

## **Black Dreams\***

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Published in the Heresies collective's journal, this was O'Grady's first attempt to deal publicly with issues of black female subjectivity. It is based firmly in personal anecdote and psychological description rather than the more theoretical analysis she would later employ.

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"Which would you guess was the biggest category?" I asked as I handed my new black woman therapist the organization chart I'd made of nine months' worth of dreams.

I'd finally located her in September. Even in New York it hadn't been easy. Only one percent of the therapists in America are black, and I'd spent July and August going to one white therapist after another who'd ask the standard question: "Why have you come into therapy?" When I was too embarrassed to answer directly, they'd accused me of being an aesthete, of wanting to take a symbolic journey into self-discovery.

There was the estrangement from my son, of course. But even if I'd been able to talk about it. I couldn't have placed it in its deepest perspective by describing the specter standing behind not just my problems with motherhood, but those with my family, sex, and my artistic persona. With these male and female therapists I couldn't break out of the defense I'd adopted toward the whole white world, the mystique that everything was all right, that I had no racial problems. Even when I trusted their capacity for empathy, I couldn't talk to them about the subtle identity problems of a fair-skinned black woman, born and raised in Boston at a time when "social" blacks (the families who sent their children to Ivy League Schools) were still trying to be white.

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Meanwhile, shopping for a therapist was becoming expensive. Jung had said that series of dreams were far more informative than dreams taken singly, and since I'd begun collecting my dreams at the beginning of the year, I now had nearly 150. To save time and money I decided to organize them. At the end of August, after saying goodbye to my last white therapist, I took my journal to Martha's Vineyard and arranged the dreams into 24 categories with names like *Upstairs/Balconies* and *Downstairs/Basements*, *Papa*, *Mama*, *Devonia* (my sister), *Sex*, *Art*, *Fear of Ending Up Alone*, and *Blacks/Racial Attitudes*.

The results were startling. The *Blacks/Racial Attitudes* series was the largest, with roughly 30 dreams containing the motif, 10 more than the next largest series. I knew I'd been kidding myself, as well as white people, about the extent of my problem, but seeing it statistically tabulated like this unnerved me.

The black woman therapist, Vassar-educated and 10 years older than me, looked over the list. "I don't want to guess which category contains the most dreams, Lorraine, because I don't know you. But," she hesitated, "experience would lead me to. . . could it be *Blacks/Racial Attitudes*?"

On Thursday, August 20, I was feeling depressed about Reagan, and paranoid about the fascism lying in wait just below the surface of the country. In my worst-case fantasies, the dragon breaks out and, as in Nazi Germany, gobbles up those closest at hand: assimilated blacks first.

That afternoon I wrote in my art journal a proposal for an installation to be called *Walter Benjamin Memorial Piece (A Black Intellectual Gets Ready in Time)*, with a wall plaque containing the following quote:

On September 26, 1940, Walter Benjamin, who was about to emigrate to America, took his life at the Franco-Spanish border. The Gestapo had confiscated his Paris apartment, which contained his library (he

had been able to get "the more important half" out of Germany) and many of his manuscripts. How was he to live without a library? How could he earn a living without the extensive collection of quotations and excerpts among his manuscripts? [Hannah Arendt]

Mounted on three dry walls was to be a life-sized photo reproduction of my library alcove (the shelves contain about 3,000 volumes). In the center of the alcove, my actual desk, extremely cluttered, a typing table and chair, and scattered about on the floor, a jumble of packing crates with labels not yet filled in.

That night I had the following black dreams. I made the journal responses a couple of months later and gave them, together with the dreams, to the black woman psychiatrist.

### **Dream 1 THE INTERNMENT CAMP**

A prison camp, like the Nazi concentration camps or Nisei internment camps of World War II. Fifteen or 16 people have been rounded up from the general prison population to be specially tortured. No rhyme or reason for the selection, just the private hatreds and prejudices of the guard, a small-boned, rat-faced Hispanic male about 35 years old.

Men and women, mostly white, but one or two blacks, including me. As a whole, an intellectual group. Forced to sit in straight-backed chairs, four or five to a row, facing rigidly front. I am in the front row. The rat-faced Hispanic guard paces back and forth, issuing peremptory commands at unpredictable moments.

Kept in this position for days, without sleep, without food, without being able to get up and stretch our legs. Soon the chairs are covered with shit, the place begins to stink. But somehow everyone manages to keep themselves looking presentable. This group has pride. As a result, when the international inspection comes through, they don't think we're really being tortured.

"Do you see that?" I say, pointing to the back of the chair. Draped over the wooden slats are dripping pieces of intestine

where even I had expected there to be just shit. "Do you see that?" I say. "That's *me*."

Perhaps this is what finally convinces the inspection team. We are released back into the general prison population. When I pass the rat-faced guard, who'd had a special thing against me (I really set him off in some way), his face glazes over as if he didn't recognize me.

"Shit. So that's the way it's going to be," I say to myself. "We're going to pretend that it didn't happen, that it never really was."

Needless to say, this pisses me no end. It's a pattern I recognize only too well, and this time I'm determined not to play along with that game. I'm getting the hell out of there.

### **Response:**

No matter who revolts against whom, I won't be safe. If the whites decide to quarantine, or if the blacks and browns rise up, there I am. In the middle.

Driving to work with my boss, Alice Shurtcliff, a Brahmin from Boston's Beacon Hill, but now my neighbor in the fluid Dupont Circle area. She talks about buying a co-op in a more exclusive part of Washington. It is the early 60s. The new apartment has "reasonable resale restrictions, of course."

"How many rooms will you have?" I ask, and the car does not explode.

Back from Europe, temporarily teaching in an inner-city high school, Valerie, a 16-year-old shy beauty, my pet, arrives one morning, eyes swollen, red with tears. She's been assaulted by a white male customer outside the restaurant where she has to work midnights after school.

"What do you know?" she hisses at me as I try to put my arm around her to console her. "The way you live, the way you look. What do you know about being black?"

Marty, my beautiful Jew, my big love, after two years of mutual fantasizing about permanent commitment, announces: "I just don't want to marry a. . . ." He can't even say the words.

Later I see him at a party with his not very attractive French-Canadian wife. We smile and chat.

This time, though, I am not going to play along. I vow to get the hell out of there. But what will I do when I leave? Will I avoid and sublimate, or will I revolt? Against whom?

## **Dream 2 THE FUTURIST DREAM**

I am alone, walking across an empty lot. When I get to the main street, I don't know where I am. The people coming toward me look unfamiliar. They are dressed strangely, heterosexual couples joined inside sarongs of colorful cotton wrapped three times around the women and once around the men, leaving each room enough to move.

As I continue, I realize I have walked into the future, I am on a narrow business street, like the kind they have in Copenhagen. Music is issuing from the steeple of a bank. Phenomenal Latin jazz. I'm amazed. You mean the future has good taste? I go indoors and find myself in a private living room. People are sitting in intimate attitudes, talking, reading, playing solitaire. The decor is dark red, faintly Middle Eastern, and reminds me of the apartment Marinetti described in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*.

I sit down at one end of a couch in front of a coffee table. At the other end, a small black man plays chess by himself. When he looks up, he is quite taken with me. As I get up to leave, he offers to take me home.

I say, "No. Someone is going to be there."

As I say this, I seem to half-believe that someone *will* be there. But when I'm walking down the stairs, I realize I've only

told this man no because he was black, and that the man I'm hoping to have home is white, but he won't be there.

When I get outside, I'm in a back alley. A cab is standing there. I have a feeling that someone else wants it and I have to rush. I run over, open the front door quickly, and throw a piece of fruit (a pear) down on the seat to claim the cab. Then I open the rear door. Before I can get in, I am shoved aside. I am pushed away by a large white man with a large white wife, and several stupid-looking kids—real middle-American types. He has taken my pear and tossed it on the ground, and thrown a greasy, airy sugar donut down on the seat instead. Somehow I end up with this donut as the consolation prize. As the cab drives away, I look down at the donut in disgust.

### **Response:**

Passing a mirror in the company of a man, a sudden clear glimpse of what I've become. The more independent and self-validating, the more like Mama and my West Indian aunts, turning men into children by waiting on them like slaves. The deeper I get into my career, the more simply convenient men are for me.

In the future I see men and women yoked, not like the undivided parts of Plato's androgyne, but in a *shammah*, the shawl Ethiopian women wrap around their shoulders and carry their infants in.

What does it matter that Latin jazz is blasting from the steeples of European banks? What difference does taste make in Erewhon? *Plus ça change, plus la même chose*. I have brought the past with me, and so have all the people playing solitaire.

The slightly-built jazz musician with a limp who takes me to lunch, without asking me a single question about myself, talks non-stop about his hatred of white people. The famous black judge takes me to dinner and tells me of the day when, a senior in high school, the dean of the Ivy League college denied him the scholarship he'd already won on seeing that he was black. Then he says: "I can't imagine that you'd ever find a black man interesting, either intellectually or aesthetically." I decide that

black men of a certain age are carrying a heavier burden than I can cope with.

But I already know the white man won't be there, that he won't bring me *that* protection.

And something must be wrong if I'm competing for the same cab as the middle-American.

Something has to give. But what? Where?

### **Dream 3 CARRYING MY SUITCASE ON MY BACK**

I'm at a "therapy camp." I have to prove that I belong there. Two or three therapists, including a black woman, keep asking me the same question: "Why are you here?"

I struggle with the words, but I can't sort out the answer. I realize that I am going to have to leave.

In the camp's community room, a young black woman is singing, rehearsing for a concert she's giving in a few days. She is extraordinarily talented. Her song is excellent and I listen to it with rapt attention. The words seem very significant (but I can't remember them). She goes over to straighten out details of the show with the musicians, a signal that it is time for me to begin packing. When I ask someone about the singer, I'm told she is an off-duty policewoman. I marvel at this, and feel the police are no longer as bad as people think. I finish packing, and go outside to get a cab.

Suddenly I have many relatives with me. Mama, and the various aunts. They are supposed to be helping me with my bags, but they really don't. When we hail a cab, Dan Goldberg comes along driving a gorgeous antique, fully outfitted as the living room of a European country house on wheels. Mama and the others are fascinated by the decor and climb in.

First I put the small suitcase inside, and then I have to go back for the big one. I return carrying it on my back. Bent over

under the load, I think: "That's interesting. I would have expected it to be much heavier. Perhaps that's the best way to carry heavy loads. On your back. It distributes the weight more evenly than carrying them by hand."

I dump the suitcase into the cab, still filled with relatives, and climb in. Danny is in a good mood. I tell him to put the meter on, because I know he's been waiting a long time. We drive off.

### **Response:**

The black woman singer, whose song is so significant, is the most positive black figure of my dreams to date. She determines me to leave my German-American male Jungian analyst from Wisconsin and look for a black woman therapist.

But I still have to struggle with the question: "Why are you here?"

Mama and the aunts can't help me—they're part of the baggage I'm carrying. Problems of racial identity. It's their fascination with European elegance that's been transmitted to me.

The "European country house on wheels" is driven by Dan Goldberg, a friend whose rich, liberal parents sent him to a racially mixed high school. Danny identified so completely with his black classmates he became a junkie to keep up with them.

Are we meeting in the middle here? Is this a projection of my belief in the mulatto as the crucible and the solution?

Earlier today, flipping back through pages of responses to dreams in other categories, I felt short-circuited. I had an intuition:

You know, Lorraine, your unconscious may contain too many issues for one consciousness to integrate. Mama. Papa. Dee. Blackness. Child abuse. Dozens of others. You may have to



make arbitrary decisions, deal with each problem as it comes up. As if the others didn't exist.

But now, seeing the image of the two suitcases makes me feel less depressed. The easier, lighter one first; the heavier, more difficult one. Spread the weight out evenly.

And at the end of the dream, a vision of opposites reconciled: the black white man, the white black woman, the "European country house on wheels" transformed by laughing Caribbean women.

This cab actually drives off. Is it possible that change can take place after all?