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THE ART OF NEGRITUDE-Personal Opinion Essay

by Sydney Portilla-Diggs

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The original title of this essay was "Black like Black." However, after reading Henry James' *The Art of Fiction* and heeding his admonishment to write from experience, I renamed and rewrote the essay to reflect what I know best, the art of being black. You will notice throughout this essay that I refuse to submit to the more politically correct term of African-American. In my opinion, you cannot dare to call yourself an African-American unless you know exactly what tribe in Africa your family comes from. Since I do not know, do not dare to call me African-American. On a personal note, my family came to America from France via Puerto

Rico and St. Croix. The other branch of my family is of German and American Indian descent. Obviously, someone in my ancestry came

from Africa because when you mixed it all up in one family—I came out black. I digress—let me tell you about my first experience with the issue of race.

The race issue confronted me at an early age. I have a vivid memory of playing on the playground with a group of children. This was my first day in a new school; I was the new kid, and I was eager to please. An older boy ran past our little group and screamed out the word "nigger." Time stood still for me. I know many of you will find it next to impossible to believe this, but I had never heard that word before. Imagine my surprise when the other children informed me that I was the target of that hateful epithet. How was it, you may wonder, that I had never encountered the "n" word before? I can only state that my parents had never addressed the issue of race with me, and I had no idea that color was an issue. Color was no more significant to me than the differences in the clothing we chose to wear. Not only was I ignorant of the meaning of the word but also I had no vestigial idea how the other children knew he was referring to me. However, I know now that I was the only black child on the playground.

Because of this incident, my parents were forced to explain prejudice and racism to me. How do you explain prejudice to a child? How do you explain hatred? These are not rhetoric questions; somewhere out there, someone knows the answer because racism keeps rearing its ugly head generation after generation. My mother painted a grim picture of society; it resembled a tall ladder with equally spaced rungs. She explained to me that white people created this societal ladder to preside at the top and look down upon all people of color. Even some people of color, she told me, looked down upon other minorities. We, black people, were on the bottom rung of society. I have never forgotten that talk. I know now that prejudice can flow both ways.

Another aspect, I will attempt to address in the art of negritude is what it means to be black. Perhaps a better way to say this is to address the preconceived ideas of what black people should look like or sound like. Let me ask you this—what color is intelligence? What color is justice or freedom? What color is perseverance or determination? Or destiny? Or love?

If you can answer these questions for me, I can attempt to answer what black is supposed to be. I can tell you this—I am not the keeper of the knowledge of all things black-related. I cannot and will not speak for the entire race. In addition, I will not condone the practice of calling some white man to the carpet and expecting him to answer for his race. I cannot say something “black” on demand like a trained poodle. Black is not a language. I have no proof that I am black. I just am.

I also have an early memory of attending an elementary school in a suburb of Houston. In retrospect, I realize that it was an all black school. It was there that I learned I was not black enough. The other children didn’t like me because I didn’t act black. They laughed at the way I spoke and my use of

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proper grammar. I've had my blackness measured by blacks and whites alike and was found lacking by both. Sadly, I watch as my own children experience the same treatment. At a college retreat, one of my daughter's white friends commented that my daughter was not really black. Was that meant to be a compliment? My daughter was highly offended. Even now, some of my black friends tell me that I am the whitest black woman they know. Was that meant to be an insult? There is something incredibly frustrating about having to defend my blackness to other black folks while dealing with the same racism they experience.



nce I dated a black man who didn't appreciate the fact that I had many white friends. He was

convinced that if I fully understood the black man's struggle, I wouldn't befriend whitey. What did he mean by the black man's struggle? I decided to question my son to discover if and when he knew that he was black. He said his color was revealed to him in the first grade. Although his friend Jordan informed my son that he was black, my son let Jordan know that he was not black but brown. This became a consistent argument between the two boys. My son liked to play with Jordan because he had the coolest toys. Young Jordan (who I believe is a politician in the making) used his toys as a negotiation tool. He told my son that if he wanted to continue to play with the toys he would have to admit that he was black. My son pondered the proposal for a while and posed one question. Do you mean black like brown or black like black? Jordan confirmed that when he said black, he meant black. My son shrugged and conceded. Okay, I'm black.

I wonder if at that moment all the other white first graders were disappointed that my son was not more radical in his convictions. Or were the other black first graders morally outraged that my son "sold out?" Where did my son rate on the shades of blackness scale?

Did that moment of weakness in his racial identity resort in the forfeiture of the right to be called black? Had he been demoted to gray? This is what I know. Although I didn't come to America aboard a slave ship or fight my way out of a ghetto, I wake up black every morning. I fight for equal pay in corporate America. I fight to be taken seriously. I fight the stereotype. Here is a news flash. We are not all the same. I don't like watermelon, and I just learned to fry chicken two years ago. How can I prove that I am black without giving in to some stereotype? Why do I have to prove my blackness to other black people? If you ask me, that is the true black man's struggle, establishing a unique identity. Don't talk to me about the black man's struggle; I live it everyday.

The true art of negritude is to embrace your soul. From the moment I was conceived, I am who I was destined to be. However you add up my points on the shades-of-blackness-scale, there is nothing anyone can do to change what God has created me to be or the race I will pass on to my children. Don't question my blackness—find your own. Don't question who I am—find yourself. Don't categorize me—I am unique. In my soul, I know who I am. I am a black woman.