Jörg Heiser

The Great Escape: Adrian Piper's Memoir on Why She Went into Exile

Like many others interested in contemporary art, I first came across the work of Adrian Piper in the pages of an art magazine – in my case in the early 1990s. I remember quite vividly seeing a black-and-white photograph of her riding a New York bus with a white bath towel stuffed in her mouth, a work from her early 1970s *Catalysis* cycle of unannounced performances (unannounced in the sense that in most cases she would just turn up in public and confront regular passers-by with these actions). I was struck by the deadpan humor, whether the performance involved her walking around Central Park with Mickey Mouse helium balloons attached to her teeth, hair, and ears, or riding the subway with clothes that had been soaked for a week in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod-liver oil. But besides the humor, I was also struck by the way these enactments seemed to challenge the very mechanisms of cognition and recognition with which we instantly tend to categorize people and try to pin them down. And it seemed significant that these enactments were performed by a female conceptual artist who identified as African American and would later become a tenured professor of philosophy.

In 2018, the Museum of Modern Art in New York awarded Piper its largest ever retrospective of a living artist, spanning five decades of her work. The exhibition travelled to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and was accompanied by a sumptuous catalogue, as well as a comprehensive reader of in-depth essays on Piper's work (full disclosure: I was one of eight contributors to that reader). Whatever mechanisms of recognition might have previously failed, Piper has finally gotten her well-deserved due from museum curators and art historians.

However, as the dust raised by the much-acclaimed retrospective has begun to settle, another book comes into view that Piper herself has written. It is titled *Escape to Berlin*, and subtitled: *A Travel Memoir*. It's a stunning, beautifully written book. At times I felt I needed to read it at the pace of an epic poem, but then again it was like reading a thriller. It's alternately moving and devastating, often both within short range or simultaneously. To be sure, this is not a memoir like any other, though it does also, like most memoirs, tell the story of an upbringing, and a coming to maturity. But its main concern is revealed on the page just before the first chapter, which is empty but for one simple question, "Would you like to know why I left the US and refuse to return?," followed by a short answer: "This is why."[1] And indeed Piper tells the story, between the hard covers of a book handsomely illustrated with her artworks, poetic texts, and family photographs, of why she has become an

Detail of the book Adrian Piper, *Escape to Berlin: A Travel Memoir / Flucht nach Berlin: Eine Reiseerinnerung,* (Berlin: APRA Foundation Berlin, 2018). Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

American artist in exile, who did not attend her own New York MoMA retrospective. It is a story of discrimination based on race and gender, a story of workplace bullying and gaslighting in academe, but also one of resistance and reckoning. You could also say: Piper, as she reveals in this book, at some point in the 1980s, became a whistleblower in the workplace. And like other American whistleblowers, she was severely punished for being one.

The book is bilingual English and German (at 327 pages, roughly half for each language), which is unusual but in itself a statement: it is Berlin, Germany, where Piper has lived since 2005, and it is the German context which she addresses just as much as the American and international ones (Piper, an expert in Immanuel Kant, is fluent in German). Piper's memoir makes clear that her move to Europe, which she had prepared for since the year 2000 – that fateful year of the Florida recount that made George W. Bush president – has a lot to do with the United States, in the sense that it reflects the country's development especially in regard to the toxic discriminatory politics that have continued to structure and dominate it. Her flight into exile also has a lot to do with US academia, and specifically with the ideological-educational

complex that forms a substantial part of it; and with Piper's experiences therein as a philosopher and tenured professor. It is no exaggeration to say that because of these two factors combined, Piper went into exile.

As I read on, what also became increasingly clear was that pretty much all of Piper's artwork since the 1980s can be directly related to the experiences that eventually led to her decision to escape to Berlin. And while these were largely – not only – experiences within academia, they were reflected in her artistic work, but not necessarily in a way that would be detectable unless you knew – as upon reading this memoir – about her traumatic experiences.

Of course that does not license reducing that artistic work to mere outpourings of pressure experienced in the social or professional sphere, illustrations of biographical incidents, or a therapeutic release valve. Her works – key ones are depicted in the memoir, and are part of its narrative – transcend the therapeutic and the biographical. They have cathartic or compensational value only because they transcend an all-too-illustrative or instrumental function.

Naturally, we may expect a good memoir to transcend the merely biographical or therapeutic
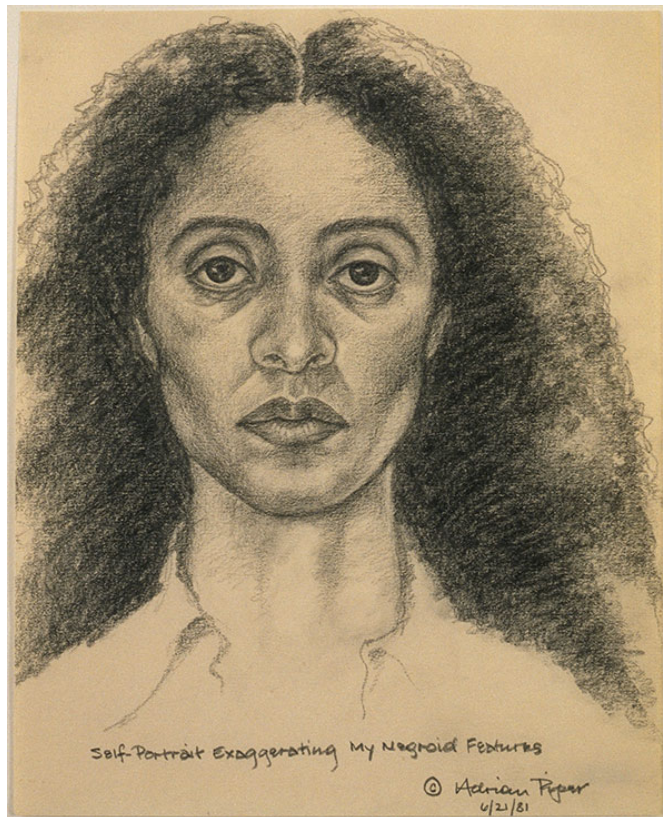
Adrian Piper, *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features,* 1981. Pencil on paper. 10" x 8" (25.4 cm x 20.3 cm). Collection of Eileen Harris Norton. Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

towards something artistic and possibly political. And Piper's can indeed be seen in the venerable lineage of the great memoirs of writers who tackle American racism and its historic roots – maybe most clearly in relation to James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). There are obvious parallels: both born and raised, intellectually and artistically gifted, in the north of Manhattan (Piper in Washington Heights and Riverside Drive, Baldwin in Harlem); forced into exile in the face of harassment (in Baldwin's case, harassment by the FBI, to France's Provence from 1970 and for most of the rest of his life until his death in 1987); and a fundamental inability to flinch or shut up in the face of discrimination. And there are also, of course, some differences: Baldwin's stepfather became paranoid and treated his stepson harshly, whereas Piper describes her father as a man of modest restraint and gentle paternal love. While Baldwin's famously lucid, rhythmic prose was trained on the force of preachermen (the stepfather was a Baptist minister, Baldwin himself became a child preacher), Piper's prose – though also eloquent and elastic – has more to do with the deductive reasoning of a philosopher, and the imaginative leaps of a conceptual artist.

There is another difference: Baldwin writes about how the bitterness of his stepfather, but also his power and "crushing charm," had something to do "with his blackness, I think – he was very black – with his blackness and his beauty, and with the fact that he knew that he was black but did not know that he was beautiful."[2] Baldwin was as black as him, and anyone could see his African ancestry by looking at him, whereas Piper's was more difficult to determine – which often led others to search for or concoct visual evidence to confirm it.

So while black kids in Harlem might tease her by calling her "pale face," white kids might play cruel games challenging their siblings to guess "whether Adrian is white or colored." These early childhood experiences, of course, took on more monstrous dimensions later in life. This kind of ideologically programmed cognitive dissonance comes out of what Piper describes as "the wackiness of the American caste system, based on the imagined binary opposition between 'black' and 'white' 'races.'" Her inadvertent violation, and then deliberate ridicule, of America's caste categories were the main cause of the virulent retaliation she elicited.

Nevertheless, Piper to some extent is a successor of Baldwin, one generation after (Baldwin was born 1924, Piper 1948). Like him, she conveys direct connections between personal experience and societal interrogation: on the one hand, her upbringing and relationship to her parents, her experiences of authority and elite social circles; on the other, her more general questioning of society's success or failure in coming to terms with the historic crimes and contemporary taboos that structure it.

Piper makes vividly clear how the circumstances of one's upbringing are the decisive factors in the creation of one's psychological and social makeup. Her striking allegory, at the beginning of the book, is that of a delicate sprout wrapped or bandaged in layers upon layers of social effect, layers that harden or soften throughout the years, become torn or remain firmly in place. She relates this to Vedic philosophy, the ancient Indian body of texts forming the basis of Hinduism – here, also, the body and the soul are described as a complex system of layers upon layers. I was reminded, at the same time, of the way Melanie Klein, founder of child psychoanalysis, diverges from Freud in putting emphasis on the very early stages of child development, and on how decisive loving touches, or their absence, during that early stage are. In the 1970s, German cultural theorist Klaus Theweleit, based on Klein as well as Wilhelm Reich's theory of "body armor" – bodily stiffening that is like a compensation mechanism masking the absence of love, and the denial of related desires – developed an understanding of how fascist subjectivity came into being not least as a result of a deep-seated fear of that bodily armor being fractured. The fascist is seeking to release that fear, "heal" the armor, through the annihilation of others.

In Piper's family, there was no fear of that kind. "On my father's strict orders, I was never hit or spanked or beaten or whipped … As a result, I grew up physically inviolate, unable even to imagine the possibility of a breach to my physical integrity." On top of the absence of violence, her parents – both hardworking, modestly earning, always impeccably dressed members of what they termed "the negro community" – established the child-raising policy, which they also asked family and friends to abide by, to never comment on or refer to Piper's physical appearance, whether negatively or positively, in order to allow her to grow up without the feeling of being reduced to her looks. But then there came the fifth-grade teacher who asked her parents if their daughter was aware that she was colored. It wasn't until 1978, Piper writes, that she recalled that incident, when an American whose sexual advances she rejected called attention to her race. Numerous artworks came directly out of these and similar experiences, such as the 1981 drawing conceptually titled *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features*.

Piper's parents, by loving her and creating

an environment of trustworthiness around her, as well as encouraging her to speak her mind and argue whatever her case freely, had made her fearless about being who she is. But she also describes how that fearlessness made it hard for her to correctly identify reactions to it:

> I cannot count the number of colleagues and former friends I have shamed, embarrassed, or alienated by putting their claims of friendship and good will to the test, on the assumption that, like my parents', their word could be trusted. It took me decades even to figure out what the problem was: that, having been raised in an environment in which people meant what they said, I lacked the ability to distinguish between sincere utterances and merely polite or political ones.[3]

Polite and political: Piper is talking about the art world, but just as much if not more about academia, the environment in which she worked regularly as a teacher and philosopher who had written her doctorate with John Rawls.

In 1990, she accepted a tenured full professorship in philosophy at Wellesley College, the private women's liberal arts college in

Massachusetts whose alumnae include Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright. She writes about the rewarding experiences she had teaching its students, almost all undergraduates ("teaching these undergraduates was like teaching my very best graduate students in other institutions"[4]). Which is to say that the ordeals she goes on to write about and that dominated her life for the following almost two decades have nothing to do with these students, but a lot to do with the institution in question, and the structures and behaviors it apparently nurtured and provoked. What Piper describes in vivid detail is nothing short of a history of harassment and gaslighting in the workplace, and what, in her detailed description, sound like serious violations of labor and social benefit rights that are absolutely jaw-dropping.

In the early 1990s, while taking care of her dying mother on Cape Cod, teaching full time, publishing in philosophy, exhibiting her artwork, and presenting at conferences in both fields without administrative support, Piper has repeated physical collapses. It's pretty clear that in an environment of harassment, in which intrigue and false accusations – including allegations that Piper fabricated her illnesses – seem to have been the daily routine, literally no
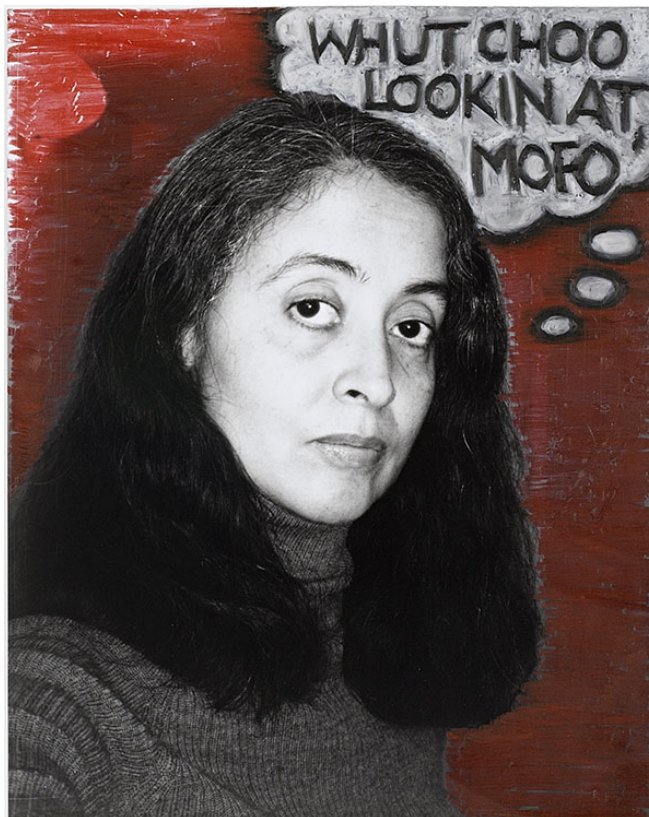
Adrian Piper, *Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady,* 1995. Self-portrait, oil crayon on black and white photograph. 30.4 cm x 20.3 cm. Collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

one would have continued unharmed. It takes Piper a while to realize how much this is connected to her stubborn belief in the trustworthiness of self-proclaimed standards: in an academic environment that prides itself on integrity, scientific rigor, and antidiscrimination measures, how could it be that the person who delivers, in 1998, an internal committee report on discrimination against African Americans at the college is not rewarded for that effort to help improve the environment, but is rather penalized, while the report itself is suppressed? The paper, which she had not circulated outside the university at the time but today can be accessed via a link in Piper's personal chronology on her website, seems based on diligent empirical research, and is a soundly argued, razor-sharp analysis of the pathologies of racism and how they manifested themselves at the venerable college, hiding behind a "false facade of civility and impeccable manners" and longstanding conventions "that assume that everyone is the same."[5]

Piper's unwillingness to sugarcoat the truth in her report resulted in attempts to discredit it as her personal vendetta. This proved a nasty kind of irony, given that she had, in fact, delayed a lawsuit against Wellesley College in order to avoid compromising her report by calling attention to her personal experiences of discrimination. She eventually lost that lawsuit – which charged the college with "fraud, breach of contract, unjust enrichment, loss of reputation, and racial, gender, and disability discrimination"[6] – in 2002, on the grounds that she had waited too long to file her complaints. Imagine that happening to you after the numerous measures apparently taken against her that the memoir lists: reductions of her salary; the delay or cancellation of payments for her health insurance, at a time when Piper was undergoing expensive diagnostic testing for numerous serious illnesses; the termination of research funding; the cancellation of her courses from the curriculum, and their "accidental" deletion from the course catalogue; the repeated, mysterious slashing of car tires on her return commutes from Wellesley to her Cape Cod house; the burglarizing and vandalizing of her house, four times. But even if one assumed that Piper merely had an exceptionally sinister streak of bad luck, the mere fact that Wellesley eventually terminated her tenured full professorship two months short of her eligibility for retirement benefits speaks for itself. Think of FBI deputy director Andrew McCabe, who in early 2018 was fired by former Attorney General Jeff Sessions days before retirement, depriving him of a substantial part of his pension: it seems a common practice for punishing the delinquent,

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and by example sending a message.

Piper identifies three weapons to drive someone out: first, starting rumors, gossip, in order to poison the atmosphere around them; second, demonization through portraying them as ill-intended; third: ostracism through silence and noninformation. The things said in that atmosphere of hypocrisy, denial, and intimidation are what contributed to the creation of a signature piece that not least of all graced the cover of the catalogue of Piper's recent retrospective. It's from a series she had already started working on in 1991, during her second semester as professor at Wellesley, called *Decide Who You Are.* The key element of the work is an authentic black-and-white portrait of Anita Hill as an eight-year-old child. Yes, *the* Anita Hill who spoke up against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1989, the way Christine Blasey Ford, two decades later, came forward against Brett Kavanaugh. "I chose her because when compelled to speak publicly," Piper writes,

> she spoke plainly and truthfully, regardless of the consequences to herself and her wellbeing, which were severe. And I chose this picture of her as a child because the fact that she could do that as an adult showed me that she had been a real child, like me; and the same kind of sprout as I am.[7]

In the piece, the onslaught of deflective rhetoric and the attempts at manipulation and intimidation in response, are represented by red typewriter letters filling the page and running across the Anita Hill portrait, as if in an attempt to drown out that optimism and fearlessness that allows these girls and women to come forward and speak out: *I don't know what you mean. I didn't notice anything wrong. It seems fine to me. I don't know why you say that. I don't see any problem. It's not your place to say that. Put a lid on it. Actually I'm doing you a favor. You're oversensitive ...* The litany goes on and on. And it feels strikingly, eerily real. As Piper puts it:

> Whenever someone tries to gaslight me with this kind of language now, I feel fear, because I know that these words of denial and intimidation conceal sinister motives and realities that the speaker wants to conceal – motives and realities that could not survive rational scrutiny were they exposed to the light of day. This alerts me that I am dealing with someone who knows that her motives are bad. And it shows me that the most explicit and overt of these bad motives is to try, through this perversion of words, to drown me out, to

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shut me up, to gag me, make me change the subject or retreat into speechlessness. Another reason I am writing this memoir is to demonstrate that this attempt has failed.[8]

This is the dark, chilling truth of this memoir: that even in the very environments that consider themselves the beacons of liberalism and equal opportunity, there is continuing discrimination that perversely pretends not to exist.

In 2006, a year after Piper had settled in Berlin, she discovered her name on the "US Transportation Security Administration's Suspicious Travelers Watch list," and decided not to return to the US as long as her name remained there. This became the excuse for Wellesley College to deny her request for an unpaid leave of absence. And thus, according to Piper, "The College" – as she simply calls it – found the excuse for terminating her tenured position two months before retirement. And if one is still in disbelief – can it really be that liberal, educated America is so devious? – one need only consult reports that Piper wrote at the time and has made available through links on her website chronology.

Piper's eventual loss of her tenured position

and her retirement benefits was the culmination of a fifteen-year-long struggle that many would have backed down from much earlier. Already a decade before, Piper had made a work called *Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady*. It's a deadpan image: she looks calmly at the camera, but with a comic thought bubble added, saying "WHUT CHOO LOOKIN AT, MOFO." Piper created it because it made her laugh, helping her to keep her temper; the idea had come to her when she had tried to imagine

what the President, the Dean of The College, and my Philosophy department colleagues could possibly have been seeing when they looked at me, in order to have reacted to me as they did ... The minute the image came up in my mind I burst out laughing, and laughed helplessly for several minutes.

But what had aroused the enmity of her colleagues? Maybe that, she continues,

I had dared to present myself as a Black Woman in the first place ... How dare I make a claim on affirmative action resources reserved for the restitution of the
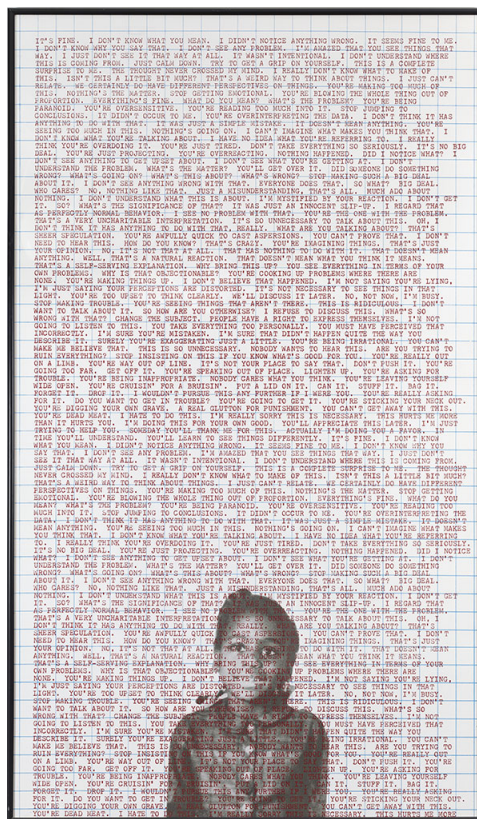
Adrian Piper, *Decide Who You Are: Right-Hand (Constant) Panel,* 1992. Silkscreened image-text collage printed on paper mounted on foamcore, silkscreened text. 185.4 cm x 109.2 cm. Various public and private collections. Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

legitimate victims of slavery, the ones you can see coming at a distance? On this hypothesis, the college's harassment was actually an extended program of fully justified retribution … Believing I had tricked them, they would feel no moral compunction about tricking me in return.[9]

Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady finds its logical conclusion in another piece from 2012, first published on Piper's website, which was included in her retrospective, and is depicted in *Escape to Berlin*: it shows her smiling, with a strange artificial skin color, accompanied by the lines of a signed letter:

> Dear Friends, for my 64th birthday I have decided to change my racial and nationality designations. Henceforth, my new racial designation will be neither black nor white but rather 6,25% grey … Please join me in celebrating this exciting new adventure in pointless administrative precision and futile institutional control![10]

Like a news headline, another statement next to the image reads: "Adrian Piper has decided to retire from being black." Titled *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, A Moment of Embarrassment*, the piece, with its seemingly lighthearted but heavy-hitting humor, raises eyebrows and causes cognitive dissonance – is she even *allowed* to do that? Can we ignore this? Is she really saying "retire from being black"? Is she suddenly denying her heritage and betraying her community? Is this some kind of self-inflicted twisted minstrel, like the one in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* of 2000?

If you take into account the aforementioned story of harassment in the workplace though, it becomes very clear that the "retirement" Piper mentions in her artwork is to be taken literally in a particular sense: what Piper retires from is being available as the target of stereotyping, but she also retires from allowing those who denied her her well-earned retirement the opportunity to gaslight her. She is retiring from a toxic environment of abandonment, silence, indifference, fear, and outright hostility in the wake of her whistleblowing: "the fish-eyed, so-what's-your-point expectant silences … the knee-jerk blame-the-victim mentality … the distancing tap dance."[11] Most chilling, she writes, was the "repeated suggestion that I had much to be grateful for and would do better not to complain"[12] – implying that as the first tenured African-American professor at "The College," she should be glad she was awarded that position in the first place, and get on with it.

Piper is not resorting simply, however, to

condemning her former colleagues and acquaintances in order to avoid self-critique. On the contrary, she observes how the conditions of her upbringing – a single child encouraged to always speak her mind, shielded from violence – had made her insensitive to the alienating effect on others of openly criticizing them, assuming they would simply criticize her in turn: "It hadn't occurred to me that I was hurting others by calling attention to their failings."[13] But even with Piper's self-described "ego-limitations" taken into account, the hardest thing for her – and for the reader – to stomach is that of the whistleblower being abandoned by virtually all of her colleagues and acquaintances, especially those who had experienced discrimination themselves.

In 2002 – a period of sickness and operations, as well as a cancer scare – Piper sees *Braveheart* for the first time, with Mel Gibson as the thirteenth-century Scottish rebel who in battle finds himself betrayed by the Scottish noblemen whom he thought were on his side: "They just watched, then turned their horses around and retreated. They had all been bought off by the King of England." She continues:

> That is basically what happened to the College's black caucus. We had forged an alliance to fight racism at The College, and to force The College to honor its promise to hire more tenured black faculty. I had fought single-handedly to prevent the black caucus from being dissolved by The College's faculty council in 1992, and again in 1999 … When I called on them for help, they just watched, and then retreated.[14]

Piper discovers the divide-and-conquer tactics of combining intimidation with incentives that deflate any sense of solidarity with her:

> Prominent African-American women in academia, the arts, and the national electronic media were particularly receptive to The College's sudden, extended burst of interest and largesse during this period, its unexpectedly benevolent dispensation of prizes, gifts, and invitations to speak or teach. No such woman, most of whom I knew personally, spoke up on my behalf.[15]

Upon this tough charge, you can almost arleady hear those presented with it denouncing Piper's description as a sweeping and false allegation, as an example of betrayal of their antidiscriminatory cause. But the reader who has read that passage in the context of this

Adrian Piper, *Everything #21,* 2010-13. Four vintage wall blackboards in lacquered wood frames, each mounted on wall at eyelevel in landscape orientation and covered with single handwritten sentence, "Everything will be taken away," repeated 25 times in white chalk handwritten cursive text. Each framed blackboard 120 cm x 250 cm. Installation view from *All the World's Futures*, Central Exhibition of the 56thVenice Biennale, 2015. Photo credit: Andrea Avezzù. Rennie Collection, Vancouver. Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

thoroughly soul-searching memoir already knows by this point that it is indeed the grey slab of human moral failure that whistleblowers, amidst institutional retaliation against them, bring out most starkly, inadvertently, through their abandonment not least by those whose cause they had defended. That is a painful truth that is not for the squeamish. Anyone involved with emancipatory politics will know it deep down; and might still prefer to continue wallowing in the myth of communities always standing together in uncompromised solidarity.

In 2002, Piper was forced to either return to teaching at The College despite all the intimidations and obstacles described, or else lose her tenured position. One month beforehand, she had recorded a forty-five-minute endurance performance on video, in which she repeats the mantra "I can take it" over and over again, until, at one point, it spontaneously becomes "I can't take it." But Piper's work as an artist doesn't stop there, in the maladies and terrors of an individual's life; it becomes about overcoming the fear of death itself, for example in a set of works that in one way or another are connected to the single sentence "Everything will be taken away," also started in 2002. One imagines a janitor putting up such a statement: that all bulky items will be removed, in the entrance to an apartment building – an accidentally profound statement about the transitory nature of mundane things. Depicted in the book are private photographs that became part of the series, and what is taken away are the faces in these photographs: Piper photocopied the images onto graph paper, erased all facial features with sandpaper, and then overprinted the sheet with that same sentence in typewriter style. In most of the images people are huddled together for a couple or group snapshot, so they must be ... colleagues and acquaintances. Although Piper doesn't give any names, it is safe to say – as her own silhouette appears in some of the shots – that these are pictures of personal significance, and that the connotations of such erasure are highly charged, especially if reproduced in a personal memoir. It becomes clear that these pictures represent friendships and professional alliances that were poisoned and destroyed in the wake of her fight with Wellesley College.

"Everything will be taken away," depending on the context, takes on different meanings, but it is always with the same underpinning: loss is always occurring, but there is also a sense of relief at being able to let go of attachments. Piper's memoir allows you to read very concrete meaning into this in regard to her professional affiliations in US academe and the US art world: being abandoned by all those depicted in the

erased snapshots made it easier for her to leave behind the country from which she has taken exile.

In 2015, Adrian Piper won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for a work called *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game # 1–3* (2013–15). It's an artwork that firmly builds on her insights and convictions as a Kantian philosopher and political human being – *and* on her experiences in professional environments that pride themselves on integrity, trustworthiness, and truthfulness, but often fail these very standards in reality. On three slate-gray walls, each with a circular gold reception desk placed in front of it, are emblazoned sentences in gold capital letters. The first states, "I will always be too expensive to buy"; the second, "I will always mean what I say"; and the third, "I will always do what I say I am going to do." At the desks, visitors can sign a contract to confirm that they are willing to follow through with one, two, or all three of these promises. After the exhibition closes, each signatory receives a list of all the others, but contact information is not provided unless explicit permission is granted, through the exhibiting institution, to a fellow signatory who has requested it.

The Probable Trust Registry is built on Piper's Kantian argument about the relationship between rationality and ethics: your promise is worth nothing if you haven't first made the promise to yourself; and if you don't have the rational capacity to see the importance of abiding by certain rules – communally, and without exception – you won't see the importance of keeping your promises without exception.

But what if others distrust and possibly persecute me because I stick to my promises, which may include breaking one rule – say, keeping a company or state secret – in favor of another, more fundamental rule – say, pointing out that that company or state secret implies major violations of constitutional rights? That distrust, the blaming and shaming and punishing of the whistleblower, the one who dares to speak and tell, is a sure sign then that the social contract has already been undermined, and that it is in dire need of repair. So while Piper has been living in Berlin since 2005, *The Probable Trust Registry* no doubt also reflects the bitter experiences she has had in American educational institutions. Those institutions, and those who play along with their power games, tend to engender a standpoint of inherited entitlement and privileges (we might call them the Kavanaugh privileges) from which it seems easy to justify hostility and belligerence toward anyone who inherently or explicitly questions

their machinations.

Let's not overgeneralize; there are as many fantastic academics full of integrity in the US, as there are dodgy, dubious types in Berlin or German universities. And in a political system as severely in crisis as the US's, we encounter an increasingly unhinged far-right xenophobia and hatred, which is also to be found all around the globe, from Brazil to the Philippines, to – not least – Germany. Nevertheless, Piper sees a more robust foundation for a civil society at work in the German context, whose majority still supports Angela Merkel's decision in 2015 to open the borders for Syrian refugees, despite the risks.

Towards the end of her memoir Piper has these statements to make about today's Germany:

> I am awed by the sophistication of the public discussions and debates, and the high degree of civic education by the news media they presuppose … This is a culture that is determined to instill in its citizens a reflective and informed grasp of the unacceptability of war at any price, and it is succeeding.[16]

I tend to be more skeptical about Germany, because of all the alarming signs of deterioration of that civic education in the far-right populist fear-mongering that is spreading across social media and around the globe like a virus. Nevertheless, if we follow Piper's point here, the big question is whether or not a society eventually makes a concerted effort to come to terms with the crimes against humanity it has committed in the past, and that continue to structure it in the present. Does it face those crimes, work through them, and publicly commemorate them? Or is it in denial, creating deflections and taboos?

In Germany, we still see many taboos at work, and a failure to come to terms, for example, with the country's colonial history, and its genocide, between 1904 and 1908, of the Herero and Namaqua people in German South West Africa (Namibia today), involving the killing of probably more than a hundred thousand people. It is now considered the first genocide of the twentieth century. And the discussion over whether, and how, Germany can come to terms with this responsibility has only just begun. That said, the country *has* acknowledged guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust. In 2017, one of the leaders of Germany's proto-fascist far right, Björn Höcke, called Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, erected in the center of Berlin in 2005, a "memorial of disgrace in the middle of our capital." Well, if you're a

Nazi, indeed this large field of steles right next to the Brandenburg Gate can only be perceived as a "disgrace" to your dreams of Aryan German supremacy. Nevertheless, a large part of society has taken responsibility, including its political establishment, even if against obstacles and its own inhibitions. A significant part of society has questioned the concepts of "race" that have led to the treatment of German Jews first as aliens, then as vermin. This is not to deny continuations of racism and xenophobia, not least and especially against people of color. But the Holocaust Memorial at the heart of Berlin *is* an undeniably visible marker that reminds anyone who can see and think of the consequences of toxic concepts of race and supremacy. The monument's centrality, vastness, and undeniability are its very points. Which makes clear why Piper expands on her admiration of the way Germany is coming to terms with and facing the truth of its historic crimes against humanity; she makes very clear that America, in her view, at present lacks precisely those qualities.

America is still, to quote James Baldwin, "the dishonest custodian of black life and wealth … and the burning, buried American guilt."[17] Baldwin wrote this in 1985, in relation to the rise of Michael Jackson (but that's another story). The burning, the burying, the guilt: these are tropes of ghost stories and horror movies. They speak of the parts of history, and fragments of memory, that are denied, not acknowledged, in an attempt to render the underlying crimes – crimes against humanity – invisible, to make them go away, even pretend they never happened, to let things stay as they are. You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to realize this doesn't work.

That Adrian Piper, like Baldwin before her, decided to go into exile, is a strong indication that there are lessons that still need to be learned about the foundations and symptomatic realities of those burning, buried parts of history. In this regard, her memoir is a bone-chilling, yet deeply moving, reading experience; but it's also an encouragement to draw our conclusions, and speak and act accordingly, not backing down – essentially, to stick with our promises to ourselves and others, and speak truth to power, whether we are white or black or of color or female or male or nonbinary. *Escape to Berlin* does not back down: with philosophical reason, artistic imagination, and humor, it fights the lingering realities of American guilt.

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1

Adrian Piper, *Escape to Berlin. A Travel Memoir* (APRA Foundation, 2018), 8.

2

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Penguin, 2017), 89.

3

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 67.

4

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 137.

5

Adrian Piper, "Racism at Wellesley: Causes and Containment," March 20 1998 http://www.adrianpiper.de/docs/WebsiteRWCC.pdf.

6

See http://www.adrianpiper.de/docs/MCADDocEvidto8_15_05.pdf.

7

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 91.

8

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 91.

9

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 159–61.

10

See http://www.adrianpiper.de/news_sep_2012.shtml.

11

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 171.

12

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 177.

13

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 171.

14

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 181.

15

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 183.

16

Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 311.

17

James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," in *Collected Essays* (Library of America, 1998), 828.