

Present Tense

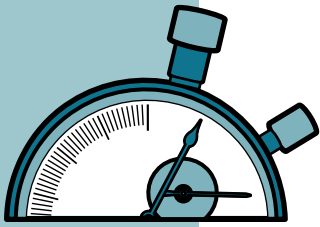
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Momma's Memories and the New Equality

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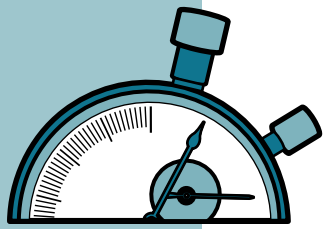
Vershawn Ashanti Young

When I recently told Momma that I accepted a job at the University of Kentucky, she began with her characteristic pause, wrinkled brow, and thoughtful gaze: "You just ain't gone learn are you?" She spoke similarly both when I took my first college teaching job and as I headed to my second one at the University of Iowa: "Don't go making them white folks feel uncomfortable by talking about race. It scares them. Challenges their power—something."¹ Momma's consistent caution comes from her formative experiences in the Jim-Crow South, where blacks, as acts of self preservation, avoided white ears and dodged white eyes. And although Momma has lived in Chicago for umpteen years, it seems she's comfortable playing by the rules of an old game. She still doesn't regularly mingle with white folks. If she's ever had a white friend, I've never met him. Even as head nurse at a clinical branch of a major hospital, most of her colleagues are people of color. Unlike Momma, however, on any given day, if I don't look into my office mirror, I probably won't encounter any brown faces. And, to boot, outside of work, many of my casual acquaintances, yep, most of my close friends are white.

Momma recognizes our social differences, and it's that distinction which prompts her advice. If her worry were that I might encounter—perhaps alone on a dark street—the present Kentucky Senate nominee Rand Paul, who believes government

should allow racial discrimination in some instances, she would offer simple advice that I'd certainly follow: Run, and fast! But Momma's more concerned about modes of the new racism, discrimination that is practiced not by foes but black people's friends. It's what the clinical psychologist Derald Sue Wing et al. describe as "racial microaggressions in everyday life"—mostly unintended "racial slights and insults" (271). The white, antiracist cultural critic Tim Wise calls it "Racism 2.0 or enlightened exceptionalism, a form that allows for and even celebrates the achievements of individual persons of color"—e.g., a black guy like me with a PhD; Oprah; LeBron James—because they "are seen as different from a less appealing, even pathological black or brown rule" (9).

Thus Momma is not afraid that someone might call me a nigger, refuse to hire me, or deny me membership in a country club. She knows those old times have mostly had their day. She wants me to evade not racists but well-meaning whites—because, as Wing et al. state, they "are often unaware that they engage in [microaggressions] when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities" (271). In other words, unlike blacks, whites are generally taught to ignore race, are not trained to perceive the new racism or consequently how to avoid it. So when they get called out for some offense, they might get edgy, feel race guilt, cry "reverse racism," or cloak themselves in denial. As a result, Momma fears that my response to



microaggressions will make me appear high strung to my white employers, as manufacturing the insult I decry, and get me kicked out of my good job. My friends will then see me as less unique, more street, and ostracize me.

Momma's too wise to ignore. At the same time, I won't be silent about race, nor will I abandon my friends and colleagues. So, I've got to explore what her words might mean, not to confirm the new racism—I know that exists—but to contemplate how to bolster the new equality. The new equality does not claim the achievement of racial and social justice. Rather, it offers an ongoing explicit pursuit of personal and systemic change advanced daily—publicly and privately—among black, brown, red, yellow, and white allies, by the sheer fact of their relational connections as citizens, friends, colleagues, lovers, employers, spouses, children, or other interactions. Together they work to eliminate both racial microaggressions and vestiges of the old racism.

Yet if white liberals and others—dare I include Momma?—are, as race theorists say, largely unaware of their involvement in and perpetuation of the new racism, then how shall we pursue the new equality? Two recent episodes, one local to the city where I currently live, Iowa City, and the other national and political, prompt my present ponder.

Shayla's Blues

On a cold Friday afternoon, as I prepared to leave my office to enjoy my school's winter break, a colleague called, a woman I've known since graduate school.

"Hi." Her voice was dry, cracking. "You got five minutes?"

"I'm listening," I said. "What's wrong?"

"My daughter's teacher just called. Shayla had a meltdown."

"What happened?"

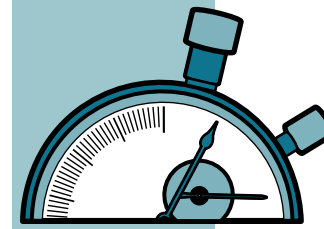
"Shayla's playmates asked her why she's so black, why her butt is so plump. Why her hair is so curly, and her gums so dark they match her skin? Shayla just cried. And she's still crying, and they want me to pick her up."

This isn't the first time my friend's daughter, who attends one of the predominantly white elementary schools in Iowa City, has exhibited confusion about being African American. In first grade, Shayla had to draw a picture of her family. She drew her mom and dad with brown faces; she left herself, however, uncolored, her hair was shaded yellow; her eyes were blue.

Shayla's confusion is not new. I still fight against the desire to be white, not because I find whites more attractive, but because they can disregard race. Thus, I did not offer words of consolation to my friend. Her daughter will learn to cope better with future insults but will also, if her experience is anything like mine or many I know, still struggle with formative experiences that ask her to question and dislike herself and her race.

I asked my friend about the teacher's response.

"Well, she consoled Shayla, told her she's beautiful and not to worry,



difference in looks is the spice of life. She placed her in a quiet space to recoup. But Shayla hasn't gotten better."

"What about her friends, what did the teacher say to them?"

"She said she is going to speak to the class about playing fair, about not hurting people's feelings, and seeing every human as valuable."

A day later, I attended an informal social gathering sponsored by some of the parents of Shayla's friends. Shayla's mom and I were the only two African Americans. As professors, education naturally came up, and I brought up the incident. A few in the conversation found excuses to leave. Another said the kids were being kids, that no harm was intended, though they felt sorry for Shayla. Others used the incident to promote why they teach their kids to be colorblind. All of their responses, including the way the teacher planned to handle the situation, actually create the racial problems they hope to eliminate.

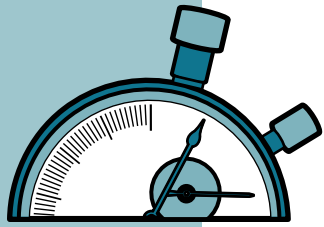
Shayla experienced "microinsult"—"communications that convey rudeness and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (Wing et al. 274). What's even more alarming in her case is the presence of gender harm, since Shayla's friends scrutinized her behind, and thus her budding sexuality. The situation exemplifies what the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins points out: "in the post-civil rights era, gender has emerged as a prominent feature of what some call the 'new' racism" and that "African American men and women are affected by racism but in gender-specific ways" (5). Further, because Shayla's teacher

and the parents would or could not deal directly with the racial nature of the incident, Shayla and her mom are subject to "microinvalidation"—"communication that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Wing et al. 274).

Unfortunately, Shayla's playmates are unwittingly being taught to participate in the new racism by parents who promote one of the "distinct themes" of microaggression: colorblind ideology, a belief that in effect says, "pretend race isn't here" or "if you ignore race, it'll go away." But, like all of us, children get tired of make-believe and want to deal with reality, as Shayla's friends did, albeit inappropriately. As adults we just get better at pretending. And people like Shayla get better at dealing with injuries of the spirit, with psychological trauma. I wonder: will Shayla use her experience to speak against microaggression when she gets older? Or will she remember it as a reason to submit to racial silence and tiptoe around whites as Momma wants me to do? Will her playmates be permitted to deny their racial microaggression? Or will they learn to accept and counter it? If so, who will teach them?

Barack Obama's Non-Negro Dialect

Two weeks after Shayla's encounter, a national debate ensued over whether Senator Harry Reid (D-Nev) should resign over his "racial" comments that President Obama is successful as an African American politician because he's "light-skinned with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one." Some Republicans say Reid's statement is just as wrong as the one made by Senator Trent Lott, who commented



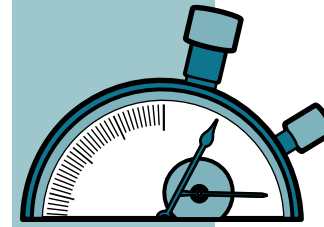
that “all these problems might not have occurred if [Strom] Thurmond had been elected president when he ran in 1948.”

As I see it, the two statements have different intents. Lott’s words yearn for the political power that a former segregationist promised whites, while Reid points out the influence of the old racism on the present American psyche and our political process. Eugene Robinson, a *Washington Post* op-ed writer, explains that Reid’s “light-skinned” comment is about the persistence of American colorism, a preference for light-complexioned people in the media, entertainment, politics, and everyday life. This doesn’t mean there are no dark-skinned figures in the American public. It simply means we are less fearful of and more partial to lighter-skinned individuals and that dark-skinned people are sometimes harassed, and consequently feel shame, as Shayla did. The real problem, according to Robinson, is that too many Americans still hold retrograde values concerning skin color.

Similarly, Reid’s comment about Obama’s dialect reveals the prejudice Americans maintain against African American English. His comment that Obama can pick and choose when to use his “negro dialect” unfortunately reflects the approach that many English teachers use to teach oral and written communication to those who speak English with an accent and to African American students. Many teachers use an instructional method called code switching, where students must translate black dialect into Standard English, while keeping the two separate, as if the two dialects were incompatible, foreign, and hostile languages.

Some teachers who realize that language is a badge of identity and a marker of group affiliation tell students to use their black dialect with friends and family, but that they must use Standard English in school, at work, or in public when they interact with non-black people. This reflects the separate but equal doctrine of segregation that Lott yearned for, where blacks were told they were equal to whites but were not allowed to mix with them—an ideology that cemented white dominance and reinforced negative public perceptions about black people, their culture, and their speech patterns. Well-meaning teachers are vigilant about code switching because they want to give blacks every opportunity to succeed in the world. But they fail to see, as Wise points out in his discussion of Obama, that encouraging code switching makes it seem “as if poor and middle-class blacks who don’t speak the dominant linguistic form or standard English have less claim on citizenship than the rest of us” (102). Instead, educators should promote code meshing—the co-mingling and intermixing of racial rhetorics, dialects, and versions of English in public, formal, and informal speech acts.

It’s clear to me that Reid’s comment is not in the same lot of old racism as Lott’s. The problem, though, is that Reid’s subsequent racial silence and his refusal or perhaps his inability to clarify his comments beyond apology constitute a manifestation of the new racism, for as Wing et al. point out, “omitting” or “inadequately address[ing] race and ethnicity is itself a microaggression” (283). In short, Reid’s good intentions can’t excuse his microaggression, his involvement in the new racism. He could have



learned from the episode, as it’s bound to occur again, since, as Wing et al. argue, “almost all interracial encounters are prone to microaggressions” (271). If Reid had recognized that the new racism is an unfortunate phenomenon that no white person can avoid, he could have converted his gaffe into an opportunity to educate. He could have explained how old racial ideologies still drive some American political speech, even his own, and that of the most egalitarian citizen. Reid could have urged us individually and as a nation not to be shy about admitting our race mistakes or about promoting our racial progress. He could have encouraged us to pursue the new equality.

Hope for Momma, My Associates, and Me

To be sure, Momma’s not a race coward. She kept black conscious books around the house and promoted a sense of racial justice in her children. She won’t oppose a march on Washington; but she doesn’t want me to participate in one because she worries—even in this day and age—that I might suffer an economic death followed by a premature actual one. She’s conflicted, as are other middle-class blacks who understand and unfortunately accept that middle-class success for them means enduring and not directly challenging a system of racial inequality, an inequality that appears now to be based less on class and more on everyday dignity. Because of many post-civil rights opportunities to increase their economic standing, blacks, like my momma, would rather strategize how to cope with the new racism than participate in the new equality, which might unsettle unaware whites.

I refuse to submit to microaggressions in exchange for middle-class luxuries. As a result, I am actively disobeying Momma—something I was raised not to do. Instead, I’m compelled to ask Momma to interrogate the problem she herself points out and to see how her silence and racial isolation contribute to the new racism. I further challenge my friends and colleagues not to view my professional success or our daily association as compensations for racism and to join me in the individual and societal conscious-building project of the new equality.

Endnotes

1. I theorize my interaction with Momma and her words in my monograph, *Your Average Nigga*. See pg 85.

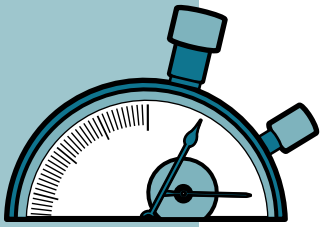
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Vershawn Ashanti Young is a performance artist, writer, and scholar. He performs his solo-show, *Ghetto Memories*, which is adapted from his first monograph, *Your Average*



Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity (Wayne State UP 2007), at small theaters and college campuses across the nation. He is also editor of *From Bourgeois to Boogie: Black Middle-Class Performances* (forthcoming Wayne State 2011) and co-editor of *Code Meshing as World English: Policy, Pedagogy, Performance* (forthcoming NCTE 2011). He is at work on two new books, *The New Equality: White People, Obama, and the New Racism*, from which this essay is taken, and *Other People's English*, which promotes code meshing over code switching in K-college language arts instruction. He currently serves as an associate professor in the division of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Media at the University of Kentucky.