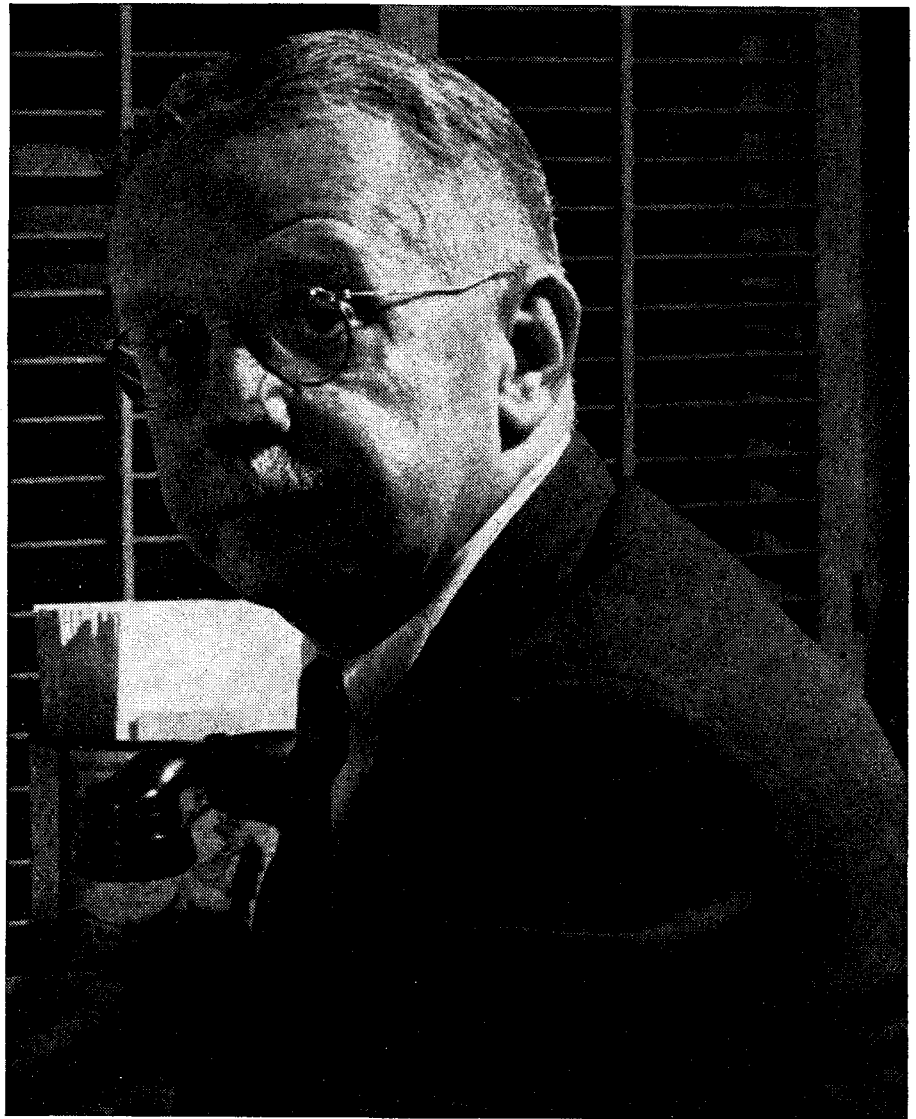


Why I Remain A Negro

WALTER WHITE

THE SCENE was a New York duplex apartment. The people were liberals, economically as well as intellectually well off. They were discussing the race question. I had been invited to speak. One of the women, listening, seemed agitated by something I had said. She scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to another woman, a woman whose skin was reddish brown, a woman who was probably colored. "Is Mr. White white or colored?" the message inquired. The other scribbled an answer and passed it back. "I am Mrs. White," the reply said. The white woman, reading it, became excited. Hastily she penciled a comment: "What a wonderful talk! This is the first time I've had the opportunity to hear him."

I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me. Not long ago I stood one morning on a subway platform in Harlem. As the train came in I stepped back for safety. My heel came down upon the toe of the man behind me. I turned to apologize to him. He was a Negro, and his face as he stared at me was hard and full of the piled-up bitterness of a thousand lynchings and a million nights in shacks and tenements and "nigger towns." "Why don't you look where you're going?" he said sullenly. "You white folks are



WALTER WHITE: "Suppose the skin of every Negro in America were suddenly to turn white. What would happen to all the notions about Negroes?" Executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People since 1931, Mr. White's books include two novels, "Fire in the Flint" and "Flight"; a book on lynching, "Rope and Faggot," and "A Rising Wind," his observations as war correspondent. Most of his fifty-four years have been devoted to a fight for Negro rights which has taken him all over the United States, and to Europe and Asia. His headquarters are in New York City.

always trampling on colored people." Just then one of my friends came up and asked how the fight had gone in Washington—there was a filibuster against legislation for a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission. The Negro on whose toes I had stepped listened, then spoke to me penitently.

"Are you Walter White of the NAACP? I'm sorry I spoke to you that way. I thought you were white."

I am not white. There is nothing within my mind and heart which tempts me to think I am. Yet I realize acutely that the only characteristic which matters to either the white or the colored race—the appearance of whiteness—is mine. White is the rejection of all color; black is the absorption of every shade. There is

magic in a white skin; there is tragedy, loneliness, exile, in a black skin. Why then do I insist that I am a Negro, when nothing compels me to do so but myself?

WHY did the white woman who listened to me speaking become flustered when the woman she chose for her question turned out to be my wife? What made her confused, bewildered, and incapable of direct and efficient communication? It was the enigma of a black man occupying a white body, the presentation in fact of a theory to which millions give lip service, never really believing it is so—that all men are brothers under the skin.

The lady's agitation was natural. Suppose the skin of every Negro in

America were suddenly to turn white. What would happen to all the notions about Negroes, the idols on which are built race prejudice and race hatred? What would become of their presumed shiftlessness, their cowardice, their dishonesty, their stupidity, their body odor? Would they not merge with the shiftlessness, the cowardice, the dishonesty, the stupidity, and the body odor of the whites? Would they not then be subject to individual judgment in matters of abilities, energies, honesty, cleanliness, as are whites? How else could they be judged?

MANY Negroes are judged as whites. Every year approximately 12,000 white-skinned Negroes disappear—people whose absence cannot be explained by death or emigration. Nearly every one of the 14 million discernible Negroes in the United States knows at least one member of his race who is “passing”—the magic word which means that some Negroes can get by as whites, men and women who have decided that they will be happier and more successful if they flee from the proscription and humiliation which the American color line imposes on them. Often these emigrants achieve success in business, the professions, the arts and sciences. Many of them have married white people, lived happily with them, and produced families. Sometimes they tell their husbands or wives of their Negro blood, sometimes not. Who are they? Mostly people of no great importance, but some of them prominent figures, including a few members of Congress, certain writers, and several

organizers of movements to “keep the Negroes and other minorities in their places.” Some of the most vehement public haters of Negroes are themselves secretly Negroes.

They do not present openly the paradox of the color line. It is I, with my insistence, day after day, year in and year out, that I am a Negro, who provoke the reactions to which now I am accustomed: the sudden intake of breath, the bewildered expression of the face, the confusion of the eyes, the muddled fragmentary remarks—“But you do not look . . . I mean I would never have known . . . of course if you didn’t want to admit . . .” Sometimes the eyes blink rapidly and the tongue, out of control, says, “Are you sure?”

I have tried to imagine what it is like to have me presented to a white person as a Negro, by supposing a Negro were suddenly to say to me, “I am white.” But the reversal does not work, for whites can see no reason for a white man ever wanting to be black; there is only reason for a black man wanting to be white. That is the way whites think; that is the way their values are set up. It is the startling removal of the blackness which upsets people. Looking at me without knowing who I am, they disassociate me from all the characteristics of the Negro. Informed that I am a Negro they find it impossible suddenly to endow me with the skin, the odor, the dialect, the shuffle, the imbecile good nature. Instantly they are aware that these things are *not* part of me. Then they grope for the positive values of the race—genius at song, easy laugh-



—Press Association.

My Current Reading

SRL has asked a number of well-known public figures to report on their current reading—books they have just read, are reading now, or plan to read shortly. The present list was contributed by **Charles Luckman**, president of Lever Brothers Soap Co., who has just been appointed chairman of the President’s new committee on food conservation.

THREE THOUSAND YEARS OF EDUCATIONAL WISDOM: SELECTIONS FROM GREAT DOCUMENTS, *edit. by Robert Ulich.*

THE DISCOVERY OF INDIA, *by Jawaharlal Nehru*

TOGETHER: ANNALS OF AN ARMY WIFE, *by Katherine Tupper Marshall*

THE BASIC WORKS OF ARISTOTLE, *edit. by Richard McKeon.*

BRANDEIS: A FREE MAN’S LIFE, *by Alpheus Thomas Mason*

RECORDING BRITAIN, *edit. by Arnold Palmer*

LEE’S LIEUTENANTS, *by Douglas Southall Freeman*

MODERN SOAP MAKING, *by Thomson and Kemp*

SECRET MISSIONS: THE STORY OF AN INTELLIGENCE OFFICER, *by Ellis M. Zacharias, Capt., USN*

MURDER PLAYS AN UGLY SCENE, *by L. A. G. Strong*



The Whites at home: Mrs. White was NAACP worker before marriage; daughter Jane is an actress; son Walter (not in picture) a student at Swarthmore College.

ter, great strength, humility, manners. Alexander Percy said that the most polite people in the world are the American Negroes.

This shift to the virtues of the Negro is apt to be dangerous for me. Once a Southern lady, discovering my identity, entered into a long conversation with me, and suggested that I come to her home where we might enjoy a more intimate chat on race matters without being disturbed. She suggested a time. I said I would surely come, and that I would bring my wife, who would be equally interested in the discussion. The lady’s

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