

MARTINE SYMS

excerpt from an essay by Patricia Williams

wide sales, then some savvy disc jockeys spinning the same yarn could capture quite a lot of market share.

Let me end with a story about how I think the imaginary line drawing of national identity operates on the very local level, indeed, at home.

Some months ago I was riding on a train. In between napping and reading the newspaper, I languidly fell into overhearing the conversation of a very well-dressed, well-educated family seated across the aisle from me. Here was a family with traditional values and Ralph Lauren looks—mother, father, bright little girl, and a big, bearded friend of the family who looked like that seafaring guy on the clam chowder label. It was a fascinatingly upper-class conversation, about investments, photography, and Japanese wood-joinery. It was also a soothingly pleasant conversation, full of affection, humor, and great politeness. I enjoyed listening to them, and allowed myself the pleasure of my secret participation in their companionability. They they started telling redneck jokes.

There was no shift in their voices to warn me of it; they spoke in the same soft, smiling voices as before, with those deliciously crisp *t*'s and delicately rounded *r*'s.

The little girl, who was probably around seven or eight years old, asked, "What's a redneck?" (No longer napping, I leaned closer, titillated and intrigued by what this moment of sharp but innocent intervention promised in terms of drawing these otherwise thoughtful adults up short in a lifeboat of glorious contrition and renewed sense of social awareness.)

"Drinks beer, drives a pickup, low-class, talks bad," came the unself-conscious reply. Then the three adults told more jokes to illustrate. Being very bright, the little girl dumped innocence by the wayside, and responded promptly by telling a bunch of blond jokes and then one involving "black"—but I couldn't hear if she were talking about hair or skin.

The father told another joke—what's got ten teeth and something I couldn't hear. The answer was the front row of a Willie Nelson concert.

They were so pleasant and happy. Their conversation was random, wandering. They showed pictures of each other's kids, they played word games, they shared hot dogs. And yet they were transporting a virus.

This process of marking. No wonder it is so hard to get out of our race and class binds. It occurred to me, as I watched this family in all its re-

markable typicality, that that little girl will have to leave the warmth of the embracing, completely relaxed circle of those happy people before she can ever appreciate the humanity of someone who drives a pickup, who can't afford a dentist. "Rednecks" were lovingly situated, by that long afternoon of gentle joking, in the terrible vise of the comic, defined by the butt of a joke.

The prevalence of how *givingly* social divisions are transmitted was brought home to me in an essay written by one of my former students: She described her father as a loving family man, who worked six and a half days a week to provide for his wife and children. He always took Sunday afternoons off; that was sacred time, reserved for a "family drive." Yet the family's favorite pastime, as they meandered in Norman Rockwell contentment, was, according to this student, "trying to pick the homosexuals out of the crowd." ("Bill Clinton would have *homosexuals* in his administration!" railed Pat Robertson in his speech to the 1992 Republican National Convention, during which convention homophobic violence reportedly rose 8 percent in the city of Houston.)

Hate learned in a context of love is a complicated phenomenon. And love learned in a context of hate endangers all our family.

NOTES

1. *Johnson and Graham's Lessee v. William M'Intosh*, 21 U.S. 543 (1823).
2. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 233.
3. Ariella Gross, letter of March 14, 1994, on file with author.
4. Susan Orlean, "Figures in a Mall," *New Yorker*, February 21, 1994, 48ff.
5. John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 123.