

# Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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**Nell Painter, a professor emerita of American history at Princeton, now works as an artist in Newark, New Jersey.**

teenth-century former toy factory in Newark, New Jersey, Painter, Ph.D. '74, turns unforthcoming. Asked why she might bring together this drawn figure with that digital backdrop, such-and-such block of text with so-and-so loud field of color, she answers simply: Because she can. Because she likes the way it looks. Because to do so brings her pleasure. Yet pleasure is not enough: Painter insistently separates herself from the ranks of

Sunday watercolor painters. More than a fish-out-of-water tale, Painter's memoir testifies to her unusual ambition.

The gatekeepers at the Rhode Island School of Design were not encouraging. Their reactions to Painter's work, and even her presence, ranged from passive disinterest to racist, sexist, or ageist dismissal. Painter herself was dismayed to find her painting hand—dormant since college—rusty, her "twentieth-century eyes" unsophisticated. She set herself to tireless, iterative image-making, but even that drew criticism. Calling her "dogged," one RISD

## Painter, Anew

*A historian embarks on her artistic career.*

by OLIVIA SCHWOB

**I**N 2006, Nell Irvin Painter, recognized by seemingly every venerable institution—Harvard doctorate, Princeton professor emerita, Guggenheim fellowship, to name just a few—boxed up her accolades as a historian and went back to school to become an artist. Now, 76 years old and

12 years deep into her second lifetime, her decision has been well documented and much discussed, not least by Painter herself, for whom a whirlwind press tour has followed the publication of her bracingly honest memoir, *Old in Art School*, this spring.

But in her studio in a red-brick, nine-

O P E N B O O K

# “I Got Race”



Sharmila Sen

In 1982, Sharmila Sen's family arrived in Cambridge from Calcutta with six bags and \$60, dressed in their best clothes. In India, they were upper-caste Hindu Bengalis, Anglophone-educated and downwardly mobile, their privilege precarious. They would

soon learn that the United States had its own hierarchy. *Not Quite Not White: Losing and Finding Race in America* (Penguin Books, \$16) retraces that journey, its comic scenes from girlhood—studying *Hawaii Five-O*, whipping up no-bake Jell-O desserts every day—cut with wry observation.

America gave Sen '92 new manners (“The Proper Use of Salt and Pepper”; “The Blessed Sneeze”; “The Indoor Voice”); more deeply, over time, she also “got race”: “I got race the way people get chicken pox. I also got race as one gets a pair of shoes or a cell phone. It was something new,

something to be tried on for size, something to be used to communicate with others. In another register, I finally got race, in the idiomatic American sense of fully comprehending something. *You get what I'm saying? Yeah, I get you.*”

In this passage, Sen, now executive editor-at-large at Harvard University Press, recalls the flush of humiliation she felt as a 12-year-old when people asked why her family had immigrated:

**We weren't chic expats** or political dissidents with lofty ideologies. We were three people moving from a country with fewer resources to one with greater resources. I doubt we added glamour or value to our surroundings.

“Why did your parents come to America?”

“For better jobs.”

To this day this small exchange—repeated endlessly throughout my years in the United States—instantly determines the social hierarchy between my interlocutor and me. I wish I could say my parents possessed some extraordinary professional

skill for which an American institution wooed them. We did not hold noble political or religious convictions that were at odds with the government of India. There was no war raging in my city and we were not being resettled. *Homo economicus* has a duller, more prosaic story to tell.

“Why did your parents come to America?”  
“For better jobs.”

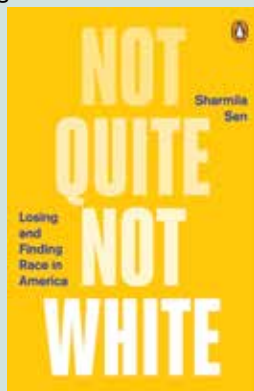
The native-borns nod and feel pleased that they are citizens of a country that of-

fers better everything—jobs, homes, food, schools, music. I would feel the same if I was in their shoes. It must feel good to be born in a country that has more wealth than other places, to have the hardest cur-

rency in your wallet. It must feel good to be generous and invite others—after intense vetting and preselection—to share in this plenty. Even though I had no say at all in my family's decision to emigrate, I felt my shoulders weighed down with the plenitude of the host country. This plenitude of which I was to be the grateful recipient was evidence that white people

were superior to people like me. How else could one nation be so wealthy and another be so poor; one country have so much to give and another stand in a queue to receive? The inequality of nations was surely a sign that some races were morally, physically, and intellectually superior to others. The inequality of nations surely had nothing to do with man, but was shaped by Providence.

“Why did your parents come to America?”  
“For better jobs.”



teacher told her she'd “never be an artist,” no matter how much work she made or how many professional marks she hit.

True, pure toil didn't get Painter much closer to her first dream, of artistry through technical perfection. But the boot-camp-style cycle of effort and dejection (a “circuit of torture,” she writes) did help her find a niche: a convergence of art and history. With her thesis project, “Art History According to Nell Painter,” she collaged images of figures from black cultural history with paint-daubed fields of bold color and abstract patterns, distorting them with digital photo-manipulation tools, and obscuring or illuminating them with text. The project has echoes of Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and Faith Ringgold, but dodges nostalgia by being, simply, weird.

“I've been skirting expectation for some time already,” Painter says. That began, arguably, with *The History of White People*, published in 2011, when Painter was in the midst of her M.F.A. Though the book sold in a way most academic historians only dream of, some critics called it “grandiose,” “superficial,” and “too ambitious.” To Painter, these

**“I'm standing up for my right to be myself,” Painter says. “And that can seem odd.”**

criticisms were attempts to keep her within bounds: let the black historian write black history. Her ambition was a “problem” for the art world as well—her desire to work the material of her scholarship into images was deemed excessively academic or literal.

Nevertheless, since graduating, Painter has steadily cleared the bars of professional achievement—gathering a handful of gallery shows, fellowships, residencies, and commissions. More importantly, she has staked out her own territory on the border between art and history, transmuting the figures and events that populated her old life with the tools of her new one. A project called *The Odalisque Atlas* builds on material from *The History of White People*: one imagined map transforms the geographies and stories of young women's enslavement, drawn from across the globe and throughout time, into a single dense composite; labels and arrows swirl around the Black Sea. Also recently,





**Painter made *Black Sea Composite Map 4 Historic Map* (left) and *Black Sea Composite Map 7 Washed Away in 2012*, as part of her *Odalisque Atlas* project.**

excerpts from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* have been transformed into imagery through digital projection and hand-painted lettering. A playwright friend commissioned images of Ella Fitzgerald and Hilton Als to illustrate an edition of her work; stage flats commissioned by an opera company feature Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Everywhere in her work, towering figures of the historical black pantheon make glancing eye contact with the viewer, before slipping out of sight.

Painter understands better than most the roots of the demand that black artists and public figures make themselves legible and unthreatening to a white audience. Much of her career as a historian focused on how figures like Sojourner Truth evad-

ed and manipulated society's gaze. When she began her memoir, the same conviction that brought her to the top of the ivory tower (and the *New York Times* bestseller list) assured her that she had a story worth telling; writing the book was, in a way, "claiming a privilege" that readers would find her interesting, Painter admits. But telling her story isn't the same thing as explaining herself, or making her life digestible or even political. Instead: "I'm standing up for my right to be myself," she says. "And that can seem odd."

At the far end of the basement studio, one white wall has been cleared of framed images, photocopies, and sketches; a bright light shines over it. 2018 has been the year

of the book, but soon there will be time for new projects, Painter hopes. She wants to make an artist's book—something between a folio of paintings and a text-driven work like the mem-

oir—about Emmett Till. Last year, the art world was seized by controversy around the exhibition of Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* in the Whitney Biennial. Critics questioned whether Schutz, a white artist who is an acquaintance of Painter's, had the right to make, distribute, or profit from an image based on an iconic photograph from Till's funeral. Painter wants to make her own version of the painting to consider critically what she calls the history, the forgetting, and the rediscovery of Till. "I do this not to better the world or necessarily to make art history," Painter says. "It's not art history. It's mine."

## "Little Shards of Dissonance"

*An oratorio adapted from Langston Hughes*

by SOPHIA NGUYEN

**A**T SOME POINT, while preparing for the Rockport Chamber Music Festival, Davóne Tines '09 and Michael Schachter '09 were freshly struck by their circumstances. Their piece *Were You There*, a musical meditation on racial violence, starts with Handel and ends with Tines inviting the audience to join him in singing "We Shall Overcome." The friends were rehearsing in the Massachusetts town's soaring concert hall, its entire back wall made of glass. Out that window they could

see people partying on Cape Ann, enjoying the water, celebrating the Fourth of July.

"Davóne and I had a moment when we looked at each other," Schachter recalls. "We're singing about police brutality, and we're amidst a lot of wealth and people who could go through years of their lives without confronting—not only any racialized violence, but literally any other *races*. We felt like, it's bizarre—we have to be messengers or evangelists for something that people might otherwise have no real need to confront."

This is a contrast they've grown familiar with, as creators of classical music: presenting art about injustice in gracious venues. It's one they'll likely face again with their next collaboration: *The Black Clown*, with music by Schachter and its title role sung by Tines, adapts text by Langston Hughes for the stage, and will open the American Repertory Theater's (A.R.T.) new season.

The poem is obscure, its structure strange. Introducing it as "a dramatic monologue to be spoken by a pure-blooded Negro