YOUR AVERAGE NIGGA
PERFORMING RACE LITERACY AND MASCULINITY
VERSHAWN ASHANTI YOUNG
To Dorothy "Momma" Young, for giving me life and literacy,
and to the late Chicago journalist Leanita McClain (1951–1984):
May her voice continue to inspire.
As I drive, I can’t shake the picture of the playing kids, laughing, jumping on hardened patches of glass-glittering dirt, where grass and a few small trees once grew. They’re in the middle of a wasteland, where, according to Momma’s stories, a thriving community used to be, a community that is now virtually empty, deserted, reminiscent of the end of a bad Western. I drive faster, trying to leave behind the memories. I don’t want the dark shadows I’m ashamed of to follow me to my new home. But when I get there, they’re with me. So I run some bathwater and light the candles. Nina Simone sings in the background, just above a hum, and I remember . . .

“White people don’t know how to tell the difference between one black man and another,” writes the comedian Chris Rock in his book Rock This! “If they could, we’d all get along” (1997, 11). So Rock declares, “I love black people, but I hate niggers.” For he believes that if whites could distinguish good blacks from bad ones, everything would be okay. We’d finally be able to determine which blacks to eliminate because, as Rock says, “the niggers have got to go” (17). Apparently, some whites agree. In Nella Larsen’s Passing, John Bellew presents an earlier version of Rock’s quip when he teases his wife, Clare. “She was as . . . white as a lily,” he says. “But I declare she’s gettin’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one these days and find she’s turned into a nigger” (1997, 39). Both jokers get laughs but are duped by the paradox they spin. Bellew learns that his wife really is a nigger. And Rock must answer, What am I?

Rock thus reproduces for himself what I call the burden of racial performance, the demand to prove what type of black person you are. It’s a burden all blacks bear, and it is the core of the problem of black racial authenticity. It is the modern variant, I argue, of racial passing, making Bellew’s racial distinction archetypal of Rock’s performatve differentiation. Further, this burden both supports racial discord between whites and blacks and provokes blacks to abhor other blacks, causing Rock to exclaim, “It’s like our own personal civil war.” This
conflict, however, is not only interpersonal, as it is presented in Rock’s example: “Every time black people want to have a good time . . . some ignorant ass niggers [are present] fucking it up . . . Can’t go to the movies first week it opens. Why? Because niggers are shooting at the screen” (1997, 17). It’s also intrapersonal as I describe in a crack of my own, in a poem I’ve titled “shiny.”

as dark as i am and tryin’ to pass
somebody needs to kick my black ass
for using proper english all the time
when the rest o’ my family’s spittin’ rhyme
dressin’ all preppy, talkin’ all white,
obody tell me this ain’t right

my skin so black folks think maybe it’s blue;
who am i foolin’, Two Eyes? Cain’t be you
I wash and scrub and cosmetically bleach
but this doggone pigment just won’t leach
so tryin’ to be white ain’t working at all,
since the only attention I get is in the mall
when heads turn to see the nigga with the silver dollar tongue
wondering, who dat talking deep from the diaphragm and lung?

as dark as i am and tryin’ to pass
somebody really needs to kick my black ass
for walking like a white man with my rear end tight
but when someone calls me stuffy I’m ready to fight
I bring it on myself with highfalutin’ ways
livin’ like whitey did in the brady bunch days?

i been walkin’ so long down the other culture’s path
that i’m gone need me a little nigga momma wrath
to kick my butt and do it good
the way a nigga momma should
for me paradin’ ’round as white
when my skin is shiny as night

as black as i am and tryin’ to pass
somebody piececase kick my black ass

Thus my interest in this chapter is not only in analyzing a literary problem but also in helping to solve a social—even a personal—one.

“Sugaarr!” my sister Cookie screamed the half of my nickname that I can’t shake. It was my turn to dance a jig, sing a tune, something to entertain the crowd of mostly women and kids gathered in the living room of my apartment. My brothers, male cousins, and brothers-in-law were in the kitchen. I was there too, trying to bond with them, participating in the men-talk they found so enjoyable and that I decided I no longer would avoid. “Sugar Bear!” She wasted no time calling again, this time using my full nickname—the version I like better since “Sugar” alone signifies so much of the effeminacy I hate. Cookie was the only person, family or friend, who was always careful to call me either by my full nickname or just “Bear,” rarely only “Sugar”—because “Bear” didn’t so easily instigate the taunts that calling me “Sugar” did. “He got sugar in his tank,” they used to say as a matter of fact, grownups and kids alike. “He a little sweet, ain’t he?” they’d ask my family, mostly my brothers, as if I couldn’t hear or answer back, as if I’d tell them I wasn’t, which they presumed was a lie.

“Hold your panties,” I told Cookie, trying to sound cool or at least get a laugh from one of the guys. But they seemed not to notice. So I just unfolded the paper that I had in my back pocket, waving it as I walked to the living room to indicate that I was doing a reading for my performance, not the modern dance routine that I used to do as my sister Y’shanda sang a Phyllis Hyman or Anita Baker tune in the background after we’d argue about who should be in front—the singer or the dancer. I gave that up at eleven after our last duet at a family reunion some occasion like that. I had practiced until my routine was perfect, complete with a high kick, twirl, and a frozen pose in the fifth position at the end, with only my fingers moving, wiggling back and forth to affect leaves blowing in the wind. When Tyrone, a proud homosexual, the cousin of somebody’s girlfriend, saw my routine, he took it as his cue to outdance me and everyone else at the party with even higher kicks, backbends, and Alvin Ailey leaps. My family egged
on a challenge, even though they knew I couldn’t outdance Tyrone. Afterward, Tyrone tried to talk to me, pointing out this and that technique, giving me advice about dancing, since he was professionally trained. But I ignored him, because during the competition, when the disco tempo thumped, Tyrone had launched into his jazz dance version of Swan Lake. And in between the crowd’s “You go, boys,” their “Hit it” and “Show ’em whatcha got,” I heard, “Look at that fag” and “Ain’t that just like a sissy?” And since I couldn’t tell which one of us they were talking about, I pretended to be tired and panting on the sidelines so it wouldn’t be me. Tyrone kept right on going, and I admired him, even though I decided right then and there that I wouldn’t be caught dead dancing like that again. I didn’t want my family to see me as a Tyrone type of person.

After that I limited my performances to lip-synch routines—until that too lost its appeal when I first went to a bar where a drag queen entertainer was lip-synching for a living. I found out that a whole culture and lifestyle revolved around that performance genre and that it was mostly gay. So I never went there again and felt like I was progressing well and fast toward losing the faggot identity that seemed to follow me like a shadow or stick like gum to the bottom of my shoe. Just when I’d turn the corner or scrape it off and walk a few steps, there it was again. And I wasn’t about to go conjuring it up—not in the living room of my own apartment, even if there really was no way to avoid it.

I’ve read a poem this year, I announced, clearing my throat—loudly—so if there were any objections I could pretend not to hear them. And I promptly began: “As dark I am and trying to pass.”

They roared.

“You gotta be kidding me!”

They howled.

My family, enjoying themselves, participated call-and-response style in the performance. They didn’t care so much about the poem’s scanty aesthetics, knowing that anyone of them could write one better. My cousin, an amateur rapper and singer, was one of the few men to watch me perform. He was the yearly neighborhood talent show winner; he performed his own material only because his “shit was better than what those jive-ass popular punks did for the white man,” as he used to say. Afterward he told me that my poem was off-key. He said it lacked rhythm, that the flow was rough and the language forced, and that he’d show me how to fix it, though he never did, because he was home for only a short time, between trial dates for a murder he said he didn’t commit but refused to say who had—a gangbanger’s code of ethics or something like that. But what he mostly liked, he told me, and what also seemed to delight the rest of the family, was the man’s repeated plea. Every time I got to the refrain, “Somebody needs to…” they’d chime in, as if on cue, “kick your black ass.” They obviously saw themselves as the poem’s community and I, to them, was the failing-to-pass-for-white, dark-skinned black man who needed them to help him get his act together, so he could just be black.

I was inspired to write the poem one night as Marilyn, my sometimes too-white friend, and I talked on the phone. It was a year after I was let go from the nearly all-white school district where she was still teaching. Every weekend she’d call to tell me how much she hated teaching there, though I couldn’t figure out why at first. I used to see her as whiter than I could ever be, because she never slipped into the blackness I know. I used to see her whiteness as authentic and mine as made-up, since I had to mold myself so that I could sound and act white proficiently, whereas she just grew up that way, in Tacoma, Washington, in an area heavily populated by white people. Marilyn told me that she and her sister were often the only two blacks at the schools they attended. I met her sister, a fledgling novelist, in and out of college writing programs; she was younger and worse than Marilyn. Too white, some of my family members would say if they met her—Tiger Woods, Tyra Banks white.

Marilyn’s sister didn’t talk much about black issues or racial politics. She deemed them pointless and outdated and said so once when she was visiting and we all went to dinner. Marilyn and I started joking with each other about who talks the whitest. Her sister playfully rolled her eyes and said, “You guys, people are people.” Marilyn and I laughed away our self-consciousness, feeling a little hypocritical, since we are usually the ones to preach her sister’s words to others. But when we say it, we mean in the long run, not in the meantime. We know that
in this America, even as we've progressed in racial politics, some black people, some who can racially pass for white, still feel it necessary to do so. And some people—like the white wife of Anatole Broyard—still find it necessary to out them. In 1990 Broyard was a seventy-year-old retired “erudite book reviewer for the New York Times,” whose wife could no longer live a lie or at least she wasn't going to let her husband die with one. So days before he died, she told their college-aged children that their father had black racial heritage (Thadious Davis 1997, xxv). I wonder: If Broyard had been one-eighth Native American, a quarter French, or maybe even half Moroccan, would his wife have been compelled to reveal that part of his secret—to disrupt at death the racial identity he'd chosen?

The literary critic Thadious Davis cites Broyard's experience in her introduction to Larsen's Passing as one example of “several recent public revelations of racial passing [that] have revived interest in and speculation about its motives and consequences” (1997, xxii). The literary critic Mae Henderson suggests that novels about racial passing “educate” readers “ethnographically about black life.” She emphasizes that this “renewed interest” stems from “a more general preoccupation with notions of hybridity, biraciality, and social constructionism as they structure contemporary conceptions of personal and social identity” (2002, xx-xii). In other words, we contemporary readers look to passing novels to help us understand the forces that shape our racial identities—both those ascribed to us and those we assign. Henderson is interested in such questions as, What does it mean to be mixed raced? And how does one with both black and white racial heritages reconcile these identities?

For me, though, these novels address a more fundamental question: Why must blacks still pass? Thadious Davis acknowledges that the answer “is less easy to decipher in the wake of the civil rights movement . . . which led to changes in the legal system” (1997, xxii). And while Henderson recognizes how central the phenomenon of passing is to ongoing discussions of black racial identity, like Thadious Davis, she cannot account for its endurance. But the anthropologist Signithia Fordham does.

Fordham argues that passing not only persists but is required—not just of blacks with light skin and “good hair” but even of those with nappy hair, wide noses, and skin so black you think maybe it’s blue. That is, if they want to achieve success in America’s mainstream and elevate their class status. This, of course, includes Marilyn and me. We both are striving to become financially secure, trying to achieve a solidly middle-class status by working in the most mainstream of America’s institutions—school—as English teachers, no less. And we both have to do this with our dark skin and kinky hair. But these physical traits don’t matter, and it’s good for Marilyn and me that they don’t, since we could never literally look white. For us, then, “becoming white is not the issue” (Fordham 1996, 23). “Acting white” or “looking white on paper—behaving in ways and displaying the skills, abilities, and credentials that were traditionally associated with White Americans”—is what matters because acting white, Fordham stresses, “became the way to pass” after legal discrimination (44).

Fordham’s account explains why Marilyn’s sister believes that people are just people. As Fordham acknowledges, “acting white is . . . unavoidable,” an “inescapable outcome of American citizenship” and “American schooling” (1996, 23). Marilyn’s sister may believe that Marilyn and I don't really talk white, that we talk and act American, behaving in ways common to educated people. Her attitude is the result of what the linguist Rosina Lippi-Green points out as “a general unwillingness to accept the speakers of [Black English] and the social choices they have made as viable and functional. Instead we relegate their experiences and capabilities to spheres which are secondary and out of the public eye” (1997, 201). Marilyn’s sister refuses to acknowledge the language and cultural differences between blacks and whites, as well as people’s negative perceptions about black culture. I believe that, like so many others who hold these views, she wants to excise Black English speakers from the public eye. But even if she doesn’t wish to make them invisible, she likely thinks that they experience the problems they do because of their resistance to Americanization. But she’s ignoring what Fordham calls the “subtle limitations” of assimilation. In other words, even though Marilyn and I have taken so much
advantage of the American dream that we act white in our sleep, we face obstacles that whites don't. And we recognize these limitations in the lives of our black students, particularly when they insist upon using Black English. That's why we haven't chosen to pass as completely as Marilyn's sister has—although we understand that she does it because the psychoemotional pain of negotiating two cultural/racial worlds is far too great for many. For this same reason we understand why there are those, like some of our students, who refuse to pass.

Reflecting on the decision he made to pass for white, the Ex-Colored Man in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* expresses regret, saying: "I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people" (1995, 99). And, although he says, "My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am" (100), "an ordinarily successful white man" (99), his gladness cannot replace his anxiety. "I cannot repress the thought," he laments as the novel closes, "that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (100). This suggests a simple resolution: If you're unhappy passing for white, just be black. But it's not that easy. In my poem what my family considers to be my white ways have always been or have become just as much a part of me as my black ways. In order for me to be like my family, to return, as it were, to my community, I must not only stop acting white, I must learn how to be black. Because it's impossible for me to recuperate or acquire the necessary blackness, I'm subject to my family's incessant expressions of dissatisfaction.

Similarly, when the Ex-Colored Man announces that he wants "to go back to the very heart of the South, and live among the people," his white patron asks: "What kind of Negro would you make now?" The patron's question is prompted by his perception that the Ex-Colored Man is "by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man" (67). It's not the Ex-Colored Man's white skin alone that makes him insufficiently black. What makes the patron exclaim that "this idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment" (67) is his conviction that the Ex-Colored Man's behavior, the performance of his racial identity, is sufficiently white.

In *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) Carter G. Woodson sustains the patron's view of whiteness as not only a racial classification but a behavioral one—one that makes it possible for a black man to act white. "When a Negro has finished his education in our schools," Woodson writes, "then, he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man" (1990, 5). Woodson believes that because of education some blacks inhabit an improper relation to less educated blacks and can therefore be of no assistance to them in their struggle for equality. An educated black person, without the proper consciousness, is no more to underprivileged blacks than your average white man. It's precisely because the Ex-Colored Man's white behaviors are by no means limited to his accent or gait but extend to areas that he cannot manipulate, like education, that his efforts to be black seem futile.

The problem that the Ex-Colored Man and I both face is that we fail to measure up, in ways beyond our control, to what's considered by both whites and blacks to be authentic blackness. Because he has white skin, however, the Ex-Colored Man can escape blackness by completely passing for white—what his patron advises him to do. Passing today, however, no longer mandates that you look white. It requires instead that you be black but act white, erasing the requirement of racial concealment and stressing racial performance.

My poem, then, recasts the significance that Jim Crow placed on skin color with an emphasis on performance. It replaces the light-skinned black who passes by hiding his blackness with a dark-skinned black who passes by performing his whiteness. The danger in both cases is the danger of discovery, although what's discovered isn't exactly the same. In the classic Jim Crow passing saga, such as the *Autobiography*, what's discovered when you're pretending to be white is that you're really black. In my post–Jim Crow passing saga everybody already knows I'm black. My fear is that they'll discover that I'm really black—ghetto black, what Chris Rock calls a "nigger." And, of course, in both stories the threat of failure is accompanied by what may be worse—the threat of success. For if I can keep my ghetto blackness from being detected, a move that will keep me estranged from the
black community, I risk the same lingering psychoemotional torment that the Ex-Colored Man must bemoan for life.

As another consequence of success the male passer’s masculinity and sexuality are inevitably called into question. In his analysis of Autobiography Phillip Brian Harper claims the literary passing subject has what he calls a “feminine function,” which magnifies the femininity of even male passing characters. This femininity is signified, according to Harper, by the Ex-Colored Man’s white racial features. Since passing today involves not looking white but acting white, this femininity is pronounced not by looking white but by the passer’s language and behaviors that are racialized as white.

As a boy, especially at that family party, I knew that if I wanted to become fully a part of my black community, to be accepted as black, I also had to comply with the gender behaviors appropriate for my race and sex. Although my poem doesn’t explicitly address concepts of masculinity and sexuality that are chained to blackness, I didn’t want to put myself at risk of being called a fag. So I read the poem that night in a hip-hop style, trying to connect myself to the more thuggish rap music genre wherein even women refer to each other as man. Thus the post-Jim Crow problem of passing is the drama that my poem presents—the project I know firsthand.

I was hoping that my relatives would see themselves in my poem—see the folly in the performances that blacks are called to give in order to prove our blackness to one another and our whiteness to whites and sometimes our whiteness to blacks and our blackness to whites and how tangled up this gets—and how confusing and frustrating it is. So much so, that we’d go insane if we didn’t prevent it, if we didn’t choose to live as either a Resisting Black, embracing the performance of blackness while resisting whiteness, like some in my family do, or as a Passing Black, striving toward whiteness and repudiating blackness, as I sometimes do.

“Shuck ’em both,” some say, “I’ll just be me,” trying to find some way to escape race, to keep from identifying themselves as this or that type of black. But they soon find that they have to turn somewhere, perform for some group, before they belong to none, like Leanita McClain, who grew up in a Chicago ghetto, in the Ida B. Wells housing projects. At only thirty-two, right at the height of a highly successful journalism career, she “took an overdose of a powerful antidepressant medicine and went to sleep” (Page 1996, 49).

“I am burdened,” she wrote, “with trying to prove to whites that blacks are a people.” She was also burdened by her “brothers and sisters,” blacks she knew in the hood, “many of whom have abandoned me,” she said, “because they think that I have abandoned them” (Page 1996, 48). She was called to perform her blackness to keep from becoming estranged, feeling alienated, from the community she felt she belonged to.

Ironically, performing her blackness for whites also made her the success that she was: “I assuage white guilt,” she wrote, and “I prove to whites that Blacks are a people.” Before she became the first black editorial board member of the Chicago Tribune, her blackness had landed her a place at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. Medill wanted to train blacks to meet the media demand, not for light-skinned blacks who were racially passing for white, who couldn’t or didn’t say they were black, but for blacks who were black, who said it and showed it.

The media didn’t want blacks who were too black, though; talking that black talk and acting black—not that kind of black. McClain’s “liberal white acquaintances” didn’t see her as that type of black anyway. “They put me on the head,” she said, “hinting that I am freak,” thinking she was nothing like those in the projects she came from. Because of that she asked the world: “When they attempt to sever me from my own, how can I live with myself?” (Page 1996, 48). McClain got entangled in this racial double bind, called to give performance to whites and another to blacks. And, inevitably, she gave out, writing: “I will never live long enough to see my people free anyway” (49).

Because McClain was at least three decades removed from separate but unequal and more than one hundred years beyond emancipation from decimation, the Chicago journalist Clarence Page, who writes about his ex-wife’s suicide in his essay “Survivors’ Guilt,” believes she already had the freedom she wanted. “Looking back I see with greater clarity the freedom Leanita had at her disposal, whether she was willing to realize it or not. She did not have to march for it,
fight for it, or crusade for it. All she had to do was... accept it” (1996, 69).

Page swears that McClain and other middle-class blacks “refuse to see” the freedom that came after Jim Crow, when “anti-discrimination laws made class differences more important arbiters of opportunity than racial differences” (58). He warns that too “many of us compensate by identifying excessively with our less fortunate brethren left behind in the ghetto” (59). Page regards this identification as unnecessary, harmful even, since lower-class blacks post-Jim Crow are separated from middle-class blacks not by race (we’re all still black) but by class (some of us are just not poor). Page’s confidence in the progress resulting from antidiscrimination laws stems from his comparison of the legal status of blacks before Jim Crow to black class mobility after Jim Crow. But class isn’t the only, or even the primary, factor that Page uses to separate blacks.

“Showing your color,” Page says, was the term that parents used to foster “the success stories of [his] generation.” It “was just another way to say,” like Chris Rock, “don’t behave like those Negroes, those loud, lazy, godless, shiftless, doo-rag wearing, good-for-nothings who hang out on the corner and get themselves into trouble” (Page 1996, 59). Page fingers the contemporary gangster rappers “Ice T., Ice Cube and Snoop Doggy Dogg,” who glorify the black ghetto in their lyrics and style of dress, as examples of the types of Negroes he was told not to be like and cautions black people against imitating today. It doesn’t matter to Page that Ice T., Ice Cube, and Snoop Doggy Dogg make more money than he does and clearly enjoy greater celebrity. The problem is that they show their color. By advocating that these gangsta rappers hide their color, Page is not saying that they should hide their race, something their dark skin prohibits. He is suggesting that they act white.

Just as the Autobiography depicts the Jim Crow project of passing as personified by the nameless protagonist, it predicts the post-Jim Crow project too—embodied by another nameless character: the upper-middle-class black doctor whom the Ex-Color Man befriends aboard a ship as they travel from Europe to the United States. The doctor invites the Ex-Color Man to spend a few weeks with him in the Boston area. While they are sightseeing, the doctor points out a group of lower-class blacks that he describes in terms curiously similar to Page’s depiction of those who show their color, as “those lazy, loafing, good-for-nothing darkies.” The doctor says, “They’re not worth digging graves for; yet they are the ones who create impressions of the race.” He exhales to the Ex-Colored Man: “We are the race, and the race ought to be judged by us, not by them” (J. Johnson 1995, 73). Because the doctor’s skin is too dark to pass in the way the Ex-Colored Man can, the doctor worries not about whether he should reveal or conceal the fact that he is black but about what blackness is taken to be—how it is defined and by which blacks. The doctor thus transforms the class difference between middle- and lower-class blacks into a racial difference—which ones are truly black?

I argue, then, that the doctor prefigures Page’s contempt for lower-class blacks and represents the central problem of black authenticity. Like Johnson’s doctor, Page thinks it’s the middle class that embodies the race. Like Snoop Doggy Dogg, Ice T., and Ice Cube, my family thinks that being middle class—or, rather, acting middle class—is a way of betraying the race. McClain, pulled in both directions, wanted to reconcile the problem within the race. But neither lower-class blacks (her brothers and sisters in the ghetto), middle-class blacks (Page), nor whites (her colleagues) would allow her to do that. They wanted her to choose—and to prove it through her performance. This is why McClain believed that she would never live to see her people free—because blacks cannot achieve freedom from the burdens of racial performance, unless race ceases to exist as a category of distinction or you die. Knowing the former would not come in her lifetime, McClain hastened the latter.

McClain’s racial dilemma and her heroic end uncannily parallels Clare Kendry’s in Larsen’s Passing. In the concluding episode of the novel, Clare’s white husband forces his way into an all-black party that she is attending and demands to know if she is “a damned dirty nigger” (1997, 111). Clare frees herself from her husband’s demand, and by extension the unspoken demand of the black guests, to claim either her whiteness or her blackness over the other by going through a window. Thadious Davis writes that “were it not for the view of Clare’s
body” on the ground outside, Clare’s “disappearance out the window” could be read “not as death but as escape into a new life” (1997, xxx). However, I read Clare not as escaping into a new life but as choosing, like McClain, to escape the racial limitations of the old one—one where she’s forced to choose. As Mae Henderson writes of Clare, “her continued existence would menace both Belloc’s [white] and Irene’s [black] world, so [since Clare can’t be both, she] must cease to exist” (2002, Ixxiii). Larsen’s ultimate accomplishment in the novel, Henderson says, “lies in the narrative performance of her refutation of essentialism” (Ixxiv). But in jumping to her death, in refusing to choose either blackness or whiteness, Clare isn’t just refusing essentialism. Neither is she embracing a performative account of race. She’s refusing to perform. From this perspective it’s clear why Thadious Davis and Henderson can’t explain why passing continues—because what’s wrong with Henderson’s antiessentialism is that it produces the demand for racial performance. Essentialism begets essentialism, even if we call it antiessentialism.

Like McClain and Clare, I want to be free from the burdens of racial performance, free from having to choose a passing identity or a resisting one, free from having to be this kind of black here, that kind there. I’m tired of being the family nig who tries to prove he’s a man, of being the white boy, the academic scapegoat, the one who’s book smart but not street smart, who’s always running up behind white folks like a whipped puppy, sorry eyes, wet nose, and all, wagging for affection, hoping they’ll accept me for who I am, asking them to forgive me when my blackness offends them.

I’m tired of seeing little black kids, too smart for their own good, who got it right, but their right is made wrong, when they call school white and hate it. There’s nothing left if their names are not Iverson, Shaq, or Jay-Z. The future is grave for them, because many of them end up in one, in jail, or on the streets, on drugs, and still poor, and they think it’s okay, the way it should be: a cashier at the local burger joint at forty; on welfare at seventeen with one, maybe two, kids and pregnant again; a gas station attendant; a security guard at the local Chinese-owned clothing store, stealing a jersey here, a pair of sneakers there to make herself feel better. “Jobs somebody has to do,”