

WHO

Last summer, a prominent professor of African history made a shocking confession: Though she'd spent years posing as Black and Latina, she was in fact a white woman from suburban Kansas City. Five months later, Krug has been banished from George Washington University and the campus is struggling with questions she left behind. **MARISA M. KASHINO** pieces together the professor's real story—and how a supposedly skeptical academic world came to believe her fake one.

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At her elite private school, Krug [first row, second from left] was known for stirring up drama. But once she left, classmates never saw her again.

“I AM A COWARD.”

Jessica Krug’s confession started ricocheting across screens one brutally muggy afternoon in late-summer Washington. “For the better part of my adult life,” it began, “every move I’ve made, every relationship I’ve formed, has been rooted in the napalm toxic soil of lies.” Krug, a faculty member at George Washington University, had taken to Medium, the online forum, to reveal a stunning fabrication. Throughout her entire career in academia, the professor of African history—a white woman—had been posing as Black and Latina.

“I have thought about ending these lies many times over many years, but my cowardice was always more powerful than my ethics. I know right from wrong. I know history. I know power. I am a coward,” she wrote. “You should absolutely cancel me, and I absolutely cancel myself.”

The statement, posted September 3, 2020, went viral immediately, unleashing a tidal wave of *Oh, my Gods* across the

text chains of Krug’s GW colleagues and other academics. “We were all blindsided,” says GW history-department chair Daniel Schwartz. Distraught emails from Krug’s students—less than a week into a virtual semester already upended by the coronavirus pandemic—began piling up in faculty in-boxes. Meanwhile, an online mob went to work churning up old photos of Krug and tanking the Amazon ratings of her book. By the end of the day, a now-infamous video of Krug calling herself “Jess La Bombalera” and speaking in a D-list imitation Bronx accent was all over the internet.

The next morning, Schwartz convened an emergency staff meeting on Zoom. The initial shock of their colleague’s revelation had quickly given way to anger, and now the GW professors who logged on were unanimous: The department should demand Krug’s resignation right away. If she refused, they’d call for the university to rescind her tenure and fire her. That afternoon, they issued their ulti-

matum in a public statement. Five days later, Krug quit.

It was a dizzyingly fast fall for a woman who’d been among the most promising young scholars in her field. The 38-year-old had a PhD from one of the nation’s most prestigious African-history programs. She’d been a fellow at New York’s famed Schomburg Center, done research on three continents, and garnered wide praise for her book. She’d achieved all of it, as far as her GW colleagues knew, despite an upbringing that was nothing short of tragic. As Krug told it, she’d been raised in the Bronx, in “the hood.” Her Puerto Rican mother was a drug addict and abusive.

The tale was just the latest version of one Krug had been evolving for more than 15 years, swapping varied, gruesome particulars into the made-up backstory (a rape, a paternal abandonment) for different audiences. It was a heart-tugger—and, it turns out, incredibly flimsy. Minimal online sleuthing would have unraveled any of

PREVIOUS SPREAD, PHOTOGRAPH ON RIGHT COURTESY OF YOUTUBE

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PHOTOGRAPH VIA GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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Some students at GW liked the unconventional profile she cut compared with other profs.

the lies in minutes—something Krug, who was still an undergrad when Facebook debuted, surely knew. But she’d also learned that the harrowing history she’d crafted was a useful line of defense against the kind of probing that could have easily exposed her. After all, who wanted to pry into such a delicate situation?

“To everyone who trusted me, who fought for me, who vouched for me, who loved me, who is feeling shock and betrayal and rage and bone marrow deep hurt and confusion, violation in this world and beyond: I beg you, please, do not question your own judgment or doubt yourself,” Krug wrote in her confession. “You were not naive. I was audaciously deceptive.”

JESSICA ANNE KRUG IS NOT FROM “THE HOOD.”

She grew up in Overland Park, Kansas, an upper-middle-class, overwhelmingly white suburb of Kansas City, Missouri. She had a bat mitzvah when she turned 13. She attended some of the area’s best private schools, including the elite Barstow

School, which counts the current Kansas City mayor, a cofounder of Tinder, and former Obama press secretary Josh Earnest as alums.

But while Krug was surrounded by preppiness and tradition, she fashioned herself as the class rebel, thrilling at opportunities to test a boundary or make a spectacle. She favored a hippie look—flannel shirts and tie-dyes, Birkenstocks, unkempt dirty-blond hair—and championed causes that seemed radical at the time. In an interview with the *Kansas City Star*, her schoolmate Quinton Lucas, now the city’s mayor, remembered her “once standing up at an all-school assembly and announcing, ‘There’s going to be a giant gay prom this weekend, and you’re all invited.’ This was 1999, so all of our jaws dropped.”

At one point, Krug forced her way onto the boys’ baseball team, in protest that there was no girls’ team. (Never mind that she apparently had never played.) On another occasion, she planned an

on-campus flag-burning to make a statement about free speech. “We all had to have a moment of a group of students and a group of teachers talking her out of it,” says a former classmate who was on the debate team with Krug and considered her a close friend.

A more troubling incident had to do with the school’s literary magazine. “Her work was always so different from everyone else’s,” recalls Miranda Lenz, an old friend who still lives in the area. “There were times where our teacher would be like, ‘You really need to tone it down,’ because her stuff would be borderline [sexually] inappropriate.” Everyone assumed it was at least original—until the day Krug got caught plagiarizing, something reported in the *Kansas City Star* as Krug’s hometown media swarmed on the story last summer.

“It was at that point that I really lost all respect for her,” says Lenz, remembering the incident. “It just seemed like she was more upset about being caught than she was about what she had done.”

For as much as she hogged the spotlight at school, Krug’s home life was a mystery, even to close friends. Some remember meeting her mother during pickup at the end of the day, but no one could recall ever going inside her house. Krug never talked about her dad. In fact, a couple of friends told me they’d thought her father was dead.

According to a family member, her dad worked in the grocery business. Her parents were not wealthy—classmates say Krug attended Barstow on a scholarship. In the course of her childhood, according to the relative, her parents divorced, remarried, then divorced again. Her father moved to Las Vegas in 1999.

The same year, when Krug was a junior, she was clamoring to graduate early and get out of Overland Park. “She would say it was too conservative for her and she hated all the traditions . . . of the school,” says her friend from the debate team.

Krug left for college at age 17, and no one heard from her again—including most of her own family. “When I tell you she lost contact,” says her relative, “it was like, off the face of the earth.”

SOME EIGHT YEARS LATER AND 500 MILES away, a grad student at the University of Wisconsin, whom I’ll call Julia, was in

downtown Madison when a stranger approached. The woman introduced herself as Jess Krug and said she recognized Julia from a class they had together. Somehow, as they made small talk, the conversation turned to race.

“She started to identify herself with the ‘us’ and ‘we’ pronouns,” says Julia, who is Afro-Latina. She had assumed that Krug, with her pale skin and nearly buzzed-off blond hair, was white. But as Krug kept talking, says Julia, “I soon came to realize that she was identifying herself as Black.”

When Krug had vanished from home after high school, she’d enrolled at the University of Kansas in Lawrence and still identified as white. But midway through her degree, a college friend remembers, she decided to follow a boyfriend out west and finish undergrad at Portland State. There, halfway across the country, she appears to have launched her transformation, occasionally slipping into conversation that she was Black. By the time she arrived in Wisconsin to get her master’s and PhD, she was fully inhabiting the lie.

On the day she met Krug in downtown Madison, Julia felt a bit bewildered by the conversation. But she decided her Black

classmate could just be exceptionally light-skinned. The two became friends, to a point. “The minute we would try to deepen our friendship,” Julia says, “she would just say or do something very off-putting about my own class position or my own Blackness.” For example, at that time Krug was telling people she came from “the ghetto” of Kansas City, went to mostly Black schools, and had been conceived when her Black mom, an abusive drug addict, was raped by her white dad. She lorded this tough upbringing over her friends, Julia says, as evidence that she was authentically Black, while calling Julia, who grew up middle class, “bougie.”

Julia remained friendly with Krug out of pity. Besides her sad past, Krug claimed to be in the midst of a crumbling

“I WAS AUDACIOUSLY DECEPTIVE.”

long-distance marriage to a Nigerian man, turning to Julia for a shoulder to cry on. Another former friend says her relationship with Krug revolved around the sob story. She and Krug hadn’t known each other long, but she says Krug would call constantly to agonize about how the guy had cheated on her with a white woman. “She made me invest a lot of emotional labor—I mean, a lot.”

Krug would repeat the same pattern throughout her fraud, attaching herself to Black friends, then using her supposed traumas and race-based victimhood to prey on their sympathies and manipulate them into believing her con. Eventually, though, her neediness and mean streak had a way of wearing people down.

A few years into their friendship, Julia and Krug were chatting online when Krug

made another of her comments questioning Julia’s Blackness. By then, other friends had been urging Julia to accept what, to them, seemed obvious: Krug looked like a white woman because she probably was one. Julia hadn’t known what to believe. But she says Krug’s cutting remark that day was the push she needed to finally see through the act. “I just blocked her,” says Julia. “There was no big falling-out. It was just a moment of reckoning for me where I just said, ‘Enough.’”

Without any real proof, though, Julia says she had no idea what she could do about Krug’s secret. So she tucked it away. It would be years before she thought about Krug again.

AS SHE WORKED TOWARD HER PHD, KRUG hobnobbed with some of the top scholars

of African history and landed impressive fellowships. She often went to do research in New York, where she would hang out with another prominent student in her field, Akissi Britton.

Britton was surprised when Krug, with her sandy-hued buzzcut, identified herself as Black. Her explanations of her background were inconsistent, too. Once, over a meal with Britton and Britton’s then husband, Krug said she came from the Tuareg people, a seminomadic group in North Africa. “My ex-husband, though, he lived and studied on the Continent for a few years, so he was very familiar with the Tuareg, and he had questions,” says Britton. Krug struggled to supply answers. She never brought up the Tuareg to Britton again.

After that, Krug implied she was African American. “We heard about her being at her grandmother’s house with her other cousins,” says Britton, who is now a professor of Africana studies at Rutgers. “Her growing up around other Black people and how she was the only one that looked like her.”

Even so, Britton says she was loath to “police” Krug’s Blackness. She was juggling school and parenting and didn’t have a lot of time for social drama. Her quiet doubts were also outweighed by how woke Krug claimed to be. “She mimicked a militant, pro-Black politic to get people on her side,” Britton says.

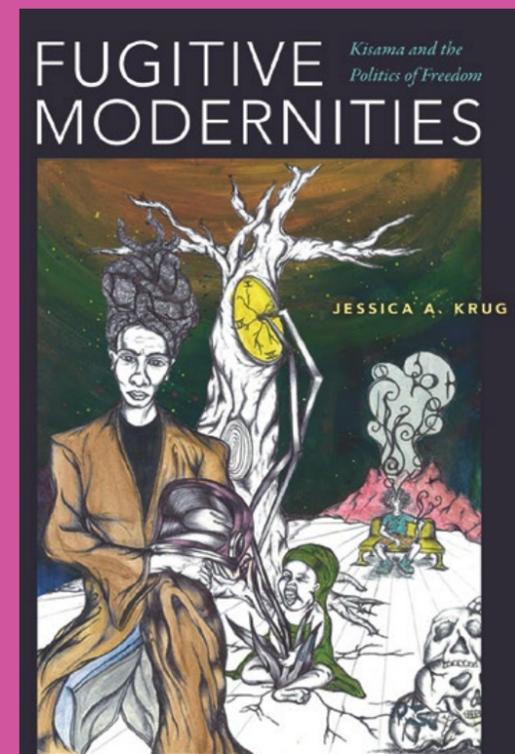
Around 2010, Krug moved to New York to finish her dissertation and live with a new beau and his family in the Bronx. It was then that yet another twist in her narrative emerged. “She did begin to talk about a Puerto Rican grandfather,” says Britton. “I was like, *Where did this come from?*”

The friend who consoled Krug through her relationship troubles remembers when Krug introduced this new backstory, too—abruptly announcing one day that

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Krug would lie and say that her light skin came from mixed-race parents—a Black mom who was raped by a white dad.



PHOTOGRAPH OF KRUG COURTESY OF ANGELA PREGGATE GROUP

She had been a rising star, one of two experts worldwide in the area of Africa she studied.

WHO WAS JESSICA KRUG?



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Krug wasn't actually her family's name. "She passed it off as her grandmother, who was supposedly suffering from some form of Alzheimer's or dementia, had a very lucid moment in which she said, 'Oh, you know, our last name is Cruz.'" In reality, as the friend explains, "the only thing Puerto Rican about her was her boyfriend."

Krug had been estranged from her family for more than a decade and was writing her dissertation at the time. She dedicated the work to her boyfriend. "Gary Kemp," she wrote in her acknowledgments, "you have given me a home."

Kemp declined an interview with *Washingtonian*, but in a short email after Krug outed herself, he told me, "When I found out, it was a gut [punch] to my stomach. I don't know what I can add. She made me feel like a damn fool. She stole my Afro Latino identity—for what? Tenure?"

IN 2012, KRUG WALKED INTO PHILLIPS HALL to deliver her final pitch for a job at GW and placed a blank sheet of paper on a podium—fake notes. She'd learned that it sometimes made people anxious when she spoke at length from memory, according to a former colleague. Dressed in an understated suit, she was confident and poised as she explained her research, deftly fielding queries during the Q&A round.

Krug didn't talk about her own race in front of the audience that day. But once she was hired, says Erin Chapman, one of a small number of Black faculty members at GW, Krug made her colleagues aware that she identified as Black and Puerto Rican, or Afro-Latina. Happy to have another woman of color in the history department, Chapman says she befriended Krug. They went out dancing and to karaoke, and they'd grab lunch and drinks together, sometimes chatting about the challenges

of dating as high-achieving Black women. Krug had an apartment in Bloomingdale but said she hated DC. "[She'd say] the city is not diverse enough—New York is so much more dynamic," says Chapman. "The men in DC were too conservative."

Krug's story about her difficult childhood had changed: She had now abandoned all ties to Kansas. Instead, she was telling people she'd been raised in the Bronx.

Once again, Krug found a sympathetic ear. But Chapman realized she couldn't maintain the friendship out of pity alone, given the way Krug frequently tried to shame her. "I'm fairly light-skinned . . . so Jess wanted to know if I had issues with my coloring and identifying as Black," Chapman says. When she told Krug she had put those insecurities to rest when she was much younger, Krug recoiled. "Basically," says Chapman, "[she] felt like that indicated that I was somehow trying to be white." She says Krug would make insulting comments—for instance, if Chapman chose to sit in the shade, Krug would accuse her of not wanting to get too dark.

Krug cut a divisive profile among other GW faculty as well. She'd decamped back to New York by her second year at the school, telling colleagues that her brother had gone to prison and that she had to help care for his several children in the Bronx. From then on, she commuted on Amtrak to her lectures. She was rarely on campus, holding office hours via Skype, and when she did make it to faculty meetings, she was combative and dogmatic, to the point of offending some colleagues. If anyone broached the idea of hiring another expert on the African Diaspora, she would pounce. "Jess would assert that she already did that," says Chapman. "I joked with others that she thinks she knows the history of anybody who was Black in the world, at any time, in any place, in any language."

Some of Krug's students despised her for how harshly she graded. Others found her refreshingly different. She showed up for class in tight tops and dresses, leather leggings, and heels. Her wavy hair was artificially black, she wore a ring in her nose, and she sometimes slipped into Spanglish. She spoke frequently about her Puerto Rican heritage and her devotion to the Bronx. Krug encouraged her students to inject their personal stories

into class, too. "She was just very relatable," says Léocadia Tchouaffé, who took Krug's world-history course. "She helped me embrace my Cameroonian heritage. It was the first time, really, that I was learning about my history in an academic setting."

In 2018, Krug got tenure. After that, Chapman remembers, she was seen around campus even less. Up in New York, though, where she lived in Spanish Harlem, Krug seemed to be everywhere. "Jess La Bombalera" was a brash, salsa-dancing, Afro-Latina activist known for railing against gentrification and police brutality. In the video that went viral after her confession, in which she'd dialed into a city-council meeting, Krug introduces herself by the nickname, then drops F-bombs while vilifying the NYPD as "a colonial occupation force."

Even the guys who swiped right were flattened by Jess La Bombalera. A 30-year-old musician named Ken Pazn told the *Daily Mail* that his Tinder date with Krug was such a disaster that he gave up on the app. After Krug refused to go to any "gentrifier spots," the pair settled on a walk. "It was all F whites, F the police, F capitalism, all of that stuff," Pazn, who is Afro-Latino, told the paper. "I feared she was ready to fistfight me if I challenged any of her views. I would have liked some physical action—but not that kind."

KRUG WAS SKILLED AT BLOWING UP HER friendships—otherwise, she never would have pulled off her ruse for so long. Years earlier, she had alienated her New York friend Akissi Britton amid a feud when she broke her foot. Britton schlepped from Brooklyn one night to bring groceries and help tidy Krug's Harlem apartment, but when she couldn't swing the same favor a few days later, she says Krug "just flipped out. . . . She was acting as if she'd gotten a diagnosis that she had to have her foot amputated." Britton felt so taken advantage of that she never spoke to Krug again.

Around the same time, in 2013, Krug lashed out at the friend who'd counseled her through her relationship troubles. Krug had gotten word that her mother had died, and she had gone back to the friend for sympathy. After hearing for years about Krug's supposedly horrific upbringing, the friend says she didn't know how to react: "I'm thinking this is a woman you didn't want a relationship with." Yet suddenly, "this was her Mother Dearest." The friend

says she tried to comfort Krug, but Krug accused her of not being supportive enough and eventually cut her off altogether.

Four years later, the friend, also a professor, saw that she and Krug were both slated to present at the same conference. She woke up early to make it to Krug's 9 AM slot, thinking it could be a chance to patch things up. "But then I get there and she's not there," says the friend. "They said for whatever reason, she didn't make it." The last time the friend had seen Krug, Krug was posing only as Black. In hindsight, the friend wonders if Krug—fully occupying her new Afro-Latina identity—noticed her name on the conference program, too, and skipped out.

At least one friend whom Krug had pushed away, though, was keeping tabs on her—and growing increasingly alarmed. Julia, from Madison, had begun seeing Krug pop up in her Facebook timeline and noticed that her identity had taken on some new contours. "I remember seeing a byline of hers in *Essence* magazine on the Puerto Rican struggle. That was when I knew, yeah, this woman had definitely morphed."

Julia privately shared her concerns with a couple of mutual friends from grad school, who'd also suspected back then that Krug was white. But Julia says she still felt powerless to act on the secret. Krug had become a well-established scholar; Julia worried that people wouldn't believe her and that outing Krug could backfire. "Academia can be brutal," says Julia, a professor herself. "One wrong move and you can ruin your career." (It was for this reason that Julia asked to be identified by a pseudonym.)

One day last August, Julia found herself engaged in a back-and-forth with other academics on Twitter about another scholar, Hermán "Hache" Carrillo, who had lied about his race. Carrillo had been a respected novelist—and remarkably, until 2015, also a professor at George Washington University. He died from Covid-19 complications in April 2020. Upon seeing his obituary in the *Washington Post*—which detailed the biography that Carrillo had given for years about being an immigrant from Cuba—his family in Michigan called in a correction: Carrillo was actually African American, born in Detroit.

The online conversation motivated Julia to finally speak up. She texted another academic, Yomaira Figueroa, with the information she had on Krug. Figueroa

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didn't know Krug personally and is more senior in her career, so Julia says she felt she could trust her to help. The Michigan State professor wasn't just receptive—she was enraged. "It hit home in so many ways, because I actually am a Black Puerto Rican woman from the hood," says Figueroa. "I felt personally hurt that she had been able to put on this minstrel show." As for Krug's nickname: "Bombalera is not even a word. I'm like, this is ridiculous."

Some quick online digging led Figueroa to obituaries for Krug's mom and dad, who died in 2013 and 2017, respectively. The write-ups revealed Krug's real origins as a white Jewish kid from Overland Park.

Julia and Figueroa both insist they didn't predict the massive fallout that came next. They say they weren't out to ruin Krug and had no intention of alerting GW or the media. "What we really wanted was for her to apologize and stop doing it," says Figueroa. "Just stop lying." But before she did anything to alert Krug, Figueroa wanted to be sure she'd been thorough. So she began reaching out to contacts who knew Krug to ask if they had additional evidence and to gauge their reactions to what she and Julia had already uncovered. Soon, Krug started deleting or locking her social-media accounts, presumably having been tipped off.

But then, instead of trying to navigate the matter privately, potentially lessening the blowback and public shaming, Krug chose the spectacle. Eight days after Julia first texted Figueroa about her, Krug hit "publish" on the Medium confession:

To an escalating degree over my adult life, I have eschewed my lived experience as a white Jewish child in suburban Kansas City under various assumed identities within a Blackness that I had no right to claim: first North African Blackness, then US rooted Blackness, then Caribbean rooted Bronx Blackness. I have not only claimed these identities as my own when I had absolutely no right to do so—when doing so is the very epitome of violence, of thievery and appropriation, of the myriad ways in which non-Black people continue to use and abuse Black identities and cultures—but I have formed intimate relationships with loving, compassionate people who have trusted and cared for me when I have deserved neither trust nor caring.

Nowhere in her 1,234 words did Krug find space simply to say she was sorry.

BEFORE HER DOWNFALL, KRUG WAS A RISING star in her field, one of two experts in the world on a little-known region of Angola. Her scholarly contributions were never in question. Why, then, did she construct this alternate universe when there was arguably so little to gain?

In her online confession, she hinted at one possible reason: "mental health issues" connected to "abuse within . . . my birth family," she wrote. "Professionals from whom I have been so belatedly seeking help assure me that this is a common response to some of the severe trauma that marked my early childhood and teen years." She didn't elaborate (and didn't respond to requests for an interview).

According to therapists I spoke to, childhood trauma could lead to issues of identity, including cultural appropriation. "In the case of someone who claims to be affiliated with a race or group of people who are fundamentally disenfranchised, it might be an attempt to indirectly show their own victimization," explains Lisa Ferentz, a clinical social worker who trains therapists in helping survivors of trauma. "Lying about one's racial identity might also be an attempt to completely disavow and abdicate any connection to one's abusers and extended family if

that affiliation evokes embarrassment, shame, or rage."

Before she changed her identity, Krug mentioned childhood abuse to at least one person she was close with. Novotny Lawrence, a friend at the University of Kansas, told me Krug shared that her mother had physically abused her. To him, though, nothing she described would explain her behavior. Instead, Lawrence, who is Black, theorizes that Krug may have gotten too immersed in the cultural experiences that were the focus of her research.

"I just feel like when you study oppression, it's easy, perhaps, for some people to start feeling very connected to that oppression," says Lawrence, now a professor of media, pop culture, and race at Iowa State University. "I'd like to believe that maybe she just got caught up . . . and not that it was something malicious."

There is an eerily on-the-nose connection between Krug's fraud and the work on which she built her career. She studied a geographic area of Angola called Kisama, chronicling how the region is not just a place but a social, cultural, and, above all, political, identity. Her work looked at how fugitives escaping violence and slavery were drawn to Kisama, turning it into "the home of fierce, intractably resistant warriors and runaways." They did not just live in Kisama, she explains; they chose to "self-identify" as Kisama.

Krug, in short, devoted her research to runaways who forged new identities. If she had fled home because of abuse herself, it wouldn't be hard to see how she might be drawn to the subject. But did she also draw inspiration from it—did she use it to justify her decision to change her own identity?

FIVE DAYS AFTER KRUG OUTED HERSELF, GW'S history department hosted a Zoom town hall for students. "There were more history majors of color [on the call] than I've seen in one place," says Chapman, her former colleague. Many of the students cried. Some of the professors got emotional, too. To them, Krug's confession wasn't just shocking but laid bare a deeper problem. "The students were, and are, hungry for a sense of safety, and Jess seemed to provide that," Chapman says. "That hunger is born of the fact that GW is very elitist. . . . It's a place that's unapologetic in its

elite, white identity."

For students who found a safe space in Krug's classroom, the violation was profound. Besides trafficking in some of the worst stereotypes of the cultures she claimed, Krug had spoken for years from a perspective that did not belong to her. "From her, I got a sense of authority," says Sally Kim, who studied the Haitian revolution in Krug's world-history course. "If she'd taught it as a white woman, I think I would've taken it with a grain of salt."

The debacle has sparked an examination of the history department. Chair Daniel Schwartz says he has assembled a committee to work on diversifying the faculty and making coursework more inclusive. The five-person committee doesn't have any Black members. A spokesperson for GW would not comment on whether diversity was a factor in Krug's hiring. But one thing driving much of the outrage over her deception is that she undoubtedly consumed space and resources that otherwise could have been allocated to an actual person of color. That notion is especially infuriating in academia, where just 6 percent of full-time faculty are Black, according to the Department of Education.

Against this backdrop, it's easy to see another reason—beyond the awkwardness and the academic-world taboos about questioning someone's identity—why so many supposedly skeptical scholars were conned for so long: In a culture that admires diversity and a profession that struggles with it, people wanted to believe.

Since her confession, Krug has all but vanished again. The last public photos of her that you can find—paparazzi shots in the *Daily Mail*—appeared a couple of days after she outed herself. They show Krug trudging up the stairwell of her apartment building, her hair disheveled, dark aviators covering her eyes. Five months later, she hasn't been heard from.

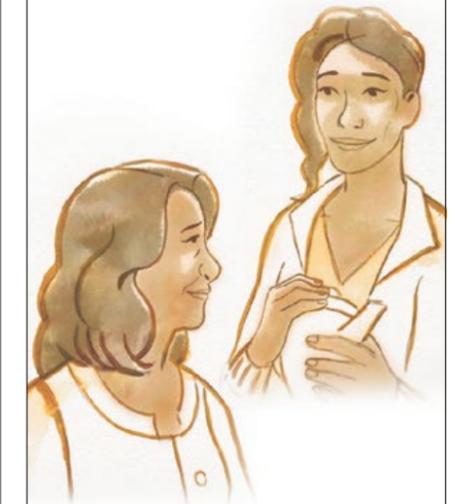
"I have not lived a double life. There is no parallel form of my adulthood connected to white people or a white community or an alternative white identity," she wrote on Medium. "I have lived this lie, fully, completely, with no exit plan or strategy." **W**

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"Everything was always very tidy. Then my family noticed how disorganized I had become."

—Theresa, living with Alzheimer's



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