By Hair and Skin
Growing Up in the UK

JANET KOFI-TSEKPO

Dans ses mémoires, cette jeune fille issue d'un héritage mixte qui a grandi dans l'Angleterre multiculturelle, explore sa position personnelle dans la diaspora africaine et assure que le croisement de « race » et de sexualité a toujours été un élément de définition.

I've started wearing braids again. Is this a political statement? When it was straightened and tonged, my five-year-old niece was always chasing me with a hairbrush, telling me she preferred it to her own, visibly Afro curls. This upset me. A couple of years before I'd bought her a book sporting positive images of children of colour; had she forgotten it? Apparently not. "My hair is *beautiful* because it's *mine*!" she quoted back at me, full of sarcasm and a look that said, Everyone wants the Barbie doll look, and you know it.

When I was five, I had my own hairstyle called the "Butterfly." Step 1: Part hair in the middle. Step 2: Brush large rounded mass downwards and outwards on each side of the parting. Step 3: Look in the mirror and admire your resemblance to a bit of wildlife. This blissful state of innocent self-acceptance was a rare moment; however, within the bounds of my girlhood, and a luxury I believe most women of colour still have to fight for.

At first glance, it would seem I was brought up in one of the most easygoing and progressive environments for a girl of mixed heritage. Growing up in multicultural west London in England with my sister and brother, there were white women and black men sprouting kids like us all over the place. It was the 1970s, a decade when the hit musical *Hair* celebrated the idea of racial mixing, as did that song about a great big melting pot.

My mother made the efforts of a conscious white parent; Barbie wasn't allowed (there wasn't a black version in those days), and we got brown Pippa dolls instead. She would go to great lengths to find stories that would reflect our lives: titles by Errol Lloyd and Ezra Jack Keats, and *Kate's Birthday Party* by Joan Solomon. My stepfather, meanwhile, bought us mangoes from the market, cooked plaintain and yams, made wood-carvings and paintings of Caribbean scenes, and taught us songs from Curaçao. Impressively, he was the first black Father Christmas I had ever seen—appearing at the top of a slide at the nursery where my mother worked, to the stunned faces of all the children there. As a family, we'd make regular visits to the Commonwealth Institute, follow the steel-pan floats at the Notting Hill Carnival, and attend group meetings at Harmony, an organization for mixed-race families.

Within this celebration of multiculturalism, an inclusive "Black" identity was apparently available to all of us with brown skin, and something I was encouraged to take on. My position within this identity, however, was less than certain. *Roots* came on television, a talking point at school every week, and Chicken George and Kizzie were our heroes; but Kunte Kinte was always a joke at someone's expense, along with the taunt "You African." Despite Alex Haley's attempts to re-awaken African pride, it hadn't really taken root, and no attempt to create a multicultural haven could protect us from the dominant forces of British life, or western consciousness.

As a girl of British-Ghanaian heritage, I was less than content with my African features. I wasn't alone in this; it seems that every girl with Afro hair at that time pranced around with a towel on her head and pretended to be a Charlie's Angel at least once. But for those of us with white mothers who had a) long, straight hair and b) no clue whatsoever how to tackle our tangled masses, this activity took on new depths of wistful longing—so near, and yet so impossible.

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Although my mother's parents were accepting of my siblings and me—we saw them religiously every week—a thin air of disapproval and condescension surrounded us when we visited the extended family. The faint hope that I could "pass" when I was a baby had soon disappeared in middle-class suburbia, where everyone strived to be "normal" and Eng-

lish. Despite my white grandmother's near-black eyes and skin as brown as mine in summer, even her Irish heritage wasn't talked about, let alone the half-visible Jewishness of my ultra-respectable cousins. When we turned up for tea at the Whites' (believe it or not, that was their family name), our mixed-race complexions foiled any attempts to conceal anything about the family that was different and foreign.

I remember feeling coy and apologetic, and relieved to be merely suntanned, as my grandmother called me. Not *properly* black like that boy Darkus in my first primary school, who spent much of his time standing in a bin with his hands on his head. Not properly African like my father, from whom my mother separated when I was very young. But not white, like our cousins living in Surrey, or their Girl's World dolls with the blond hair that grew. Realizing I couldn't live up to any white ideal—though I longed to be Blondie, or Sandy in *Grease*—being black was also a shaky identity, which could be denied by me or *to* me at any moment.

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In the last year of primary school I joined a gang. The core group was made up of six boys, five African-Caribbean, one Kenyan-Asian, and four girls. There was Martine, who was white; myself, light-skinned but definitely brown; Julia, Indian-Irish, who identified as white (in those days, without today's fashionable status, South-east Asians got more stick than the rest of us); and Sylvia, who was dark-skinned black. Although hard-nut Lewis was leader of the gang, Sylvia was the real boss, because she had brothers who could beat us all up. You'd see them occasionally when we hung round her house at the weekend, where we'd race each other down the road and play football against somebody's wall.

Sylvia was the most physically developed, and could run faster than the fastest boy in the school. I was second to her in both respects. But to the boys, Julia was the prettiest and most desirable—she had that barely detectable exotic look, with green eyes and dark shiny hair, and wasn't in the least bit athletic. Martine was strangely less fêted as a blue-eyed blonde.

This set off a different kind of pecking order between the girls. On one hand, the girls and the boys were friends and equals. At the same time, we were wildly pubescent 11-year-olds, snogging under the stairs and playing an advanced game of kiss chase that bordered on sexual harassment. Occasionally, one of the boys would decide he actually wanted to "go out" with one of the girls—as when Lewis courted Julia with a fake gold chain and announced her as his trophy.

I remember shedding jealous tears when this happened—why not me? I vowed to steal the leader of the gang from my green-eyed rival. In the middle of my scheming, I somehow forgot that Sylvia had been Lewis's girlfriend a while back; they'd made a formidable couple in the playground before he'd passed her over for his pale-skinned queen. When I did some weeks later achieve my goal of going out with him (no gold chain in sight, just a quick word under the shed), I should have known right then there was going to be trouble.

Despite Sylvia's unquestionable playground power, Julia and I posed another kind of threat. Whatever her true feelings about us as friends, it was clear Sylvia felt something had to be done. One day out of nowhere she accused Julia, Martine, and me of laughing at her. She banished us from the gang, forbidding the boys to talk to us, threatening to beat up anyone who defied her. I was bewildered and distraught, and couldn't quite see why I was being punished. At the same time, I had vague feelings of both indignation and guilt. Looking back, I see how all the girls in the gang had been set up against each other—competing across a continuum of skin colour. Within the murky world of sex and race, it was an early taste of things to come.

Arriving at secondary school, my position was still shifting and unstable. I wasn't the Caribbean girl it seemed you had to be if you were black, and being African wasn't even a question; all I had was my father's name, hard for people to spell and even harder to pronounce. Should I be a Casual and wear designer sportswear or their imitations like a lot of the black kids at school, or dress like a Trendy as the posh white kids with scruffy clothes were called? I couldn't decide. Sometimes I'd wear Casual-style jeans with my top inside out, as a desperate compromise.

One boy suggested I get my hair done like Grace Jones, which I took as an insult. A girl who looked mixed-race but fiercely denied it taunted me with the words: "You think you are white." Rumours went around that my mother was one of the art teachers, a plump brown woman with tight shiny curls, whose real daughter I envied for her smooth, wavy locks and the confident air with which she strode about.

Maybe it wasn't just the hair. But turning 17—the year it grew long enough to scrape back and adorn my face with ringlets—marked the end of my teenage torment as I surely knew it. This Sade-style "exotic" phase in the bloom of youth became a consolation and compromise, pam-

pered by class-ridden pretensions and a few male fantasies. Of course I didn't think about it quite in that way then, just felt a bit better than before, a bit more accepted. When I did notice, it was because some other mixed-race girl seemed more exotic than me, and I felt the same kind of resentments I seemed to get from girls with darker skin.

When I bumped into Sylvia years later, there seemed to be only a fondness for each other, but something meanwhile had stuck. Was it a fear of retribution for the wrongs I felt I'd committed under a false and privileged light? Privilege is a shifting, slippery thing and, notably between girls and women of colour, attacks and counter-attacks can be made from all sides. Back at primary school, it hadn't been just Sylvia and I who had parted ways—Julia, Martine and I also blamed each other as the real culprit, true to "mulatto, quadroon and pure whitey" form. We had struggled for positions on a continuum based on racialized images of sexuality and desirability. Who needed the house and the field, as featured in *Roots*? It was all happening on my front doorstep.

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FEMME

Giliane Obas

Assise sur mon trône
Une douce pluie tombe

Je suis femme
Je suis reine
Je suis femme Africaine

Celle qui règne
Sur les brousses et les plaines

Ma tristesse et mes pleures
Oui j' ai senti la douleur
Dans mon coeur, la fureur
Oui, j'ai surmonté ma peur

Dans mes oreilles
Résonnent toujours
Les cries horibles
Les voix du passé

Mes enfants kidnappés
Si violemment arrachés
De leur mère bien- aimé

Pendant des années
J'ai pleuré
J' ai senti leur souffrance
Cette douleur immence

Agenouillée, j' ai pleuré
Imploré
Tendu vers le firmament
Mes mains ensanglantées

Dans mes plaines
J' entends toujours leurs chants d' espoir
Emporté par le vent,
Leurs cries de victoires

Mes pières exocées
Nous y sommes arrivés

Avec une rage
J' ai cassé mes chaines
Et dans mes yeux
Couleur ébène
Ils ont vu ma haine

Les diamants et l' or
Saisis par les voleurs
Ne compareront jamais
Au trésors que j'ai dans le coeur

Alors la tête haute
Devant mon peuple
Je me tiens

Ma couleur bronze
Luisant au soleil
La tête haute
Je me tiens

Admirée par mon peuple
J' airai toujours ma fierté,

Je suis femme
Je suis reine
Je suis femme haïtienne

Giliane Obas lives in Montreal.