

# Discovery Mode



*"I speak out of a direct  
and particular anger  
at a particular academic conference,  
and a white woman  
comes up and says, 'Tell me how you feel  
but don't say it too harshly  
or I cannot hear you.'  
But is it my manner that keeps her  
from hearing, or the message  
that her life may change?"*

*- Audre Lorde*

Discovery Mode

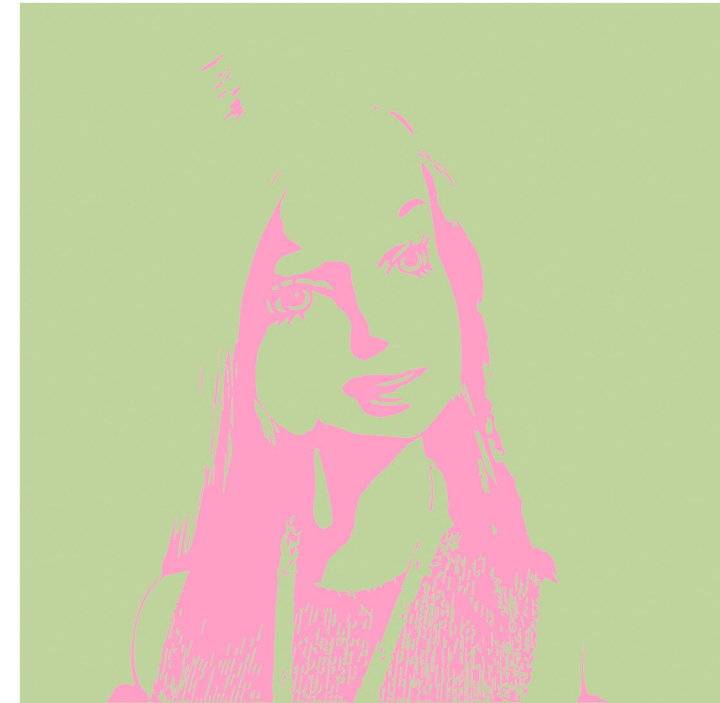
Victoria Smits

*"The quality of light  
by which we scrutinize  
our lives has direct bearing  
upon the product which we live,  
and upon the changes which we hope  
to bring about through those lives.  
It is within this light  
that we form those ideas  
by which we pursue our magic  
and make it realized."*

- Audre Lorde

*A White Woman's Worth*

I live in fear -  
a lucid nebulous grasp  
of manacled history  
where I detach  
my body from burden  
and make myself free:  
generational white  
blueprints weep,  
a "woe-ing of me."  
I play Barbied lore  
across my childhood -  
all white, all blonde,  
all breathtakingly upbeat.  
If I were to grab  
hold of truth and justice,  
of equal voting, housing,  
access to birth my young,  
would I lie here  
across my down comforter,  
feathers dusting my cheek,  
and cognize sacrifice  
and solace, death  
of my Black sons?  
I barbecue in the park,  
ask for directions,  
run in the street,  
move into my home,  
open my front door -  
all while being white -  
breathing, living, being  
free, free, and free.  
My fear: a hardened crumb -  
bonded to white history  
and familial church-going folk -  
a sanctimonious self-savior  
escaping 400 years of enslaving.  
What lights do I hold  
up, scrutinizing my life,  
seeking magic, magical change,  
and not impotence?  
My ruminating here  
is not luxury, but sustenance  
for embryonic acumen and worth.



Beware:  
Ignorance  
Protects itself.  
Ignorance  
Promotes suspicion.  
Suspicion  
Engenders fear.  
Fear quails,  
Irrational and blind,  
Or fear looms,  
Defiant and closed.  
Blind, closed,  
Suspicious, afraid,  
Ignorance  
Protects itself,  
And protected,  
Ignorance grows.”

- Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents*

#### *What I See*

I traversed across  
United States from East,  
Midwest, to West,  
United Airlines my chaperone.

Airports tally  
demographics and entitlement,  
an accounting of racial history.

In supposed woke Oregon,  
my white  
body lays claim  
to prior intent:

an 1844 exclusion law  
deemed  
Black bodies  
must be  
whipped,

thirty nine lashes  
every six months

until they left.

A simultaneous slavery ban  
prohibited  
Black home ownership,  
property,  
the right to vote.

And so white Oregon  
was birthed  
from hatred,  
not socialist servants,  
cooperative Marxists  
sharing  
white and Black  
lives.



*"I am not free  
while any woman  
is unfree,  
even when her shackles  
are very different  
from my own."*

- Audre Lorde

*Where do I Begin?*

I don't remember their first names,  
and maybe that's my original  
sin - that they exist only as the Baileys,  
my former Black neighbors with six kids.  
They heard of our homestead changes  
and in chit chat across the street, welcomed  
our invitation to survey this white version  
of life inside brick walls.

I don't remember the entire tour  
but we must have taken them this way  
and that - through the kitchen,  
living room, maybe even the Master,  
an ironic term forged from slavery  
some say, while others say Sears spoke  
it first. It was on our second floor  
when I heard the gasp. Mrs. Bailey,  
this minister's wife, "I've never seen  
a Black baby doll in a white person's home!"

Perverse inner pride smoldered and grew.  
I convinced myself inside my white, white skin  
that racial literacy was mine and mine alone to keep.

How is it possible that a plastic and rubber  
figure forged to represent race  
was enough to satisfy, yes satisfy, in that moment,  
that I had done my work? This work is mine and mine  
alone, limited eternally by the surface sheath  
I wear each day, privileged and oh so free.



"You won't exist until we validate you."

- Howardena Pindell  
(as white woman in *Free, White and 21*, 1980)

1980: *Eighth Grade and Me*

I found my prairie skirt  
ripe for 8th grade graduation -  
tiered fabric circles  
twirling, feminine,  
placating gender norms  
of (white) women's place -  
at Eastview mall,  
peaches and tans,  
patterned and light,  
while Black Arthur McDuffie  
fought for his life -  
a former Marine Corps  
lance corporal  
beaten by white  
Miami policemen,  
acquitted by white  
jury Jim Crow men -  
the law and lawlessness  
of the land.

My dreams spun circles  
inside drawings and diaries,  
of lists of boys that I liked.  
I whirl in my skirt  
in my bedroom,  
the fabric umbrella  
asylum conserving  
and lifting my worth  
while Black Arthur McDuffie  
clawed for his life,  
Kel-Lite flashlights  
drubbing his body,  
slowly losing his own light.  
Even in death  
white men lie  
waiting,  
waiting to take  
your last breath.



*"The practice of love  
offers no place of safety.  
We risk loss, hurt, pain.  
We risk being acted upon  
by forces outside our control."*

*- bell hooks*

### *On Lineage*

I am third in line of (white) women  
educators, leaders of some path,  
forging ahead, arm in arm  
with students, hailing learnedness,  
understanding, and truth:  
cryptic genes flow through us,  
a belief we can lead others toward light.

But clamped along mastery's DNA  
lives a small molecule, a cancerous  
tear-laden fragility, a feeble frailty  
streaming through our veins.  
Released during dysregulation,  
the rock of chiseled fortitude  
erodes in ebullient wispy avalanche.

It has come to my attention,  
a Discovery Mode of sorts,  
how cancer thrives exponentially  
if sequestered in its roots.  
I am here to tend the garden,  
to uproot every single last weed.  
Stamped deep within systemic nurseries  
of race, and class, and hegemony  
are dandelions, prickles, and seeds.



"Love is divine only and difficult always.  
If you think it is easy you are a fool.  
If you think it is natural you are blind."

- Toni Morrison

*Red, White, and Blue*

Clear across the plains  
and mountains, rivers  
and meadows, Douglas Firs  
bend benevolently in wind -  
needles and branches brush -  
a lover's touch on skin.

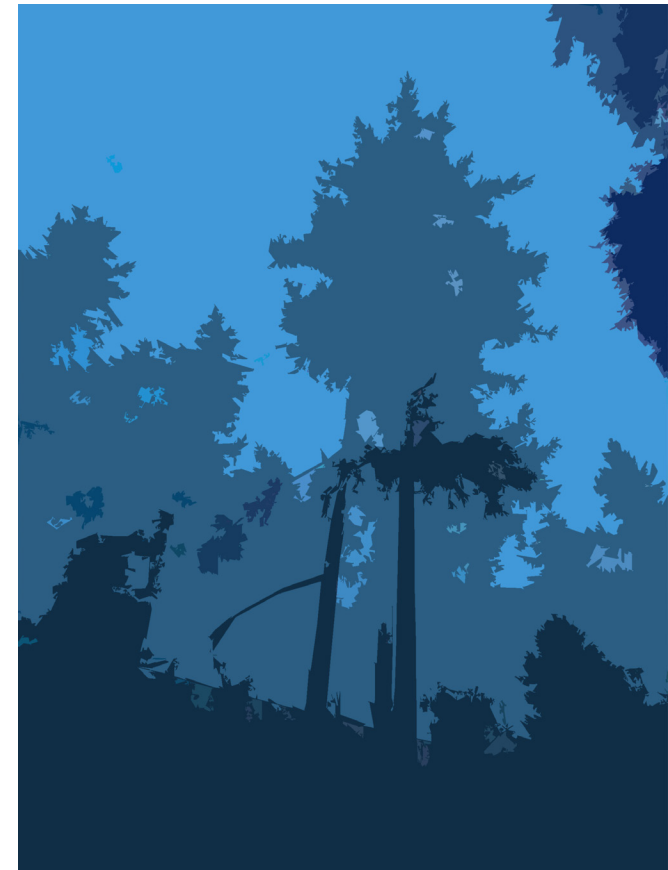
I watch TV:  
the supposed freedom  
capitol on the other side of united  
states, the democracy den,  
hides elected supplicants of our will  
while deranged vile patrons  
of Trump, white nationalists,  
Qs, patriots, beat down doors,  
and humans, killing inside  
furry coats of libel.

I see:  
flies on shit,  
swarming spurious nutrients:  
lies, lies, lies.  
Their breach intends  
to liberate,  
to self-assign their free  
white bodies as king -  
Trumping truth -  
trashing votes at whim.

whiteness cloaks  
corruption, nefarious  
slaughter of disfigured  
democracy where (Black)  
Dread Scott, 33 years ago  
spread the ole red, white,  
and blue across the floor,  
inviting our feet to softly  
step on stars and stripes -  
"What is the Proper  
Way to Display a U.S. flag?"

An earnest query deemed  
disgraceful, a desecration,  
denounced 97-0 by Senate vote.

Will my hooded privilege  
turn toward Douglas Firs  
and wind?





“The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free.”

- Maya Angelou