

Dreaming of a Self beyond Whiteness and Isolation

We are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other – male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so very often do I. But none of us can do anything about it.

James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons"

What men believe to be true is true in its consequences.

Alfred North Whitehead, in David R. Loy, The World Is Made of Stories

Some years ago, I conducted an exercise in a class on the history and nature of the self. Most of the students in the class were white, and most were law students. After reading some neo-Jungian articles about dreams, and dreams in relation to identity, I asked the class how many of them had ever dreamt that they were something non-human: an animal perhaps, or something inanimate. The vast majority of the class affirmed that they had. In their dreams, they had been foxes, spirits, and clouds. Then I asked them how many of them had ever dreamt that they were someone of a different race. Only a couple of students raised their hands. The number who had dreamed about being of a different gender or sexual orientation was only slightly higher.

In some ways, the discussion following this exercise was as interesting as the initial responses. For many of the students, the results were unremarkable; after all, why would they dream they were of a different

race or gender? It was only after some prodding that they began to share my sense of amazement. Here we were in a class in which many of the students would identify themselves as liberal or progressive, yet in their dreams, they were more likely to imagine themselves as animals than as people of different races or genders. It was easier for a white man to dream he was a cloud than to dream he was a black woman.

Dreams allow us unrestrained adventures, costless experiments, and some of our most uninhibited states. In them, we have license to experience superhuman powers or ignore sexual taboos. Social constraints and reality have little grip on our dream worlds. Yet our classroom discussion indicated that for many, racial boundaries remain largely intact, even in this realm. How is it that such a line is drawn and policed, even in our sleep, and what does this mean for our waking consciousness?

We returned to this theme many times throughout the course. I encouraged and challenged the students to imagine themselves across these racial, gender, and sexual orientation boundaries in their dreams. Before the semester had ended, virtually all of the students had done just that. They had imagined themselves as the other, and they had begun to question how these boundaries were erected, maintained, and given meaning.

Andrew Hacker conducted a similar experiment with white students. He asked them how much money they would need to be paid to switch their race to black. Even as the imagined amount of money increased, there were very few takers.¹ In a different setting, however, many of these same students might claim that race does not exist or matter. In a moment of intellectual clarity, many would insist that race, and therefore racial boundaries, are not real, but instead are socially constructed, as discussed in previous chapters. Yet even with the license to imagine themselves as anyone and anything, crossing this apparent color line remains unimaginable, whether in dreams or for a price.