

My Secret Life as a Black Man

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I willingly or not, we all provide clues, signs and bits of information that others use to identify and interact with us. Sometimes this information is to our advantage; sometimes it is not. In all cases, we find it difficult to convince others that they have read a "cultural marker" wrongly or that they are attaching exaggerated importance to it. In this essay, the author takes us into the thinking of a man who, while proud to be African American, finds others' expectations a barrier to the kind of life he would like to lead.

I have often thought of myself as having two lives: my life as a black man and my other, real life. Since grammar school I've felt a tension at play in my inner life, a pull between what was expected of me as a young black boy, adolescent, and man, and what I wanted as myself, Anthony. I've been at war, and the stakes of the battle are who I am and who I can become. When I was younger, I thought this struggle would end at some point. Now, at thirty-six, I realize it won't end; that its roots are as deep as the most fundamental problem of philosophy—the uneasy coexistence of body and soul. As William James writes in *The Principles of Psychology*, "Our bodies themselves, are they simply ours, or are they us?"

One night last November I walked along the pier at the southern tip of Miami Beach with an old friend from school, a white woman. The evening was unseasonably warm, and moonlit. We hadn't seen each other in eight or nine months, and we were chatting amiably, taking our time. My friend was excited about a book of poems by David Malouf and was exhorting me to read it.

About a third of the way out we passed a middle-aged black woman who remarked on my friend's considerable beauty and the color of her blond hair. I thought to myself, "How nice!" but when I entered the woman's frame of vision, she launched into a tirade. "Oh, I see," she hissed, "one of them who done married a white wife. Think you too good!" She followed us most of the way down the pier for what felt like an excruciating length of time, berating my friend for being with me, excoriating me for treason to the race—then she suddenly turned back and disappeared as abruptly as she had pounced.

I don't know if the woman was deranged or just angry, but the incident—this is what troubles me most—wasn't really anything new. That night in

Miami was merely one more instance in which I'd offended another person, in this case a black person, by doing nothing more than living my own life.

I can remember conflicts years before with certain black kids in Aurora, Illinois, the town where I grew up, over my bookishness, my flagrant love of school and the library, and my tendency to make friends outside of the race and to join groups like Little League and Boy Scouts, activities considered insufficiently "black." One girl was so outraged by my failure to follow her tightly circumscribed ideas of how the black kids in our neighborhood should act that for two years she and the boys in her clique threw my books in the mud, picked fights with me after school, and threatened a white friend of mine in an attempt to stop us from sharing a locker. In the end, I withdrew from public school and enrolled in a Catholic school.

All along there were conflicts with white kids as well—over the appropriateness of my aspirations and the threat these aspirations posed to them. I wasn't in their group, and many seemed to think there was only so much achievement to go around. Along the way I also butted heads with black and white teachers, both groups declaring me too big for my britches, though for different reasons—some whites thinking I was uppity and arrogant, some blacks thinking I was more brazenly self-confident than was healthy for a young black.

Most troubling were the struggles with my parents, who for a long time disapproved of my "over-involvement" with the arts. I wanted to be Martin Scorsese or Sting; in *their* scenario, I was to be a doctor or a pastor, the crown jewel of our family's long struggle up from slavery. At times my parents seemed heartbroken over our lack of common ground. To their thinking, I was courting disaster by turning my back on the way that black people had done things for ages.

Finally, there were the momentary, or ongoing, scrapes with white strangers—the wider world—those people too busy, fearful, or thoughtless to perceive others in any fashion other than as stereotypes. When these people gazed upon me, they saw only what their culture and society had constructed and coded as a "black man." And a six-foot, two-hundred-fifty pound one at that—a threat to doormen, security guards, and cabdrivers; someone suspicious, dangerous, but irrelevant.

Black strangers, like the woman in Miami, were often just as troubling, expecting me to conform completely to their ideological and cosmological positions, even though we knew nothing about each other.

The problem of defining the self, of authenticity, is a problem for every human. But, for better and worse, it is more sharply and starkly dramatized for blacks. Walking down the street, I can't simply be lost in my thoughts, in my soul—in what I'll have for dinner, a movie I saw the night before, an essay I read about Flaubert—because I'm constantly jolted and reminded, by the looks in strangers' eyes, of my *body*, and of the assumptions and expectations that go along with it. What I think of as myself, my soul, is under crippling siege.

A black man * * * is still constantly being told—by society, by the media, by white behavior and stricture, by other blacks—what he should think, what his soul's affinities should be, whom he should love and be in love with, what his ultimate loyalties are.

I have tried to imagine what the black woman in Miami thought she saw that evening and why she reacted the way she did. I can forgive her the rage, if not the bad manners. It was almost as if two different zones of reality and history—with their varied expectations of behavior and duty—had collided. To the woman, perhaps my white friend was the symbol of everything that had oppressed her and her people down through time. To me, she was someone I'd sat next to in class. I suppose the black woman and I each had to live up to, and live with, our respective interpretations of the scene, but as blacks we have historically been expected to agree with each other—which in this case was impossible.

The desires and intentions others have for me, however profound or superficial, usually conflict with my own. And so of necessity I devised a way of navigating these treacherous shoals of expectation, a mode of being that allows me to maneuver through society, black, white, rich, poor—and one that I suspect has cost me something. I learned, quite unconsciously, how to be a "black man," how to slide through the surface of any situation. I developed, in fact, a great many ways of being, a sense of the self as a shape-shifter, a kind of post-modern extrapolation of DuBois's "double-consciousness."

In Harlem, talk crap and slap palms; in Scarsdale, be the soul of probity; in Mississippi, agree with whoever is talking; with my parents, steer the conversation away from anything remotely "controversial." I became like Ralph Ellison's Rinehart, the chameleon of *Invisible Man*—all things to all people, whoever they wanted him to be.

A black man, if he chooses to enter mainstream society, must manipulate many contexts, must alter his appearance often and change his diction and demeanor as circumstances require. Classically, this was known as "bowing and scraping," but today, with a wider range of possibilities in a society that is itself fragmenting, the reality is far more complex.

A black man's "identity" in the boardroom of a bank is different from his "identity" as an anonymous black motorist stopped by the police, and both of those are different from his "identity" as a husband and father, or with his friends, be they black, white, or black and white. A day in Los Angeles that might start in South Central could finish in Orange County. How much skill and energy and psychic strength is required to "pass" in these wildly different places? These (and many more) fragments of identity are shifting and overlapping and contradicting one another daily.

Other questions of identity underlie and plague this fluid, protean self. Am I a human first? A male? A Christian? A black? A black male? Or am I a Southerner? A Midwesterner? A college graduate? A bourgeois? A writer?

I think it's safe to say that being black is not necessarily the irreducible fact of black people's lives. My parents, and millions of other blacks like them, think of themselves as African-Americans. They could be fairly described as militantly proud of that fact. But if you said to them, or many other blacks, that they had to choose between their Christianity or blackness, they would happily choose Christianity even if it meant they would be martyred.

My various modes of moving through and effacing a society, black and white, * * * were conceived as techniques for surviving the resulting fragmentation of self. I now see, as I get older, that the techniques *themselves* are something I must survive, as they pose a danger of leading me away from being true to myself (and thus true to others).

The problem, put simply, is one of authenticity—of preserving the capacity for being whole in a specific moment and honest with one's self, and with others.

I had been forced to consider if somehow I owed it to the woman on the pier to be strolling that night with a black woman. This brings me to the question, *Is there a me that is not defined by others, and not defined solely in opposition to them?*

The philosopher Charles Taylor has written, "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something that only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself."

Each of us is an original, and has an original way of existing as a human, though we may not ever fully realize it. Emerson emphasized that the soul was a unique and private thing, to be guarded from the world, to be mined, probed, and created in secret. But what does this notion of defining one's self mean to a black man?

Throughout my life what I've been hearing in various forms is, "Be true to your kind." But I wonder who, exactly, are my kind: the black kids who tried to stop me from going to the library, or the old white lady librarian who, without my asking, set aside special books for me on subjects I liked? People who share my epidermal melanin content, and perhaps little else, or those who share my obsessive interests in Glenn Gould, Thelonious Monk, and string quartets? Am I my skin color, my gender, my family's social position? Or instead, am I my loyalties, my pleasures, those people and things I love? How do I choose who I am? How much is society choosing for me, and how much am I choosing for myself? Can I be, irreducibly, anything that I do not choose to be?

There are, classically, three constituents of identity—biology, culture, and belief—and the problem in our society is that we are always turning the categorical (abstractions humans invent in order to assign meaning and hierarchy) into the biological (descriptive facts that cannot be modified and that can have an irrevocable impact on one's fate). To describe someone as "black" or "Irish" or "Cuban" is to say something very different about that person than to describe him as male or as left-handed or as having heart disease, but we often

invest the two kinds of description with equal authority. As Ellison wrote in *Invisible Man*, however, blackness is “not exactly a matter of a biochemical accident [of] my epidermis. . . . [it] occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact.” This “peculiar disposition,” I might add, occurs in the eyes of blacks as well as whites.

It becomes tempting, taking into account the dangers of imprecise descriptors, to say that there is no such thing as a “black man,” or any of the other socially constructed categories we have become used to declaiming. But we know that this is not quite true, or I wouldn’t be writing this essay.

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When, late at night, I get on the elevator in the library of the college where I teach, the female student who reacts uncomfortably to my presence as we ride down alone is not necessarily interested in the fact that I’m carrying books by Emerson, Gordimer, and Rorty. On my good days, I shrug and say to myself, it’s not me—not a black man—that she finds so alarming, but the general category of “male.”

When I think of my lonely hours in the library, or in contemplation and in prayer, I don’t see why my most personal affinities should be of interest, or meaning, to anyone but me and those few with whom I choose to open my self. Why must the people I love, the things and places I treasure, my lifetime’s accumulation of an interior life, become subject to other people’s politics, shallow rhetoric, and public scrutiny?

We live in a society that forces sincere and law-abiding people to break themselves into little pieces in order to survive it, to inhabit the margins of the culture rather than to embrace it whole. Democracy, in its pure, and even its corrupted form, should allow us to choose a self freely. Instead, in its modern-day American version, it leads, in the end, to a more fragmented self. The tragic legacy of our democracy, as described by Ralph Ellison, is that as we are freed from sweeping social categories, from fixed, generational identities—and in order to flee the anguish of choice and responsibility, we simply create our own smaller categories and defend them viciously. We are “Asian,” “black,” “gay,” “suburban,” “Latino,” “white,” “feminist,” “conservative”—a legacy of soundbites, the commodified self, the “self” bought and sold for its utility.

It is almost structurally impossible for an American—and I stress that I’m speaking for more than black males here—simultaneously and openly to embrace and enjoy all of the aspects of the culture for which he or she might feel an affinity.

Are we becoming a nation of Rineharts, with different personas at work, at home, at play, at church? Is this the new human condition * * * ? Race, religion, gender, sexual preference, social class, economic power, age—definitions of some aspect of identity are always going to be at odds with others and preclude simple choices.

I am a black man, however, and I suspect that the question, finally, is not “What does it mean to be a black man?” but rather, “What is living as a black man in this society doing to me, to my soul?” Is there a me aside from the black man? Am I finally, and only, my body, or are the soul and body of a black man two different things?

There is a Zen koan that says, “Show me your original face; show me the face you had before you were born.” The question is, Can an American black man in the late twentieth century find that original face under the noise and expectations that surround and overwhelm him once he is in the world? Dare he show it? Can others see it?