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Socially Constructed Self

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From Mulatta to Mestiza

Passing and the Linguistic Reshaping of Ethnic Identity

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There was a campus orientation for new students of color. A black woman slowly approached me and as she hesitated, I knew she was going to ask the inevitable question. After struggling with it for a few seconds, she finally blurted out, "What are you . . . ? I mean, where do you come from?" Then instead of waiting for me to answer, she showed that she already knew and said, "Your mama is Black, right?" I nodded in agreement and then I realized that she had said everything in Spanish.

—Kristal Brent Zook, "Light Skinned-ded Naps"

The act of passing usually refers to the ability to be taken for a member of a social category other than one's own. The very term, like the practice, is viewed negatively in most studies of ethnicity. But in other areas of cultural studies, most prominently in queer theory as it has emerged from poststructural feminism, the notion of passing—together with its associated concepts, masquerade and mimesis—has become a crucial theoretical tool (e.g., Butler 1990, 1993; Silverman 1992). Indeed, this difference in perspective is one of the fundamental divisions between multicultural feminist theory and those strands of feminism that focus primarily on sexuality.

Why is a concept that is considered invaluable for understanding certain social categories rejected as a way of understanding others? The answer can be found in the eagerness with which poststructural feminism has declared the end of identity and the destruction of social categories. This event has not been met with answering cheers from all quarters; a reticence that is due to the fact that the implosion of sexual categories authorized by queer

theory has not yet been matched by the eradication of racial and ethnic categories. The subversive appeal of queer identities lies precisely in their ability to be disguised. Metaphors of theater, parody, and drag permeate postmodern feminist writing, with little recognition that disguises cannot be as easily assumed by members of social groups whose identities have been imposed rather than assumed or appropriated—namely, members of nonwhite racial and ethnic groups. The categorizing power of skin color, hair, and facial features remains a reality for most Americans of non-European background, a fact that is often overlooked by white poststructural feminists. Whereas gender theorists celebrate passing as an achievement, a transcendence of sexual difference, in ethnic studies the phenomenon is generally considered an evasion of racism, an escape that is available only to individuals who can successfully represent themselves as white.

Nevertheless, both passing and poststructuralism may be rehabilitated for use in studies of ethnicity. After all, a major contribution of scholars of race and ethnicity has been to destabilize these social categories, an activity that is quintessentially poststructuralist in spirit. Such scholars demonstrate that the assignment of race to particular body types is without scientific basis. Instead, racial categorization authorizes social divisions on the basis of purported scientific divisions (Outlaw 1990). The ethnic paradigm, for its part, is no more valid. Ethnic theory replaces science with social science as its justifying discourse, arguing that racial characteristics are part of a larger set of social behaviors like language and custom. But this strategy fails as well because it obscures the phenomenon of racism by attributing all social inequalities to the cultural values of minority ethnic groups (Omi & Winant 1994).¹

The assumption that an essential core, whether biological or social, determines one's race and ethnicity promotes the belief in ethnic authenticity. Authenticity—that is, the legitimacy of one's claim to ethnicity—underlies the traditional definition of passing given above, which posits a recategorization of the passing individual from her "own" ethnic group to another that is not her "own." The framework of authenticity is especially difficult to sustain, however, in the case of individuals of ambiguous or mixed ethnic background, for when multiple identities are available it is not at all clear which identity takes precedence. As I use the term for the remainder of this chapter, then, *passing is the active construction of how the self is perceived when one's ethnicity is ambiguous to others*. From this perspective an individual may in certain contexts pass as a member of her "own" or biographical ethnic group by insisting on an identity that others may deny

her. Furthermore, passing of this kind is not passive. Individuals of ambiguous ethnicity patrol their own borders, using the tools of language and self-presentation to determine how the boundaries of ethnic categories are drawn upon their own bodies.

In the following pages I support these claims, using evidence drawn from twelve interviews with women of ambiguous or mixed ethnicity.² Interviews were conducted with individuals from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, and it should therefore be kept in mind that speakers were in many ways more different than similar.³ Nevertheless, the breadth of ethnicities represented in the data provides a sense of the scope of the issue of passing and its various meanings in women's lives.

Passing in Queer Theory and Practice

Just as movement across ethnic borders casts doubt on the biological basis of race and ethnicity, so too does movement across gender borders interrogate the rigidity of sexual categories. A striking example of this process is provided in the early ethnomethodological literature, in Garfinkel's (1967) study of Agnes, a young adult who looked female to outward appearances but had male genitalia. She insisted that she was neither male nor hermaphroditic but lived as female and therefore sought a sex-change operation. Garfinkel's study, carried out in collaboration with Robert Stoller, was undertaken in order to decide whether the operation should be done; such an extreme measure, it was felt, could be justified only if Agnes really was who she claimed to be: a woman. Extensive psychological and physical testing supported Agnes's assertion, and she steadfastly refused to provide the researchers with any information about herself that might undermine her claim to femaleness. On the strength of Agnes's normative femininity, the operation was authorized. It was not until eight years later that Agnes offhandedly revealed that she had in fact been born biologically male and had achieved her female shape by taking her mother's estrogen pills since the age of twelve.

Garfinkel seems to have received this revelation good-naturedly, even appreciatively; although his opponent has bested him, he expresses admiration for her skills. The irony of the situation was not lost on him: the operation, meant to "right" a biological "wrong," succeeded in erasing altogether the maleness that Agnes had already partly obscured. The weight of social norms, in the end, overwhelmed the objective tests of medical science. Agnes's strategic deployment of cultural stereotypes of feminine linguistic and social practices can therefore be seen as simultaneously subversive and constitutive of the social order.⁴

On the basis of his work with Agnes, Garfinkel argues that passing is not a one-time event but a never-completed process of achieving a position in a recognized social category: "members' practices alone produce the observable-tellable normal sexuality of persons, and do so only, entirely, exclusively in actual, singular, particular occasions through actual witnessed displays of common talk and conduct" (181). The ethnomethodological perception of identity as emergent in practice is in many respects compatible with the view put forward by poststructuralist queer theorists. Elizabeth Grosz (1994), for example, suggests that lesbian and gay identities, unlike all others, are based on practice rather than essence. Grosz's contention leads her to assert that sexual identities can be effaced or obscured far more readily than other identities: "It is this split between what is and what one does that produces the very possibility of a notion like 'the closet.' . . . It also accounts for the very possibility of coming out—after all, a quite ridiculous concept in most other forms of oppression. This is what enables homosexuals to 'pass' as straight with an ease that is extraordinarily rare for other oppressed groups" (151). But, with the important caveats already given, most other identities can indeed be separated in the same way; as the case of Agnes proves, if femininity is displayed and performed, an individual does not need to be a woman to be taken for a woman. Such disjunctions may be relatively rare, but they do occur. The calculated use of social practices, including linguistic practices, allows an individual to mark out an identity that may not correspond to biology or biography.

Linguistic Studies of Passing

The fact that language use is instrumental to the projection of social identity is widely recognized by sociolinguists, but studies of the relationship between language and passing have been undertaken only recently. The work that has been done thus far focuses primarily on gender and sexual identity rather than on ethnicity. This work corroborates nonlinguistic research on queer subversions of gender categories in that it demonstrates that parody, as much as passing, is the goal of such subversions. This parodic element, identified for example by Judith Butler (1990), has often limited the utility of poststructuralist insights for multicultural scholarship. Yet, to distinguish sharply between gender and ethnicity in the deconstruction of social categories is to overlook that both parody and passing are acts of performance. The recognition of ethnic identity as performance allows researchers in this area to gain valuable insights from queer theory.

Most important from a linguistic perspective, the new work on gender-

bending convincingly demonstrates that language may be a crucial resource for moving from one social category to another. Recent ethnographic work in non-Western cultures, for example, indicates that the construction of a female identity by biological males and intersexed individuals takes place in large part through the strategic deployment of stereotypically feminine speech features (Gaudio forthcoming; Hall 1995, forthcoming). Similar observations have been made regarding the phenomenon of drag in North American society. Anna Livia (this volume) recounts the experiences of a butch lesbian who attended a workshop for aspiring drag kings, in which students were trained in the linguistic features associated with masculinity. The test of the workshop's efficacy came when each participant attended a "passing event" in the guise of a man.

These discussions do not explicitly address ethnic issues, but other studies do incorporate ethnicity. For example, in Rusty Barrett's (forthcoming) research on the performances of African American drag queens in gay bars, the performers made no pretense of being female, although they employed stereotypically feminine speech features. Indeed, as Barrett's nuanced analysis shows, such use of middle-class white "women's language" by lower-class Black gay men is a political statement that is designed not to efface but to highlight disjunctions of ethnicity, class, and gender.

Kira Hall's (this volume) discussion of phone-sex workers also contributes to this line of research. Hall offers several examples of the uses of ethnically stereotyped language by both female and male phone-sex workers to project a variety of feminine personas. In these instances, the performance of ethnicity is not designed to be recognized as such, and must therefore count as passing. Both studies make clear that social boundaries may be transgressed, whether overtly or covertly, using the tools of language.

Language and Ethnicity

As Hall's study (this volume) suggests, the ideological link between language and ethnicity is so potent that the use of linguistic practices associated with a given ethnic group may be sufficient for an individual to pass as a group member. In support of this fact, numerous studies have found that speakers may be able to pass linguistically even if they lack the ability to pass physically. Ronald Butters (1984) cites an unpublished study of a European American child whose peer group was African American; based on tape-recordings of her speech, more than forty native speakers of African American Vernacular English judged that she was African American. Additionally, Howard Giles and Richard Bourhis (1976) found that a majority of third-generation West Indians in Cardiff were heard as "white" in a judgment test

involving both white and Black judges. It is important to note that in these studies the speakers were not attempting to represent themselves as members of another ethnic group; indeed, in the Giles and Bourhis study the ethnic identity of speakers who were judged to be white did not differ in any apparent way from that of the other speakers. In short, linguistic ability is not a reliable predictor of ethnicity or of ethnic identity.

However, it is by no means exceptional for individuals to be perceived as outsiders in an ethnic group if they lack the requisite linguistic skills. This linguistic metric of ethnic authenticity is exemplified nowhere better than in the writings of William Labov. In his pioneering sociolinguistic research Labov (1972a) held speakers to stringent standards of vernacular language use, seeking methodologies that would elicit the purest and most authentic varieties of nonstandard dialects. For this reason he elected to use teenage male street gang members for his investigation of African American Vernacular English (Labov 1966, 1972b), a method that necessarily eliminated the linguistic practices of female speakers, as well as those of male adults and middle-class African Americans. This important criticism of Labov's research has been issued by Michèle Foster (this volume) and Marcyliena Morgan (1991). Indeed, given his well-known insistence that women's speech is more standard than men's (Labov 1991), we might infer that for Labov female speakers in general are linguistically inauthentic. Thus one of the "linguistic consequences of being a lame," to borrow Labov's (1973) title, is to be excluded from sociolinguistic research.

The women in the present study are likewise atypical group members, "lames" in the parlance of the street gang members Labov studied, who lack complete knowledge of the vernacular of at least one of the groups with which they are associated. Labov views such individuals with suspicion, for their "connection to the vernacular is one of wishful approximation" (1972b:xviii). The women I interviewed, however, did not seem to harbor any idealistic nostalgic feelings for their vernacular languages; instead, they clearly recognized their limited knowledge of such varieties as an inevitable consequence of their marginal position in vernacular-speaking communities. Ursula,⁵ for example, a twenty-four-year-old whose mother is African American and whose father is European American, explained her linguistic situation not wistfully but matter-of-factly: "In a sense I was brought up pretty much in white culture so that's where my identity comes from. I use the language of white culture. . . . When we [studied] the Black English thing in school I had just as much problem as anybody else."

Labov is not alone in linking language use to group membership. A large body of sociolinguistic and social psychological research argues that language

is frequently a central component of ethnic identity; in fact, language is often a primary criterion of the definition of ethnicity itself.⁶ Hence ethnic identity is especially sensitive to language issues, as Gloria Anzaldúa (1990:207) confirms: "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language." Moreover, for individuals who have access to multiple linguistic codes, as many of the interviewees do, language choice is inevitably an act of self-presentation. María Dolores Gonzales Velásquez (this volume) makes this same point in her analysis of Spanish, English, and codeswitching as three functionally different linguistic varieties in New Mexico. Language becomes a powerful tool in the display of the ethnic self, a tool that can either reinscribe or subvert the ethnic identities assigned by outsiders.

Traditional Perspectives on Passing

In the epigraph of this chapter Kristal Zook (1990), a light-skinned Black woman, describes how language can be mined for the materials of identity. Yet, Zook's expression of ethnicity through language use differs from those already discussed in that she is not biographically a member of the ethnic group with which she identifies; language is the glue that binds her to her ethnic identity. Zook describes the effort required to gain access to her adopted community, and the motivation for this effort:

Due to a complex combination of socio-economic circumstances, I happened to find a kind of psychological shelter in Latino heritage and even grew to identify more with *it* than with my own culture(s). . . . It wasn't until years later that I realized why I had such an obsessive drive to learn Spanish and why I felt so at ease, relaxed and at home in Spain, a country whose people had the *exact* same skin color I did. I had simply been searching for a kind of psychic shelter, wherever I could find it. (92)

Coincidentally, another essay (Creel 1990) published in the same collection also emphasizes the appeal of Latino culture as a place of ethnic security and certainty:⁷

When I am thirteen, I bury my mother once and for all and decide to go Mexican. It makes a lot of sense. I am no longer Elena, I am now Elaina and I begin insisting I am Mexican wherever I go. With my long black hair, my sun-darkened skin, and my new name, I can pass and I am safe. I obsessively hide my Japanese mother and deny my Japanese roots. . . . I love it when people ask if I am Español, because it is safe, because it means I do not stand out. (82–83)

Like Zook, Elena Creff undergoes a linguistic makeover (in this case an unofficial name change) in order to shore up the ethnic claims she is able to make on the basis of her physical appearance. The two passages are also similar in their description of the labor that goes into the construction of a new identity: both authors employ the term *obsessive* in reporting this process. In these reminiscences, being of ambiguous ethnicity presents psychological difficulties. Precipitated by the insensitive remarks of outsiders, the desire to pass offers itself as a temporary solution to racism and rejection. At the conclusion of both essays, however, the authors return to their biographical ethnic origins.

This perspective is corroborated by Erving Goffman (1963), whose sociological study of passing relies heavily on autobiographical materials. Goffman discusses the phenomenon of passing not only across racial boundaries but also between the worlds of the insane and the sane, the deaf and the hearing, the blind and the seeing, the gay and the straight. This rather bizarre taxonomy collapses diverse groups into a single dichotomy that separates "normals" from the stigmatized; the stigma can be escaped, Goffman suggests, by passing as "normal." In his data passing is viewed merely as a stage that the individual can transcend through self-acceptance. He reports that "in the published autobiographies of stigmatized individuals, this phase in the moral career is typically described as the final, mature, well-adjusted one, a state of grace" (101-2). George Kich (1992), in his research on biracial identity, presents a similar developmental account: in his three-stage model, passing occurs in Stage 2, a period during childhood and the teen years in which the individual seeks the approval of others; self-acceptance comes with adulthood in Stage 3, when the biracial identity is embraced. In such frameworks, passing is tantamount to pathology. An individual cannot be psychologically healthy or whole unless her or his entire ethnic heritage is acknowledged.⁸

The autobiographical emphasis on psychological problems is also common in literary treatments of racial ambiguity, but happy endings such as those reported above are rare in literature. Whereas the autobiographies emphasize that passing may represent a search for a sense of belonging, the evidence of early-twentieth-century novels suggests that it is a rejection of one's true community. In fiction, passing from one ethnic group into another is most often represented as a symptom of confused identity and denial of one's heritage. This pattern was established early on in literature on passing. In the context of American race relations, the phenomenon was usually restricted in the literary imagination to the movement of people of mixed African American and European American ancestry from Blackness

to whiteness.⁹ Although permanent changes in identity were in reality very rare (Spickard 1989), this sort of passing provided dramatic tension for novelists. In most fictional accounts, the figure of the "tragic mulatto," the mixed-race individual, suffered an untimely demise for her or his transgression of racial borders. For white novelists projecting their own racist fears onto the pages of their texts, this trope was a useful warning of the dangers of miscegenation. For Black novelists the issues were more complex because passing could allow an individual to avoid racism and garner economic advantages, but only at the price of rejecting her or his community. Thus even in novels by African Americans, mixed-race characters who were spared the fate of death nevertheless ended their lives unhappily. James Weldon Johnson's ([1912] 1990) fictional *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, for example, concludes with the narrator, a Black man who has lived his life as white, lamenting, "I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (154).¹⁰ And in Nella Larsen's ([1929] 1986) novella *Passing* the mulatta who moves between the world of her white husband and the Black New York of the Harlem Renaissance inexplicably falls to her death upon her husband's discovery of her racial background.

As Anna Livia (this volume) points out, literature should be used as a source of information not about social realities but about dominant ideologies. Hence we may understand from these and other novels that the hegemonic cultural belief about passing is that it is a deliberate and permanent project of identity transformation that yields economic or social benefits in exchange for heavy psychological costs. My own study suggests a mismatch between the novels and autobiographies on the one hand and the narratives of the women I interviewed on the other. Passing does not always emerge from an identity crisis or a sense of alienation. Moreover, it is very rarely a long-term undertaking; it is far more commonly temporary and most of the time it is unintentional. In short, women may pass in a number of ways and for a number of reasons, not all of them negative. It is necessary, therefore, to expand the notion of passing to incorporate the entire range of the phenomenon. At the same time, it is important to note that most of the interviewees did not use the term *passing* to describe their experiences, and some explicitly rejected the term. Thus Paige, a twenty-three-year-old Filipina, commented:

The thing was, when someone would ask me what I was I would tell the truth. . . . I was always curious to see if I could get away with being, you know, something else, but then I thought, "Why pretend to be something I'm not?" I'm proud of who I am, so there's no reason for me to lie, which is flat-out what it is when you pass for something else.

Paige is responding here to the traditional, essentialist definition of passing. But what should count as passing becomes more complex when individuals of mixed ethnicity are involved. Unsurprisingly, then, revised understandings of passing come from mixed-race theory, an emerging branch of ethnic studies.

Mixed-Race Perspectives on Passing

In early 1995 *Newsweek* magazine dedicated its cover story to the topic of mixed race in the United States. This event represented a milestone in public awareness of the issue, coming as it did on the heels of the publication of two autobiographies—both quite well received on the talk-show circuit—by authors of mixed race whose families were split by “the color line” (Haizlip 1994; Williams 1995). The category of *mixed* itself has slowly begun to enter the public discourse as well: in commenting on the O. J. Simpson trial in March 1995, an event in which racial issues are paramount, a talk-radio host in San Francisco remarked that the jury included seven Blacks, two whites, two Latinos, and one person of mixed race. The recent shift in popular thinking about mixed race is due in large part to the efforts of mixed-race activists and academics, whose undertakings include high-profile lobbying for a *mixed* ethnic category on the next U.S. census form. Theorists of mixed-race identity have also sought to challenge earlier analyses of multiracial heritage as a psychological burden or as a romanticized symbol of racial harmony. In addressing these issues, such theorists have inevitably turned to the issue of passing.

It is possible that mixed-race theory leads other theories of ethnic identity in the analysis of passing because, as Carla Bradshaw (1992:80) remarks, “The only people capable of racially passing, and the only people to whom the concept can realistically apply, are multiracial ones.” Some of the newer theories of passing echo traditional analyses in suggesting that passing is a denial of identity, but where earlier commentators often viewed passing as a rejection of one’s true ethnic group, mixed-race theorists now advocate a mixed-race identity in which no single ethnic category is paramount. Nonetheless, several scholars have recognized the potential for a positive understanding of the phenomenon. Naomi Zack (1993), for example, points out that individuals who are able to pass may draw upon a variety of flexible identities to their own advantage. Additionally, in a recent collection of essays on mixed-race Americans, Reginald Daniel (1992) argues that passing may be viewed as a subversive exercise of agency, and Cynthia Nakashima (1992:177) suggests that passing should be seen as a way of selecting an identity: “An interesting twist on the phenomenon of ‘choosing’ occurs when a

multiracial person chooses to be a different race or ethnicity altogether—for example, an Asian-White person who identifies as Hawaiian, Samoan, Native American, or Latino.” As Nakashima’s comment indicates, the new theories recognize that passing is not simply a movement into whiteness; individuals may pass as belonging to another race or ethnicity, or as having a mixed ethnic background.

This fact is illustrated in my own research: none of the interviewees reported being taken for white; instead, the ethnicities ascribed to them by outsiders ranged from South Asian to Polynesian to Cuban to Native American. For example, Shaneinei, a twenty-two-year-old of Japanese and Latin American descent, recalls:

I remember one time in high school within the distance of just a few feet I got asked by different people. “Are you Hawaiian?” And then the next stop, “Are you Filipino?” And then, what was the next one? Filipino and then, oh, “Samoan?” “No.” And then I kept walking and someone else asked me if I was Mexican.

Regardless of category, choice is also at issue when an individual refuses an assigned or ascribed ethnicity. Paige, the Filipina who commented above on her unwillingness to represent herself as a member of another ethnic group, describes such a situation involving an encounter with a young boy in an airport waiting room:

And then he says, “What are you?” ... He said it really brashly. And I was thinking, “Where are you coming off?” And I said, “Well, I’m American,” because I am. And he said, “Are you Chinese?” And I said, “No,” and he said, “Are you Mexican?” “No.” And it was weird because the way he was talking he assumed that I wasn’t American, that I couldn’t speak this language. And here I am talking to him! ... He was asking me these questions like, “Do you speak Chinese?” or “Do you speak another language?” ... And I said to him, “Never make assumptions based on what someone looks like.... Don’t ever assume that someone can’t speak English if they have black hair and slanted eyes.”

Paige’s rejection of imposed ethnic categories intersects with the reinterpretations of passing offered above in demonstrating how individuals actively construct contested identities. Moreover, her comments point to one important facet of this process that is rarely discussed at length in the scholarship on mixed race: the contribution of language to the projection and ascription of ethnic identity.

Ideologies of Language

In the interview data I collected, ethnic identity is a site of struggle. Respondents reported that although their physical appearance violated the standards of their biographical ethnic groups, language could be instrumental in challenging the assumptions triggered by their appearance. For example, some participants in the study took steps to reclaim a lost language of heritage as part of their display of an ethnic identity. Hence Paige bought a book on Ilokano—one of her family's languages of heritage—and searched for classes in the language, and Shaneinei attended twelve years of Japanese school and majored in Japanese in college. As she reports, her efforts made her feel more authentic than the other students, who had two Japanese parents:

When I was growing up I felt sometimes like I was in a way more Japanese than the Japanese American kids were, just because they were trying so hard to forget their Japanese and I was trying so hard to learn Japanese. Just language! Not even, you know, cultural aspects, although of course you get that with language too. Like sometimes I felt like I understood some Japanese things better or, or like I don't know if *appreciated*, but somehow I felt more Japanese than they were sometimes. Which, now that I think about it I don't know if I could get past just because of how I looked. I don't think I felt like I really could ever admit that openly to anybody just cause I didn't look Japanese.

Shaneinei's statement illustrates the dissonance between the possibilities of language and the perceived limitations of the physical self. Even as Shaneinei's appearance renders her inauthentic in the eyes of others, she constructs her ethnic authenticity through language.

Over and over again, the women in these interviews use language to challenge external perceptions and to lay claim to their own definition of ethnic identity. For example, Kavita, a thirty-year-old of mixed European American and African American ancestry, explains how she resists being the subject of racist stereotypes about African Americans: "I work hard to be articulate and to come off as intelligent, to be sort of upstanding." Kavita's definition of her own ethnic identity runs counter to the expectation that nonwhite ethnic groups will be lower-class speakers of a nonstandard variety, for she explicitly defines her "articulate" speech style as standard English. Similarly, Claudia, a twenty-one-year-old Mexican American, distances herself from users of nonstandard Spanish, or "slang": "People say things and I don't understand. . . . I've never been around people who speak that way, and I was told not to use slang when I was growing up." Although both Kavita and Claudia report being teased by others for their "proper" speech, they have

made no effort to adopt vernacular speech community norms. As Kavita emphasizes, language and identity are intimately connected: "I don't alter my language the least bit. What you hear is what I am inside."

Although it is clear that the ability to speak like members of a group enhances the likelihood of being included by group members, the comments of Kavita and Claudia suggest that the inability to speak a particular way may be effective in challenging ethnic expectations. In her study of bilingual children of Japanese and American ancestry, Teresa Kay Williams (1992:295) likewise describes a type of linguistic passing predicated not upon language ability but upon inability: "Many ... learned when to keep quiet about their knowledge of the *other* language and when to disclose it. Sometimes Amerasians pretended they could not speak either language, to get special attention or for mere convenience." An example of this phenomenon in the present study is offered by Shaneinei, who occasionally refuses to engage in interaction in Spanish, a language in which she is fluent. As she explains, she does so in order to resist the imposition of an identity she views as problematic:

Latino people speak to me in Spanish. Sometimes, I don't know, it's really bad of me, and it makes me feel like a hypocrite because ... I don't like to look down on people but I guess I do because sometimes I won't answer in Spanish, I'll just answer in English. I guess from when I was a kid it was kind of bad to be Latino because you know just this big stereotype of Latino and Chicano people being so, like, dirty or bad or lazy or blah blah blah, whatever bad or negative stereotypes. I think that's partly why I still say the Latin American part of me is second because you know I identify more with the Japanese part and plus that's, like, the better side. You know, follow the existing stereotype.

Shaneinei's analysis of her own behavior is sensitive to the complex hierarchy of American racisms, which ranks ethnicities differentially based on stereotypes of class, color, and other factors.¹¹ Unwilling to be boxed into a category that carries with it the racist beliefs of the dominant culture, she averts the situation by not revealing her linguistic knowledge.

Ideologies of Gender

In resisting ethnic stereotypes, the women in this study resisted gender stereotypes as well. Indeed, Barrett's (forthcoming) research on drag queens and Hall's (this volume) work on phone sex, discussed above, indicate that ethnicity and gender are not separable parameters: any performance of gender is always simultaneously a performance of ethnicity. Conversely, as

my interview data suggest, any performance of ethnicity is always simultaneously a performance of gender. Violations of one social category may be attributed to violations of the other; hence, Claudia ascribes her atypical ethnic identity to atypical gender arrangements in her family:

My father died when [my twin sister and I] were a year old, so my mother raised us by herself. And I think that had a lot to do with different things, because my father's side of the family was very . . . traditionally Mexican where they live together in the same community, they like to stick together, with the male dominating view on the culture.

Under the guidance of their mother and older sister, Claudia and her twin were discouraged from embracing the markings of a stereotypical Mexican American female identity, in short, from being "cholas," or gang-identified.¹² The nexus of ethnicity and class thus also inescapably involves gender, for gender norms are linked to class positions. It is important to keep in mind that all the interviewees were students or recent graduates of a prestigious university and thus in violating expectations of gendered ethnicity they may be distancing themselves from lower-class status. In the passage below, Claudia describes the factors that make her ethnically ambiguous. Strikingly, none of the features she lists is associated with her skin color or facial features; the markers of ethnicity, as she describes them, are language and self-adornment:

I think it has a lot to do with how you present yourself. And if I don't have an accent, if I don't use slang a lot, if I don't dress a certain [way], they tend to think, "You know, she could be something else." Because if I had a perm, if I had, like, a plaid shirt with jeans . . . they would know right off [that I was Mexican].

Several of the badges of ethnicity that Claudia cites are also badges of gender: specific hairstyles, distinctive clothing (she comments elsewhere that dark colors in particular point to a Chicano identity). These details are enumerated by Paige as well, in a parallel discussion of her own resistance to the stereotyped image of her ethnic group: "I avoided stuff that made me look typically Filipino, like big hair and lots of eyeliner." The ethnic stereotypes that Paige mentions, cosmetics use and hairstyle, are also gender stereotypes. The passages suggest that one cannot be merely Filipino or Chicano; like the forms of these words themselves, one must be marked for gender as well, as a Filipina or a Chicana.

The pressure to display an ethnically appropriate persona is motivated in part by expectations of normative heterosexuality. Ursula, who is of African

American and European American heritage, reports that in her experience this pressure has been exerted primarily by men:

I remember one instance I was on a bus in Rhode Island and I was just dressed the way I normally dress, you know, sort of Gap basic clothes, and there was this Black guy and white guy, they were friends obviously, sitting behind me, and the white kid was asking the Black guy, "Well, how come you wear that kind of scarf and that kind of hat?" which is sort of the Islamic kind of hat and Arab scarf. And he said, "Well, I feel it's part of my culture and part of my heritage, and I just want to say that I'm identifying with that and I'm not buying into the white culture." And the kid's saying, "Oh, that's really interesting," and then this Black guy behind me says, "You know, you see that girl sitting in front of us, she's obviously not in touch with her roots." And I felt so mad, but being the little female I didn't stand up and say anything to him.

Ursula's violation of ethnic expectations by dressing "white" is also a violation of gender expectations, and thus she experiences herself in this incident as the object of specifically male scrutiny. Men's evaluations may extend to other areas of women's lives as well: Ursula notes that she is often criticized for dating white men. But male disapproval is not the sole province of any particular ethnic group. As she remarks, "Men feel territorial, just in general."

Because ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity are so tightly bound up together, however, it is not always easy to determine which factor is uppermost when women withdraw their participation in culturally expected practices. Thus, Kavita could not decide whether her racial background or her emerging recognition of her lesbianism was the reason that she did not date as an undergraduate at a predominantly white university. At the same time, she reports that in her own life sexuality takes precedence over race as a way of organizing identity and community. She explains, "The bonds don't come from race, they come from shared experience."

Yet, this assertion does not mean that racial or ethnic concerns are absent altogether. On the contrary, the interview data attest to the complexity of Kavita's ethnic identity: within the space of an hour-long conversation she offers at least three ways of understanding her ethnic self:

"Mostly, when I feel like I'm being myself I feel like I'm acting like a middle-class white person."

"I identify as black, but there's kind of a dissonance or something. It's like having two identities, basically."

"I just don't see myself as white or black."

Kavita's shifts in self-definition imply not the fragmentation or incoherence of her identity but the multiple perspectives that are available to her from moment to moment. Just as significant to the presentation of self are the labels that individuals reject; Paige, for instance, does not allow herself to be labeled *mixed* although she acknowledges that her ancestry is technically multiracial (Spanish and Filipino). She reports with some amusement that another woman tried to befriend her on the basis of their assumed shared experience as mixed-race individuals. As Kavita notes earlier, however, shared racial background does not necessarily yield commonalities of experience.

Nevertheless, rejecting particular practices or labels does not entail rejection of the biographical ethnicity. In fact, interviewees tended to assert their biographical identity precisely because observers frequently failed to recognize this identity. Embracing a contested ethnicity when it is called into question in this way, insisting on its authenticity, is, in effect, an act of passing.

Acting and Passing

To assume one's biographical identity when it is in dispute is not acquiescence to a default category but active resistance to the way one's body is read by a stranger. It often involves subverting hopeful expectations of the exotic: Ursula reports being asked if she is Azorean, commenting, "People don't think I'm Black. They'll choose something way out there." Disappointment often greets the revelation of ethnic identity, as noted by both Claudia, who is commonly taken for an Italian or a Middle Easterner, and Paige, who (until she cut her hair) reported being mistaken for a Native American. "Oh, did I let you down?" is the way Paige summarizes her feelings to such reactions.

Even when an individual elects to exploit ethnic ambiguity in the direction of another ethnic group (that is, the traditional sense of passing), she may undermine this representation of herself in order to complicate the easy assumptions of outsiders. The extended passage below shows how the conflict of workplace demands, employer racism, and ethnic expression may be reconciled through creative linguistic work:

I used to work as Princess Jasmine [from the film *Aladdin*] at Disneyland. And that was interesting. And for a while Disneyland didn't want—they were debating whether they should have an ethnic-looking person for this ethnic character, because they never did [for] a face character like Snow White who talks, and Belle [from *Beauty and the Beast*], things like that. . . . For a while, like for a month, they

had a white girl. . . . They used her for a while but she didn't look like her at all. And I think I look [like Princess Jasmine]. I mean once you put the wig on, things like that, you look like the character. But it was funny how they didn't want to use [a nonwhite actress]. . . . And then when guests, the people at the park, with kids would come, Spanish-speaking kids [would say], "Oh, Jasmine!" . . . We could speak to them in Spanish if we wanted to, any language if we knew different languages. And they were really surprised and you know, "Are you [Latino]?" And people did think that I was maybe Arabic and they would try to talk to me. That was funny, so depending on where you are you can look like different things, and [it's funny] what benefits you can get or can't get.

Claudia gains access to the financial opportunity that the Disneyland job represents precisely because of her ethnic ambiguity, because she can pass as Arab. Yet by drawing upon her Spanish ability (an ability that, she reports elsewhere, she is normally reluctant to use in public), Claudia calls attention to her ethnic identity as a Mexican American. This maneuver challenges the racist belief of her employers that white actors should play the parts of nonwhite characters. In asserting herself as an "ethnic" Princess Jasmine, Claudia also delights Spanish-speaking children who visit the theme park and thereby subverts racist social arrangements that dictate that Latinos must be in invisible or subservient positions. Yet she accomplishes this reversal by playing to gender stereotypes; the character wears a bikini top and diaphanous full pants, and is hardly a feminist role model. The situation recalls Hall's (this volume) study of the appropriation of feminine speech features by phone-sex workers: by drawing on existing ideologies of gender, individuals may overcome economic—and in Claudia's case, racial—barriers. Such strategies at once preserve and subvert the social order. Although actual identity practices may be fluid, social categories themselves are rigid ideologies. Claudia plays off these ideologies and reaps economic and symbolic benefits by constructing her identity—and deconstructing Princess Jasmine—through language.

But deconstruction cuts both ways. If women of mixed racial background can appropriate ethnic categories, so too can other individuals. In particular, white women may co-opt other ethnicities for their own use; this may occur because European Americans are often viewed as lacking an ethnicity. Laying claim to another ethnic group may allow whites to "become ethnic." Such a situation is exemplified in my data by my interview with Julia, a European American woman of Celtic descent. Julia contacted me by

telephone about the study because, she said, she is often asked if she has Asian ancestry. When we met in person, however, I was surprised to find that, at least as far as I could see, she was unambiguously white. Julia explained that in some situations, especially photographs, people remark that her eyes look Asian. Moreover, sometimes people ask her whether she is of African American descent because of her curly hair. She states that these questions, which are exclusively from European Americans, surprise her: "I don't look anything but white, to me anyway." Such comments, she goes on to suggest, are potentially insulting, although she does not take offense at them. In fact, she reports that she herself is often the one to joke about being racially mixed.

Julia takes great pride in her Irish heritage, and makes no claims to an Asian American or African American identity. She suggests that one reason for her ethnic pride is that she has always lived in ethnically diverse areas; as she was growing up, most of her friends were Asian American. Her insistence on her potentially ambiguous ethnicity should be read in juxtaposition to this fact. She feels that white ethnic pride is often trivialized or labeled racist; in this context a claim to Asianness or Blackness may provide a sort of ethnic legitimacy that even Irishness does not offer.

Julia's situation calls to mind a similar and widely debated issue in feminist circles: the issue of European American women's co-optation of Native American identities. For example, some non-Native women use sacred symbols on clothing, jewelry, and in other contexts that Native Americans view as sacrilegious. Some white feminists have even invoked a part-Native American ancestry to argue that they have a legitimate right to practice indigenous people's spiritual traditions. Still others have suggested that spiritual practices should be open to all interested individuals. These arguments overlook the fact that racial differences produce power differences, and that in taking up the practices of other groups, well-meaning whites may strip these groups of an important source of their own power and identity. As such situations indicate, the politics of deconstruction, by eradicating social categories like ethnicity, gender, and so on, leads inevitably to the politics of appropriation. Despite the many contributions of poststructuralist theories to ethnic studies of language and gender, these theories should be scrutinized carefully for what they may, perhaps unwittingly, authorize.

Conclusion

Cookie Stephan (1992:62) has asserted, on the basis of her research with individuals of mixed race, that "regardless of number of identities, ethnic identities do not seem to involve conscious selection. One does not experi-

ence electing to be Hispanic, for instance, but instead experiences being Hispanic." But as I have argued in this chapter, ethnic identity, especially for those of ambiguous ethnicity, is a consciously constructed product of self-presentation. The fluidity of ethnicity means that individuals can authenticate themselves in a variety of ways, and language use is a particularly effective tool in this process. As Ursula aptly puts it, "If you have the ability to use either [ethnicity] then you use them in situations to get what you can. I'm sorry to say it's not any kind of deep ideology, it's just kind of like, I mean, you look out for yourself." The renovated notion of passing contributes greatly to such an enterprise.

Poststructuralist feminism and ethnic studies converge in the notion of passing, whether sexual or ethnic, as performance. Moreover, performance is not limited to gender subversions any more than it is limited to individuals of mixed race. Just as issues of gender ambiguity highlight the strategies of all gendered persons, so does attention to individuals at the boundaries of ethnic categories illuminate the ethnic work that all speakers do. Finally, as Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (this volume) demonstrate, social categories like gender and class—and, I would add, ethnicity and sexuality—are not separable, nor are they separate from language. Speakers cannot abstain from affiliating themselves with a social identity in their linguistic choices, for identity in all its facets is largely constructed through language.

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Notes

1. To deny the coherence of race and ethnicity as categories is not to deny their ongoing relevance in interaction as well as their utility for social and political organization. For further discussion see Bucholtz (forthcoming).
2. Although it is widely recognized among sociolinguists that speakers' reports of their language use reflect idealized rather than actual usage, these disparities can be scrutinized for information about speakers' ideologies and identities (Blom & Gumperz [1972] 1986). Such data are therefore crucial in a study of this kind, which focuses on how language is deployed in self-representation and representation.
3. Because all the interviewees were affiliated with the same California university as students, recent graduates, or staff members, they had in common their

membership in the academic community, as well as a general middle-class identity. Their age range (eighteen to thirty-two) was also fairly narrow. Three men were also interviewed for the study, but their comments are not presented here because the small number of male participants precludes meaningful comparative analysis.

4. Many of the linguistic devices that Agnes used correspond to the features of "women's language" described by Robin Lakoff (1975, 1982), including intensifiers and emphatic stress: "Oh, everything was just so wonderful"; "It was the best job I ever had" (Garfinkel 1967:167). Agnes also managed information about her private life by using feminine conversational strategies to draw out other speakers, especially men (P. Fishman 1983), and to avoid talking about herself.
5. Interviewees were asked to select their own pseudonyms.
6. See J. Fishman (1977) and Gudykunst and Schmidt (1988) for overviews.
7. The security afforded by a Latino identity is not universally agreed upon. As I will describe later, the interview data suggest that the pressure of racist stereotypes can make this identity problematic for some individuals of Latino descent.
8. The utility of such models for some individuals should not be dismissed. Their danger lies in the potential to label as developmentally backward an adult who chooses not to embrace a multiracial identity. Conversely, Maria Root (1990) offers a nonlinear model of multiethnic identity that views a number of solutions as equally acceptable over a lifetime, but passing does not figure into her account.
9. The opposite type of passing, from white to Black, is a literary rarity, although Goffman (1963) briefly mentions it as a possibility. The most famous documentation of a white man passing as Black (Griffin 1960) denaturalizes the process by suggesting that it is achievable only through scientific intervention. In consultation with a doctor, Griffin took pills and used ultraviolet light to darken his skin for what he calls the "experiment."
10. The very possibility of a man who looks white but is classified as Black is a quirk of the American system of race: the existence of a single Black ancestor has historically been sufficient to classify an individual as legally Black. In 1986 the U.S. Supreme Court refused to reject this definition of Blackness, often termed the *one-drop rule*. The case, *Doe v. State of Louisiana* (479 US 1002), involved a woman who sought to change her parents' race, as recorded on her birth certificate, from *colored* to *white*; the classification had been made on the basis of the fact that her great-great-great-great-grandmother was Black (United Press International, December 8, 1986). The state court had denied the claim in part because the "fact that family members describe themselves as 'white' did not prove error on document designating their parents as 'colored'" (479 So. 2d 370 [1985]).
11. Like the topic of mixed race, issues of colorism, that is, of bias based on skin color, have recently come to the fore in the popular press (Russell, Wilson, & Hall 1992), as well as in activist writings (Camper 1994; Featherston 1994).
12. The term *chola/-o* has a wide variety of meanings that almost always have

negative connotations. The term may designate a range of sexual, racial, and class positions ('mestizo', 'pretty boy', 'hick', etc.) that often suggest outsider or stigmatized status. See Polkinhorn, Velasco, and Lambert (1986).

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