

Excerpted from

Thomas Chatterton Williams, "Adrian Piper's Show at MoMA is the Largest Ever for a Living Artist. Why Hasn't She Seen It?" *The New York Times Magazine*, June 27/July 1, 2018, 40-49:

Though Piper remembers her students fondly, her decade and a half at Wellesley presents one of the most unusual focal points in any autobiographical writing I have ever read. In 2000, she brought suit against both Wellesley and its president at the time, Diana Chapman Walsh, for breach of contract and other claims, arguing, according to court documents, that the college had been "unjustly enriched by reaping the benefit of free publicity from her anti-racist artwork while failing to provide her with promised institutional support." The lawsuit and a subsequent complaint were dismissed, but Piper's relationship with the school, where she remained employed until 2008, never recovered.

In "Escape to Berlin," Piper's need to flee Wellesley takes on the urgency and melodrama of a psychological thriller. In several instances she accuses members of the philosophy department, the administration and the board of campaigns of harassment, vandalism and, ultimately, trying to kill her. (She never explicitly mentions Wellesley, referring only to "The College.") "I still think The College wants me dead," she writes, "that it will want this even more once this memoir is published; and that, with its powerful international political and corporate connections, it will find a way to make this happen." She made an artwork that consists of the words "Make it look like an accident" over a smiling, desaturated self-portrait, specifically over the area of forehead where a hired assassin would aim a laser beam.

If you talk to faculty members who knew Piper at Wellesley or to members of the current administration, you will receive a range of reactions to this claim. "I think people were inclined always to be helpful to her and maybe even a bit protective of her at first," Alison McIntyre, a chairwoman of the philosophy department at that time, told me in an email. "Nothing about her persecution narrative seemed to us to be grounded in reality, but still, I think the attitude toward her was more like uncomprehending forbearance, not hostility." When I asked Wellesley to comment, a spokeswoman provided a statement that called Piper an "exceptional conceptual artist" who eventually came to have "her differences with the College, but all of her claims against Wellesley were dismissed in court." Wellesley explained her termination as a direct consequence of her absence: After moving to Germany, she didn't show up to work for more than two years.

Yet when I spoke to Selwyn R. Cudjoe, a professor of Africana Studies who was instrumental in recruiting Piper to the school, he offered another layer of complexity. "Adrian is a brilliant woman," he said. "A brilliant, black woman. Folks in philosophy may have been very, not resentful, but they do not accept excellence among black people that easily." Cudjoe is the longest-serving black faculty member at Wellesley. He assured me that, in his 32 years there, he found Wellesley to be "a very nurturing place." But something about our conversation about whatever happened to Piper must have touched him. Several days after we spoke on the phone, he emailed me again: "Since talking with you, I have been thinking. I believe that part of Wellesley's problem — and Adrian may have been a victim of this — is that it does not quite know how to treat its older black intellectuals, particularly if

they are as smart as Adrian is. It might be that we have been here for such a short time they don't quite know whether to appreciate our talent and our gifts or that we do not demonstrate enough thanks or gratefulness for their having hired us to this prestigious institution."

Whatever one is prepared to accept as plausible, it seems undeniable that Piper derives from the particularities of her own experiences at elite institutions like Harvard and Wellesley certain larger questions about the very real challenges of being a black woman or of simply being black or being a woman, that are worth taking very seriously indeed. Still, the allegations about Wellesley nagged at me. While I don't doubt for an instant that Piper came to seem extravagantly inconvenient to a number of people there or that she believes in the core of her being that her life really was at stake, I could not square the extremity of her feelings of persecution with my own sense of reality, no matter how hard I tried.

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Piper has said of the "[Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3" (2013)] Registry" that it probably arises "from my jaded attitude toward institutional authority." It is a response, she elaborated, "to the despair induced by recognizing, at a deep level, that the human institutions that are supposed to civilize and prepare us for a stable community anchored in shared interests and values are not working, and never have worked, because institutional professions of commitment to those values almost always mask a bottomless pit of need to accumulate, preserve and extend personal power." Yet what feels so moving about the work to the hordes of participants is precisely the opposite of whatever jadedness that spawned it. On the contrary, it is the sheer naïveté of the piece that makes it function — the chance it presents for a respite, however silly and brief, from all the incessant, sophisticated little obfuscations and half-truths most of us must rely on to make adult life bearable.

"The Probable Trust Registry" made Piper the first woman of (openly, she would caution) African descent ever to win a Golden Lion. And yet neither the mainstream press nor the black community seemed to make a very big deal of this achievement at the time or since, certainly nothing like the tremendous outpouring of racial pride that was paid, for example, to Kehinde Wiley for painting Barack Obama's presidential portrait. Perhaps this has to do with Piper's decision not to exhibit her work in all-black shows, which has been perceived by some as self-loathing. In 2013, when Piper pulled her work from a group show, Valerie Cassel Oliver, the curator, responded by saying it was clear to her "that stigmas about blackness remain not only in the public's consciousness, but also in the consciousness of artists themselves."

In researching this article, I reached out to a half dozen of the most prominent black women artists and curators in America for their thoughts on Piper's significance and was amazed by the resounding silence. Each declined an interview or reneged after initially agreeing, even those who clearly have been influenced by Piper's oeuvre or were in attendance at the opening of "Synthesis," Instagramming videos of Piper dancing. I thought about this while rereading an incredible section of "Escape to Berlin," in which Piper writes with an unusually cleareyed self-awareness:

I am identified as “black” by others, both “black” and “white,” only when this serves to enhance their own social status, and not otherwise. Identifying myself as “black” had also very often served this function for me. I had regarded it as an honor and a privilege to be counted among the members of a community that had proved its mettle, its intelligence, and its genius by surviving and sometimes flourishing amid the most resourceful and sustained effort to destroy its humanity the world has ever seen. Outside the circle of my immediate family, however, the general presumption among both “black” and “white” Americans has been that I know nothing about the African-American experience. I now agree with that presumption. I would only add that my family and my parents’ African-American friends probably did not know anything about it either, although, like me, they may have thought they did.

Here Piper puts her finger on a most punishing aspect of black or any marginalized group identity that is seldom addressed with the honesty it requires. The idea that some black people do not even possess knowledge of their own experience when that experience strays from the predetermined plotline is itself oppressive. This is, at least in part, why Piper confessed to me in Berlin that she never would have found the freedom back home to exist outside of the black-white binary.