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Racial Cross-Dressing

Robert S. Chang*

I am not Latino, but I could be. One feature of Latino identity is that Latinos may be of any race. I can imagine a different family history that would have placed my ancestors as laborers in Latin America or the Caribbean.[1] I can imagine a secondary migration in the Asian diaspora that would then have brought them to the continental United States and the various identity crises that they might have undergone. I can imagine intermarriage such as that which took place between Punjabi Indian immigrants and Mexican Americans.[2] The children would not look like me, but perhaps they would not be so different. You cannot tell by my features that I am not Latino.

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This is an embellished version of a talk that was delivered at the First Annual LatCrit Conference sponsored by California Western School of Law and held in La Jolla, California from May 2-5, 1996. Thanks to the participants for their feedback. I would also like to thank the conference organizers, Laura Padilla, Gloria Sandrino, and Frank Valdes, for inviting me to participate. I take my title from Eric Lott, *White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness, in* CULTURES OF UNITED STATES IMPERIALISM (Amy Kaplan & Donald E. Pease eds., 1993).

1 There were quite a large number of Chinese laborers who went to Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and other Caribbean and Latin American countries. For Cuba, see RONALD T. TAKAKI, STRANGERS FROM A DIFFERENT SHORE 35-36 (1990).

2 *See generally* KAREN ISAKSEN LEONARD, MAKING ETHNIC CHOICES: CALIFORNIA'S PUNJABI MEXICAN AMERICANS (1992). *See also* SUCHENG CHAN, ASIAN AMERICANS: AN INTERPRETIVE HISTORY 109 (1991).

My introduction asks, in what context could a person who looks like me claim a Latino identity? It also assumes that at some level, there will be resistance to such an identification. This resistance may be internal as well as external. But by invoking the history of Chinese contract laborers in Latin American and Caribbean countries, I open up the space for such an identification, even if I do not actually claim to be Latino. But what if I were to make that claim?

Earlier in the symposium, Barbara Cox asked us to consider what it would mean for Frank Valdes to claim sensibly, in a specific context, a lesbian subject position, or for her to claim a Latina subject position.[3] What are we to make of these claims to seemingly inapposite identities? How can a man claim a lesbian subject position? How can a white Euro-American woman claim a Latina subject position? Are they simply confused over their racial/gender/sexual positions? Valdes explains that he has, with careful qualifications, at times "claim[ed] inclusion in the lesbian category," doing so "to poke at the sex/gender essentialisms that rigidly and absurdly confine us all."[4] He goes on to argue that "[g]ender-bending is important and (sometimes) rewarding political work."[5] But while gender-bending -- and for that matter, race-bending -- may indeed "do" important political work, we must, as both Cox and Valdes acknowledge, approach such performances with caution.[6] They may represent instances of appropriation -- as in *mis*appropriation -- just as easily as they may represent claims to solidarity and thus a basis for collective political action. Stated

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3 Barbara J. Cox, *Coalescing Communities, Discourses and Practices: Synergies in the Anti-subordination Project*, 2 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 473 (1997). *See also* Francisco Valdes, *Sex and Race in Queer Legal Culture: Ruminations on Identities and Interconnectivities*, 5 REV. L. & WOMEN'S STUDIES 25 (1996).

4 Valdes, *supra* note 3, at 30. To be fair, his qualifications include his acknowledgment that he self-identifies as a man and that this comes with privilege in this patriarchal society.

5 *Id.*

6 Cox, *supra* note 3, at 473-475; Valdes, *supra* note 3, at 29-34.

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differently, moments of cross-dressing contain within them oppressive as well as emancipatory possibilities. The difficulty lies in telling these representations apart.

Elaine Showalter examines the oppressive possibilities in her brilliant essay, "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year."[7] She examines the film *Tootsie* in which Dustin Hoffman plays Michael Dorsey, a failing actor who realizes his aspirations to stardom only after he dresses in drag and transforms himself into Dorothy Michaels. As Dorothy Michaels he becomes a television star and a role model for women.[8] Indeed, one film critic, Molly Haskell, "calls Dorothy 'the first genuinely mainstream feminist heroine of our era.'"[9] Showalter comments that Michael Dorsey's success as Dorothy

> comes primarily, the film suggests, from the masculine power disguised and veiled by the feminine costume. Physical gestures of masculinity provide *Tootsie*'s comic motif of female impersonation. Dorothy Michaels drops her voice to call a taxi, lifts heavy suitcases, and shoves a hefty competitor out of the way. Dorothy's "feminist" speeches too are less a response to the oppression of women than an instinctive situational male reaction to being treated like a woman. The implication is that women must be taught by men how to win their rights.
>
> In this respect, cross-dressing as portrayed in *Tootsie* is a way of promoting the notion of masculine power while masking it.[10]

Showalter then moves from the film to the recent involvement

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7 Elaine Showalter, *Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and The Woman of the Year, in* RARITAN READING 364 (Richard Poirier ed., 1990).

8 TOOTSIE (Columbia Pictures, 1982).

9 Showalter, *supra* note 7, at 369-70 (quoting Molly Haskell).

10 *Id.* at 371.

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of certain male critics in feminism, calling this male feminism a form of "critical cross-dressing." She observes:

> If some of them are now learning *our* language, all the better, but there is more than a hint in some recent critical writing that it's time for men to step in and show the girls how to do it, a swaggering tone that reminds me of a recent quip in the *Yale Alumni Magazine* about a member of the class of 1955, Renee Richards: "When better women are made, Yale men will make them."[11]

Both examples show the darker forms that cross-dressing may assume.[12] I turn now to a more ambiguous example.

At this conference, Elvia Arriola told us the story about Micki, a postoperative male-to-female transsexual, who joined a women's support group.[13] Arriola invites us to "[i]magine then, the turmoil

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11 *Id.* at 367.

12 Although she is correct in pointing out specific episodes of problematic male participation in feminist criticism, this is not to say that male feminism is an impossible venture. Indeed, it was Elaine Showalter who encouraged two men to work on the project that became ENGENDERING MEN: THE QUESTION OF MALE FEMINIST CRITICISM (Joseph A. Boone & Michael Cadden eds., 1990), a collection of essays that featured an all male cast. The editors acknowledge the problem inherent in male feminist criticism which will exist "so long as men live in a society in which most of our sex (white, straight, middle-class men) have been, and continue to be, the beneficiaries of an asymmetrical sexual system that oppresses women." *Id.* at *Editors' Introduction* 2. Nevertheless, they "hope that in opening up for critique the essentializing homogeneity of patriarchal discourse, this collection's alternative project of 'engendering men' by giving their individual voices a forum will contribute to the deconstruction of such privilege." *Id.*

For a thoughtful examination of the role of white men in outsider jurisprudence, see Peter Halewood, *White Men Can't Jump: Critical Epistemologies, Embodiment, and the Praxis of Legal Scholarship*, 7 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 1 (1995). *See also* Nancy Levit, *Feminism for Men*, 43 UCLA L. REV. 1037 (1996).

13 Elvia Arriola, *Law and the Gendered Politics of Identity: Who Owns the Label Lesbian?*, 8 Hastings Women's L.J. 1 (1997). A portion of this manuscript

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created in this 'womanspace' when one day a tall, quiet woman who had shown up regularly at meetings for several weeks, suddenly came out to the group as a transsexual female. Not only that, but she was also a transsexual female who identified as a lesbian."[14] How do we make sense of "her" identities, both as "woman" and as "lesbian"? Arriola writes that some members of the support group felt threatened, saying that "she was nothing but a fake," that her "self-confident demeanor betrayed that although she had given up her male identity, hints of her socialization as a privileged white male clearly remained," and that the sex-change operation left "*his* sexual orientation unscathed."[15] However, this controversy over whether Micki is a "woman" and a "lesbian" begs the question: what do "woman" and "lesbian" mean? In light of that question, we see that Micki's "impersonation" incites in her interlocutors what Marjorie Garber calls *category crisis*.[16] The question then for them (and for us) is how to negotiate this crisis.

We might, as did some members of the support group,[17] decide that once a man, always a man, and call for strict policing of that boundary. Or we might, as did others in the support group,[18] allow the line to be drawn differently so that it might include a person like Micki. But if we are going to redraw boundaries, we must do so with "a critical awareness of how borders have been (and continue to be) systematically policed and for whose ideological benefit and

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was presented at LatCrit I.

14 *Id.* at 2.

15 *Id.* (emphasis added).

16 She defines this as "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another." MARJORIE GARBER, VESTED INTERESTS: CROSS-DRESSING & CULTURAL ANXIETY 16 (1992). She goes on to argue "that *transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself." *Id.* at 17.

17 *See* Arriola, *supra* note 13, at 3-4.

18 *See id.*

material profit."[19] What are the consequences of drawing the line differently?

In the context of racial passing, Elaine Ginsberg writes that there is a

> positive potential of passing as a way of challenging those categories and boundaries [of race and gender]. In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress.[20]

Although I empathize with the women who felt threatened by Micki's presence in the group, the attitude "once a man, always a man" indicates the sort of essentialism that is politically limiting and potentially self-defeating.[21] Recognizing Micki's claim to a subject position as "woman" and "lesbian" allows for "agency" in a way that permits the construction of open political identities. Understood in this way, Frank Valdes' claim to be lesbian and Barbara Cox's

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19 Vera Kutzinski, *American Literary History as Spatial Practice*, 4 AM. LITERARY HIST. 555, 560 (1992). This quote in fuller form is one of the opening epigrams in MICHAEL AWKWARD, NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCE: RACE, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF POSITIONALITY (1995).

20 Elaine K. Ginsberg, *Introduction: The Politics of Passing*, *in* PASSING AND THE FICTIONS OF IDENTITY 16 (Elaine K. Ginsberg ed., 1996).

21 This is not to deny the power and efficacy at times of deploying a strategic essentialism. *See generally* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*, *in* SELECTED SUBALTERN STUDIES 3, 13-15 (Ranajit Guha & Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak eds., 1988). Nor is this to deny the power and efficacy at times of deploying a strategy of separatism. For a thoughtful analysis of separatism, see Bill Ong Hing, *Beyond the Rhetoric of Assimilation and Cultural Pluralism: Addressing the Tension of Separatism and Conflict in an Immigration-Driven Multiracial Society*, 81 CAL. L. REV. 863 (1993).

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claim to be Latina might be sensible as claims to political identities, rather than to essential identities. They are disrupting the inertia of essentialist notions of identity and are laying the groundwork for developing a collective political identity.

We might compare these identity claims with an episode of racial cross-dressing that occurred in the climactic scene of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*.[22] Near the end of the film, after fire has been set to Sal's Pizzeria, a group of Blacks and Latinos turn to the Korean grocery store across the street. One member of the crowd, ML, tells the Korean immigrant grocer that he is next. The grocer responds, "I Black." ML explodes, telling him to open his eyes, saying "I'm Black!" The grocer repeats, "I Black. You, me, same. We same." The crowd is incredulous and laughs. What could this Korean mean when he says that he is Black? Is he acting out of self-interest -- or is there more?

The Korean grocer's claim to Blackness is problematized by the real-life conflicts between some Asian American shopkeepers and some members of African American communities served by the shops.[23] Conflicts such as this may make it difficult to imagine solidarity between Blacks and Koreans, but it is precisely this difficulty that makes it important to explore, to see if there is some

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22 DO THE RIGHT THING (Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 1989). I have written in more detail about this film elsewhere. *See* Robert S. Chang, *The End of Innocence, or, Politics after the Fall of the Essential Subject*, 45 AM. U. L. REV. 687, 687 (1996). Although the following paragraph is pretty much verbatim the first paragraph of that essay, I draw slightly different lessons here.

23 *See, e.g.*, L.A. Chung, *Tensions Divide Blacks, Asians: Economic Differences, Cultural Misunderstandings Set 2 Groups Apart*, S.F. CHRON., May 4, 1992, at A1; Jonathan Rieder, *Trouble in Store: Behind the Brooklyn Boycott; Blacks v. Korean Produce Merchants*, NEW REPUBLIC, July 2, 1990, at 16.

One particularly explosive incident that preceded the recent L.A. riot/rebellion involved a Korean immigrant woman and shop owner, Du Soon Ja, who killed an African American teenager and customer, Latasha Harlins, by shooting her in the back of the head. For a fascinating discussion of this case, see Neil Gotanda, *Multiculturalism and Racial Stratification, in* MAPPING MULTICULTURALISM 238 (Avery F. Gordon & Christopher Newfield eds., 1996).

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common political identity that they might create. Is it possible that a claim to a common "Blackness" in United States society might be a starting point for forging an Afro-Asian alliance?

We might examine the development of a "Black" Afro-Asian identity in Britain. Kobena Mercer comments:

> When various peoples -- of Asian, African, and Caribbean descent -- interpellated themselves and each other as /black/ they invoked a collective identity predicated on political and not biological similarities. In other words, the naturalized connotations of the term /black/ were disarticulated out of the dominant codes of racial discourse and rearticulated as signs of alliance and solidarity among dispersed groups of people sharing common historical experiences of British racism. The empowering effect of the transformed metaphor, which brought about a new form of democratic subjectivity and agency into being, did not arise out of a binary reversal or a closed anti-white sensibility, but out of the inclusive character of Afro-Asian alliances which thus engendered a pluralistic sense of "imagined community."[24]

If we read the Korean grocer's claim to Blackness in *Do the Right Thing* against the grain of the stock story or master narrative of conflict, and read it thus as a sign of alliance or solidarity, we create new possibilities. Whether "Blackness" in the United States may become a basis for forging an Afro-Asian alliance will depend on how open "Black" is, and whether Asian Americans are willing to accept a "Black" identity or subject position.[25] Transgressive

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24 KOBENA MERCER, WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE: NEW POSITIONS IN BLACK CULTURAL STUDIES 291-92 (1994).

25 The same point may be made of a more broad-based solidarity which will depend on the openness of "Blackness" and the willingness of non-African Americans to accept a "Black" identity or subject position. For some interesting examples of Whites claiming Black identities, see generally RACE TRAITOR (Noel Ignatiev & John Garvey eds., 1996).

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moments, such as when the Korean grocer says, "I Black," may help create the space for such an alliance.

These examples contain potential successes and failures for a variety of boundary transgressions loosely collected under the term "cross-dressing." In the context of race, racial cross-dressing already contains the notion that there is such a thing as racial dressing, that racial identity already contains within it aspects of performativity or agency. This is implicit in *Do the Right Thing* when Buggin' Out tells Mookie, "Stay Black." Because Mookie cannot change biology, such a statement must refer to a politico-cultural notion of "Blackness." It also acknowledges agency. To acknowledge agency is necessarily a rejection of essentialism, a move away from the essential subject accompanied by what Stuart Hall terms "the end of innocence."[26]

The "end of innocence" means that we must understand and take seriously identity as political, not essential, as Gerald Torres invited us to do during the first day of this conference.[27] This notion of political identity already understands identity to be aspirational, as Gerald López reminded us,[28] and as even Calvin Coolidge understood in the early part of this century when he said, "We have a great desire to be supremely American."[29]

The challenge for us is articulating this political identity or identities to serve a progressive anti subordination agenda. This challenge is also present in the shaping of a progressive Latino political identity, "racial dressing" as it were. If we are to effect real change, however, we must not stop at racial dressing. Racial

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26 Stuart Hall, *New Ethnicities, in* "RACE," CULTURE & DIFFERENCE 252, 254 (James Donald & Ali Rattansi eds., 1992). In a similar vein, Angela Harris reminds us that we need to lose our romance with racial community as a found object. Angela P. Harris, *The Jurisprudence of Reconstruction*, 82 CAL. L. REV. 741, 784 (1994).

27 Gerald Torres, Remarks at LatCrit I (1996).

28 Gerald López, Remarks at LatCrit I (1996).

29 WALTER BENN MICHAELS, OUR AMERICA: NATIVISM, MODERNISM, AND PLURALISM 3 (quoting Calvin Coolidge) (1995).

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cross-dressing will help us establish chains of equivalents between different enactments of oppression[30] so that we may, as Jerome Culp invited us, participate in the struggles of people who are not we.[31] Perhaps then we might make sense of Frank Valdes' context-specific claim of being lesbian, Barbara Cox's context-specific claim of being Latina, and the Korean grocer's claim of being Black.

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30 Chantal Mouffe writes:

> The progressive character of a struggle does not depend on its place of origin . . . but rather on its link with other struggles. The longer the chain of equivalences set up between the defense of the rights of one group and those of other groups, the deeper will be the democratization process and the more difficult it will be to neutralize certain struggles or to make them serve the ends of the Right.

Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Toward a New Concept of Democracy, in* MARXISM AND THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE 89, 100 (Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg eds., 1988).

31 Jerome Culp, Remarks at LatCrit I (1996).

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