

REMINISCENCE OF A POST-INTEGRATION KID: *Or, Where Have We Come Since Then?*

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Gaye Williams

I want to dedicate this to the young woman who sat in the University of Tennessee dining hall while a table of seven white kids—who would share her microbiology class an hour later—stood to leave as she sat down. They stood to prove that they were too good to sit next to a Black woman. However, one of them (her lab partner) could later laugh and joke with her by the safety of the microscope where no one could see them, as if nothing had happened. Sharing space were the young man and the woman, who was smarter but darker, and who knew what it was to be hurt.

Post-segregation. I asked my mother why, when I got around to attending schools, everything had calmed down. “After the whites realized they had lost,” she said, “they mostly gave up fighting desegregation.” So, no mobs lined up to keep me out of North Roebuck School’s third grade class, or my Black teacher from her job teaching all those white kids. I even won Top Scholar of my class.

Someone asked me when I first began to identify as a feminist. I realized then that I was outraged about the unequal treatment of women in relation to men long before I understood what racism meant. Before being asked the question, I had not thought about the fact that I lacked a racial consciousness growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, in the sixties. I thought some more.

The absence of a racial consciousness was a result of my being a post-integration kid. I came up through a conspiracy to silence the Black movement, which was not a topic in the white schools I attended. Even though one of my babysitters was among the girls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, everything was fine, or so the silence suggested. There were no bombs, no riots, no state troopers taking me to school. There was also no one to reinforce the radio’s message that Black was beautiful, just James Brown shouting as I got ready for school “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud!”

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But JB’s message did not sink in. In elementary school, I thought the white kids would not know I was Black if I did not tell them, although I am not at all light enough to pass. I made myself invisible and pretended I was someone else, for protection from the self-hatred that I had learned from somewhere. The fact that my imaginary self was always male, and more often white than Black, says something about the effects of curriculum, climate, and the availability of suitable role models to my sense of self-validation. Very little in my pre-college schooling gave me an alternative to hating my Blackness and femaleness, although at the time I am sure I would not have spoken of it that way. I retreated into identities I felt were safer, more attractive than my own.

Was that all the fault of curriculum, climate, lack of suitable role models? Maybe not, but I spent the great bulk of my pre-college time either in school or studying, with very little free time left over. When I was not studying, I was acting, and the classes and plays were little different in content from my school lessons.

Very early in my education, the lines were drawn between the kids singled out as smart and the others. I think about the church schools I attended—no rods spared nor children spoiled there. Being “good” and “smart” were my best defenses. From there I went to public elementary school for second grade, where I wandered outside of class to the school library and the reading specialist’s lab. I was a favored child, along with my friend Eric. We were taught at home by our school teacher/administrator families. We both advanced beyond the other kids and were treated something like a prince and princess—“golden” children.

I thought I was rich, with my light skin and proper talk, because I was set apart by the teacher, attractive to boys, and picked on by at least one girl. I knew, even while she made me cry, that Debra was as much attracted to me as she was envious or curious. That was the year when the teacher performed a wedding ceremony for Eric and me in front of all the others.

The chance to develop my talent also set me apart from other Black kids. I was not a singer, coming along in the bosom of a Black church choir, but acting in plays that had Black characters only because their actors happened to be Black. After a successful audition, I went to the Alabama School of the Fine Arts in drama. The number of Black kids in the school slowly grew, but most of them were musicians. Even among the Black actors, I was still set apart by my lack of a Black or southern accent.

The other side of being a golden child marked for success was the feeling of being separated from my peers. I was held up for praise and vulnerable to disdain. One problem of post-integration kids is that the divisions between us of class, sex, and color have become more virulent. These differences have

always been present in the Black community, and their resulting hierarchy a divisive problem. But this distancing effect of the combination of light skin, brains and opportunity became much greater post-integration because the possibility of admission to white society became much more probable. With post-integration came more options.

I came from a family that sent its children, daughters included, to the best schools the Black community had to offer, at whatever sacrifice. They considered education the necessary ticket to advancement. By the time I was ready for college, even the Ivy League was within reach. My admission was bought by sit-ins, marches, riots, freedom rides, and legislation, but I had only the vaguest understanding of the importance of these occurrences.

My mother once said that she wondered whether she had done the best thing sending me to mostly white private schools. Which is more important—that kids have the best opportunity to develop their minds in language, art and science, or that their souls and spirits benefit from the best the Black tradition has to offer, so that they face the world's hostility feeling part of a strong community and heritage? She could not ask nor answer then the question of why we should have to choose between the two.

It was in college that I began to gain a full sense of what it meant to me to be born Black and female. Knowing that the Ivy League probably had little idea of what a young Black girl/woman from the South needed or wanted so far away from home, I had the sense to build a community of friends around me very soon. Convinced that I was not prepared to be in this prestigious university and that I was going to have a difficult time academically (even though I never before had trouble in school), I surrounded myself with people and activities to help see me through. First, I found upperclass women students who were intrigued, I think, by my boldness and always ready with advice and comfort. They were my survival, along with special teachers, the Boston women's community, and the Black children and their families I met in the Intergenerational Outreach Saturday Educational Program.

I met older Black kids who had a strong racial and feminist consciousness. But they had also felt separated from most Blacks for the same reasons I had. These folks were discovering together how to bridge gaps, knowing that these were the most important lessons to learn. I grew from a base of self-love to alliances and friendships with students who were Chicano, Puerto Rican, African, Asian and American Indian, and the gay folks of all ethnicities.

The most important thing about going to college when I did and where I did was that I began to broaden my idea of education. Thinking about what education has meant to me seems almost the same as thinking about what being

young means. There is the education that happens inside classrooms or other clearly designated learning places. But it is difficult, and perhaps undesirable, to separate the learning I did there from the constant process of figuring out what I was doing in this world. The point to consider is how the learning in everyday life and that of school fit together. Then I can begin to answer questions of how my racial/feminist consciousness was shaped.

I went to a lot of conferences and events in the Boston area while in school. The most significant one was the 1981 Women and Law Conference. Meeting feminist women of color there had a catalytic effect on my education, helping to bring everything together. Afterwards, I began demanding that my course work in school complement the questions I was framing and hearing outside the classroom. I insisted that this expensive schooling give me something that would help me understand the meaning of my life as a Black woman. From the example of the women I met there and at subsequent events, I gained the inspiration and courage necessary to run successfully for president of the Harvard-Radcliffe Black Students Association, and learned to bring the force that women's work embodied onto the campus and into the lives of the other students.

I have not liked feeling cut off from people, especially from Black folks. It has been my good fortune to make friendships that showed me how silly and immaterial were the barriers which I thought kept me apart. With the help of my friends of all races I have come to insist that the post-integration decades be just that: a time that allows me to "integrate" and to use all the parts of myself. I insist on it being a time that does not demand that I be either Black or female, but recognizes that I am both, *all* of the time. From there I can go on to the business of helping make this world fit for all of us to live in.

Of course, my education does not end with the close of classes. The beat, I know, will keep going on.