

THE SPLIT OF IDENTITY

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Ranked number one in women's singles tennis, Serena Williams has more Grand Slam wins than any other tennis player in history. However, despite her talent, the African-American tennis player has suffered due to those who believe her race is an issue. As Williams pointed out when she was a guest editor on a special edition of *WIRED* magazine, "I'm in a sport that wasn't meant for black people." In her essay "Graphite Against a Sharp White Background," the writer Claudia Rankine argues that despite Serena Williams' resilience, "nothing could shield her from the people who felt her black body didn't belong on their court, in their world." Williams, like many other African Americans, must make a hard decision: how does one respond to others' racist mindsets? How should someone prioritize between her chosen career and her inherited race without sacrificing essential parts of her identity?

There are many events in which Serena Williams has been "cheated and robbed" due to the injustices on the tennis court, the most critical occurring during the 2009 Women's U.S. open semifinals. As Williams served to stay in the match, the line judge falsely claimed that "Serena [had] stepped on the line". Williams responded with an outburst of profanity, threatening to shove the ball she was holding down the line judge's throat. However, instead of being commended for finally standing up to the injustice she received, many criticized her response, calling her insane, and accusing her of bad sportsmanship. It doesn't end there; the media called Serena Williams' "Crip Walk" victory dance in the 2012 Olympics "ghetto" and "classless." British journalist and television personality Piers Morgan even "jokingly" told Williams that she looked like a "gangster." These are in fact racist jokes and comments. Associating Williams' victory dance with "the ghetto" is not acceptable, and identifying her as a "gangster" reveals the kind of mindset that causes Serena Williams and many other African Americans to become enraged.

Rankine states that one reason Serena Williams struggles so much is because many people today have a similar mentality to people in the days of slavery. Rankine points out that many people believe Serena would fit more in a Millet

painting of peasants than on the tennis court. In other words, some people believed working the land as her great grandparents had was a more fitting job for Williams. This mentality is not only engraved in the minds of some White Americans but also in the minds of a number of African Americans, too. For instance, I have often had people tell me, “You’re like a white girl stuck in a black girl’s body.” At first, I paid no attention to the comment, because it was always sounded like a compliment. For quite a long time, I went on taking the comment as a compliment, unaware of all the issues that came with it.

Then one day I was helping out a classmate who was struggling with history. He was an African-American boy who was 5’8”, a lover of basketball, and the class clown who always made racist jokes to amuse others. While helping him out with his homework, I decided to play my Spotify playlist, which consisted of music from Taylor Swift, Demi Lovato, and Selena Gomez. It was something to distract me while he attempted his homework. He asked me why I was listening to “White music,” to which I replied, “Because I like it.” He then made the effort to point out everything he believed made me white. He mentioned that I listened to white music, spoke like a white girl, barely had swear words in my vocabulary, and actually enjoyed reading. “You’re so white,” he stated.

I asked him, in what way I would need to act in order to have a black personality? I expected him to say that I should act like someone who was strong and reliable, because those were characteristics that I lacked but that many African Americans in my community had. My classmate didn’t mention those characteristics however; in fact, he didn’t mention any characteristics at all. Instead, he stood up and in a really loud and annoyed tone he said, “NAW AWW! WHO TOLD YOU THAT YOU COULD SIT HERE?” while moving his neck back and forth, constantly wagging his index finger. The whole class responded with laughter and was greatly amused by his impression of a black girl. I, however, found it to be extremely disrespectful and started to finally understand that my great qualities are robbed from me when people call me “White”; they are instead treated as qualities I have mimicked from a white girl. Anything perceived as “ghetto,” “ratchet,” and “classless” is what people perceive as black characteristics, while someone who has high intelligence, class, and reserve is seen as possessing white characteristics.

It’s no wonder African Americans often feel like “[g]raphite against a sharp white background.” The racist mentality of the country has only strengthened

this feeling. Many African Americans like my classmate believe in these hurtful thoughts and judgments against African Americans. According to Rankine, this mindset is hurting us. Under those circumstances, many African Americans in the end have either gone on to feel angry, bitter, and outraged at these thoughts, or they have changed who they are to fit an image of how African Americans are portrayed, causing a never-ending cycle of self-dividing racial thought.

But how should African Americans respond when feeling like “graphite against a sharp white background”—when they feel different and perceive their own color based on the color of those people around them? Serena Williams felt “very angry and bitter,” even “cheated.” Speaking out in 2009, Williams responded to a pattern of bad calls “with a string of invectives.” Williams’s rage, however, only hardened the racist mindset that some people had toward her. On the other hand, when responding to racial discrimination, Zora Neale Hurston in “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” chose to forget the past and give herself a new identity. Hurston admits that she has felt like a “brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall” when around whites, but she also realizes that all people are essentially the same, no matter what color we are. Hurston did not allow the fact that she is a “granddaughter of slaves” to become her singular identity. She shaped herself to be strong and proud, not seeing herself as “tragically colored” but instead as being too “busy sharpening her oyster knife.” Not letting the color of her skin bring her down or upset her, she cultivated within herself the mindset, “How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company?” Hurston created this identity to become happy, realizing that reminding ourselves about the past and others’ racist thoughts leads many African Americans to become angry.

There may be some use for Hurston’s approach given the current mentality of our country, but I also think that there are still some problems with it. Rankine claims that Williams, in order to control her rage and get on with her career, “has had to split herself off from herself and create different personae.” Rankine implies that today, successful African Americans like Serena Williams must split themselves from blackness in order to achieve their goals. It seems that “splitting ourselves” and “sharpening our own knives” can separate an individual African American from her people. Rankine wonders if Serena Williams’s change indicates that she has surrendered to the rules of success to “be ambiguous, be white”.

How can we separate and forget all the times when African Americans were wrongfully targeted? George Zimmerman was let free after killing Trayvon

Martin, an unarmed African-American boy. The Baltimore Police Department faced no punishment after handling Freddie Gray in a way that caused the man to fall into a coma and eventually die. The New York Police Department faced no punishments after putting Eric Garner in a chokehold, despite Garner gasping out, "I can't breathe." The racist mentality against African Americans has been going on since before the birth of America. As a result, many African Americans have suffered and have been robbed of their success and, most importantly, their rightful identity.

The real question is what do we do about this mentality that robs us? How can we embrace our pride, as Hurston suggests? Creating an identity where we aren't estimated primarily for our race can help us become stronger and happier, but it can also cause people to inadvertently accept or learn to tolerate racism. However, responding to the injustice of racism with outrage can also backfire and confirm the judgments made about African Americans, making us even more unhappy. Sometimes it seems as if we need to split ourselves from how we are identified with our race without forgetting our race or accepting the wrongdoings of the world. It is very difficult to do, but in the end we need to learn to negotiate between our individual identities and our racial identity to truly upend the racist mentality.

First Lady Michelle Obama has been successful at this kind of negotiating between her race and her self. She has the respect of Americans as both an African American woman and as First Lady. It's not clear how she does it, but her positive attitude and hope are big factors. Michelle Obama is also able to pick out the right time and place to unleash her identity as an African American. She is able to be subtle about her race and her position as First Lady, never ceding more importance to one identity than the other. It's possible that we can learn to negotiate our identities in an effort to destroy the racist mindsets that have persisted for centuries.

WORKS CITED

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