

“Invisible” White Man

by Richard Kostelanetz (August 2015)

Reading about the “outing” of the chief of the Spokane NAACP, who was induced to resign because her parents told the world that she was wholly white, rather than, like most African-Americans only part-white, I was reminded of a recent revelation about my own experience. Some fifty years ago, while a graduate student (in American history) at Columbia University, I resided along with my then-wife in a public housing project several blocks down Amsterdam Avenue from the campus.

As the epitome of 1950s low-income housing, the General Grant Houses consisted of eleven buildings, each with 21 floors and 11 apartments to a floor. Across the street(s) was a middle-income cooperative called Morningside Gardens, because the social planners’ idea was that low-income residents would assimilate middle-class behavior, especially at the large grocery store that we both patronized. With rent at \$55 per month for a solid concrete abode with two bedrooms, the NYC Housing Authority offered us a deal that couldn’t be beat.

I remember my neighbors as being roughly 50 percent black, 45 percent Puerto Rican (as Dominicans hadn’t yet come to Manhattan), and perhaps 5 percent white. Nearly all of us white people were graduate students in our twenties, and at least by sight we knew each other. Among them were David Burner, who became a history professor at SUNY-Stony Brook, and Peter Armacost, long the president of Eckerd College in Florida.

At a recent luncheon at Columbia University, I met a black man a few years younger than I, now a lawyer, who told me that he resided in the Grant Houses at the same time. About my residence there as well, he expressed surprise, assuring me repeatedly that no white people resided in the Grant Houses during his years there.

Rather than disagreeing with him, I realized a truth new to me and perhaps others—that so few would be no more visible to the predominant community than, say, a sprinkling of black people in a white New York City community. The unconsidered assumption must have been that we white kids, busy and focused as graduate students customarily are, probably didn’t live there, but were doing social work, etc.

Maybe some of our neighbors assumed we were black people who looked white, which is to say “passing,” or reverse passing, much as Rachel Dolezal was. Perhaps as well my luncheon companion accounted for why my partner and I were never racially harassed in any way I can

recall. The second truth is that in spite of efforts by some publicists to make race so all-determining, sometimes skin hue doesn't count for much and, consider, never has. To put it differently, someone's race isn't noticed until someone else, often a provocateur, only sometimes polite, proclaims that it is.

May I remind Ms. Dolezal's critics that most of the founders of the NAACP a century ago were white; so was I, mostly, when I first joined it in 1960.

Individual entries on Richard Kostelanetz's work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, NNDB.com, Wikipedia.com, and Britannica.com, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked. His many books are [here](#).

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