

Wanting to be white, and other tales of diversity

By Bruce Jacobs

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Expert Forum



A white friend of mine told me how she heard a black woman declare that she wishes she could try being white. The black woman, a well-known artist, had given a talk at which she made the “white” remark. My white friend, who attended, was taken aback. How, she asked me, could this strong, successful, confident black woman be so insecure as to wish she were white? How could this black person feel such a thing, let alone

declare it in public?

I told my friend that I’d bet anything that what the artist meant was that she’d like to be white *for a little while*. So would I and a lot of other black people I know – as long as we could promptly return to being black, since it’s a state of being we appreciate too much to give up.

We’d want to be white for a little while because we want to see what white society conceals from us: what some whites say to other whites when there are no blacks in the room or when people of color are out of earshot; how some whites behave when only whites are watching; and most importantly, what the experience of whiteness actually feels like in a society in which blackness is both feared and envied. What is it like to be white and stand, drink in hand, in a circle of white peers while one of us chortles at a black joke or ogles an African-American *derrière*? How does it feel to be white and see two young black men with baggy pants walk toward us on the street at night, or to stand in a crowd at a funkified concert and gyrate to music that has not been second-nature to us since birth, or to go through our days and nights without experiencing the kinds of everyday treatment encountered by people with dark skin in America?

I told my friend about the old Eddie Murphy *Saturday Night Live* sketch in which he goes undercover, as a black man with whitened skin and hair, to discover how whites really treat one another (he learns that whites don’t use money but simply give stuff to one another; only people of color have to pay). The skit worked because it played on the core tension of all forms of apartheid: people want to witness the worlds that are forbidden to them.

To be sure, there are black Americans who, via the long-standing teachings of white privilege, truly wish for whiteness: I think of poor late Michael Jackson’s self-maiming surgeries, or the bitterly secret lives of extremely light-skinned blacks who secretly “pass” for white. I am certain that, for similarly sad reasons of bigotry and privilege, there are gay people who at times wish they were straight, and women who (issues of transgendered identity aside) sometimes wish they

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were men. It is part of living in a stratified and discriminatory society, and it is a reality we must overturn.

But I am also certain that what the black artist was trying to say in the talk attended by my friend was something like, “As an artist who is African-American, I want to see everything. Especially the points of view that society tries to hide from me.”

The more we can do that, the better.