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NIKKI GIOVANNI

ied fish. The poet remembers her grandmother's joy at fried fish and
tra salt. Yes. And maybe a cold beer to salute her mother. Good
b, mommy. I'm here; not necessarily crazy; looking forward to to-
orrow. No mother could do more. Maybe, the poet thinks, I'll buy
lottery ticket. The forty-first cigarette is lit. First thing in the
orning. Fish and a lottery ticket. Hey . . . we're going to make it.

Essays on Race, Identity, and the
Ambivalence of Assimilation

Racism,
Consciousness, and
Afrocentricity

 Molefi Kete Asante

A Frame of Reference

I was born in Valdosta, Georgia, on August 14, 1942. My great-
great-grandmother, Frances Chapman, had given birth to my great-
grandfather, Plenty Smith, in 1866. My grandfather Moses Smith had
moved his family from Dooly County, Georgia, to Valdosta, in
Lowndes County. The Smith family had strong Asante and Mandinka
ancestry despite the disruptions of slavery. My father, for whom I was
first named, Arthur Lee Smith, married Lillie Wilkson, whose maternal
grandmother was Muskogee. I was their first child, although my
mother had three daughters, and my father, a son older than me.
Eventually between them there were sixteen children in all. I lived in
Georgia and Tennessee until May 1960, when I graduated from high
school in Nashville, Tennessee.

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My early experiences certainly contributed to my racial consciousness by bringing me at once into the quicksand of the social environment that was the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Subsequent events were to underscore the lessons of my ritual of passage into the world of southern racism, where whites often exhibited an anti-African phobia unfathomable to me as a young boy of Valdosta, Georgia, and Nashville, Tennessee. I went to a church boarding school in Nashville when I was eleven years old. Every summer and holiday I would return to Valdosta to crop tobacco and to pick cotton in order to have spending money for the next school year.

Realization

The whites I saw in this small Georgia town in the 1950s were neither more intelligent nor more industrious than the Africans I knew. The whites were wealthier and consequently more powerful by virtue of the false status bestowed by race in America. Living and growing up in Valdosta ruined the self-esteem of some Africans and brought our self-confidence into question. But in the end we were to have no problem of consciousness, the reality of being black in Georgia was too intimate, personal, defining. I did not reject my blackness; I embraced it.

To remind us of just how cruel the whites could be in the South, an African man was killed and his body dragged through the dirt roads of the two black sections of town, Southside and Westside. I was barely six when this happened, but the fumes rising from the anger in the black community colored the mental skies of a thousand children for several years. The damnable deed rained down hatred among us every time the story was told of how the poor victim had pleaded his innocence before they killed him. Whenever I heard the name Kill-Me-Quick, the area in Valdosta that the lynched man is said to have come

from, I thought of it as some distant, foreboding community instead of the small satellite community of the Southside it really was. I never knew how it got its name, only that the name conjured up some strange sense of terror.

So lynching registered early and substantially on my mind; the effect of the monstrous crimes against innocent and often defenseless African Americans was permanent. Several years would pass before I understood the extent of the mental chains with which we had been shackled: African men and women harassed, mutilated, murdered in the stark piney-woods country or under the shade of the Spanish-mossed oaks.

The Element of Race

Shaped in the mold of segregation, I knew at a very early age that the world of America was black and white. The technicolor revolution of the Asians and Latinos had not penetrated the thick, gloomy fog of reality that hung over the question of race in Valdosta in those days. It would not be until I attended college in California that I would experience the multicolored reality that was becoming America. Here I was for all practical purposes a made-in-America person. Yet the making itself had not convinced me that I was truly a part of the process that governed the society. Black and white, two colors, two origins, two destinies, that is what intervened in the midst of reflections on place for a young African in the south of Georgia.

We were for all practical purposes the whole world. And when the young people of our church sang, "And he got the whole world in his hands," we knew that it meant both the Southside and the Westside and maybe the white people who occupied those big houses on Ashley and Patterson streets. I was sixteen before I ever knew anything about Chinese or Mexicans. In fact, the only Jew I had ever seen, besides

the Nordic Jew Jesus whose picture hung on the wall of the church, was the man who ran Lazarus Brothers Pawn Shop on Ashley Street in Valdosta. This was the one store on the main street of the city that largely catered to a black clientele. Japanese we had heard of because of the war. They had been the comic characters in our books, the wild-eyed killers of the war comics. My impression of the Japanese was certainly warped by the information that went into my young mind. Puerto Ricans did not exist in Valdosta. Blacks and Protestant whites, that was it for the entire city, with the exception of the one Jew.

What I knew about race relations was just about all that the whites knew, too, I suspected. Their world was also black and white. We worked for the whites; they never worked for us. I observed this every time I was awakened at five-thirty in the morning by my mother so that I would not miss the truck that took us young children to the tobacco or cotton fields. A black man usually drove the truck to the farm. It would be an old truck, often a small pickup, loaded with about twenty or twenty-five people. Arriving at the fields before the sun came up, we would all pile out of the truck and put our cotton sacks on or hitch our mules to the sled, depending on whether it was cotton or tobacco. After a full day's work in the fields we were dead tired, dirty, hungry, and ready to be paid. A white man paid our driver, and would pay us when we had weighed the cotton of the day or accounted for the "cropped" tobacco.

Life had been like this since Emancipation. Sharecroppers and tenant farmers and hired laborers served the interests of the white farmers who made the economy of the region. Neither the whites nor we could have given a clear dissertation or disputation on the state of the world, so locked we were into the social cage of our existence.

Being About My Own Business

When I was twelve years old I thought I had to be about my own business. Work had never been far from our house. It sat outside our door at six o'clock every morning in the summer as a big truck with workers piled on it. Let us say that I had heard about twelve's being the age that a child becomes conscious of right and wrong, and let us say that this had a powerful impact upon my brain. In fact, at church they said Jesus had been about "his father's business" at that age. I had to be baptized and I had to get a job.

Nothing in the Bible my father and mother kept on the small table alongside the wall of the front room could have prepared me for the shape, the deep grooves, of the hatred whites held for us by virtue of our color. Although I was later to be told that it was also because of their fear of Africans, resulting from the five hundred years of war on African people. I am not so sure, however, that the Valdosta whites knew anything about five hundred years of domination. They knew about the whites' place and the blacks' place. It was all about location, and in their minds God had decreed these "places."

By twelve I had mastered the litany of possibilities for the African American: a schoolteacher, a preacher, a funeral-home director, and maybe a lawyer. My family had three or four root men and women and I was said to have been born with a veil over my face, meaning that I would probably be a root doctor or a preacher. Moses Smith, my grandfather, had practiced the roots openly and was known as a strong follower of the spirits. But his father, Plenty, my great-grandfather, carried even more authority in his combination of roots and Baptist tradition. He relied upon his own spiritual sights to heal and counsel people who made pilgrimages to his Dooly County home. Moses had made a convergence between dream books, Christianity in its Church of Christ fundamentalism, roots, hoodoo, and Yoruba. My father, Arthur, only dabbled in the spirits, often being told by his

elders that he did not have enough faith in the healing or spiritual powers of the unseen.

With my father's lack of interest in the roots and stubborn rationalism I was not encouraged in the root line of work though it seemed to be a logical path for me. Eager to work and to show my own contribution to the family's economy, I started on the road to my profession with a shoebox that held shoe polish, a rag, and an old brush. I found a white barbershop down on Ashley Street willing to give me a chance to work on the shoes of the white customers. My very first customer, demonstrating for others in the shop his contempt for Africans, even a child, spat on my head as I leaned over his shoes. I knew what had happened. I did not say a word as I gathered up my shoeshine box, forgot about my payment, and walked out of the barbershop to the laughter of the man and a few other customers. My father, I remembered, was proud of me.

Unwelcomed as a child in the most elementary economic position one could have in the Deep South of the late 1950s, I came to expect nothing from whites. In fact, whites in the South were seen as the natural enemies of Africans. One spoke to them as if to strangers from another planet. They could wreak havoc in one's life with a word, a signal, a sign, or a whisper to the sheriff that you were "a bad nigger." I had come from a family of "bad niggers," whose Asante and Creek roots meant that there was a whole history of resistance to white hatred. Our family lived in poverty but never in shame; we were hard workers and prided ourselves on our ability to outwork anyone. If hard physical labor could make one rich, then all of my brothers and sisters would have been millionaires. Discrimination, prejudice, segregation, and the doctrine of white racial supremacy were neither innocuous nor benign in those days; they were real legacies rooted in the great enslavement of Africans. And often what we thought was benevolence on the part of whites, who would give our church their secondhand clothes, often turned out to be another statement of their alleged superiority.

Insight and Introspection

The tightly knit community of Africans who lived on the dirt roads of Valdosta never saw themselves as intellectually or physically inferior to whites. There existed no reference points outside of ourselves despite the economic and psychological poverty of our situation. Our social, political, and economic situations could be explained in terms of white racial preference. Whether this was true or not in every case, we believed it. For example, if only whites worked in the banks downtown as tellers and managers, we knew that it was because Africans were never given a chance. The proof came later when Africans were given jobs in the banks and department stores; the incredible thing is that whites were amazed that we could be successful in those positions, such was their ignorance. Whatever advantage whites had was directly tied to race. My grandfather Moses, a favorite name for males in my family, had often told us sitting around the fireplace eating boiled peanuts that if they gave a black person a chance to enter any sport—tennis, swimming, or golf—they would do just as well as the whites, if not better. It was a problem of access and money, he would say. Although we recognized our degradation, I do not ever recall wanting to be like whites; they were neither beautiful nor strong nor decent people.

I was a young adult when I really felt the rage against prejudice inside me. But I never allowed it to control me. My father had instructed me too well for that to happen. I controlled and directed the rage with committed vows made in the name of my great-great-grandmother, Frances Chapman, who lived and died in the piney woods of Dooly County, Georgia, about eighty miles north of Valdosta. Among the vows, I remember, was never to allow white racial supremacy to go unchallenged. As a student in elementary and high school in Tennessee, where I had gone from Georgia when I was eleven, my friends looked to me in any confrontation with whites because I

maintained an understanding in my relationships with whites that demanded mutual respect. During the school year I attended the Nashville Christian Institute and received religious education. My religious training dampened any desire I had for confrontation, although I was always taught to defend myself.

Becoming a Christian at eleven, I tried preaching, since the ministry was a natural extension of the roots tradition, in which I felt right at home, until I became disenchanted with religion generally and the way it was practiced in the Church of Christ specifically. After several years I gave up the attempt and endeavored rather to demonstrate propriety and good judgment in the face of ignorance. Relocating myself from the Christian religion became a substantive pathway to many future liberations. Whites did not only control the money in the country, they also controlled the religion. I wanted no part of the mind control that went along with a religion that had become the deification of white culture, including white dislike, hatred, and fear of Africa and Africans.

It seemed to me that whites demonstrated their fear of us in their inability to allow us to share space in almost any enterprise. The whites in Valdosta who rose above the petty, pedestrian attitudes toward Africans were often ostracized by their neighbors. A few of them were labeled "nigger lovers" by other whites. One year I saw the Ku Klux Klan marching down the streets in their white robes shouting vile remarks about "nigger lovers" and "niggers." I thought of them, I remember, as a pathetic band of misfits; I was curious, however, about who they were behind those hoods. The Klan was not just against Africans, that little circle of frightened men was against whites who thought Africans were intelligent, human, moral, and equal to whites.

The Terror of Reality

It has taken me considerable time to understand that the fundamental terror which resides in the white mind in terms of black-white relationships is rejection, that is, the fear that we will reject white values, standards, and ideas. But it is a deeper fear than, say, the fear that one might not be able to succeed in some venture; it is an existential fear, the fear that one might cease to exist without us to give them their sense of identity. To me, quite frankly, it mattered little how much whites feared the lack of existence because of their treatment of Africans. Almost every white I met felt some guilt about the condition of Africans but felt helpless to do anything about it. They recognized the historical nature of the racism that was daily poured into the African's cup. Every day brought other revelations, and whether it was social services or education, economics or housing, the situation was the same.

The attack on Africans in the academy, that is, the absolute difficulty some white professors have in granting excellence to African students or the immense problems whites have in giving tenure to African American scholars, is directly related to the fear of rejection. More amazingly, despite the Civil War, whites never allowed or wanted Africans to be truly "free" in America. Physical freedom did not mean psychological freedom, either for blacks or whites. Thus, confrontation is inevitable on almost every front because the white American is stuck with the heritage of the enslavement, unable to let the slave go free, and thereby refusing to see himself or herself alongside the African. They are forced by this position to oppose the African's leadership, creativity, innovation, and direction. Yet the African has vowed to be free. This is the source of conflict. I made that vow of freedom in the sandy piney-woods country when I was fourteen.

The feeling that you are in quicksand is inescapable in the quagmire of a racist society. You think that you can make progress in the

interpretation of what's happening now only to discover that every step you take sinks the possibility of escaping. You are a victim despite your best efforts to educate those around you to the obvious intellectual mud stuck in their minds. For me, however, the course has always been rather clear, thanks to Arthur Smith and Lillie Smith's giving me the Francis Chapman and Plenty Smith stories when I grew up in Valdosta, Georgia.

The Illusion of Double-Consciousness

I was never affected by the Du Boisian double-consciousness. I never felt "two warring souls in one dark body" nor did I experience a conflict over my identity. Since I was a child I have always known that my heritage was not the same as that of whites. I never thought we came over here on the *Mayflower*. When I got up in the mornings to go to the cotton and tobacco fields, little white children got up to go fishing in the lakes or to camp. I knew that much from seeing them at the swimming pool, at the lakes, and at the parks as I rode those trucks back and forth to work. That was the experience it seemed of the white children I either saw or heard about; however, certainly somewhere in Georgia there must have been other whites with work experiences similar to mine. The point, though, is that most of the labor in the South during that period was performed by Africans. There were and remain in this country dual societies, one white and richer, one black and poorer. Perhaps in a great number of Africans these societies and the "two warring souls" converge to create a caldron of psychological problems; this was not the case with me or my family even when we were dysfunctional.

Valdosta, in all of its transparency, made my consciousness unitary and holistic. The starkness of the contrast was as evident as the paved streets in the white section of town and the muddy dirt roads on our

side. My identity was solid, not fluid. My parents never gave any indication of suffering from low self-esteem or low self-confidence; they suffered from a severe income deficiency. Did I think that I shared something with these whites? Was I that crazy? Did I believe that I was an American in the same way whites were? Did I want to be like whites? No, we did not even go to the same Christian churches; our religion, although called Christian, was different. It might have been another matter if I had gone to school and to church with whites when I was younger. I might have suffered confusion, double-consciousness, but I did not.

The *orishas* captured us and sent us on a different way. The whites had no *orishas*. Our music was different. Our parties were different. Our clothes were different. Were there then two warring souls in my bosom? No, anger, resentment, and hatred for the people I thought had to be the most callous, inhuman, brutal beings on earth, that was in my heart. Was I conflicted about my identity? Not for one moment did I experience any sense of personal or cultural confusion about my origins, community, and struggle. There were no "two warring souls" in my personality. This is not to say that the hypocrisy of the United States in not living up to its guarantee of African freedom was not often present in my mind, but I was clear about the reality of America.

One discovers in this kind of situation that there is no beginning and no end, or so it seems. To think that a young person growing up in the South could decipher the situation in any realistic way is to attribute too much to experience and not enough to reading history and culture. This I was to come to much later in my life. But I had seen enough, heard enough, and felt enough to understand my predicament. Because I had such an insular upbringing in many respects, that is, the segregated schools kept me away from the longing to be white or to be accepted by whites that Du Bois must have felt in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. My whole world was black except on rare occasions when a lone white would enter our neighborhood to collect

the insurance money, to hire an employee, to deliver some secondhand clothes, or to campaign politically.

Avoiding Psychological Trouble

I knew, however, that it would be necessary to avoid becoming either a misoriented African or a disoriented African in the maturing process. One could be misoriented by receiving and accepting false information. I had to cautiously weigh information that was presented to me. I had seen many young people, my own age at the time, totally disoriented about America. Disorientation occurred when a person got the wrong information, accepted it, and tried to act on the basis of it. My reading included everything from the King James version of the Bible to Marx and Fanon. We were into Fanon in the late sixties. His early death gave him a kind of martyr's status with me. Here was this clear mind, this brilliant analyst, who would help Africans to see how to liberate themselves. In a fundamental way, Fanon was one of the guides that I used to chart my own path out of the maze of disinformation and misinformation that surrounded me. Observing as a young man of the sixties, I could see an anti-Africanite in every opposition to our freedom and equality. I could discern the bogus use of equality as it was emerging in the counter use of the term to mean that affirmative action was reverse discrimination. The more sophisticated white reactionaries seemed to call it reverse racism. Of course, it was neither. Affirmative action was a down payment on the reparations that should have been granted to Africans who had worked in this country for 244 years for free. My youth had prepared me for the sixties.

The racist anti-Africanite was clearly in the ascendancy in the South of my youth. Almost every white person who occupied a political position was an anti-Africanite. Sometimes they campaigned for office on the grounds that they would be sure to "keep the niggers in their places." Could I possibly have been confused about where the sheriff

of Lowndes County, Georgia, stood on issues of race? Only if I was crazy. This is not to say that "crazy" black people did not exist then. As now, we had individuals who felt that the "Lord gave the whites the power to rule" over us. If it were not so, they argued, then it would not be so. I saw the irrationality of our condition at an early age and was reminded that my great-grandfather, Plenty, did not like fools or ignorant people. His style was to maintain distance from the source of his irritation. I learned that lesson on one of my many visits as a child to my great-grandfather's farm in Dooly County, Georgia.

I am sure that there were misoriented Africans in Valdosta during that time. By *misoriented* I mean Africans who believed that it was better to identify with the "masters" rather than with the "slaves." I remember one black man who went around trying to convince other Africans that a certain white racist was better than another white racist because at least the white racist he was supporting for election "had never beat a Negro." Presumably, the other white racist had physically whipped some of his field hands.

The racist anti-Africanite finds the activities of the misoriented African comforting for his or her anti-Africanism. The misoriented African, much like Sartre's inauthentic Jew, runs away from his or her Africanity by attempting to deny it, conceal it, or attack it. Unlike the Jew, who seldom wishes to destroy his or her Jewishness, the misoriented African assumes that he or she is not African and therefore takes exception to those who remind him or her that he or she bears all of the major characteristics of resemblance to those who are African. Thus, the misoriented African, that is, the inauthentic African, allows the dominance of the single-consciousness of Europe to conquer him or her. At that moment, and not before, the misoriented African becomes for all practical purposes the spitting image of the racist anti-Africanite. Neither a victim of double-consciousness nor attuned to the consciousness of his or her own historical experiences, which would center the person, the misoriented African becomes disoriented and believes that he or she is actually a European.

Since one can only have one heritage despite the multiplicity of

cultural backgrounds that go into that heritage, to assume that one possesses more than one heritage is to suggest contradictions in the person's heritage. Actually our heritage might be composed of many backgrounds but in the end we inherit a unified field of culture, that is, one whole fabric of the past rather than split sheets or bits and pieces. Otherwise what we inherit is not very useful.

Despite denial of Africanity, others see the misoriented African as African and box him or her into the existential reality which he or she denies. Denial may take many forms, including the idea that one is indeed different from those Africans who do not deny. A person who denies his historical reality means that he is not confident in his reality. He possesses a fluid identity. This is what I tried to avoid as a young adult in college, this fluid identity. I thank my *ori*, Obatala, for giving me a solid sense of identity. Therefore, I found every opportunity to learn from other Africans with solid identities.

There was always something in me that said you cannot flee from reality, you cannot escape the historical condition and remain sane. Denial assumes a larger and larger portion of the concentration time of those who have fluid identities. What I have seen in their lives is obsession, the obsession with denial-and-discovery. To deny the reality opens the possibility that one may be discovered to be authentically African despite all psychological efforts at denial. There is perhaps nothing worse than seeing an African who looks concretely African and who acts expressively African trying to deny Africanness but who is discovered to be African by the very people he or she is trying to fool.

Consciousness Transformed

In 1972 I visited Ghana during the first of what were to be eighteen trips to Africa over the next twenty years. UCLA had graciously con-

sented to allow me to visit Africa in my capacity as the Director of the Center for Afro-American Studies. When I finally reached the library at the University of Ghana, Legon, I asked the librarian whether my book *The Rhetoric of Black Revolution* had reached his campus. He replied, "Yes, but I thought the author Arthur Smith was an Englishman." He could not understand how a person with an African phenotype could have an English name or so it seemed to me. Nevertheless, it was a profound encounter for an African American.

I vowed then and there that I would change my name. The name Arthur L. Smith, Jr., inherited from my father, had been betrayed by the dungeon of my American experience. Soon thereafter I took the Sotho name Molefi, which means "One who gives and keeps the traditions" and the Asante last name Asante from the Twi language. My father was elated. He said to me that had he been able to, that is, had he known an African name, he would have changed his name long ago. This made me very proud because I had always been supported by my father's sense of reason. I had no intention of ever masking or wanting to mask. I was straight up and down an African in my consciousness and that fact did not contradict my nationality as an American; it simply threw everything into the most ordered reality possible for me.

The Mask

I could never understand the aim of the Africans who sought to mask. Masking leads to masquerades. The first stage of masking is to cover up, whether sartorially or linguistically. Making certain that you wear the right fashions, have the right hairstyle, and affect the appropriate outward expressions of taste becomes the main preoccupation of masking. "Oh no, I couldn't be seen in those ethnic clothes," a misoriented African American once said to me while dressed in Italian shoes, an English paisley tie, and a French suit. Further masking is effected by

using language to befuddle and mislead the potential discoverers. "You see, I'm only part Negro; my father's father was German" may be a correct statement of biological history but it is of no practical value in the American political and social context. There is neither a political nor a social definition within the American society for such masquerade. Neither biracial nor interracial has any political meaning in the contemporary setting of the United States. Thus, to employ the biological argument is to engage in a masquerade because the person seeks to escape the social and political definition for people whose biological history is essentially similar. Most African Americans have mixed gene pools, either one African ethnic group with another or African with some other ethnic and/or racial groups. Nevertheless, we say we are black and mean the word in all of the political and social dimensions it has in this situation. It is like calling the ancient Egyptians "black," which certainly they were in terms that we recognize today. That is, the ancient Egyptians looked no different from the present-day African Americans. In fact, the contemporary Egyptians in the south of Egypt can be mistaken for African Americans!

In the proving ground of America, some of us, and I am one, have been tested in every way. Yet as a lover of harmony I have thought that the most remarkable Maatic achievement of the human personality in this age would be the elimination of racism, prejudice, and discrimination. Perhaps I have wished for this because of the early rites of passage that I went through as a young man, but I would hope that my wish is a part of the celebration of the human possibility. Even from my young adult years I thought a precondition of my fullness, a necessary and natural part of my maturity, was the commitment to be who I am, to be Afrocentric.

One becomes Afrocentric by exploring connections, visiting the quiet places, and remaining connected. The furious pace of our dislocation, mislocation, displacement, off-centeredness, and marginalization, often brought on by the incredible conspiracy of the Eurocentric architecton, drives us further and further away from our-

selves, reinforcing us in our dislocation and affirming us in our out-of-placeness. In such a situation, in the fringes of the European experience, pushed away from the center, we swirl around lost looking for place, for location. Afrocentricity is the active centering of the African in subject place in our historical landscape. This has always been my search; it has been a quest for sanity. Therefore, it was unthinkable for me to entertain ideas of living in the margins, being in the periphery of someone else's historical and cultural experiences. My aim was more fundamental, basic, the essential quality of being normal, uncomplicated. By being normal I do not reject the other; I embrace that which I truly know, i.e., jazz, blues, railroads, Obatala, roots, hoodoo, soul, rhythms, sweet mommas, Dunbar and Hughes, Sanchez, Mari Evans, and Charles Fuller, and so on, in ways that I do not know the products of the other, i.e., country music, mistletoe, Valhalla, Wotan, pale blonds, Frost, and Mailer. I recognize these products as a part of my experience in the large but they do not impact on me in the same way as those which seem to grow from the soil of my ancestors. With my own products I can walk confidently toward the future knowing full well that I can grasp whatever else is out there because my own center is secured.

True, I saw and see many who assume that for an African to strive to be European is the real normalcy. Such "Negroes" are often insane, suffering from a deep sense of self-hatred, which in the end prevents them from having a healthy relationship with the whites whom they admire merely because of their whiteness. Fortunately for me, I have managed to hold back the demons of double-consciousness by being who I am and trying, in Harriet Tubman's name, to be all that I ought to be.