

NAFISSA THOMPSON-SPIRES: HEADS OF THE
COLORED PEOPLE (2018)

FATIMA, THE BILOQUIST: A TRANSFORMATION STORY

There are happier stories one could tell about Fatima. In the nineties you could be whatever you wanted—someone said that on the news—and by 1998 Fatima felt ready to become black, full black, baa baa black sheep black, black like the elbows and knees on praying folk black, if only someone would teach her.

Up to that point she had existed like a sort of colorless gas, or a bit of moisture, leaving the residue of something familiar, sweat stains on a T-shirt, hot breath on the back of a neck, condensation rings on wood, but never a fullness of whatever matter had formed them.

The week she met Violet, Fatima had recited “An Address to the Ladies, by their Best Friend Sincerity” before her eleventh-grade AP English class. She blended her makeup to perfection that morning, but the other students barely looked at her, instead busying themselves by clicking and replacing the lead in mechanical pencils or folding and flicking paper footballs over finger goalposts—even during the part she recited with the most emphasis: “Ah! sad, perverse, degenerate race / The monstrous head deforms the face.” They clapped dull palms for a few seconds as Fatima sulked back to her desk. But they sat up, alert, when Wally “The

"To everyone who asks, right?" Violet finished.

The sales associate frowned, looked back at her colleague, looked at Violet and Fatima, and frowned again. "I'll get those ready for you," she said.

Fatima considered putting her headphones back on and trying to float out of the department store, away from this loud girl with the jarring features and booming voice.

"Here," Violet said, handing her the dark gloss in its tiny gloss pot.

"You keep it," Fatima said and started trying to vaporize toward the shoe department.

"It's for you," the girl said, following her.

And like that, they were friends, or something to that effect.

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It was Violet's appraisal—"You're, like, totally a white girl, aren't you?"—that set Fatima into motion. They were eating dots of ice cream that same day at the food court after Violet showed Fatima how to get samples from Estée Lauder, Elizabeth Arden, and MAC. Fatima felt a little like a gangster, holding up the reluctant salesgirls for their stash, but she had a nearly full bag of swag by then, perfume, lip gloss, and oil-blotting papers, without spending any of her allowance. It was already too good to be true, so she didn't feel sad when Violet said "white girl," but almost relieved by the inevitable.

Fatima had been accused of whiteness and being a traitor to the race before, whenever she spoke up in Sunday school at her AME church or visited her family in Southeast San Diego (Southeast a universal geographical marker for the ghetto) or when a cute guy who was just about to ask her out backed away, saying,

"You go to private school, don't you?" It was why she didn't have any black friends—and why, she worried, she would never have a boyfriend, even rifferaff to upset her mother.

The allegations offended her but never moved her to any action other than private crying or retreating further into her melancholy belief that her school, Westwood Prep, and her parents' high-paying jobs, had made her somehow unfit for black people. Rather than respond, she usually turned up her Discman louder, sinking into the distantly black but presently white sounds of ska and punk, and sang under her breath, "I'm a freak / I'm a freak" (in the style of Silverchair, not Rick James). At the moment she especially enjoyed reading Charles Brockden Brown and daydreaming of a sickly boyfriend like Arthur Mervyn. If black people wouldn't accept her, she would stick to what she knew.

But Violet's judgment held more heft, in her critique a possibility for transformation. When a black girl with natural green eyes and blond hair and a big chest and bubble butt tells you that you, with your sable skin and dark hair, are not black enough, you listen.

"It's not that I'm trying to be white. It's just that's what I'm around."

"You don't have no church friends? You adopted? Your parents white, too?" Violet didn't seem to want a response. "Where do you stay?"

"With my parents." Fatima wondered if something was wrong with Violet for asking such a stupid question.

"I mean where do you live?" Violet asked.

"Upland."

"They got black people there. My cousin Frankie lives there," Violet said, chewing the dots of ice cream in a way that set Fati-

ma's teeth on edge. She wore a tight white top, cream Dickies, and white Adidas tennis shoes.

"Yes, but not on my street." Fatima wore a pink cardigan, black Dickies, and skater shoes, Kastels.

Violet paused her crunching and talking for a moment. "You have a boyfriend?"

Fatima shook her head. "Do you?"

"I'm in between options right now. Anyway, the last one is locked up in Tehachapi."

Fatima nodded. She had a cousin who had served time there. He called her *bourgie*, and she'd kicked him in the face once, delighting in his fat lip and his inability to hit girls.

"I'm kidding," Violet said. "We don't all get locked up."

Fatima stuttered.

"I can see I'ma have to teach you a lot of things. You ready?" Violet meant ready to leave the food court, but Fatima meant more when she said, "Yeah, I'm ready." And thus began her transformation.

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If only Baratunde Thurston had been writing when Fatima came of age, she could have learned how to be black from a book instead of from Violet's charm school. Even a quick glance at Ralph Ellison could have saved her a lot of trouble, but she wasn't ready for that, caught up, as she was, in the dramas of Arthur Mervyn and Carwin, the Biloquist, and all of them. With Violet's help, Fatima absorbed the sociocultural knowledge she'd missed—not through osmosis or through more relevant literature, but through committed, structured ethnographical study.

She immersed herself in slang as rigorously as she would later immerse herself in Spanish for her foreign-language exam in grad school; she pored over *Vibe* magazine and watched *Yo! MTV Raps* and *The Parkers*, trying to work her mouth around phrases with the same intonation that Countess Vaughn used, a sort of combination of a Jersey accent and a speech impediment. When she couldn't get into those texts, she encouraged herself with the old episodes of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* that played in constant early-morning and late-night rotation, feeling assured that if Ashley Banks could, after five seasons, become almost as cool as Will, then she could, too. Her new turns of phrase fit her about as awkwardly as the puffy powder-blue FUBU jacket she found in a thrift store in downtown Rialto.

Still, she was happy when Violet looked approvingly at it. Pale Violet became the arbiter of Fatima's blackness, the purveyor of all things authentic. Though she was five feet eight and chunky by most standards—nearly obese by Fatima's—you would think Violet, judging by the way she walked, was Pamela Anderson, like a hula doll on a dashboard swinging hips and breasts.

The distance between their respective houses was fifteen minutes, but only seven if they met halfway, Fatima borrowing her father's extra car (the 1993 Beamer, so as not to look ostentatious) and Violet getting a ride from one of her brothers or occasionally driving her mother's old Taurus. They never met at each other's houses, lest Fatima's upper-middle opulence embarrass Violet, and because there was no space for Violet to carve out for herself at her house.

Violet made Fatima a study guide of the top ten black expressions for rating attractive men, and they practiced the pronunciations together. The pinnacle of hotness, according to Violet, was either

“dangfoine,” “hella foine, or “bout it, bout it,” as in “Oooh, he bout it, bout it.” This phrase especially required the Countess Vaughn intonation and often included spontaneous bouts of raising the roof.

During their tutoring sessions, Fatima stifled her joke about the rain in Spain falling mostly on the plains and practiced on, assured that Violet’s instruction would confer upon her, like Carwin, “a wonderful gift” of biloquism.

Glossaries soon followed, in which Violet broke down slang that had previously mystified Fatima. She couldn’t wait to replace her traditional “fer shure” with “fisshow” in a real conversation, but she took issue with some of Violet’s recommendations, especially “nigga” and “gangsta,” which Violet explained as terms of endearment. “So basically,” Fatima summarized, ventriloquizing Ashley Banks again, “you want me to turn good things into bad things and vice versa.”

Violet said, “Mostly.”

Fatima tried pumping her shoulders in a brief Bankhead Bounce, but it was obvious she lacked the follow-through and wasn’t ready for dancing yet.

And it was almost like any romantic comedy in which the sassy black person moves in with the white people and teaches them how to live their lives in color and put some bass in their voices, only Steve Martin wasn’t in it, and no one was a maid or a butler or nanny, and the romance was between two girls, and it was platonic, and they were both black this time, but one didn’t look like it, and one didn’t sound like it, at least not consistently.

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“They racist up at that school? I can’t stand cocky white people,” Violet said one day while they sat at their usual table, near

the flower divider in the mall’s arboretum. Some white guys from Hillwood sat across the way, laughing loudly.

Fatima didn’t like to talk about her school, but everyone in the Inland Empire knew Westwood and Hillwood, rivals on and off the football field. “I don’t think so,” Fatima said.

“What do you mean you don’t think so? Either something’s racist or it’s not.”

No one at school poked out his tongue and called her *that*, like they did in the poem Wally read, but Fatima thought about Wally, his affectations, and Principal Lee.

“It’s not always comfortable,” she said. “It can be awkward, but I’m awkward.”

“You sure are.” Violet laughed, and Fatima laughed, too. She was learning to do more of that, and to wear a kind of self-assuredness with her side-swooped Aaliyah bangs.

In fact, most interactions were easier with Violet than they were with others. Violet understood things. Fatima never had to explain why she might wrap her hair in a silk scarf at bedtime or why she always carried a tube of hand cream to prevent not only chapped hands, but also allover ashiness. Those shared practices validated Fatima, and so did Violet’s understanding of Fatima’s fears about her body. “Sometimes I just feel horrible about all of it, the sweating, the bleeding. I don’t always feel like a regular girl, you know?” Fatima said one day, “But what is normal anyway?”

“Word, that’s deep,” Violet said, and explained that she, too, felt the weight of her body, because it did not look “like what people expect black to be.” In spite of her seeming confidence, Violet confided, she had a complex about her albinism. Fatima understood when Violet intimated that albinism marked her as both desirable for her lightness, her hair color, her eye color, and yet

despised for some perceived physical untruth. Fatima had seen the way people glanced two and three times at Violet, deciding where to place her and whether she warranted any of the benefits of whiteness. Violet could call other black people like Fatima white, but to be called white herself pushed Violet to violent tears. Just ask her ex-boyfriend and her ex-friend Kandice from middle school, who had called her Patti Mayonnaise in a fit of anger and gotten a beat-down that made her wet her pants like Fatima's preschool friend.

"Why Patti Mayonnaise?" Fatima said.

"You know, from *Doug*, she was the black girl on the DL who looked white, and mayonnaise is white. It's a stupid joke."

"Patti was black?" Fatima said.

"Girl, a whole lot of everybody got black in them," Violet started.

Fatima had heard some of Violet's theories before during a game they sometimes played on the phone. The list included Jennifer Beals, Mariah Carey, and "that freaky girl from *Wild Things*," Denise Richards, and now, apparently, Patti Mayonnaise. When Fatima suggested Justin Timberlake, Violet said, "Nah, he's like that Wally kid at your school."

The nuances of these and other things Emily, Fatima's best friend since second grade, just couldn't understand, no matter how earnestly she tried or how many questions she asked, like why they couldn't share shampoo when she slept over, or "What does 'For us, by us' even mean," and why Fatima's top lip was darker than her bottom one.

Fatima picked up some theories on her own, too, without Violet or the literature. The thing about the brown top lip and the pink lower one, Fatima had pieced together after what she learned from Violet and what she had learned at school, was that you could either read them as two souls trying to merge into a better self, or you

could conceal them under makeup and talk with whichever lip was convenient for the occasion. At school and with Emily, she talked with her pink lip, and with Violet, she talked with her brown one, and that created tension only if she thought too much about it.

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Fatima passed the time at school by imagining the time she would spend after school with Violet, who promised to teach her how to flirt better on their next excursion and to possibly, eventually, hook her up with one of her cousins, but not one of her brothers, because "Most of them aren't good for anything except upsetting your mother, if you want to do that." Fatima did not want to do that.

Now at school when Wally the Wigger looked like he was even thinking about saying something to her, Fatima made a face that warned, "Don't even look like you're thinking about saying something to me," and he obeyed. In her mind, she not only said this aloud, but said it in Violet's voice.

She didn't mind the laughter in her parents' eyes when she tried out a new phrase or hairstyle, because it was all working. There was something prettier about her now, too, and people seemed to see it before Fatima did, because a guy named Rolf at Westwood—a tall brunette in her history class, with whom she'd exchanged a few eye rolls over Wally—asked her for her phone number.

Without pausing to consider anything, she gave it to him.

IT MIGHT SEEM, up to this point, that Fatima simultaneously wore braces, glasses, and forehead acne, when you hardly needed to glance to see the gloss of her black hair or the sheen on her shins, with or without lotion. Fatima knew this truth instinctively,

but buried its warmth under the shame of early-childhood teasing and a preference for melancholy self-pity. It was more romantic to feel ugly than to pretend she couldn't hold her head just right, unleash her beautiful teeth, and make a skeptical man kneel at her skirt's hem. She just didn't have the practice, but she was hopeful that she might get it, with Rolf or one of Violet's cousins, hopeful that the transformation had taken hold.

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She had just returned from a movie with Violet—where not one but two guys had asked for her phone number, though three had asked for Violet's, pronouncing their approval of her "thickness" with grunts, smiles, and by looking directly at her butt—when her mother said, "You got a phone call, from a boy."

It couldn't be one of the boys from the theater already; that would make anyone look desperate.

"Who is Rolf?" her mother asked with a smile, "and why didn't you mention him before?"

Fatima nearly floated up to her bedroom. She thought about calling Violet but called Rolf back instead, waiting, of course, for an hour to pass, a tip she had learned from Violet in the event of a hypothetical situation such as this.

By now, and with some authenticity, Fatima could intone the accent marks in places they hadn't been before, recite all the names of all the members of Cash Money, Bad Boy, No Limit, Wu-Tang, Boyz II Men, ABC, BBD, ODB, LDB, TLC, B-I-G-P-O-P-P-A, Ronny, Bobby, Ricky, Mike, Ralph, Johnny, Tony, Toni, and Tone, if she wanted. But when she called Rolf, all they talked about were skateboards and the Smiths, in whose music Fatima had dabbled before Violet.

"The Smiths are way better than Morrissey," Rolf said. His voice was nasal but deep.

"You can barely tell the difference since Morrissey's voice is so overpowering," she said, from her pink lip.

"No, but the Smiths' stuff is way darker," Rolf said. "You should hear the first album. Then you'll get it. I've got it on vinyl."

"Okay," Fatima waited.

She noticed that he didn't invite her over to listen or offer to lend her the album, but he did call back two days later and ask if she wanted to hang out over the next weekend, "like at the mall or something, see a movie?"

Fatima counted to twelve, as per the rules (the universal ones, not just Violet's) and said, "Yeah, that'd be cool." She almost left the "l" off the end of the word, but caught herself. "Which mall?"

"Where else?" Rolf said. "The Montclair Plaza."

This would be her first date, and though that was the kind of thing to share with a best friend, especially one with more experience, Fatima felt—in some deep way that hurt her stomach—that Violet didn't need to know about Rolf, not yet at least. She would keep her lips glossed and parted, her two worlds separate.

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The week leading up to the first date, Fatima tried to play extra-cool, asking Violet more questions than usual when they spoke on the phone. Neither of the guys from the movie theater had called Fatima, but one of Violet's three had asked Violet out, and she was "letting him stew for a while before I let him know. Anyway, I thought you wanted to check out *Rush Hour* this weekend."

"This weekend?" Fatima said.

"This weekend."

"I told my parents I would babysit this weekend, I forgot," Fatima lied, feeling a bit like a grease stain on a silk shirt.

"Since when?" Violet pushed.

"We can go next weekend, or during the week," Fatima said, and changed the subject.

Before they got off the phone, Violet said, "I guess I'll call Mike back, then, and tell him I'm free after all."

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Fatima would say that she wasn't embarrassed by Violet or Rolf, but she wasn't ready for them to meet. She felt relief, then, when their first and second dates went without a hitch—and ended with a gentle but sort of indifferent kiss—and even more relieved that Rolf was okay with seeing each other during the week so that Fatima wouldn't have to explain to Violet why she suddenly had other plans on Friday and Saturday evenings.

"Tell me more about your other friends," Rolf had said on the phone one night, when Fatima was starting to think she might love him. He knew Emily from school. He knew she went to an AME church.

He'd met her parents and siblings by then, though she still hadn't met his. When he first came over to the house, he shook hands with Fatima's father—noting Mr. Willis's height with a "Whoa, you're tall"—and hugged her mother and patted her six-year-old brother's head awkwardly, in a way that reminded Fatima of someone stroking a rabbit's foot for luck.

At dinner Rolf chatted to excess, complimenting the drapes, the silverware, and Fatima's frowny-faced eight-year-old sister and indifferent younger brother. She wasn't sure how nervous ei-

ther of them should be. She found his foot with hers under the table and smiled silently, "Calm down. Be quiet." She tried to signal, but Rolf prattled on, "I think it's great that you as a black family are so successful."

No one addressed Rolf, but her parents stood to clear the dishes. She heard their irritation in faint whispers from the kitchen, could see it in their eyes even with their backs turned. Fatima declined dessert. "We have to get to the movies. We'll get some candy there," she said.

Still, she and Rolf were together a month later, and her parents hadn't expressed any concrete disapproval. A month later, she was only just telling Rolf about Violet.

"I guess my other best friend," Fatima responded, "besides Emily, is Violet."

"Violet," Rolf repeated. "Cool name. She's not at Westwood, is she?"

"No, public school."

"Ah," Rolf said, in a tone that Fatima interpreted as neutral.

"She's my girl." She stopped herself from saying "Ace boon coon." "We hang out a lot on the weekends, actually."

"How come you never mentioned her before?"

"I don't know." Fatima felt her mouth lying again, moving somehow separately from her real voice. "She's kind of shy. She got teased a lot."

"Oh, that's too bad," Rolf said.

"They called her Patti Mayonnaise," Fatima said, and she didn't know why it was she who was now prattling on.

"Don't tell anybody this, but I always thought Patty was cute on *Doug*," Rolf said, and shifted to talking about all his favorite cartoons. Fatima exhaled.

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Over time they grew to joke, a little awkwardly, about Fatima's position at school, as one of two black girls. She asked Rolf if this was a thing for him or if she was his first black girlfriend, because by now they called each other boyfriend and girlfriend.

"I don't see color," he said. "I just saw you. Like, one day there you were."

Violet would have said that color-blind people were the same ones who followed you in the store and that Rolf's game was hella corny.

"Anyway, it's not like you're black black," Rolf said.

Fatima remembered the lifelessness, before Violet, of feeling like a colorless gas and tried, in spite of a dull ache and the numbness of her brown lip, to take Rolf's words as a compliment.

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The conventions of such a transformation dictate that a snaggletooth or broken heel threatens to return the heroine to her former life. That snaggletooth, for Fatima, was either Rolf or Violet, depending on how you looked at things, and Fatima wasn't sure how she did.

When she saw Violet, on April 4—after hiding her relationship with Rolf for three months—approaching from across the lobby of Edwards Cinema with Mike's arm around her waist, Fatima's first instinct was to grab Rolf's hand and steer him toward the exit. But Violet was already calling her name.

This wasn't the natural order of things, for these separate lives to converge. Other factors aside, the code went hos before brós, school life before social life, family before anyone else. But Rolf

was both school and social, and Violet both social and nearly family, and Fatima's math skills couldn't balance this equation.

"I knew I saw you," Violet said to Fatima once she got close. "Who is this?"

"Rolf, Violet. Violet, Rolf," Fatima said, "and Mike."

Mike smiled, and Rolf smiled, and they shook hands, but neither young woman saw the guys, their eyes deadlocked on each other.

"Ha, so this is Violet," Rolf said, ignoring or misreading Fatima's firm grip on his arm. "Even your black friends are white, too." Rolf laughed.

"I was gonna tell you—" Fatima started to say to Violet.

"Wait, Patti Mayonnaise, I get it now," Rolf said aloud, then, "Oops, I—" and both women scowled at him.

Fatima made a noise that could be interpreted as either a guffaw or a deep moan.

When she turned back to Violet, though she opened and closed her mouth several times, no sounds emerged. She didn't mean to hurt her; some things had just come out, and other things she hadn't told Violet because she wasn't sure which lip she was supposed to use. Before she knew it, her voice was over there and then over there, and she was ventriloquizing what she'd learned all at once, but from too many places and all at the wrong time.

Violet didn't curse or buck up as though she might hit Fatima—though perhaps one of those options might have been better; she just grabbed Mike's arm and walked away.

And like that, Fatima was a vapor again, but something darker, like a funnel cloud, or black smoke that mocked what was already singed.