that black is white, that female is male. We are talking about "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities."<sup>3</sup>

My lesbian sisters have shown me that I am not the only one who has to struggle with coming out. Their courage gives me courage.

\* \* \* \* \*

The last story I want to tell you is one that I am really not proud of. I like to think it would not have happened if we hadn't been so tired and jet-lagged. But we were. There were eighteen of us coming from all parts of the country for a two day board meeting in Oakland. We were a group of feminist lawyers and activists, a group very self-consciously created to represent as many different kinds of women as possible. In general, we enjoyed getting together enough to travel thousands of miles for a grueling two day session. It was a group of women who are smart, considerate, funny, and committed to women's issues. Our first meeting was scheduled for Friday night at eight o'clock. We decided to hold the meeting at a restaurant near the hotel.

Now you must remember that for some of us, meeting at eight in the evening was in reality meeting at eleven in the evening, after an exhausting day of travel. Nonetheless, we were all energized by being together, and off we went to search for a restaurant with a table large enough to accommodate us. What a relief it was to find one, only a few blocks away.

There were about a dozen of us there, and we were seated around a large round table. Menus came out, along with pots of tea and cups for sipping tea. We started to relax, to look with relish at the menu, to talk about what we would order and how we would share the food. And it was then that Dai broke into the over-tired, energetic talking and said, with a flat voice, "I think we should all consider leaving this restaurant." Dai travels through the world in a wheelchair. And it appeared that this restaurant *was* wheelchair-accessible, but only if you didn't mind going through the back door, past bags of smelly garbage, and through a dirty corridor. Dai was visibly wounded by that process, and although she was by now seated at the table with us, she thought we should leave in protest. There was a long silence. And I don't remember exactly what happened next. But what I do remember is that, at first, no one wanted to leave. There was the suggestion that perhaps we could go ahead and eat, and write a letter of complaint to the management later. Dai was bitter, and angry at us. "You wouldn't stay here if there were an entrance for blacks only." I remember being torn by her analogy. Was she right? But surely not: the only reason she couldn't come in the front door was because she couldn't maneuver her wheelchair up the stairs, a physical, not political, problem. Not a problem of status and degradation. But what I remember most clearly was being angry at her for having to deal with her anger when all I wanted to do was to enjoy my all-too-late dinner after an all-too-long day.

Eventually, of course, we left the restaurant. Two of the group stayed behind to explain to the manager why we left. Another was given the task of writing the owner about his non-compliance with relevant regulations on accessibility. We decided to check the restaurant for compliance before including it in our material for conference attendees that spring. But what struck me the most was that instant when I recalled a conversation with another black woman academic returning from a conference composed predominantly of white feminists, one of whom stated that she was tired of dealing with the anger of black women. We were outraged by their "fatigue." But that evening in Oakland, I saw that I could be, no, *was*, like those white women who were tired of dealing with my anger. For I did not want to deal with Dai's anger. And because I was not in the wheelchair, I was the one who was empowered. I was the one who could listen or not, pay attention to her anger or not, understand or refuse to understand, let my hunger for my own comfort get in the way of recognizing her pain. Dai showed me that in some ways, and to some people, anybody who is not in a wheelchair, be they black, Chinese, Indian, gay, is the insider.

And she is the outsider, beating on the door, crying for inclusion. Wanting to be seen, wanting to be known.

I have learned many things from my sisters about being different and being the same. Sometimes, like that time, I did not want to learn the lesson. But it was an important lesson. I learned that sometimes I am the one who gets to wave "the magic wand . . . of exclusion and inclusion."<sup>4</sup> I am like Dai, who feels her difference and her exclusion so keenly. But I am also the non-disabled one. And thus, I am the insider. I am like my white sister too.

\* \* \* \* \*

There are many more stories I could tell, for once I was able to see the commonalities I see them everywhere. And yet there are more questions, so many more unanswered questions.

I have been wondering why difference is so hard to accept. I have been wondering why difference makes us all so anxious that we create categories, and then expend enormous amounts of energy to make sure people fit in them, and stay in them. And I have been wondering why the system of dualism is so important: what is there about a continuum that is unsatisfying? frightening? Why must life—and we—be seen in either "black" or "white," with no shades in between? For it is this system of rigid dualism that fosters so much anxiety when people don't fit into the categories neatly, when people "transgress boundaries."

And why is it that we look so hard for sameness, when we are, each and every one of us, so different from each other?

And why is it that we find it so hard to find sameness, when we are, in so many ways, so much the same?

But this is the work of another paper. For now, it must suffice that I have come a little way along this path. I have been engaged in my own struggle with being different, and I have found, along the way, the sameness, the connectedness I needed. I have been able to see the commonalities. And have found a home.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Age of Womanhood*

Now is the time  
to examine old scars  
to minister unhealed wounds  
and reflect on faded pain

Time  
to pause along this road  
and groom for the stretch  
that lies ahead

I am entering  
my age of womanhood

Now  
is the time  
to make blues into stew  
bake woes into bread  
steep tears into  
an ancient medicinal brew

the weight of womanhood  
gathers about  
my hips and breasts  
centers me in time  
I wear new clothes for it

I look back  
on my footsteps  
gather myself  
into myself

step firmly down the road<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

I offer this essay as a gift to my sisters everywhere; and I dedicate it to my parents, whose unending love has seen me through.

### *Journal Entries:*

These journal entries are essentially unchanged from the original. As I pulled this piece together in 1989, I reworked several sentences and added a few others for purposes of clarity.

The poem fragment on page 311 is from Lucille Clifton's poem "some dreams hang in the air." It is so powerful and wonderful that it is worth more than a credit cite:

some dreams hang in the air  
 like smoke. some dreams  
 get all in your clothes and  
 be wearing them more than you do and  
 you be half the time trying to  
 hold them and half the time  
 trying to wave them away.  
 their smell be all over you and  
 they get to your eyes and  
 you cry. the fire be gone  
 and the wood but some dreams  
 hang in the air like smoke  
 touching everything.

LUCILLE CLIFTON, *GOOD WOMAN: POEMS AND A MEMOIR 1969-1980* 155 (1987). *BLACK RAGE* was written by WILLIAM H. GRIER and PRICE M. COBBS (1968). The quote from ZORA NEALE HURSTON is from *How It Feels to be Colored Me*, in *I LOVE MYSELF WHEN I AM LAUGHING . . .* 153 (1979). See also P. MURRAY, *PROUD SHOES: THE STORY OF AN AMERICAN FAMILY* (1956) and J. WILLIAMSON, *NEW PEOPLE: MISCEGENATION AND MULATTOES IN THE UNITED STATES* (1980).

*Reflections:*

<sup>1</sup> D. FISHER, *THE THIRD WOMAN: MINORITY WOMEN WRITERS OF THE UNITED STATES* 107 (1980).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 522.

<sup>3</sup> Haraway, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s*, 15 *SOCIALIST REV.*, Mar.-Apr. 1985, at 71.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Alchemical Notes: Reconstructing Ideals from Deconstructed Rights*, 22 *HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV.* 413, 431 (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Jackson-Opoku, *Age of Womanhood*, 14 *ESSENCE*, Feb. 1984, at 146.

