

GROWING UP NEGRO, SOON TO BE BLACK

BY SYLVIA WITTS VITALE

It happens all the time. For me as well as other Black people, some racist instances are every day, every week, no big deal, the norm, what the hell did you expect, so what, who cares. So what occurs is that I get used to it.

For the most part, I, as a Black person, have experienced so much overt and covert racism that it is hard to focus in on one specific area. When my white acquaintances tell me of instances in their lives that have made them feel uncomfortable because they were in "minority" settings, I find it hard to feel anything for them. Yet these instances stand out in their minds.

I was raised during the Negro era and gradually graduated to the Black era. My mother was raised during the colored-Negro era. My grandmother was raised during the colored or, as they said, "cullid" era. These are very distinct times in my development. I did not grow up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as a girl proud of her race. All I knew was what was on television, radio; what I learned from school, church, family and peers. I knew that my race came from Africa, but that was nothing to be proud of in the 1950s. How could I be proud when Tarzan, the white man, was always Tarzan, the right man? I felt proud of Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis, Jr., Harry Belafonte, Marion Anderson, Diahann Carrol, Johnny Mathis, Pearl Bailey, the Harlem Globetrotters, and a few others. But I only got to see these people when they were on the Ed Sullivan Show or the Nat King Cole Show. My white teachers led me to believe that this was all there was. As a people we did not do anything other than sing, dance, entertain, do sports, get in trouble, go to jail, drink and be on relief, a.k.a. welfare.

I can remember being the only Black girl in class when the teacher showed us an anthropological film on—where else but—Africa. It made me mad to be a Negro. Why did we have to look like that? Why were we always depicted as savages in skimpy cloth? The class laughed and said things like, "There's Sylvia." One tribe had plates in their lips, another suffered from elephantiasis. I felt so low, so bad that day. I was embarrassed and ashamed.

I was about 12 years old when I moved to New York. I blossomed into a singer and actor. It was a great way for me to break out of my shell, meet people, and be accepted for my talents. I'll never forget my first year in the All City High School Chorus try-outs. I had been called back for my second week of auditions. The altos were sitting in "posture" position to sing. I started a conversation with a white girl about how nervous I was. She said to me, "What are you?" I didn't know what she meant so I said, "First alto." "No, I mean you, you know, your background." What a joke! I am dark enough for it to be obvious so I just said, "Negro." "You talk real nice, you don't sound like a Negro." I busted out in this big beautiful smile. I was so happy that I did not sound like a Negro. She made my day.

In 1967 I joined a group called Hector Rivera and the Latin Renaissance. We had just cut an album and I had time off from rehearsals. One of my best friends, Author, asked me to go down South with her and her family for a visit. I smiled at the invitation but behind the smile was fear. The South, oh no, they'll kill me! I was so full of horror stories about what was done to my people in the South by white folks that it took a whole lot of convincing to ease my fears. I was told that at least in the South you knew who did not like you but in the North they'll pat you on the back with one hand and stab you with the other. I was convinced that the South had changed and that people got along better. Anyway, the "colored only/white only" signs were taken down.

My friend's family and I went to North Carolina to a dinky town called Chockoweney. We went out to eat one night at this restaurant that advertised that the food was so good that it tasted like Mom made it. By the stares we got when 12 Black people walked into this small town restaurant, you'd think that we had done something wrong. We ordered our food and waited. And waited. And waited. I got scared and started thinking about what they must be doing to my food. I got images of them grinding glass and other junk to make me sick. When the food did come, I did not eat it. I did not trust these white folks. They unnerved me. My only frame of reference for whites with southern accents was the Ku Klux Klan. It was like by day they were normal, by night they wore sheets. My family is mostly from the South and although most of them had lost their southern accents I could deal with a Black southern accent. Not a white one. Sometimes I still have problems with it.

Since I spent a great deal of my time singing throughout New York for various dignitaries and public officials, my racial horizons broadened. I figured that since I learned to discard my fears and prejudices that white folks were doing the same thing. So in 1969 I enrolled in Kingsborough



My grandmother, Minnie Lou Jackson (third from left), with club members in Harlem in 1950s.

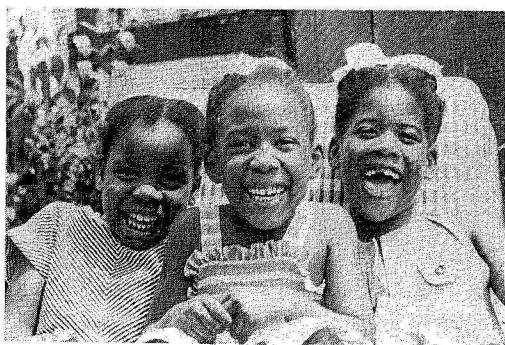
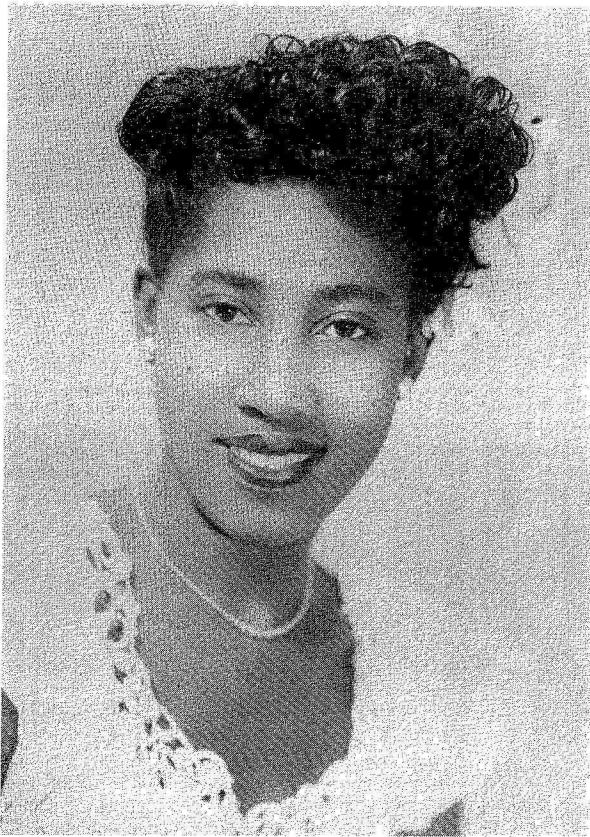
Community College in Manhattan Beach. On my way to school one day I met a middle-aged white woman on the train platform. She asked me what was I doing in the neighborhood. I told her I went to Kingsborough. She looked relieved. I found out later that most Black people in the area worked there either cleaning homes, in restaurants, or as other workers. I was too young-looking for the above. She asked me what I was studying. I really had not made up my mind yet and I was torn between majoring in music or psychology. So I said I was a music major. She smiled and said, "Oh that's nice. Your people sing and dance so well." I didn't smile. I went to school and made a decision to major in psychology. I sang in the chorus and even won the music award but I refused to major in it. That's when I realized the difference between the North and South. The South may have "for colored only" signs but the North has "for colored only" minds. In fact every time a white person told me negative things, I excelled in spite of it.

My first Black history course was taught by a white woman. She's the one who really changed the course of my life when she told me I was illiterate. After my first B in English, I aimed for and received A's throughout my college career. I could not wait to find this teacher one year later to show her that I had now become an English tutor. In my quest to please her, to have her accept me and take back those words, I worked my ass off. I remember going to her office on several occasions to talk to her. She asked me how come I never gave her eye contact. I didn't know. I never gave anybody eye contact. During the course of her class I learned about how eye contact could mean death to slaves.

In slavery, Blacks taught their children how to act and how not to act around white folks. Black people were lynched, beaten, and severely punished for merely looking a white person in the eyes. Eye contact was too close to equality, sharing personal space and meaningful communication. These lessons may have been painful sometimes in terms of discipline, but it kept many Black folks alive. I never learned this directly from my parents, but they do not usually look people straight in the eyes either. So here I was in my teacher's office, not giving eye contact to this white southern woman.

By 1973 I was well into my college life and digging it. This is also the year I experienced the Women's Movement, which changed my life. I somehow thought and was led to believe by various women that feminism embraced all women in a common struggle and that everything was better when women worked together. What a joke! I was never more patronized in my life. Queens College had a Women's Festival with a week-long series of talks, workshops, and films. I attended almost all of the activities. I walked into each one and experienced being either the only Black woman or one of a few. By the second day I began to see the same faces and women began to open up to me. I was patted on the back by white feminist teachers and told such things as, "You're great, you're so articulate," and other things that I at first thought were compliments. I started being invited to faculty and student feminist parties. I joined a CR group. I was still basically

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Left to right: My mother, Elizabeth Fennel Cohen, in the 1940s; me, growing up, from six years to the present. (Last photo by Yvonne Flowers.)

trying to figure out what feminism was and why so few Black women were in it. The following week Queens College was back to normal. Classes as usual. All of a sudden I missed the high I was on. A white woman, whom I met during the festival, saw me in the student lounge and came over to talk to me. She told me about this meeting that was coming up at the old NOW headquarters in Manhattan for Black women in the Women's Movement. She couldn't go because she was white and her Black lover did not want to go. So I thanked her for the information.

I showed up at this meeting. I was in a room full of approximately 30 Black women. This was the first time I had seen so many sisters together talking about feminism. Some faces I recognized from Queens College. I felt so good. People like Reverend Magora Kennedy, Michele Wallace, Lore Sharpe, and Faith Ringgold were there. Faith termed what we were experiencing "consciousness raging." I could dig it. I felt it. We knew we had to meet again. And we did. Again and again and again until we formed the National Black Feminist Organization. We held a press conference and our story was carried in the *New York Times*. Florence Kennedy, Eleanor Holmes Norton, and Shirley Chisolm were just a few who wished us well and gave substantive support.

In the meantime some of my white feminist friends began to have problems with our organization. They somehow thought that we were dividing and therefore weakening the movement. They could not see the need for Black women to gather and focus in on issues that specifically spoke to our needs. I said then and I still maintain that this autonomy is necessary. My analogy is simple: During the '60s Black folks had to go behind closed doors to redefine ourselves. We yelled, we screamed, we disagreed, but when we finished, we told the world, "We are BLACK! not NEGRO, not COLORED." We insisted on it and we succeeded. The tactics we used ended up being the mode of operation for all liberation groups to follow. Similarly, women had to go behind closed doors to scream, disagree, argue until we decided who we were. We emerged as WOMEN, not GIRLS, not CHICKS, not BITCHES, not LADIES. It was accepted. We defined ourselves with strength.

Somehow both of these groups who fought so hard to define themselves could not see the validity of Black women uniting to work on our issues. Black men and some Black women were led to believe, via Black Nationalist philosophy, that when Black people were liberated, all benefited. Not true. Thanks to non-Blacks like Daniel P. Moynihan, who wrote "The Moynihan Report," the focus was on finding jobs for Black men. The theory was that if the Black man had a job he could therefore take his rightful place as head of the household. He would marry Black and take care of his family. I even heard discussions from Black women about how if they were in a situation where the job opportunity came between them and the Black man, they would yield to the Black man. Although Black women worked just as hard as Black men in all of our liberation struggles, sexism was still a major problem. So when some Black women embraced the Women's Movement,

somehow we felt that our common struggles were paramount. White feminists wondered where all the Black women were. One white feminist even told me that the Women's Movement needed Black women. That we were strong and good leaders. But some Black women soon realized that our issues went far beyond their issues. Black women could not afford to separate ourselves according to income, who lived in which neighborhoods, etc. Our movement consisted of the women who cleaned white women's homes. Our movement consisted of dealing with welfare mothers, household technicians, students, single mothers, triply oppressed lesbians, high school dropouts, teachers, lawyers, office workers—in other words, all Black women. We needed to lend support to one another, to network. We needed to see each other's faces, hear our stories. Herstory has shown just how strong Black women are.

So why didn't Black men and white women understand that? My dual identification had a tendency to force me to make unreal choices. That is, until I became aware and strong enough to deal with the D & C (divide and conquer) method. White women wanted me to identify as female and oppressed as if I had no color. That was their way of not dealing with racism yet being racist. Black men wanted me to identify as Black because being a female was not an issue. One day I was invited to speak at a women's conference. A woman asked me: What do I identify most with, being Black or female? That did it. I told the audience that I do not know what my mother noticed first, that I was a girl or her brown baby. I do know, however, that I was born head first and that is the way I will continue to operate—head first!

I can remember being at women's conferences where the slogan "Sisterhood is powerful" was used a lot. White women would address the audience with the word "sisters." Somehow I did not feel comfortable with the term because I knew that when I used it I meant women of African descent. Some white women challenged me one day and demanded to know why I could not call them sisters. So I told them. When my ancestors were stolen from Africa and brought to Amerika as slaves, families were divided. Some because of health were dropped in the Caribbean. We were bred, traded, bought, and rarely knew where to find one another, so when we were so-called "freed" most of us did not know where our relatives were. I have "family" throughout the Third World, in Brazil, Cuba, the West Indies, etc. So when I meet someone who says that I remind them of someone that they know, or I meet someone who reminds me of someone else that I know, I automatically think that somehow we are all "slave-ancestor-relatives." Therefore, the words "sister" and "brother" have very significant roots. I understood very well why I could not call a white woman my sister. They can be "cousins" only.

It is not good enough for me just to sport my brown skin and call myself Black. To be Black in Amerika is to be politically aware of my past, present, and future.