



# lives **Learning Whiteness**

**By Dalton Conley**

In the largely minority housing project where I grew up in the 1970's, race was not something mutable, like a freckle or a hairstyle; it defined who looked like whom, who was allowed to be in the group — and who wasn't. But for my sister and me, as whites, race was turned inside out. We had no idea that we belonged to the majority group, the privileged one. We merely thought we didn't belong.

That began to change when I started at the local public school, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The first day of classes, the principal called my mother and me into his office. The school was P.S. 4, a mini-school, named for its diminutive size. But the moniker reflected nothing about the size of the classes. There were three, each with about 40 students.

"We do not have a class for your son," the principal told my mother in a heavy Puerto Rican accent, looking down and smiling at me; I remember staring, transfixed, at his snakeskin boots, feeling as if they might slither around the floor of his office if I took my eyes off them. "You see," he continued, "there are the black and *Puerto Rican* classes." The words "Puerto Rican" stood out from the rest; they seemed to spring naturally from his mouth, whereas the English words dropped out like stillborns. "And then there is the Chinese class. . . ." He trailed off, as if he regretted the Chinese class. "There have been many Chinese that come here now." They were coming from an ever-expanding Chinatown, which had crept into the other side of the school district.

"So, which class do you prefer?" he asked. "You see, there is no white class." It now dawned on my mother that school desegregation did not necessarily mean classroom desegregation. "I suppose we'll take the black class," she said. In this instance, the choices our race gave us were made quite explicit — by a government institution, no less.

I found myself in a crowded classroom with paint peeling from the walls and plaster falling from the ceiling. The teacher was a black woman with a slender frame but a booming voice. She normally taught fourth or fifth grade and wasn't too happy about being stuck with us first graders. She paced across the front of the room, intermittently drawing on the blackboard to illustrate what she was saying. She also compulsively brushed chalk residue off her hands and dress. As each day wore on the layer of chalk dust got progressively thicker, giving her skin a ghostlike quality, as if she were fading away — along with our attention.

As if to compensate for her weakening skin tone and our waning concentration, she grew stricter by the hour. In the mornings we could get away with whispering or fidgeting in our seats. But by 1 p.m., any peep or audible rustle meant a whack across the knuckles with a yardstick. For everybody but me.

"Yo, your momma been on welfare so long," my classmate Earl whispered to me, "her face is on food stamps." He gave a low five to the boy seated in front of him.

"Up here right now, Earl," our teacher said. She stood, arms akimbo.

Earl marched up slowly, staring at his sneakers, face down and Afro up, as if it offered protection. It didn't. She took his hands and whacked them three times with the thin edge of the ruler. I felt myself leap off the seat with each whack. I started to blink, and my cheeks began to twitch. Earl did not flinch or yelp in the least.

the table, you know? I told my mom one time, when a Mexican pulls out in front of you or something you scream that old stuff at them, and you really expect me to be happy with what I am? You hear bad stuff about Mexicans so you automatically think Mexicans are bad. You kind of develop your own prejudice against your race. I'm really working hard — just to get out of here, do the best I can. I just can't wait to get out of here.

He turned around and walked back to his desk with a stoicism that exceeded his age. When he passed by my seat, I stared down as he had in the presence of the teacher, unable to look him in the eyes. I remember catching a glimpse of his bloodied knuckles, where his brown skin parted to reveal the scarlet flesh underneath. I fantasized about being beaten myself, digging the graphite tip of my No. 2 pencil into my skin. Then I released the pressure, trying to share the sense of relief I imagined Earl felt after his punishment was over. At lunch Earl asked if he could sit next to me. I nodded. Still looking down, I tensed up and twitched, waiting for his blow. It never came. Instead, he offered me his Tater Tots. As if he could read my mind, he said, "Aw, she's all right; don't worry about her."

Over the weeks, every kid received this form of corporal punishment, boys and girls alike. I was the only one who escaped — and not, I knew even at the time, because I was particularly well behaved. Everyone involved took it for granted that a black teacher would never cross the racial line to strike a white student. The other kids didn't resent me for this. I even tried to get into fights in school, fights I knew I would lose; I wanted to feel the relief of being struck. But Earl, one of the largest kids there, took it upon himself to protect me. By the end of my first term, my mother noticed that I was twitching and blinking compulsively.

Wanting to get to the bottom of my tics, my mother made an appointment with the principal. He wore the same gray snakeskin boots and sat on the edge of his desk, one foot swinging back and forth slowly, as if he were trying to hypnotize my mother.

"Does the teacher hit Dalton?" my mother asked.

"Oh, no," he answered. "In fact," he added, "Dalton is the only student that is not hit."

"That must be it," she said. "That's why he's twitching."

"So you want him to receive physical discipline as well, then?" the principal asked, as if this were the logical conclusion to their conversation, as if Board of Ed. rules didn't explicitly ban corporal punishment. His boots had stopped moving and were now clamped against the side of his desk for balance as he leaned toward her.

"No, no," she said, pushing her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. She asked whether something could be done to prevent the other kids from being struck.

"No, Mrs. Conley," he explained in a tone that was simultaneously sympathetic and exasperated. "The other parents had requested that their children be physically disciplined," he said. "We knew that white parents spoil their kids, so she doesn't strike Dalton."

The Puerto Rican class had a Puerto Rican teacher who also hit the students, so the solution was to switch me to the Chinese class. The teacher there did not use corporal punishment. The local Asian population was still comparatively small, so the class had the added benefit of having fewer students. I transferred in during the first week of the spring semester. Half the lessons were taught in English, the other half in Chinese. I liked the friendly dynamics of the class and felt challenged by my language handicap, which compensated for the fact that by some error, I had been switched from my first-grade class into kindergarten.

"When I call out your name, stand up," the teacher said during roll call on my first day. "If you have an American name, tomorrow I will tell you your name in Chinese. If you have a Chinese name, tomorrow I will tell you your name in English." I was excited by the prospect of being renamed and merging into the group, of which I was the only ethnically non-Chinese member. Of course I didn't know then that none of the name pairs were actual translations, that there was no straightforward way to convert names from a tonal, character-based language to English.

The next morning the instructor came in and started the roll call again. This time she read off two names for everyone: "John," she said. He stood. "Jiang." Then, "Jaili: Julie." She was standing too, now. Then she got to me. "Dalton," she said, sighing, almost apologetic. "Dalton." ■



#### ▲ Friends for Life

Mary Riley and Marjorie Braggs, Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, Saint Gabriel, La.

BRAGGS (right): Before I got locked up I had to carry things in my car to protect me at night, because some of the Ku Klux Klan in the area, they were pretty bad. About 1979, a young guy was walking the street late one night and they found him dead. Somebody had hanged him in a tree, on Black Lake Road. It was frightening, and that's how I ended up with a pistol. I killed my common-law husband's girlfriend with that pistol, and I was given a life sentence. Even though I take the blame for what I did, I had just bought that gun for protection. Mary's a sweet person. We have some whites around here, the older ones, that don't want to be bothered with you. It's a racial thing but it's under cover, because they don't want to get reported to security. For some people racism is a problem, but not me. I've always gotten along well with white people. I hate to say those words, "white people" — I just think of people as people.

RILEY (left): I have two roommates, and one's black and one's white. We are very content with each other's company. In this kind of a situation — both me and

Top: Maude Schuyler Clay. Right: Nina Berman.