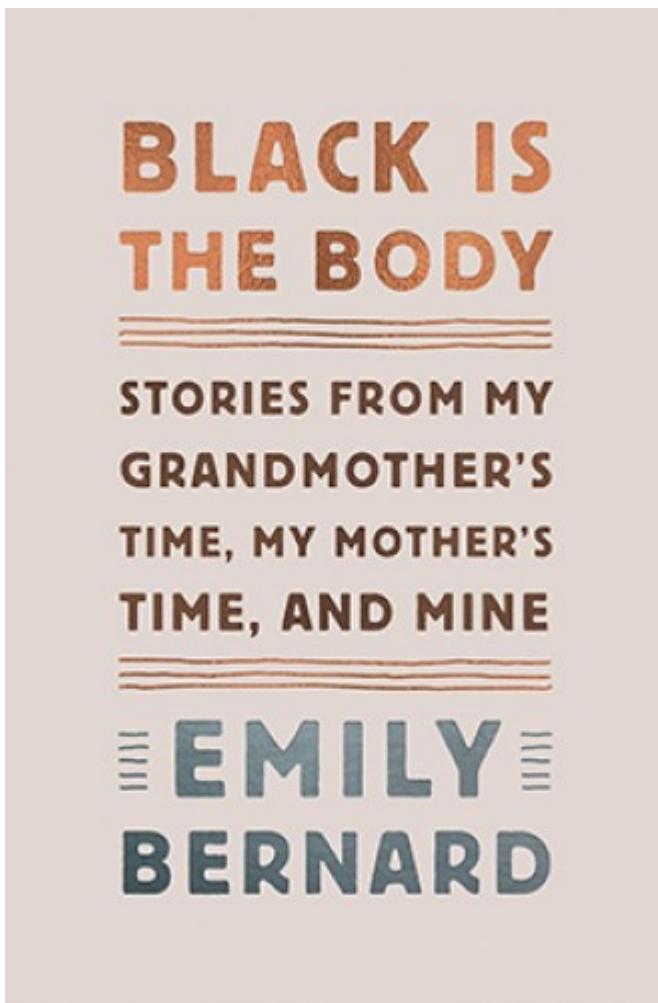


The intersection between blackness and whiteness

Emily Bernard's essays insist that no conversation is about race alone.

by [Allie Lundblad](#) in the [September 25, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Black Is the Body

Stories from My Grandmother's Time, My Mother's Time, and Mine

By Emily Bernard
Knopf

Black Is the Body takes place somewhere between a wound and its healing, between the raw material of experience and a finished story, between a history and the identity forged within it. In each of this collection's beautifully crafted essays, Emily Bernard claims the powerful choices made in the spaces between. She dispels any notion that story, identity, or healing simply spring forth on their own.

In fact, Bernard makes clear that the work of telling our stories and embodying our identities is always done in conversation with other stories and other bodies. In an essay on her marriage, for example, she describes a moment when her white fiancé changes a flat tire as she and her black family stand anxiously by the side of the road. Fitting this moment into larger narratives, she traces her family's anxiety back, remembering her parents' need to stop in places they knew would be safe throughout her childhood. She sets those memories within the longer history of dangers faced by black people on the road.

Bernard names the varieties of experience in that roadside moment as "the difference between living white and living black in America." She concludes, "I see the difference. Mostly, I despise it. But my belief that difference can engender pleasure as well as pain made it possible for me to marry a white man."

Bernard creates stories from experiences by gathering multiple narrations of a single event, multiple events that tell a new story as they are set side by side, and multiple stories that become the background for one another. Her potent combination of stylistic skill, emotional honesty, and insight draws readers into her story making.

As Bernard explores her life—as a black woman, a mother, a professor, a wife, and a friend—she reflects moment-by-moment reactions and changing feelings and thoughts. She draws attention to the significance of perspective, offering both the answer she gives her students and the one she keeps to herself, for example. She includes both her own reaction to an event in her daughter's life and the way her daughter makes sense of it. She tells a story in third person and then identifies herself as a character within it. These shifts in perspective are sometimes simple and at other times surprising and poignant.

This multiplicity of perspectives witnesses to the complicated relationship between the stages of our experience and the stories we live upon those stages. Together

they reveal the moments when old stories become the stage upon which new stories are told.

Bernard makes the distinction between story and stage early in the book when she describes being stabbed by a stranger in a New Haven coffee shop in 1994. She writes that her “experience of being at the wrong end of a hunting knife was only the situation, not the story itself; it was the stage, not the drama.” The drama, she shows, is as big as her own story—and even bigger. It plays across encounters far broader than the violence of that single moment. That particular moment, however, comes to symbolize for Bernard those larger encounters, and particularly the violent encounter that has been American race relations.

Race itself, then, becomes another space where story, identity, and healing must be made out of experience. In her introduction to the essays, Bernard names blackness as the situation, the stage upon which her story plays, but also as the quality of the story itself. Blackness, she writes, as both situation and story, holds the fullness of life, “beauty, misery, wonder and opportunity.” Blackness includes the harm of American racism but is not limited to it.

Where the reality of racism does set the stage, Bernard shows that it’s the stage not only of blackness but of whiteness, too. It’s the same stage upon which the white people in these essays must tell their stories. In this way, their stories, along with so many others, become a part of the author’s own.

In Bernard’s hands, the all too frequently constricted space of conversation about race opens wide enough to hold complexity and honesty, critique and commitment, error and uncertainty. Her intention is “to contribute something to the American racial drama besides the enduring narrative of black innocence and white guilt” (although that narrative holds truth as well). She is more than successful.

These essays make a number of contributions to the usual conversations about race, including those that I frequently have with my congregation. I’ve found that it is far too easy to slip into talking as a group of white people about experiences that are not our own in the context of what needs to be *done*. It is far too easy to slip into talking about race as though it is synonymous with racism, and as though we know exactly what that means.

Black Is the Body invites us into a different kind of conversation. It insists that no conversation about race is a conversation about race alone. Race is lived, a story

told in choices—how we care for our children or how we nurture friendships—and thus it is impossible to abstract or to essentialize.

Bernard invites us to consider how our own racial identities are made. She reminds us to make room for the stories that are not ours but have set the stage for our own stories. She invites us to ask questions that don't have easy answers, questions that don't lead to practical action steps before they force us to recognize people's complexity, our own and that of others. She offers honesty, and she asks for our honesty in return.

I finished reading this collection with a feeling much like the one Bernard expresses at the end of the book: a desire for easier answers and happier endings than those provided by the complexities of life. It is for precisely this reason that I find myself trusting her as a storyteller and trusting the truth she tells.