



Reconciling Myself to The Body's Lessons

By Faith Adiele

*Is identity on the inside or the outside?
Taking ownership of a mixed-race culture*

My official “coming out” as The Black Girl in my school occurred in third grade, when I debuted Chief Kamiakin Elementary School’s first Afro. Our town of Sunnyside, Washington, had never witnessed such a display. Originally formed as a Christian cooperative community on a few of the six million acres of land that Chief Kamiakin (of the Yakama tribe) and other Native chiefs were forced to relinquish to the U.S. government, the town had embraced its isolation, the ring of hills a deterrent to new ideas and new hairstyles. By the time my mother returned to the family farm in the early ’70s with me in tow, Sunnyside was a village consisting roughly of 4,500 Anglo farm owners, 1,500 Latino farm workers, one Asian family, one “Negro” family (according to the U.S. Census Distribution of the Negro Population), and me, product of an absent Nigerian father and Nordic-American mother.

Before The Afro, comments on my difference were limited to the usual playground interrogations (*Where’s your real mom?*) and the occasional racist taunt by someone who failed to recognize me as the child of the indeed real, strict, fearless, junior high school teacher Mrs. Adiele. I occupied a special status, somewhere between town mascot and village idiot: *Yes, she’s odd. She doesn’t have a father or go to church. Her entire family is a different color than she is, but she’s ours.* Despite coming in a Black Body, I sounded and behaved pretty much like everyone else. Without knowing it, I was “passing.” Until Mom blew my cover.

My mother had been conducting serious social anthropology—for my sake. She’d been watching Black culture from afar, studying Black Bodies for clues. Each month, *Ebony* and *Jet* and, later, *Essence* made the long journey from New York City to Sunnyside. Each month we tore off the brown paper wrappers and ran our fingers over the glossy covers, as if Blackness could be read like Braille: *Diana Ross as Billie Holiday; Black Colleges & Cheerleaders; Most Influential Blacks.* We weren’t exactly sure what it all meant, but it was clear that another America, strewn with “Black is Beautiful” banners, existed somewhere over the hills. Nine years old, Mom decided, was old enough for me to apply for citizenship. One Sunday, she burst into my bedroom waving a photo spread of the mod, brilliantly-costumed, halo-haired Sly and the Family Stone. “How would you like an Afro?” she trilled. “It’s what they’re wearing now in all the magazines!”

After some coaxing, I settled before the mirror and felt the plastic hair pick climb my scalp and draw out, stopping in mid-air. Little did we realize that this simple gesture was equivalent to drawing a line in the sand. It certainly didn’t feel like a “style,” but by aligning myself with the Jackson 5 rather than David Cassidy, I had chosen Black over White, which Sunnyside would take as a betrayal, a declaration of war.

The reaction began benignly with the collective intake of breath when I walked into class on Monday, escalated to notes passed in class (*So did you stick your finger in a light socket?*) and catcalls on the playground, but ended without grave mishap. By day’s end, a few older kids approached and requested permission to touch The Afro. This too seemed benign, the first one, two, three, five, ten years I stood motionless, a stranger’s hands in my hair.

After The Afro, however, now that I’d become Officially Black, there was no going back. Suddenly the lessons I was learning seemed critical to my survival. Over dinner I learned that my mother had been thrown off the farm for dating a Black man and having a mixed child. I learned that ours was an international family, with international responsibilities. I learned that education was paramount to both my parents. They had risked much to become the first in their respective families to graduate from college and had dedicated their lives to educating others—my father in post-colonial Africa, my mother in rural America. I learned that I had work to do.

At Chief Kamiakin Elementary, and then Lincoln Middle School, I learned something different.

I learned what not to expect from the few folks of color: The glossy-maned Chicana friend at whose house I was told to keep quiet (*Her father was killed in a car accident by a Black driver, so her mother hates Blacks. You understand.*). The student teacher I adored for her long ebony hair and brown skin, who decided that, when I made a friendly comment that was too witty for what she believed a Black sixth-grader capable, I had “cursed her out.” Without being asked or told what I’d supposedly said, I was suspended from school.

I learned what to expect from the principal who wouldn't believe that my best friend, the white daughter of a doctor, could have been the ringleader when we sneaked off campus to the drive-in. Though she admitted it proudly, he punished me alone. She, he took aside, warning that as I got older my True Black Nature would emerge. Did she really want to continue to associate with me?

A few months later, my best friend and my rival (the one Asian girl), having found a book that referred to Blacks as shadows and spooks, issued the challenge: *Shun The Shadow!* I arrived at school to find friends who wouldn't speak to me, classmates who refused to pass my desperate notes begging for info, an entire lunchroom "saving" seats, and me, The Shadow, standing alone.

College, my prayed-for escape, was a quick and dirty lesson in the *politics*, not just appearance, of The Body: I could choose either to align myself with Black Liberation, a male project, or with Feminism, a white project. Neither group wanted to hear about the other, and no one wanted to hear about my being mixed race. It was like being asked to amputate my arm or leg, my mother or my father. Not surprisingly, I failed.

Next stop: Asia. It was not until I stood alone as the only Black, Western nun in a Buddhist temple, by erasing The Body's social markers (shaving my post-Afro hair, trading my street clothes for white robes) that I recovered my identity and reconciled myself to this body in its entirety. Now, I use my biracial, multicultural identity—this body, inside and out—to help those I teach find their own connections to the world.

My first career was running a social justice center that trained college students to work with communities around the globe. We were a multicultural collective making decisions by consensus—no easy feat when negotiating different ethnicities, nationalities, first languages, socio-economic classes, religions, and genders/orientations. Time and again, I found myself relying on storytelling. I started to realize that personal narrative is how we explain who we are and what matters to us. Eventually I moved storytelling into my current career as author, lecturer, and writing teacher.

When teaching multicultural literature, I ask students to create an inventory of common images about a group or region, posing it as a way to understand the worlds their characters and readers inhabit, as well as the challenges of writing about a particular community or topic. In the process of immersing themselves in "the other," students begin to question, critique, correct.

When teaching and writing personal narrative—that is, the exploration of the self in the world—I ask students to consider: *Where do your stories connect to and illuminate the human experience?* I ask them to list their identity markers and social roles, to determine which ones enhance their writing and which ones don't feature at all, and why. I have the class choose a shared, public event about which each person will write. When read aloud, the different versions create a collective text, demonstrating how an individual's position and subjectivity inform and add to a nation's reality.

So despite the fact that, in academe, The Afro continues to be read as "biased" (code for Being Black or "gives-bad-grades-to-anyone-who-doesn't-agree-with-her-politics") with an "agenda" (assigning texts that represent the world's actual demographics); despite the number of colleagues who tell me how difficult it is for them to find tenure-track jobs because they're "just ordinary white"; despite the fact I can't seem to find those places apparently swimming in tenured Afros; with each breakthrough I witness, each email report that students are sharing their work and supporting each other, each letter testifying to

personal change, Chief Kamiakin Elementary School's first Afro stands a little less lonely. A little more reconciled. A little more hopeful. ☺



Faith modeling an outfit that her father sent from Nigeria

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Finnish Family (left to right): Mummi Lempi (grandmother), Tāti Rauha (elderly aunt), and Faith sitting in her mother's lap



Faith with her cousin, Barbie, and friends (sisters) whose parents ran a bakery in town



Having her eyebrows and head shaved was part of the ceremony in Faith's ordination as a Buddhist nun