Earned Secure Blackness:

The Journey of a Black Woman from Assimilation toward Selfhood

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I'm going to start this case presentation by saying something about my practice. I have had the opportunity to work with a number of patients of color; at one point a third of my caseload. You might wonder why patients of color would choose to work with a white analyst. I have two theories about this: The first has to do with where I work, in a small community, a town, really. This means that most patients of color already know—or know a good deal about—the few therapists of color. The second is about being, for years, the only Jungian analyst in Ithaca. Many patients of color tell me that they read or heard something about Jung's *openness* to cultural differences, and that's why they contacted me. This flies in the face of the Jungian community's current reckoning with Jung's *blindness* to his own cultural racism. I think both can be true.

This case describes two rounds of analysis with my first long-term Black patient, a woman I will call "Sara." The first was for 10 years, and the second, after a break of five years, for just over one year. I am grateful for her permission to share the material; I have changed many details to protect her privacy. I'm going to share some art as I go along, by Amy Sherald, Kara Walker, and Calida Rawles [2. IMAGE].

Sara secretly rented an apartment to leave her husband a few weeks before our first session and moved out the next weekend. She is now a popular and creative community

college professor. Her ex-husband, Evan, is a well-regarded medical professional. She is a Black woman, and he is white.

Sara had been in therapy for two years with a white, male therapist and found it helpful but too focused on her husband, as her friends kept telling her, and said she wanted to focus on herself now. "I find myself giving in too much," she said, and "Evan knows how to get me to that place." They had tried couple's therapy after a brief, earlier separation, but when that therapist brought up communication issues—"when Evan hears what he wants to hear" rather than what Sara is actually saying—he bailed.

Sara grew up in a largely Black community but always moved among a multi-racial mix of friends. [3. IMAGE] In elementary school, Black friends would ask why she talked "white"—it was because her working-class parents insisted that Sara and her sister speak proper English, so they could get ahead in the world. Sara also accepted the task of watching out for her younger sister, who was shy and socially awkward, to protect her from being teased or bullied. Sara didn't date in high school, as it all felt too complicated to manage. She described feeling surprised, and then put off, that her Black peers at a highly selective Southern university would socialize only with other Black students. She opted not to limit her social life in this way, was shunned by the main group of Black students, then found herself dating only white men. She and Evan met in grad school.

Sara and Evan have three biracial children together. The two older children are dark skinned, like herself, and the youngest is lighter skinned with tightly curled hair. The middle child is volatile and anxious, like her husband, prone to "acting out," while the oldest and youngest are calm, a bit melancholy, like her, and tend to shut down when overwhelmed. Sara's worry about the middle child was, "I'm starting to notice him go along

with his father to keep the peace." Her worry about the youngest was his light skin, which confused some of his friends, who insisted that he's "white," leaving the child confused.

We worked together over ten years, as Sara gradually untangled herself from the power dynamic she had stepped into as caretaker and submissive partner to Evan's narcissistic accomplishment. Paradoxically—or not—her white husband is an innovator at work in addressing racism in medical care and has published papers on anti-racist strategies to improve Black health outcomes. Sara described him, at home, however, as controlling and emotionally abusive. He insisted that they divorce through a collaborative law process, to save money. "Insisted" is the key word here, as they met regularly with two collaborative lawyers for more than a year and got nowhere—he would agree to one point only to then backtrack on another. He didn't want a divorce; he wanted to hold onto her. It was only after she shifted gears and hired an aggressive lawyer that the divorce could finally happen.

The beginning transference with Sara felt like one of dependence, but with a cool hesitancy in it, as if she had learned early to calibrate the level of trust in another, ready to step away and stand on her own at a moment's notice. [4. IMAGE]

My initial countertransference included elements of awe, maternal concern, and frustration. The awe has to do with being "let in" to psychoanalytic work with a Black patient for the first time. The maternal concern was activated by my felt sense in the room of an un-mothered, un-cared-for aspect of Sara, who became parentified early on, to watch over her too-much-for-their-mother sister. Sara heard herself described as "normal" so assumed that she had nothing substantive to complain or feel bad about. I imagine this meant that she split off from painful emotions and then was unable to process or learn

from them. She did well in school, identified with her parents' expectations that she would earn a graduate degree and become a professional. The frustration I felt had to do with a giggly, schoolgirl-ish quality, evidenced by a tilt into high-voiced naiveté, that would appear at odd moments; I found this a bit annoying.

I would describe Sara's attachment style as avoidant. I'm going to talk about her growth toward earned-secure attachment by focusing on what some researchers now propose should be included as part of attachment theory for people of color, and that is racial identity. Mary Ainsworth's original research took place in Uganda, which has its own history of slavery and colonialism, but there has been very little research about attachment theory among African Americans here in the United States, where Black people constitute a small minority with a history of white enslavers.

Jessica Stern and her colleagues have identified some important differences between African American and white family systems, including "somewhat lower levels of maternal sensitivity and rates of attachment security" (Stern, 2022, p. 397). They couch these considerations in an awareness that Black parents' primary concern is the safety and emotional wellbeing of their children within a racist white culture. For Black parents, they write, "firm control combined with warmth, as well as moderate emotional suppression with high levels of emotional support, offer protection against the emotional and physical risks associated with racism" (Stern, 2024, p. 10). They propose three key factors in assessing attachment for African Americans: (1) parental protection; (2) the role of nonparental figures, like fictive kin, mentors, and spiritual communities; and (3) the development of positive racial identity (Stern, 2023, p. 11).

Sara grew up, I would say, missing out on aspects in two of these factors—parental protection and a positive racial identity. I want to add a quote, here, from filmmaker Kobi Libii, who spoke of his own and his ancestors' assimilation to white culture in an interview about his movie, *The American Society of Magical Negroes*, saying, "to have any judgment of anything they had to do to survive that system of domestic terrorism, is absolutely not my place" (Kuo, 2024).

Many of Sara's initial dreams involve clothing—not enough clothes, not the right clothes, being naked. At first, I thought about these dreams as having to do with persona, but this dream took me further:

> *We were at the mall, and [my family] had things they needed to get. Everyone got their things done except me. I thought, "Oh, great, I'll have to come back to the mall later, and it will be crowded." I tell them later that I need to go shopping. "Why didn't you do it when we were there?" someone asks. They make a big deal about what I would wear—a top, too short—almost like a long dress shirt, black, loose, so that I'm not quite dressed. But I'm just going to go anyway—I'll be cold because it's winter. My sister sees me. . . . I'm about to go out the door, I turn right—there are coats hanging up and a woman there . . . seems to know me—I'm looking at the coats. There's a coat I know is Evan's coat—she questions me—why am I taking that coat? "Because it's cold," I say, "I need a coat."*

I began to wonder, what kind of persona might be necessary equipment for a Black woman negotiating life and relationships in a white-dominated culture—would it need to

be extra-protective? A powerful white man like Evan would have automatic access to such a protective persona, but it seemed that Sara didn't have the resources to get one for herself and had to borrow it.

Sara had arrived for an earlier session wearing a striking, teal-colored raincoat. When I commented on how beautiful it was, she giggled and told me that the last time she and her sister got together, they both showed up wearing this same, exact coat. I felt a ping of recognition around the twinning aspect that can play out among sisters but also the tender loss in having to share even this simple, expressive aspect of one's persona with another.

I also wondered, what might Esther Bick's concept of "psychic skin" add to this imaginative picture? I read some of Bick's papers, which led me to the work of Didier Anzieu. In his book *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self*, he writes, "to be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own and, secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations" (Anzieu, p. 51). "To be an Ego is to feel one has the capacity to send out signals that are received by others. . . . [This envelope] confirms [the baby's] individuality: it has its own style and temperament, different from anyone else's though built upon a background resemblance. To be an Ego is to feel unique" (Anzieu, p. 62). Sara didn't yet have her own skin ego, the capacity to be just herself. And neither did Marisa.

Next, Sara dreamed:

> *There's a car, a feeling of danger. I am driving the car, by myself all of a sudden. Then I'm naked, nothing on at all. Can they tell? Am I upset? Then, there's no car, just my naked body, whizzing through air, prone. I have a sense that there's a destination. How*

long am I going to be whizzing along like this? I feel a little ashamed, but also it's liberating. I never get there.

It sounds like she loses the borrowed persona, in this dream, along with the vehicle she has been driving by herself to move through life. There's a destination, somewhere, but she's not there yet; she's in-between selves, whizzing through liminal space, no longer the old, white-protected self and not yet a new, Black one either. I quite like the mix of shame and liberation.

I'm going to read, now, a dialogue from an article by psychoanalyst Dhwani Shah, who is Indian American, on what he calls the "racial melancholia" of a young, mixed-race patient after her white boyfriend broke up with her. I want to add a caveat and say that cross-racial relationships can have many meanings, so I don't want to imply that they always suggest a lack in one partner or the other. Nonetheless, I believe this dialogue captures something about what it might mean for a person of color to "marry"—that is, to have intimate access to—whiteness, in and of itself:

Sandra: This sounds strange, but I think it's something about him being white. I don't know why that just flashed through my mind. I don't know. I was just remembering what it felt like to touch his skin. I felt whole somehow. His white skin. That's fucked up. I'm not sure what I'm saying here.

Me: What did it feel like?

Sandra: Like I had something I've always wanted. . . . I felt at peace. That feeling of my body touching his body.

> Me: It felt like you got something you were longing for? And now it's been taken away from you?
>
> Sandra: [looking upset] I don't know. I feel like shit. I don't know what I'm talking about. It's stupid. (Shah, pp. 588-589)

This interaction reminds me of a story from another Black patient who has spent time in Ghana, about what it's like to just sit outdoors at a coffee shop, there, without any gaze lingering on her, no one noticing her, just an ordinary woman having a coffee, nothing to see here. I wonder if Sandra's feeling of "peace" in contact with white skin is an experience of ordinary intact-ness in a racially fragmented world. [5. IMAGE]

Two years into our work, Sara became concerned about one of her children and made an appointment with a child therapist. Evan resisted her, insisting that they would have to, first, meet individually with and then mutually agree on the therapist. She felt caught between caring for her son and being blocked by her now ex-husband. I offered to do a few family sessions, in the meantime, until something could get worked out.

Before this could happen, though, just weeks after the divorce became final, Sara underwent emergency abdominal surgery. Her appendix was removed but it turned out appendicitis was not the cause—she had a widespread, un-identifiable abdominal infection, rather progressed and dangerous. She learned, then, when medical staff told her she would likely have been in a great deal of pain, that she has a high pain threshold. We began to process what this means about responding to body signals and illness and distress.

Black people in the United States are caught in a double bind when it comes to physical pain: "Race-based physiological myths have long influenced medical practice,"

according to an article about the differential effect of the opioid epidemic on Black people—fewer have died because they are prescribed less pain medication. “Even today, some doctors believe that African-Americans are more tolerant of pain. . . . relative to other racial groups, physicians are twice as likely to underestimate black patients’ pain.” (Frakt, 2019).

At the same time, I wonder if Black people *need* to learn to ignore a certain amount of pain to manage the daily suffering caused by microaggressions and larger acts of outright racism. How is one to distinguish between routine, expectable suffering—racial insults and bias, subtle blocking, not being seen—and simple physical pain?

Professor Imani Perry writes about a reparative experience with the medical system, after a racially informed misdiagnosis, followed by a correct one, from a doctor who

> told me that I had a “dangerously high threshold for pain,” a habit of pushing through the incessant aching and throbbing. If I didn’t learn to listen to my own suffering and respond with kindness to it, he told me I’d undo myself.
>
> People need each other, and I’m no different, but the core responsibility for my care can’t be outsourced; whether or not someone holds my hand, I matter. (Perry, 2023)

At the end of the first family session with Sara and her children, Sara and I agreed that Evan would need to be informed about the meeting, to protect the children from responsibility for conveying this information. She asked if I would do it, and I said yes.

When I called Evan, he erupted in anger over the phone, yelling and threatening to have my license taken away. I made my voice calm and told him it was a collateral meeting for Sara, to help her be the best single mother she could be, not therapy for the children. He insisted this wasn't okay with him, and I'd be sorry, then said he couldn't talk more, because he had one of the children with him. I gave him my phone number and offered to talk again. He never called back.

The shift in the transference, when I shared this story with Sara, was palpable. I told her I felt shaky and vulnerable after speaking with Evan, even though I had researched the legalities ahead of time, "because of the anger I could feel pouring through the phone line," and she expressed "relief that it isn't just me dealing with him." It felt as if we became a team that day, sisters wrestling together with the effects of malignant narcissism.

In retrospect, I colluded a bit, here, falling into a rescue position in relation to Sara, who was still caught in a victim position, cut off from her own aggression. On the positive side, this enactment gave me a chance to feel what she felt, the degree of fear in being verbally attacked for trying to take good care of herself (or myself) and her children.

She dreamed:

> *There is a book, a medical textbook. I had brought it for [my son]. It was a history book of some sort. We're all still living together. Evan comes home and sees the book. I'm down in the basement doing laundry or something. He asks, "Why do we have this book?" He doesn't think [our son] should be exposed to it. The book is called* The Last, Biggest Southern White Racist of All Time*. "Has he read this?" he asks. I answer, "No."*

"There this stuff in it," he says. He doesn't want him to see it. I can't understand why not—he's 12, not a little kid. This is a good time for him to have this knowledge, I think.

In her associations, Sara said, "There's a way that race has become a much bigger part of my life now," and she told me about becoming a trainer for a local anti-racism program. "I allowed some of his white privilege to rub off on me. I knew all I'd have to do is send this 'doctor' dad to the school, for instance. Now, I'm a Black woman on my own. The buffer is gone." It seems she has now consciously shed the "coat" of white masculinity that was so necessary to keep her safe and secure before. She also changed her hairstyle, about this time, shifting from away from the straightened hair of her youth to elaborately braided dreads, and she learned to swim. [6. IMAGE]

In 2012, I attended an "Undoing Racism" weekend. It was my daughter who asked me to go with her, but in retrospect I also felt a push to "match" my patient and "allow race to take up a bigger place in *my* life," as well. Sara was visibly pleased when I told her about it and said she had attended this same program a few years before. She encouraged me to participate in a round of the local anti-racism program she facilitated for, with another leader, and I did.

Eventually, there came a day when Sara announced that she had a dream with no Evan in it, and we celebrated this shift. She didn't bring many dreams after that. We spent years, instead, working through Evan's demanding, confounding, long-winded emails—there are pages and pages of them in her file—sorting out what could be ignored and what needed a terse, business-like response. [7. IMAGE] It was slow, exasperating, but oddly satisfying work. It built her capacity to speak, bit by bit, from her center, locate and then

ignore what was irrelevant, find what had value to her, and know where and how she needed to stand up to him, along with the few places where she could go along. It was as if these emails *were* a kind of dream, a repetitive nightmare that spoke in a harshly critical, demeaning, denigrating, harassing voice, the racist shadow, perhaps, of the positive, protective "coat" her husband had provided, with Sara now coming to terms with the cost she paid to have it and now to do without it.

Feminist thinker Jacqueline Rose, in her book *On Violence and On Violence Against Women*, writes,

> Harassment is always a sexual demand, but it also carries a more sinister and pathetic injunction: "You will think about me." Like sexual abuse, to which it is affiliated, harassment brings mental life to a standstill, destroying the mind's capacity for reverie. (Rose, p. 37)

We could say that Sara, through the slow, painstaking sorting of those dream-like, nightmare-ish emails, was recovering her capacity for reverie, having a mind of her own.

Sara arrived one day with a determination to make all of the session about her. We discussed her recently increased frustration with white men, in life in general, and on match.com, in particular. She wondered how she would help her biracial children become adults who are able to carry their Blackness, with a white father. And she shared a dream:

> *I am at a community gathering, and the moderator suggests that I introduce myself to two newcomers, both white men, by telling them about my ex-husband Evan. I'm*

> *confused by this reason, but I start by telling the story of following my husband here and then move on to what I'm doing now. The two men are talking to each other. They're not paying attention to me. I continue to speak, waiting for them to shift and pay attention, but instead the table starts enlarging, moving them even further away from me. Paradoxically, their voices get even louder. This continues for a while, as I wonder what I should do—confront them? or keep going? An African American man to my left speaks to me, saying, "Just keep going. Don't let them get away with this." As I start to wake up, I realize what I should do—walk over and confront them, asking what they are doing not listening to me.* [8. IMAGE]

In this dream, Sara is supported by a Black animus figure, who seems to offer help with navigating life and interactions as a Black woman.

Evan married again soon after the divorce and started a new family. Sara took her time, relying, as always, on a large friend group—stable friends from college, members of a multi-racial writing group she founded, and various colleagues. She allowed herself to experience crushes on decades-younger men, date a Black man for the first time, and try out a relationship with a divorcing Latinx man. Eventually, she started dating a gentle, relational, never-married, white man, who works as a nurse practitioner. They are married, now, and he has been warmly accepted by her children, parents, and friends. Not least of these improvements has been rediscovering herself sexually. In contrast to the one-sided (*his*-sided) sex she described with Evan, she was now experiencing mutuality. It was lovely to witness the shy, excited glow on her face—and body—as she described this new capacity. Anzieu writes, in *The Skin Ego*, about touch as a reflexive structure,

> being a piece of skin that touches at the same time as being a piece of skin that is touched. It is on the model of tactile reflexivity that the other sensory reflexivities (hearing oneself make sounds, smelling one's own odour, looking at oneself in the mirror), and subsequently the reflexivity of thinking, are constructed. (Anzieu, pp. 61-62)

Sara's discovery/recovery of mutual sexuality parallels, perhaps, Dhwani Shah's in-session dialogue with mixed-race Sandra, about locating a lost part of belongingness, safety, and acceptance, without sacrificing one's racial identity, in mutual relatedness with a white-skinned Other. [9. IMAGE]

After ten years, as Sara found herself with less and less to talk about, we started meeting less often and gradually came to an ending. I saw her once after that, from a distance, walking and talking animatedly with another former patient, a white, female therapist, and thought, with a prick of jealousy, I can see how they could become friends.

In the five-year break between our two rounds of analysis, I read a science fiction novel by Octavia Butler. Several Black patients had mentioned this author, so I decided to read one of her books, and I started with *Kindred*. In this time-travel story, a young Black woman, Dana, is pulled repeatedly out of the present and transported back into life as a slave on a Southern plantation. Dana remains aware of her 1976 self even while caught in the 1800s but nevertheless suffers the actual, terrible, daily reality of slavery, both physically and psychologically. [10. IMAGE]

I have to say, at first, the time travel conceit didn't quite hold me. It seemed a bit trite. But then I remembered those demeaning emails and began to wonder if Sara had experienced a kind of psychic time travel, then—back into the pain of her ancestors, into the dreamscape of all Black/African Americans who are descendants of enslaved people. In her case, given voice by a personal, white ex-husband, standing in at the same time for the impersonal, collective horror of our human capacity to denigrate and enslave other human beings. Sam Kimble's concept of the phantom narrative provides another description of this dynamic: "It regularly manifests as social suffering, repetitionally traumatic intergenerational processes, and ongoing political attitudes that severely restrict our capacities to be human to each other, even in the relative privacy of our own families" (Kimbles, pp. 32-33). Evan was enacting narcissistic tendencies, to be sure, but he also got caught up, it seems to me, as did Sara, in something much larger, of concretizing the slave-owner–slave relationship—as if he was saying, "You are my property and I decide what you can and can't do, even whether you will live or die," and she had no choice but to accept this arrangement. [11. IMAGE]

Poet Stephanie Burt writes, in a 2021 review of *Kindred*,

> Americans, Butler's plot implies, can review our abused and abusive past, but we cannot undo it. . . . "I began writing about power," Butler once said, "because I had so little.". . . Consent, political, legal, or sexual, is at best contingent and suspect, at worst nonsensical. [The United States] is a country founded on anti-Blackness, on white supremacy . . . the use of knowledge and law and information not to create free or equal individuals but as a channel for force. (Burt, 2021)

Sara contacted me again in 2022, with a narrower, more specific issue to work on. She is in her 50s now, and her children have grown into young adults. In past jobs, Sara had felt disrespected and passed over, but she works now in a setting where her Blackness is considered an asset. She and her partner are buying a house together. And she has continued to develop an additional creative outlet: Sara started a family swimming program, based in a community center in the Black part of town. [12. IMAGE] She wrote a grant to fund the program, and her children and their friends have worked as swim instructors. At the end of the swimming season, she organizes a picnic at a local park—Sara loves to bring her various, multi-racial communities together. This annual event was put on hold through three years of COVID. By 2022, the gathering resumed, celebrating the most people ever involved in the program. In the middle of this long-awaited picnic, she told me, her sister Marisa "attacked" her middle child, punched him in the face, and pulled him to the floor, out of the blue, right in front of Sara's family and friends.

There was a flurry of quick apologies, followed by an estrangement on the part of Sara's child, from Marisa. The apologies, to Sara, didn't seem heartfelt, and indeed Marisa subtly shifted the blame to Sara for not warning her that the child never trusted Marisa.

At the end of our first session, I commented on the possibility that Marisa might have been taken over by jealousy, seeing Sara—divorced, recovered from the rupture of divorce, warmly connected with a new partner, satisfied in her work life, engaged in creative social activities—all things, except "divorced," that Marisa doesn't (yet) have for herself. I said, "I wonder if Marisa was really attacking *you*, or what you represent." We explored the possibility that Sara has betrayed their childhood contract, by growing

beyond Marisa rather than holding herself back, no longer willing to sacrifice her development to shield Marisa from her own limitations.

Sara asked Marisa to participate in some family therapy sessions, with another therapist, and in the last of these Sara stated her new view, "I understand that I was enlisted to be your caretaker when we were children, to fix things for you, but now I am going to stop doing that job." The family therapist, Sara told me, did a good job translating this statement several different ways for Marisa, who seemed to take it in at the time. But it isn't sticking. [13. IMAGE]

In my imagination, what has surfaced has to do with the undergirding of Sara's original attraction to a narcissistic white man. Within the psychic system of her birth family, Sara and Marisa's parents modeled assimilation to white culture, so they were taught to trade a portion of their Black racial identity for the possibility of success in the outer world. This left them vulnerable to feeling at home with non-relational, even racist-behaving partners. Sara's individuality had to be sacrificed further to ballast her sister's fragile ego—they had to share the same coat, a beautiful one but not an individual one. Sara, as the more naturally social sister, had included Marisa in many friend-group events. But at this picnic, Sara was located right in the center of the group, standing out, acknowledged, and "seen" by her created community as an individual, accomplished, beloved Black woman.

Sam Kimbles writes about how cultural complexes operate:

> When these complexes are functioning positively, they structure the individual's sense of belonging. Identity is then achieved through identification with one's

> cultural, racial, ethnic, or social group. On the basis of this very belongingness, however, the negative function of the cultural complex is released, in its generation of stereotypes, prejudices, and attitudes that see otherness as essentially threatening. (Kimbles, p. 63)

Evan, to Sara's surprise, stepped into a supportive role for their child during this time, which provided some welcome relief and gave Sara space to work on the relationship with Marisa. She was furious with her sister but also empathetic. Kimbles writes, "Cultural losses and the associated symptoms of rage, shame, and anger are demands for recognition, restitution, or reparation, and are an important part of the group's and the individual's healing process," (Kimbles, p. 86). Sara has taken on the task of actively suffering her parents' model of assimilation, both the cost of her past stance and the cost of her new position. This is a way forward into earned-secure attachment that includes her Black identity.

I'm going to end with this quote from *The Skin Ego*:

> The repetition compulsion often leads fragile subjects to attach themselves to partners who call forth in them the deficiencies, traumas and paradoxes they experienced in their earliest environment and who thus prolong the originally pathogenic situations. It is the psychoanalyst's task, not to make good the narcissistic rifts, nor to provide a real love object but to develop in the patient an adequate consciousness of self and of others so that [s]he can, outside the analytic context, seek out, find and retain relationships with persons likely to satisfy [her]

bodily needs and psychical desires. Mental health, as Bowlby has said, is choosing to live with people who do not make us ill. (Anzieu, p. 121). [14. IMAGE]

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Art by
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