

## 27. My Calling (Cards) #1 and #2

Written in 1990 and previously unpublished.

The idea behind this series of performances, which I call *reactive guerrilla performances*, is intervention in order to prevent co-optation.

### **My Calling (Card) #1 (for Dinners and Cocktail Parties) April 1986–1990**

In this first performance, the situation is one in which I find myself in otherwise exclusively white company at a dinner or cocktail party, in which those present do not realize I am black. Thinking themselves in sympathetic company, they (or any one of them) proceed to make racist remarks (it should be emphasized that this phenomenon occurs in groups of all economic and educational levels; it would be a mistake to think of it as primarily a working-class white phenomenon). My options:

1. I say nothing. The consequence is that they think it is all right to make such remarks, and I feel both offended and compromised by my silence. I also feel guilty for being deceptive.
2. I reprimand them abstractly, that is, without identifying myself as black. The consequence is that we have an academic discussion about the propriety, meanings, and intentions of these remarks that leaves fundamental dispositions untouched and self-deceptive rationalizations inviolate, and I again feel offended, compromised, and deceptive.
3. I reprimand them concretely, that is, by informing them publicly that I am black and am offended by their remarks. This violates subtle but rigid conventions about what subjects are appropriate topics of conversation at dinners and cocktail parties and opens an abyss of silence and mortification that everyone feels. The offender is humiliated and shamed for having been caught out; everyone else is embarrassed at having witnessed this; and everyone, including me, is enraged at me for having called attention to this social gaffe instead of ignoring it and helping to smooth things over. The social network has been rent, and I (not the offender, who is beneath notice) have ruined everyone's evening.
4. I announce that I am black at the beginning of the evening. It is hard to slip this information in without seeming forced or artificial. The consequence is that they are on guard, but view me as opportunistic (that is, a "professional black") and as trying to guilt-trip them, or as socially incompetent. Everyone feels uncomfortable.
5. Someone else lets it be known in advance that there will be a black person present. Everyone feels paranoid and spends the evening looking around and trying to figure out who the black person is. Shades of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

6. Someone else lets it be known in advance that I am black. Everyone is on guard and spends the evening deploring racism and recounting their personal attempts to combat it.
7. I abdicate my black identity and "blend in." This is out of the question. Some branches of my family have tried this option, and the ones I know of have turned into really twisted people.

Dear Friend,

I am black.

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

Sincerely yours,  
Adrian Margaret Smith Piper

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*My Calling (Card) #1*  
(1986-1990).

Courtesy John Weber  
Gallery, collection of  
the artist.

8. I present the individual(s) who made the remark with my card. Some consequences: It established the possibility of dialogue between me and this individual without disrupting the group as a whole (The only evenings that are ruined are mine and the offender's). It allows me to express my anger in a semiprivate context that has already been established by the person who made the remark. This means I can assert my identity without being accused of being manipulative, etc. The general character of the statement and the rule-governed policy that governs its presentation convey the message that the offending individual is behaving in typical and predictably racist ways. It fights a stereotype by giving the offender a concrete experience of what it is like to be the object of one.

**My Calling (Card) #2 (for Bars and Discos) June 1986–1990**

This works on the same principles as #1 but is designed for occasions when I am sitting alone, reading a newspaper, and nursing a beer by myself in a bar. One major difference is that whereas in #1 my expression of anger and pain in the card is justified by the offending individual's hostility in making the racist remark, in #2 a come-on in a bar can be or can masquerade as the paradigm of friendliness; so it's up to me to deliver the message without being the first to violate that assumption. The card is distributed only after I have verbally expressed my desire to remain alone, politely at first and then with some vehemence. Typically it elicits further jokes, put-downs, attempts at flirtation, and so on, before the offender beats a sullen retreat. This card takes longer to work because it must combat the "no-matter-what-she-says-she-really-wants-it" fiction. But it ruins my evening so completely to have to use it, and I have to use it so persistently in bars and discos in the States, that in fact I rarely go into these environments unaccompanied anymore. I find restaurants and coffee houses to be much safer environments when I feel the need for the anonymity of the crowd.

Dear Friend,

I am not here to pick anyone up, or to be picked up. I am here alone because I want to be here, ALONE.

This card is not intended as part of an extended flirtation.

Thank you for respecting my privacy.

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*My Calling (Card) #2*  
(1986–1990). Courtesy  
John Weber Gallery,  
collection of the  
artist.