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Document A

[...] Steena Palsson, the eighteen-year-old exile from Minnesota, even wrote a poem about Coleman that mentioned his legs. It was handwritten on a sheet of lined notebook paper, signed "S," then folded in quarters and stuck into his mail slot in the tiled hallway above his basement room. It had been two weeks since they'd first flirted at the subway station, and this was the Monday after the Sunday of their first twentyfour-hour marathon. Coleman had rushed off to his morning class while Steena was still making up in the bathroom; a few minutes later, she herself set out for work, but not before leaving him the poem that, in spite of all the stamina they'd so conscientiously demonstrated over the previous day, she'd been too shy to hand him directly. Since Coleman's schedule took him from his classes to the library to his late evening workout in the ring of a rundown Chinatown gym, he didn't find the poem jutting from the mail slot until he got back to Sullivan Street at eleven-thirty that night.

He has a body.
 He has a beautiful body—
 the muscles on the backs of his legs and the back of his neck.
 Also he is bright and brash.
 He's four years older,
 but sometimes I feel he is younger.
 He is sweet, still, and romantic, though he says he is not romantic.
 I am almost dangerous for this man.
 How much can I tell of what I see in him? I wonder what he does after
 he swallows me whole.

Rapidly reading Steena's handwriting by the dim hall light, he at first mistook "neck" for "negro"—*and the back of his negro...* His negro *what?* Till then he'd been surprised by how easy it was. What was supposed to be hard and somehow shaming or destructive was not only easy but without consequences, no price paid at all. But now the sweat was pouring off him. He kept reading, faster even than before, but the words formed themselves into no combination that made sense. His negro WHAT? They had been naked together a whole day and night, for most of that time never more than inches apart. Not since he was an infant had anyone other than himself had so much time to study how he was made. Since there was nothing about her long pale body that he had not observed and nothing that she had concealed and nothing now that he could not picture with a painter-like awareness, a lover's excited, meticulous connoisseurship, and since he had spent all day stimulated no less by her presence in his nostrils than by her legs spread-eagled in his mind's eye, it had to follow that there was nothing about *his* body that *she* had not microscopically absorbed, nothing about that extensive surface imprinted with his self-cherishing evolutionary uniqueness, nothing about his singular configuration as a man, his skin, his pores, his whiskers, his teeth, his hands, his nose, his ears, his lips, his tongue, his feet, his balls, his veins, his prick, his armpits, his ass, his tangle of pubic hair, the hair on his head, the fuzz on his frame, nothing about the way he laughed, slept, breathed, moved,

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smelled, nothing about the way he shuddered convulsively when he came that she had not registered. And remembered.

45 And pondered. Was it the act itself that did it, the absolute intimacy of it, when you are not just inside the body of the other person but she is tightly enveloping you? Or was it the physical nakedness? You take off your clothes and you're in bed with somebody, and that is indeed where whatever you've concealed, your particularity, whatever it may be, however encrypted, is going to be found out, and that's what the shyness is all about and what *everybody* fears. In that anarchic crazy place, how much of me is being seen, how much of me

50 is being discovered? Now *I know who you are. I see dear through to the back of your negro.* But how, by seeing *what?* What could it have been? Was it seeable to her, whatever it was, because she was a blond Icelandic Dane from a long line of blond Icelanders and Danes, Scandinavian raised, at home, in school, at church, in the company all her life of nothing but . . . and then Coleman recognized the word in the poem as a four- and not a five-letter word.

55 What she'd written wasn't "negro." It was "neck." Oh, my *neck!* It's only my neck!.. *.the muscles on the backs of his legs and the back of his neck.*

But what then did this mean: "How much can I tell / of what I see in him?" What was so ambiguous about what she saw in him? If she'd written "tell from" instead of "tell of," would that have made her meaning clearer? Or would that have made it less clear? The more he

60 reread that simple stanza, the more opaque the meaning became—and the more opaque the meaning, the more certain he was that she distinctly sensed the problem that Coleman brought to her life. Unless she meant by "what I see in him" no more than what is colloquially meant by skeptical people when they ask someone in love, "What can you possibly see in him?" And what about "tell"? How much can she tell to *whom?* By tell does she mean make—"how

65 much can I make," et cetera—or does she mean reveal, expose? And what about "I am almost dangerous for this man." Is "dangerous for" different from "dangerous to"? Either way, what's the danger?

Each time he tried to penetrate her meaning, it slipped away. After two frantic minutes on his feet in the hallway, all he could be sure of was his fear. And this astonished him—and, as always

70 with Coleman, his susceptibility, by catching him unprepared, shamed him as well, triggering an SOS, a ringing signal to self-vigilance to take up the slack. Bright and game and beautiful as Steena was, she was only eighteen years old and fresh to New York from Fergus Falls, Minnesota, and yet he was now more intimidated by her—and her almost preposterous, unequivocal goldenness—than by anybody he had ever faced in the ring. Even on that night in the Norfolk

75 whorehouse, when the woman who was watching from the bed as he began to peel off his uniform—a big-titted, fleshy, mistrustful whore not entirely ugly but certainly no looker (and maybe herself two thirtyfifths something other than white)—smiled sourly and said, "You're a black nigger, ain't you, boy?" and the two goons were summoned to throw him out, only then had he been as undone as he was by Steena's poem.

Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2000, pp. 111-114

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Document B

[...] Until Obama, black politicians had always adhered to these unwritten rules. In this way, they defended themselves against those two bogeymen of black political life: the Uncle Tom and the House Nigger. The black politician who played up to, or even simply echoed, white fears, desires and hopes for the black community was in danger of earning these epithets—
5 even Martin Luther King was not free from such suspicions. Then came Obama, and the new world he had supposedly ushered in, the postracial world, in which what mattered most was not blind racial allegiance but factual truth. It was felt that Jesse Jackson was sadly out of step with this new postracial world: even his own son felt moved to publicly repudiate his “ugly rhetoric.” But Jackson’s anger was not incomprehensible or his distrust unreasonable. Jackson
10 lived through a bitter struggle, and bitter struggles deform their participants in subtle, complicated ways. The idea that one should speak one’s cultural allegiance first and the truth second (and that this is a sign of authenticity) is precisely such a deformation.

Right up to the wire, Obama made many black men and women of Jackson’s generation suspicious. How can the man who passes between culturally black and white voices with such
15 flexibility, with such ease, be an honest man? How will the man from Dream City keep it real? Why won’t he speak with a clear and unified voice? These were genuine questions for people born in real cities at a time when those cities were implacably divided, when the black movement had to yell with a clear and unified voice, or risk not being heard at all. And then he won. Watching Jesse Jackson in tears in Grant Park, pressed up against the varicolored
20 American public, it seemed like he, at least, had received the answer he needed: only a many-voiced man could have spoken to that many people.

A clear and unified voice. In that context, this business of being biracial, of being half black and half white, is awkward. In his memoir, Obama takes care to ridicule a certain black girl called Joyce—a composite figure from his college days who happens also to be part Italian
25 and part French and part Native American and is inordinately fond of mentioning these facts, and who likes to say:

I’m not black . . . I’m multiracial. . . . Why should I have to choose between them? . . . It’s not white people who are making me choose. . . . No—it’s black people who always have to make everything racial. They’re the ones making me choose. They’re the ones who are telling me I
30 can’t be who I am. . . .

He has her voice down pat and so condemns her out of her own mouth. For she’s the third bogeyman of black life, the tragic mulatto, who secretly wishes she “passed,” always keen to let you know about her white heritage. It’s the fear of being mistaken for Joyce that has always ensured that I ignore the box marked “biracial” and tick the box marked “black” on
35 any questionnaire I fill out, and call myself unequivocally a black writer and roll my eyes at anyone who insists that Obama is not the first black president but the first biracial one. But I also know in my heart that it’s an equivocation; I know that Obama has a double

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consciousness, is black and, at the same time, white, as I am, unless we are suggesting that one side of a person's genetics and cultural heritage cancels out or trumps the other.

40 But to mention the double is to suggest shame at the singular. Joyce insists on her varied heritage because she fears and is ashamed of the singular black. I suppose it's possible that subconsciously I am also a tragic mulatto, torn between pride and shame. In my conscious life, though, I cannot honestly say I feel proud to be white and ashamed to be black or proud to be black and ashamed to be white. I find it impossible to experience either pride or shame
45 over accidents of genetics in which I had no active part. I understand how those words got into the racial discourse, but I can't sign up to them. I'm not proud to be female either. I am not even proud to be human—I only love to be so. As I love to be female and I love to be black, and I love that I had a white father.

It's telling that Joyce is one of the few voices in *Dreams from My Father* that is truly left out in the cold, outside of the expansive sympathy of Obama's narrative. She is an entirely didactic being, a demon Obama has to raise up, if only for a page, so everyone can watch him slay her. I know the feeling. When I was in college I felt I'd rather run away with the Black Panthers than be associated with the Joyces I occasionally met. It's the Joyces of this world who "talk down to black people." And so to avoid being Joyce, or being seen to be Joyce, you
50 unify, you speak with one voice. And the concept of a unified black voice is a potent one. It has filtered down, these past forty years, into the black community at all levels, settling itself in that impossible injunction "keep it real," the original intention of which was unification. We were going to unify the concept of Blackness in order to strengthen it. Instead we confined and restricted it. To me, the instruction "keep it real" is a sort of prison cell, two feet
55 by five. The fact is, it's too narrow. I just can't live comfortably in there. "Keep it real" replaced the blessed and solid genetic fact of Blackness with a flimsy imperative. It made Blackness a quality each individual black person was constantly in danger of losing. And almost anything could trigger the loss of one's Blackness: attending certain universities, an impressive variety of jobs, a fondness for opera, a white girlfriend, an interest in golf. And of
60 course, any change in the voice. There was a popular school of thought that maintained the voice was at the very heart of the thing; fail to keep it real there and you'd never see your Blackness again. How absurd that all seems now. And not because we live in a postracial world—we don't—but because the reality of race has diversified. Black reality has diversified.

Zadie Smith, *Thinking by Myself*, London, Penguin, 2009, pp. 62-64.

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Document C

Gordon Parks, *American Gothic*. (Portrait of government cleaning woman Ella Watson). August 1942.

