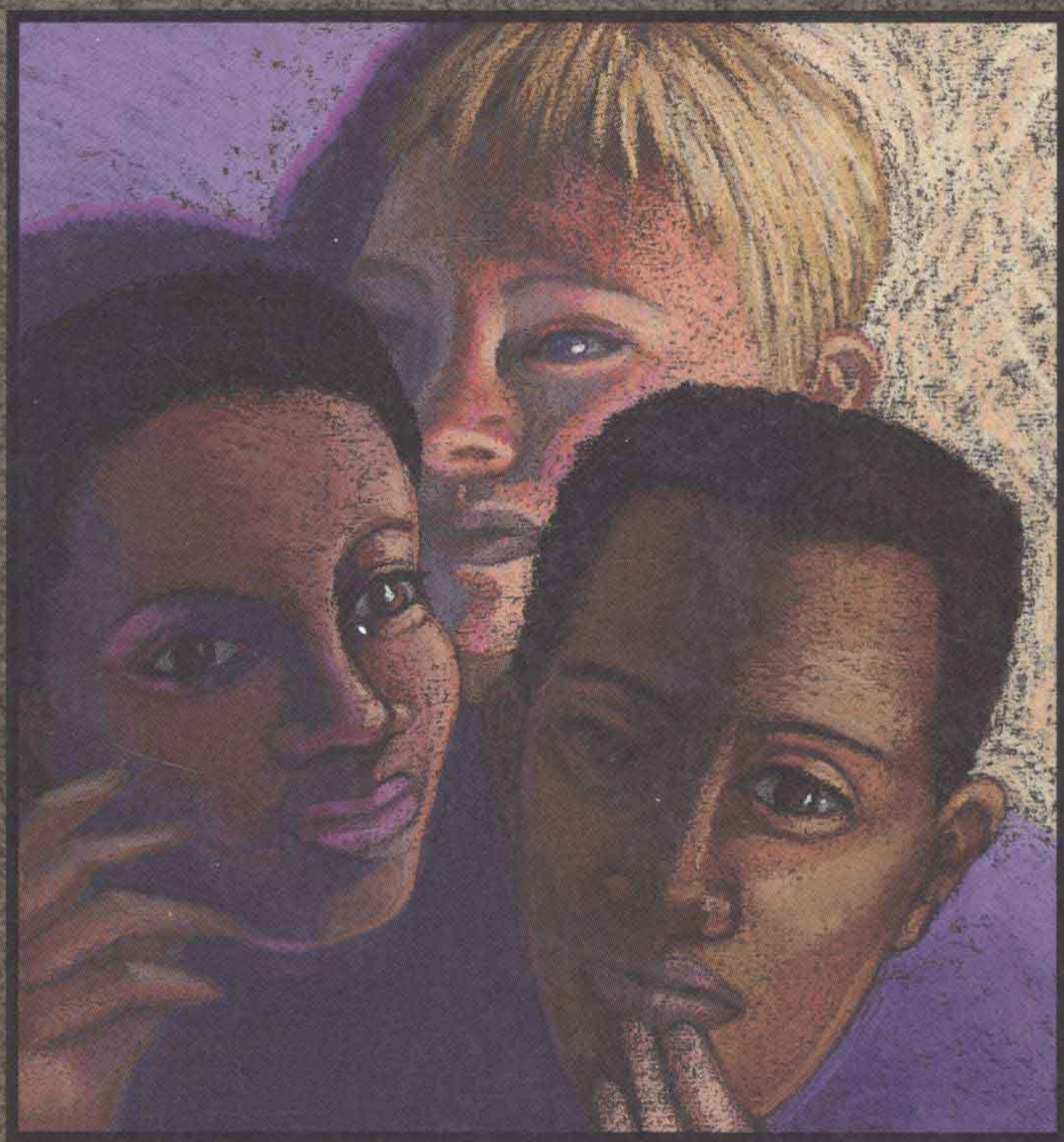


# SKIN TRADE



ANN DUCILLE



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*Ann duCille*

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For my younger brother Danny and in memory of my  
older brother Adrian Jr. (1945–1991), my first and best  
playmates

# Acknowledgments

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I have become fond of saying that my research on such public phenomena as Barbie and O.J. Simpson has made me suspect among my colleagues, who worry that some kind of mental breakdown has left me mindlessly playing with dolls and reading the *National Enquirer*. It is only a pleasantry, and nothing could be further from the truth. Wesleyan University provided an intellectually fertile environment where I was well supported in all of my work. No projects, however, generated more interest than my forays into the valley of the dolls and the “mountains of evidence.” I am deeply indebted to colleagues, students, friends, family, and even strangers for the clippings, articles, faxes, and e-mail messages that helped to keep me abreast of my subjects. I particularly want to thank Joe and Kit Reed, Nancy Armstrong, Len Tennenhouse, Elizabeth Weed, Greta Slobin, Bill Stowe, Karen Bock, Cashman Prince, and Bill Burkhart, who were among the first to see that Barbie was not just an aberration—a pink blemish on my scholarly record. Erness Brody, Jennifer Brody, and Dianne Kelly shared their doll-collecting expertise with me; Farah Griffin, Sharon Holland, Amy Hundley, Chanda Bailey, and many others shared their doll stories. Marge Thomas kept me supplied with miniature McDonald’s Barbies, and Jennifer Kirk and others at Atticus Books were ever on the alert for Barbie- and Simpson-related publications. Ellen Rooney read an earlier version of the Barbie essay and asked tough questions that challenged me to probe deeper. Phyllis Rose’s insightful comments helped me



finally put Barbie to bed. Charles Rowell pushed me to write about the Simpson case when I was convinced that there was at once too much to say and no way to say it. Late-night telephone conversations with Deborah McDowell about the Simpson trial, the Oklahoma City bombing, the academy, and life in general fed my mind and soul. Indira Karamcheti read several drafts and kept me thinking, writing, and laughing. My debt to her is inestimable.

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My chapters on Barbie and on the O.J. Simpson case were written specifically for this book. My work on so-called ethnic Barbie dolls began with an article entitled "Dyes and Dolls: Multicultural Barbie and the Merchandising of Difference," published in *differences* 6 (Spring 1994), from which one chapter draws. Chapter 2 was first published as "Phallusies of Interpretation: Engendering the Black Critical 'I'" in *Callaloo* 16 (Summer 1993); reprinted by permission of The John Hopkins University Press. Chapter 3, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood," first appeared in *Signs* 19 (Spring 1993), published by the University of Chicago Press; copyright ©1994 by the University of Chicago; all rights reserved. Both these chapters have been revised for this book. Chapter 4, on "Postcoloniality and Afrocentricity" is an expanded version of an essay originally published in *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1994), edited by Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich.

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## Prologue

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### *What You Mean “We,” Kemo Sabe?*

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . . We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . . United we stand, divided we fall, and if our backs should ever be against the wall . . . Good fences make good neighbors . . . Where we walk to school each day / Indian children used to play / All about our native land / Where the shops and houses stand / Not a church and not a steeple / Only woods and Indian . . . People make the world go . . . Rally round the flag, boys . . . Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe . . . Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we're free at last . . . And the last shall be first . . . I hear America singing . . . It's summer, the darkies are gay . . .

Even as intellectuals and politicians posit the declining significance of race, “racial difference” remains America’s pre-eminent national narrative. It may defy definition; it may exist only in the minds of maddening (if not mad) scientists and Social Darwinists; it may be an empty category, a slippery concept,<sup>1</sup> a social construction, a trope. But whatever it is, race not only matters in the United States, it also has become—as in the days of slavery—both a commercial dividend and a continental divide.

From Uncle Ben’s rice and Aunt Jemima pancakes (now pitched by the black singer Gladys Knight) to Benetton’s multi-



million-dollar “United Colours” advertising campaign, J. C. Penney’s “Afrocentric” mailorder catalog, Mattel’s line of ethnic Barbie dolls, and a new breed of black “public intellectuals,” race and its kissing cousin ethnicity have become precious commodities for both capitalism and the academy. Where race intersects with gender, class, and sex, its market value climbs even higher. Add murder, as in the O. J. Simpson case, and race becomes not only the “hottest property in America” but also “the greatest show on earth.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the ease with which the pronoun “we” has slipped from the lips of politicians and poets alike, the United States has never had an easy time living up to its professed plurality. The faces of racial and cultural diversity have spelled profit for big business, but the facts of racial difference—millions of real bodies—have spelled problems for the national enterprise. As the American melting pot has boiled over with immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, the American pie of prosperity has grown smaller—eaten away by too many mouths to feed, on the one hand, and by economic recessions, on the other. If this were indeed a land of plenty where the living is easy for everyone, white nationalists would probably care less about the approximately 18 million, mostly “colored” immigrants who have come to these shores since 1965. But in the face of rising costs and diminished opportunities, racial and ethnic differences threaten again to split the nation in two. And no matter how the socioeconomic divide is represented by conservatives and liberals—no matter whether the issue is welfare, education, employment, or affirmative action—the uncivil war of the 1990s is first and foremost a battle over entitlement: who gets to claim America, who gets to be American?

According to Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich: “To be an American is to embrace a set of values and living habits that have flourished on this continent for nearly four hundred years. Virtually anyone can become American simply by learning the ideas and habits of being an American.” To prove his point, Gingrich summons up Henry Kissinger and Arnold



Schwarzenegger. “It’s clear from their accents that they started somewhere else,” he tells us, “but it is equally clear from their attitudes and behavior that they have become Americans.”<sup>3</sup> It is significant that the two individuals Gingrich points out are white European men. It is also significant that the congressman’s version of American history as a “series of romantic folktales that just happen to be true” either glosses over or completely ignores the near annihilation of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, the enslavement of Africans, the displacement and dispossession of Mexicans, the exclusion of the Chinese, and the internment of the Japanese.

Ironically, Gingrich praises Thomas Jefferson for his “God-is-just / justice-cannot-sleep-forever” antislavery rhetoric, without mentioning that Jefferson himself owned—and may have fathered—slaves. Nor does he mention that Jefferson wrote eloquently and often of the intellectual, physiological, and moral inferiority of blacks. “The first difference which strikes us is that of colour,” he wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782). “And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races?”<sup>4</sup> Concerned with much more than beauty, Jefferson went on to detail precisely how important this difference in color is as the visible sign of innate distinctions between the races:

They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour . . . They are more ardent after their females: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation . . . in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior . . . in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.

In each instance (except memory), it is blacks whom Jefferson found wanting, whom he judged inferior.

Jefferson may have preached that “commerce between master and slave is despotism,” as Gingrich observes, also quoting



from *Notes on Virginia*, but as a practicing slaveholder he continued to profit from that commerce. And though in theory he supported the eventual emancipation of slaves, he saw no future for free blacks in America and recommended that once manumitted they all be shipped (for their own good and for the good of the nation) back to Africa. “For if a slave can have a country in this world,” he argued, “it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labour for another.” Not only did Jefferson not see blacks as Americans, his own words suggest that he barely saw them as human. Perhaps this is why he saw no contradiction in declaring that all men are created equal and entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, even while he himself owned slaves and while his own pursuit of happiness depended on slave labor.

Most if not all of the racial stereotypes that have been assigned to African Americans for the past 350 years—from laziness and mental deficiency to hypersensuality and sexual deviance—can be found in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Yet, given his time and place in history, Jefferson’s bigotry is hardly remarkable. What is remarkable is the fact that Newt Gingrich leaves Jefferson’s racism unremarked. Drawing from the same notoriously racist tract from which I have quoted, Gingrich reads right past the author’s white-supremacist rhetoric and extracts from the text only those few phrases which would confirm Jefferson in the role of God-fearing, slavery-hating founding father and model American. My mentioning of Jefferson’s racism and the alternative histories of *othered* Americans would be, in the Speaker’s view, an un-American activity—just another example of “the querulous whining and petty grievances of so many modern columnists and academics.”<sup>5</sup> “Up until the mid-1960s children and immigrants alike were taught how to be American,” Gingrich writes, lamenting the loss of prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the singing of “The Star-Spangled Banner” in public schools. Like many conservatives, he blames these losses and what he sees as the resultant decline of American civilization on the turn toward multiculturalism.



“Multiculturalism,” he argues, “switched the emphasis from proclaiming allegiance to the common culture to proclaiming the virtues (real or imagined) of a particular ethnicity, sect, or tribe.”

“Race” is curiously absent from Gingrich’s reductive reading of multiculturalism as ethnic, sectarian, or tribal chauvinism. For the racially marked—black people in particular—simple assimilation into the common culture, into the “We the people of the United States,” has never been merely a matter of how they talk, how they pray, how fervently they pledge allegiance to the flag, or even how patriotically correct they behave. For them—for what Langston Hughes called “the darker brother”—singing America, becoming American, has instead been finely connected to how they look, to the color of their skin. Nothing bears out this claim quite so completely as the would-be colorblind Constitution itself, which at various moments in history has denied or has been used to deny U.S. citizenship to African and Asian Americans, solely because they were not “white” in the sense intended by the same founding fathers whose legacy of institutionalized racism and sexism Gingrich thinks it is our patriotic duty to ignore. “America must be described in romantic terms,” he writes. “To take the romance out of America is to de-Americanize our own country.”

In practical terms, past injustices are far less relevant than present policy, and realism is far more useful than romance. A “Contract with America” that romanticizes a glorious past, while blaming welfare and disintegrating family values for the social problems of the present—unemployment, poverty, crime, drugs, teenage pregnancy—effectively denies the role that institutionalized racism continues to play in the decline of the inner city and the nation more generally. The welfare system, for example, is blamed for fostering a culture of poverty and a climate of indolence—for producing masses of men and women unwilling to work because the State will take care of them and their children. Recent studies suggest, however, that race or, more precisely, skin color remains a critical determi-



nant of one's ability to earn a living wage and to support a family. This is particularly true in the inner city, especially for black men. Not only are white men eminently more employable than blacks of similar education and background, but light-skinned blacks have a better chance in the job market than their darker brothers. A study of two thousand able-bodied men in the Los Angeles area found that being African American and dark reduced the odds of working by 52 percent. According to the study, "light-skinned African-American men were more likely than their dark-skinned counterparts to be working, although their unemployment rate (20 per cent) was still high compared with that of white males."<sup>6</sup>

It hardly counts as evidence of anything, yet, as I stack these statistics against the Speaker's romantic notion that almost anybody can become American and succeed in America, I cannot help thinking of the perhaps tasteless but popular joke among blacks that immigrants become truly American at the precise moment that they learn how to say "nigger." It seems ironic (but in keeping with the national romance of colorblindness and racial equality) that throughout the media spectacle known as *The People v. Orenthal James Simpson*, the quintessentially American word "nigger" was recreated in the public imagination as the unspeakable thing never spoken—a word so extraordinary, so far outside common usage, so rabidly racist and un-American that it could only be alluded to as the "N word." He who would say "nigger" would also plant evidence to frame an innocent black man.

"Nigger" may have gone undercover in mixed company—as in the coded message "kill ALL ni gg ERS," which five white high school seniors in Greenwich, Connecticut, managed to slip into their yearbook in the spring of 1995.<sup>7</sup> It may have become publicly unspeakable, in polite company anyway, but the word and the racial animus associated with it remain very much alive in America, as much a part of what America is as the values and living habits Newt Gingrich champions. The failure to "fix" race relations in the United States may be directly



related to our failure, on a national level, to confront how seriously and perhaps irreparably broken those relations are—how unremarkable the word “nigger” is, and the seething culture of resentment behind it.

In this book I explore the link between race and cultural commodification, between what liberals call cultural pluralism and what conservatives have dubbed political correctness, between feminist texts and masculinist readings, between the high theory of the academy and the popular culture of “the people.” In different ways, each chapter examines both the meaning and the merchandising of race and gender in contemporary society. Taken together, they also interrogate the assumptions of Americanism, Afrocentrism, multiculturalism, and feminism. How does the notion of colorblind equality fit with the social and economic realities of black Americans? How does the idea of America as a “common culture” correspond with the way that our commodity culture uses race, gender, and sex not only to sell merchandise but also to sell particular products to particular communities? How is the commodification of alterity—the selling and buying of difference—manifested in the academy through what one might call an intellectual skin trade? What role do the mass media play in the production and marketing of race, gender, and culture?



# 1

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## *Toy Theory: Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference*

This is my doll story (because every black journalist who writes about race gets around to it sometime). Back when I started playing with Barbie, there were no Christies (Barbie's black friend, born in 1968) or black Barbies (born in 1980, brown plastic poured into blond Barbie's mold). I had two blonds, which I bought with Christmas money from girls at school. I cut off their hair and dressed them in African-print fabric . . . After an "incident" at school (where all of the girls looked like Barbie and none of them looked like me), I galloped down our stairs with one Barbie, her blond head hitting each spoke of the banister . . . until her head popped off, lost to the graveyard behind the stairwell. Then I tore off each limb, and sat on the stairs for a long time twirling the torso like a baton.

—Lisa Jones, *Village Voice*

### *Black Like Me*

I was born in 1949, ten years before Barbie, who was not a part of my childhood. Though I did play with other dolls, my earliest memories of toys and games are of playing war with my two brothers. Growing up in the fifties, in the shadow of the second world war and the Korean conflict, I suppose it was natural for



children to want to play war, to mimic what we heard on the radio, what we watched in black and white on our new floor-model Motorola. In these war games, everyone wanted to be the Allied troops—the fearless, conquering white male heroes who had made the world safe for democracy, yet again, and saved us all from the yellow peril. No one wanted to play the enemy—who most often was not the Germans or the Italians but the Japanese and the Koreans. So the enemy became or, more rightly, remained the invisible Asian alien, lurking in bushes we shot at with sticks and stabbed at with make-believe bayonets. “Take that,” we shouted, peppering our verbal assaults with racial epithets. “And that! And that!” It was all in fun, our venom and vigor—all’s fair in wars of words. We understood nothing of how much our child’s play reflected the sentiments of a nation that even in its finer prewar moments had not embraced as citizens its Asian immigrants or their American-born offspring.

Our diatribe was interrupted one summer afternoon by the angry voice of our mother, chastising us through the open window. “Stop that!” she said. “Stop that this minute. It’s not nice. You’re talking about the Japanese. *Japanese*, do you understand? And don’t let me ever hear you call them anything else.” In the lecture that accompanied dinner that evening, we were made to understand not the history of Japanese Americans, the injustice of their internment, or the horror of Hiroshima, but simply that there were real people behind the names we called, that name calling always hurts somebody, always undermines someone’s humanity. Our young minds were led on the short journey from “Jap” and “Nip” to “nigger”; and if we were too young to understand the fine points of pejoratives, we were old enough to know firsthand the pain of one of them.

I can’t claim that this early experience left me free of prejudice, but it did assist me in growing up at once aware of my own status as “different” and conscious of the exclusion of others so labeled. It is important to note, however, that this sense of my own difference was confirmed not simply by parental interven-



tion but also by the unrelenting sameness of the tiny, almost all-white town in which I was raised. There in the country confines of East Bridgewater, Massachusetts, the adults who surrounded me (except for my parents) were white, as were my teachers and classmates. And when my brothers and I went our separate ways into properly gendered spheres, the dolls I played with—like almost everything else about my environment—were also white: Betsy Wetsy, Tiny Tears, Patty Play Pal.

According to her sister Sarah, Elizabeth Delany, the 102-year-old coauthor of the celebrated memoir *Having Our Say*, mixed paints until she achieved a shade of brown that matched her own skin.<sup>1</sup> It seems remarkable to me now, as I remember these childish things long since put away, that for all the daily reminders of my blackness I did not take note of its absence among the rubber-skin pinkness of Betsy Wetsy, the bald-headed whiteness of Tiny Tears, and the blue-eyed blondness of Patty Play Pal. I was never tempted like Elizabeth Delany to paint the dolls I played with brown like me or to dress them in African-print fabric like Lisa Jones. Indeed, I had no notion of such fabrics. The only Africans I had encountered were the near-naked natives who roamed the jungles of what was called the “dark continent” in my elementary textbooks. Like the dreaded drawings of happy slaves who grinned at me from the pages of these books, the occasional images of these black savages—“jungle bunnies”—in social studies books was just one more thing with which some of my white classmates could and did taunt me.<sup>2</sup> The gay “darkies” and “old folks at home” of the Stephen Foster tunes in our songbooks were another. I learned to hate those pictures and those songs (perhaps this is one reason I can’t carry a tune to this day), just as I learned to hate the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar that I had to read aloud in junior high, even as the teacher publicly criticized my Boston accent because it undermined the authentic “colored” reading she wanted.

At home my parents, as black parents have done for generations, fought back by preaching racial pride, by taking my