

arm, then fell into gorgeous ciphers of beatbox and rhyme. Some of the girls sat by the flagpole with bell hooks and Sonia Sanchez in their straw totes. Some of the boys, with their new Yoruba names, beseeched these girls by citing Frantz Fanon. Some of them studied Russian. Some of them worked in bone labs. They were Panamanian. They were Bajan. And some of them were from places I had never heard of. But all of them were hot and incredible, exotic even, though we hailed from the same tribe.

The black world was expanding before me, and I could see now that that world was more than a photonegative of that of the people who believe they are white. “White America” is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, “white people” would cease to exist for want of reasons. There will surely always be people with straight hair and blue eyes, as there have been for all history. But some of these straight-haired people with blue eyes have been “black,” and this points to the great difference between their world and ours. We did not choose our fences. They were imposed on us by Virginia planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible. They are the ones who came up with a one-drop rule that separated the “white” from the “black,” even if it meant that their own blue-eyed sons would live under the lash.

The result is a people, black people, who embody all physical varieties and whose life stories mirror this physical range. Through *The Mecca* I saw that we were, in our own segregated body politic, cosmopolitans. The black diaspora was not just our own world but, in so many ways, the Western world itself.

Now, the heirs of those Virginia planters could never directly acknowledge this legacy or reckon with its power. And so that beauty that Malcolm pledged us to protect, black beauty, was never celebrated in movies, in television, or in the textbooks I’d seen as a child. Everyone of any import, from Jesus to George Washington, was white. This was why your grandparents banned Tarzan and the Lone Ranger and toys with white faces from the house. They were rebelling against the history books that spoke of black people only as sentimental “firsts”—first black five-star general, first black congressman, first black mayor—always presented in the bemused manner of a category of Trivial Pursuit. Serious history was the West, and the West was white. This was all distilled for me in a quote I once read from the novelist Saul Bellow. I can’t remember where I read it, or when—only that I was already at Howard. “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?” Bellow quipped. Tolstoy was “white,” and so Tolstoy “mattered,” like everything else that was white “mattered.” And this view of things was connected to the fear that passed through the generations, to the sense of dispossession. We were black, beyond the visible spectrum, beyond civilization. Our history was in-