

# **Whoness: A Question of Identity**

## **by Nasoan Sheftel-Gomes**

I first met my friend Heather when she was a biracial twenty-two-year-old senior in college taking a class on Black women's literature. Heated discussions about identity and subjectivity were commonplace in the classroom. In the course of the semester, Heather started to think about things she had never thought of before. Once, in a conversation, she told me she had never really looked in the mirror until recently. For the first time, she had seen a Black person.

As a biracial person myself, hearing Heather say this made me think about my own upbringing. I realized how hard my parents tried to infuse me with an understanding of "whoness." I remember asking my parents what to say to people who asked the inevitable question, "What are you?" "Tell them your grandfather was Cape Verdean, your grandmother is African American and Cherokee Indian, and your mother is Jewish," was their response. I took that advice to heart and in the process realized that people don't really want to know all of that. They want the simple answer. "I am Black."

Heather's mother, who is White, had a relationship with a Black man that ended before Heather's birth. Heather's own grandparents didn't know that her mother was to give birth to a biracial baby until the day the baby was born. Imagine the shock. Heather's mother, having had no lasting relationship with Heather's father, also had no connections to the Black community in Washington D.C. Eventually, she married a White professor who taught at a university in Georgia.

Apparently, no one ever bothered to mention to Heather that she was of color or try to give her a sense of her heritage. In her new family she was "the only one," and in her own words, she was "raised white." Her family traveled all over the world to places like Kenya and Sweden and she lived outside the United States for most of her adolescence. When Heather returned to the United States for college, she was out of touch with the racial attitudes of most Americans.

She found herself uncomfortable in the presence of the other Black folks. She said that she felt like the other students of color didn't like her because all of her friends were White. She felt alienated and never tried to make connection with the

other Black students on campus. In taking the literature class, Heather began to confront some of her own prejudices and to look at her lack of a coherent identity. She felt uncomfortable talking about these issues with her mother. She had some anger towards her for not letting her know every aspect of who she was.

One afternoon I got a call from Heather's roommate. She told me that Heather was in the hospital. She had suffered "a nervous breakdown."

Some time later, I was having breakfast at a diner when Heather walked in with her mother. They came over to our table to say hello. Heather seemed uncomfortable, as if she was trying hard to act like nothing had happened. When I asked her how she was feeling, she glanced nervously at her mother before answering with a quick, "I'm fine."

In conversations with Heather a few weeks later, she made a concerted effort to assure me that her breakdown was not due to an identity crisis. She attributed her hospital stay to an overload of stress; I don't know if Heather had an identity crisis or not. I don't tell this story as an example of how tragic it is to be a biracial person — "They don't fit anywhere." "They aren't Black or White, so what are they?" As a biracial person myself, I appreciate the complexities of coming to terms with an identity that is neither one nor the other but all encompassing.

There are many positive experiences that come out of being a biracial person, like the ability to see the world in three-dimensional terms and not with a limited perspective. This can be difficult in a society that considers the subject of racial identity to be a black or white issue.

But it is up to our parents to make sure that we have a connection to the communities from which we come, to teach us to enjoy the unique world view we have. It wasn't Heather's fault that on that day when she looked in the mirror with the world's eyes, she was confronted with something and someone she had no tools to deal with. It's not easy.