Language, power, and the performance of race and class

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During the 2008 presidential election campaign, independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader characterized candidate Barack Obama as "half African American" and accused Obama of wanting to "talk White":

There’s only one thing different about Barack Obama when it comes to being a Democratic presidential candidate. He’s half African-American. Whether that will make any difference, I don’t know. I haven’t heard him have a strong crackdown on economic exploitation in the ghettos. Payday loans, predatory lending, asbestos, lead. What’s keeping him from doing that? Is it because he wants to talk White? He doesn’t want to appear like Jesse Jackson?

(Rocky Mountain News, June 25, 2008)

Mr. Nader’s comments raise a number of intriguing questions about racial categories and meanings, particularly for individuals such as Barack Obama, whose Kenyan father and White American mother count as members of distinct racial categories. First, Mr. Nader’s description of Obama as "half African American" is a relatively novel racial characterization. Historically, individuals in the United States with one Black parent have been considered Black, commensurate with the "one drop" rule (Davis 1991). Furthermore, commonsense U.S. notions of race center on physical appearance, and Obama’s skin color, facial features, and hair texture are all compatible with popular notions of what members of the category "African American" might look like — so why is he characterized here as half African American?

Second, Mr. Nader suggests that Obama wanted to "talk White," as if Obama’s way of speaking were a calculated strategy that did not reflect his true, or authentic, way of speaking. What is "talking White"? What is Obama’s true, or authentic way of speaking? Obama was raised by his White American mother and White American grandparents in Hawai’i and Indonesia, where there are no significant African American communities. His father was a Kenyan graduate student who did not speak African American English and who left the family when Barack was two years old. Obama had no African American family, no African American relatives, and no African American community growing up, so the English he learned was that of his White family and White and Asian larger community. Should Obama "talk White"? Was Nader slipping into long-discredited racist beliefs that "racial" categories genetically determine such characteristics of group members as their way of speaking?

Finally, Mr. Nader suggested rhetorically that Obama was trying to distance himself from African American activist and one-time candidate in the Democratic primary for President, Jesse Jackson. Why would Obama want to distance himself from such a well known African American, and what would such distancing have to do with Nader’s assertions that Obama was "half" African American and wanted to "talk White"?

Nader’s remarks raise many questions about language, race, and identity. I argue that these remarks are provocative not because Nader is ill informed or a bigot, but because U.S. racial thinking is self-fulfilled with contradictions and struggles over meanings. I present this example and these questions in an effort to get you to think about language, race, and multiracial identities in new ways. In this chapter, I ask you to be willing to suspend many of your everyday assumptions about race and try out different ways of thinking about what race actually is. You will need to be able to move back and forth between two very different ways of thinking about race: (1) everyday, commonsense ways of thinking, in which race is about apparent differences in physical appearance, and (2) an analytical frame in which race is about power inequality and specific histories of relationships between groups. Becoming comfortable with this second way of thinking about race will help you to make sense of Nader’s comments, see the importance of language for performing racial identities, and interpret the relationships between multiracial identities and social class that are documented throughout this book.

Popular, everyday commonsense notions of race in the United States are essentialist (Zack 2002). They presuppose that race is fundamentally about differences in physical appearance and that members of different racial groups have an underlying, or essential, nature that is part and parcel of this racial identity. Not only race, but language and culture are seen as reflections of this perceived essential nature. Thus, White Americans are expected to "talk White," African Americans are expected to "talk Black," and Latinos are expected to "sound Latino." This popular assumption is what allows us to make sense of Ralph Nader’s suggestion that Barack Obama wanted to "talk White."

In our everyday lives, essentialist assumptions about race and behavior often appear to be supported by what we see around us. Individuals who count as White, for example, tend to speak and behave in ways that get evaluated as White. Assumptions of essential difference receive further apparent support through relatively high rates of intraracial childbearing and socialization of children. Couples who count as African American tend to bear children whose physical appearance, language, and culture similarly count as African American. There is little ambiguity of identity in such cases - such children assign themselves African American identities and others who encounter them in the United States generally see them as African American. The fact that commonsense, essentialist beliefs about race
receive such seeming confirmation in our everyday lives helps perpetuate popular, quasi-biological beliefs in racial essences.

The very existence of individuals who count as multiracial, in contrast, under mines popular, essentialist notions of race (Root 1992). Multiracial individuals’ assertion and embodiment of identities that bridge accepted boundaries call into question the notions of similarity and difference that are the basis of any social categorization system. Because multiracial individuals do not fit within an essentialist framework for understanding the world, race loses its seemingly natural character, and we are forced to ask questions that did not seem necessary before. What is race? How can an individual be both Black and White? How should such an individual talk and behave? What are the relationships between social class and such an individual’s talk, beliefs, and claims of identity?

In this chapter, I try to convince you that the commonsense notion of race as being about physical appearance is misleading, and that race is more fundamentally about power. I will argue that identities are not something that inhere in your body or your self-descriptions, but are performances that are accepted or not accepted in a larger social world. I will argue that language, or ways of speaking, are central to these performances of identity, whether of race or social class, and that these performances involve politics, regardless of the intentions of the speakers. Finally, I use the concept of “honorary White” status to illustrate the political and ideological nature of language use and racial identification and to make further sense of Mr. Nader’s remarks about Barack Obama.

Race as power

Theorists of race in the United States argue that race is fundamentally about inequality rather than differences in physical appearance. Omi and Winant (1994: 55), for example, define race in the United States as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.” Race is thus about “social conflicts and interests,” i.e., historical power relationships and inequality. These historical power relationships were defined through imperialism of the last 500 years, when Europeans conquered and colonized much of the world. Such racial categories as White (European), Asian, Black, and Native American did not exist before colonialism—they were created and defined based on groups’ relative positions in specific colonial relationships. During the colonial period, differences in physical appearance were simply a canvas on to which particular colonial relations were projected.

Smedley (1993) argues in this vein that it is just historical happenstance that physical appearance (which is popularly assumed to be the basis of race) was linked to hierarchical rankings of groups:

I have argued that, from the beginning, race reflected a set of attitudes toward human differences generated out of the special circumstances of the rise of some European states to world commercial and political dominance. These attitudes encompassed judgments about the human worth of different groups involved in unequal power relationships. It was only accidental, perhaps incidental, that the conquered and enslaved peoples were physically distinct, for this permitted social status to be linked with biophysical differences.

(*Smedley 1993: 303)*

Historical inequality of colonialism thus lies behind racial distinctions of today. The nature and degree of historical power inequality among groups is also predictive of the degree to which such groups subsequently perceive and construct intergroup difference. In the United States, the Black-White racial divide is the most salient in the popular mind and is concretely evident in segregated patterns of residence and association, low rates of intermarriage, and the historical “one drop” rule. This is a direct outgrowth of U.S. slavery, which placed European-descent Americans and African-descent Americans at the furthest ends of the social and economic spectrums, and in which African Americans were denied basic humanity.

While Asians and Latinos, as racial groups, have both experienced discrimination and exclusion throughout U.S. history, they were not forcibly brought to the United States and enslaved in the ways that Africans were, giving those categories different character and meanings in the present. The degree of historical coercion and inequality thus correlates with present day inequality and perceptions of social and cultural difference among groups, both of which, in turn, shape inter-racial childbearing and the identity choices and practices of multiracial individuals.

Conceptualizing race as fundamentally about power helps explain strong correlations between social class and the racial identification of multiracial individuals. Researchers studying social class and racial identification of Black-White biracial individuals (for example Khanna, this volume) have found that social class can play a strong role in the racial identification of such individuals. Khanna found in her sample that such individuals commonly compare their own cultural practices and beliefs to the perceived cultural practices of stereotypical Black and White racial groups that serve as reference points for biracial individuals. Many of the differences in practices that her subjects attributed to White culture and Black culture—e.g., going to museums and playing tennis for White culture and lack of involvement in their children’s schools for Black culture—can be explained more directly as differences in social class cultures.

From one perspective it might appear that these biracial individuals are mistaking class for race. Whether they are mistaking one for another depends on one’s notions of race, however. Distinctions between social class and race are sharpest when we juxtapose an analytical notion of social class — stratification based on income, profession, and education— with a folk notion of race—divisions of people based on physical appearance and assumptions of fundamental difference. When U.S. race is approached analytically—as being fundamentally about position in power hierarchies—race and class overlap considerably. This can explain the tendency of the Black-White biracials to identify with cultural practices and racial identities that represent their own positions and aspirations—whether relatively
high or low -- in terms of the larger power hierarchies of society, regardless of whether those hierarchies are specifically conceptualized in terms of race or class.

Language and the performance of identities

Social scientists since the 1960’s have emphasized that ethnic and racial categories are social creations of particular societies, rather than natural categories (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1967). Race, as such, is not a static thing inherent in human bodies, but is part of an ongoing process of social differentiation, with different configurations and meanings across time and space. An individual who counts as White in the Dominican Republic, for example, may count as Black upon emigrating to the United States (cf. Hoetink 1967; Bailey 2001), and the Jewish, Italian, and Slavic immigrants to the United States in the early 1900’s who were commonly seen as members of distinct races lost this "racial" distinctiveness over time, becoming White Americans after two to three generations (Waters 1990; Brodkin 1998). Race is not about what one is, but rather what one counts as in a particular time and place.

Two subjective processes of ascription determine what one counts as: "self-ascription" -- how one defines oneself - and "ascription by others" - how others define one (Barth 1969: 13). If an individual sees himself/herself as White, and others see that individual as White, that individual counts as White. We typically make reference to observable attributes of group members in assigning them to categories, but the membership categories themselves are not based on the sum of objective similarities and differences among individuals or groups.

Language is our primary symbolic tool for representing and negotiating social reality, and it plays a central role in these processes of self- and other-ascription. Through talk, we position both ourselves and others in terms of class and racial categories. We sometimes claim identities explicitly ("I’m a White professional"), but much more often we perform them by speaking and behaving in ways that are seen as appropriate to those identities. We have agency to claim identities for ourselves through talk, but others also make judgments about our identities, based on our talk, that may run counter to the ways in which we see ourselves.

While phenotype, or physical appearance, is perhaps the most immediate basis for making judgments of social identity, we also make rapid judgments about class and racial identities based on speech. Take the two utterances (1) "He don’t got none" and (2) "He doesn’t have any." These two utterances have the same intended meaning but they have very different social associations. We tend to associate the first form ("He don’t got none") with speakers who have less education and social status than speakers who use the second form.

Similarly, we tend to identify certain ways of speaking with membership in particular ethnic and racial categories. The two utterances "He is always working" and "He be working" have similar literal meanings, but "He be working" is associated with African American identities and ways of speaking while "He is always working" is less clearly associated with a particular racial identity. Not all ethnic/racial categories in the United States are associated with particular ways of speaking. While there are ways of speaking strongly associated with African American identities and, less strongly, with White American and various Latino identities (e.g., Fought 2003), research shows that there are not varieties popularly associated with Asian American identities (Lo and Reyes 2008). These different patterns of association between language and identity will be explained in terms of identity politics in the next section.

To count as a member of a racial group is thus an achievement that involves a degree of performance. One must perform identities in such a way that others ratify one in that identity. We typically don’t notice this performative nature of identities because most verbal performances simply reproduce commonsense stereotypes about relationships between race, class, and language. We do notice these performances when essentialist assumptions about race, class, and language are violated, e.g., "He looks Black, but he talks White," or "She’s a doctor but she doesn’t sound that educated when she talks."

Stereotypical language-based judgments of social class status often overlap with stereotypical language-based judgments of race and ethnicity, and ways of speaking that are popularly understood as "African American" or "Latino" are generally associated with lower socioeconomic status. Such ways of speaking carry less prestige than varieties identified as White English in institutions such as schools and professions. The forms associated with White identities and higher social classes are popularly considered to be inherently superior to other forms. Many people think of such forms as "good English" or "Standard English" and a sign of superior intelligence or moral worth, while ways of speaking associated with less powerful groups are often seen as indicating a lack of such characteristics (Lippi-Green 1997; Milroy and Milroy 1985). Scholars of language have long shown that no way of speaking is inherently better than any other (Labov 1972), and that we mistake prestige for inherent quality. Thus, the ways of speaking of those in power, i.e., prestigious varieties, are treated as "standard" or "good English" irrespective of any inherent characteristics of the way of speaking itself. This relationship between historical power relations and our everyday experience of social difference and the value of various identities and cultural practices runs through this chapter.

Although social identities are popularly associated with ways of speaking, there is no social category that has uniform and fixed ways of speaking by all members. Popular associations of particular ways of speaking with particular class or racial identities can quickly become essentialist, e.g., "Black English is the way Black people talk." In fact, many African Americans do not speak a variety of African American English; some non-African Americans speak varieties of African American English; and no one uses African American English across all contexts (Spears 1988). Regardless of racial grouping, ways of speaking vary among members by income and education, age, gender, geographical location, and the individual. Each individual also varies speech across situations, e.g., people speak differently in informal encounters with peers than in more formal interactions in institutions.
Performing multiracial identities

The notion of race as performed, or achieved, is particularly useful in understanding identities of multiracial individuals. The ambiguity that is created when individual phenotypes do not match popular stereotypes for members of particular categories is compounded by issues of performance that are seen by others as ambiguous or conflicting. These issues of performance can encompass both (1) explicit self-identification and (2) performance in terms of identity-associated behaviors, particularly language.

Explicit self-identification is a performance in that individuals have a choice of how to define themselves, and claims of identity shift across contexts (Burke and Kao, this volume). When multiracial individuals define themselves in different ways at different times or refuse to define themselves in terms of a single, historically dominant category, it can attract great attention, particularly if the claim violates the "one drop" rule for African descent. In 1995, Tiger Woods was a twenty-year-old amateur golfer who was hailed as the first Black to win the U.S. amateur golf championship. As the child of a mother from Thailand and an African American father, Woods began to correct reporters who referred to him as "Black." This assertion of an identity other than Black made media headlines, e.g., "Golfer Tiger Woods says he's not black, newspaper reports" (Jet, April 24, 1995). "Black" has historically been a totalizing identity in the United States that has not allowed for ethnic diversity or inclusion of non-Black ancestry. For Woods, being defined as Black was tantamount to erasing the existence of his Thai mother, who had raised him.

During a 1997 interview, television talk show host Oprah Winfrey asked Woods if it bothered him to be called "African American," and he replied, "It does. Growing up, I came up with this name: I'm a 'Cablinasian'." This acronym made reference to his Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian ancestry. Like his earlier assertion that he was not Black, this identity claim brought considerable media attention in a country organized by mutually exclusive racial categories. For many African Americans, these claims seemed politically naive, as the category Black - and attendant discrimination - has historically been imposed on African-descent people, regardless of how they defined themselves. Such remarks were also taken by some as an attempt to distance himself from Black America. In a media statement, which he characterized as the "final and only" statement he would make about his background, Woods gave a somewhat different characterization of his background:

The media has portrayed me as African-American; sometimes, Asian. In fact, I am both. Yes, I am the product of two great cultures, one African-American and the other Asian. On my father's side, I am African-American. On my mother's side, I am Thai.

Yet at other times Woods described his racial identity in greater detail, explaining that his mother, from Thailand, had one Thai parent and one Chinese-Dutch parent; and that his father had African, Chinese, and Native American ancestry.

Which of these is the "real" race of Tiger Woods? This question makes sense only if we think of race as a fixed essence inside a person. In fact, we see race as a performance here. Each of Woods's claims of identity is a contingent performance in a particular context rather than a direct reflection of some inner-core identity or essence of Tiger Woods. Even if Woods were completely consistent in his claims of racial identity, such claims would not establish his racial identity. Like other kinds of performance, claims of identity can be debated, criticized, ratified, or rejected by others. It is only when a specific claim is accepted by others that he effectively counts as the asserted identity.

While we sometimes make explicit claims of class or racial identity, we constantly and unconsciously perform them in our everyday lives. We speak in ways that reflect our experience, including geographic origins, gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Through our accents, choice of words, communicative style, and the perspectives we reveal through talk, we say who we are - whether intentionally or not - and others judge who we are. These performances tend to go unnoticed unless they violate stereotypical associations, e.g., a male whose speech and behavior appear effeminate, or a Japanese American who sounds African American.

These performances also become salient when racial identity is ambiguous, as is the case with many multiracial individuals. In addition to embodying parents' apparent differences in appearance, such individuals can have direct connections to two distinct cultural traditions in terms of dress, style, behavior, beliefs, and language. Just as children of immigrants to the United States may become bicultural and bilingual in English and the language of one or both immigrant parents, children of biracial couples may become bilingual and bicultural. Expressive dimensions of culture from these two parental traditions become resources for the performance of identity. Outsiders rely on these communicative cues to help them resolve the apparent racial ambiguity of such individuals.

Language, identity politics, and the reproduction of inequality

From a popular, essentialist perspective, the relationship between identities and ways of speaking is unproblematic. One talks like a White person because one is a White person, or one uses ways of speaking associated with working-class identities because one is working-class. As analysts, however, we know that there is no inherent link between phenotypes and ways of speaking or class status and ways of speaking. Ways of speaking are not genetically transferred, in contrast to many aspects of physical appearance. We also know that there are many individuals whose ways of speaking do not match essentialist stereotypes: for example, highly educated, successful people whose speech sounds working class, African Americans whose speech is indistinguishable from that of White Americans around them, and phenotypically White individuals whose speech can sound Latino.

While we know that there is no inherent link between identities and ways of speaking, we also recognize the sociological fact that members of some class and
racial groups do regularly speak in ways that fit with essentialist expectations. Members and non-members of identity groups, themselves, typically treat those ways of speaking as extensions of those identities, regardless of the lack of inherent link between the two.

Given this lack of inherent link between identities and ways of speaking, what produces and maintains these patterns and associations? Why do so many Black Americans and White Americans, for example, maintain different ways of speaking after centuries of contact and English monolingualism? Why are distinctions between Latino English and White English fewer and less salient than between Black and White English? Why do Asian Americans - who are in many cases only one generation removed from various immigrant languages - and White Americans tend to speak in ways that are indistinguishable? Given the institutional prestige of English spoken by educated White Americans - and the upward socioeconomic mobility with which it is associated - why do speakers choose to use less institutionally prestigious ways of speaking? In other words, why do individuals continue to use ways of speaking that are stigmatized by wealthier, more powerful groups in society?

These patterns can all be explained by the politics of identity. Despite the prestige enjoyed by the language of educated White Americans, studies in marginalized ethnic, racial, or class communities invariably show that members of such communities not only use forms that are disparaged by dominant groups but also ridicule or censure members who use forms associated with dominant groups (Labov 1972; Basso 1979; Bailey 2001). While the varieties favored by dominant groups are popularly seen as "standard" or "correct" and have high status in institutional contexts, the local varieties used by disparaged groups symbolize and enhance solidarity in the face of such discrimination.

Sociolinguists Ferguson and Gumperz (1960) summarized the forces that shape language choice in different social groups as follows:

First: any group of speakers of language X which regards itself as a close social unit will tend to express its group solidarity by favoring those linguistic innovations which set it apart from other speakers who are not part of the group....

On the other hand: other things being equal, if two speakers A and B of a language X communicate in language X and if A regards B as having more prestige than himself and aspires to equal B's status, then the variety of X spoken by A will tend towards identity with that spoken by B.

(Ferguson and Gumperz 1960: 9)

The social hierarchies expressed in class and racial groupings thus encourage the maintenance of distinctive ways of speaking. Discrimination reinforces the internal solidarity of groups, who then favor ways of speaking that distinguish them from those who are not part of the group. Creating and maintaining distinctive ways of speaking can attest to the validity and value of identities that might otherwise be disparaged. For many members of less powerful groups, use of the language of the more powerful groups is tantamount to accepting powerful groups’ versions of the world, in which the less powerful are seen as inferior and underserving of the resources controlled by the more powerful. For many African Americans, for example, "talking White" can be experienced as "selling out" one’s people and being ashamed of one’s identity and community (Fordham 1986). "Talking White," for non-Whites, can suggest a political perspective that tacitly accepts existing racial and class hierarchies.

Ways of speaking are not just the result of socialization, but are also political acts of identity in a larger social system of meanings. Whether we consciously intend them that way or not, others take our ways of speaking as an indicator of significant attributes about us, including our beliefs and attitudes toward race and class. White and well-to-do Americans tend to take class and racial hierarchies - and their privileged position in the system - for granted and see their speech as normal, natural, and apart from politics. Members of less privileged race and class groups tend to be more keenly aware of these social hierarchies, and often take ways of speaking as cues to that individual’s relative acceptance of social hierarchies or resistance to them.

The politics of identity can explain the absence of distinctive Asian American ways of speaking. Asian Americans were not forcibly incorporated into the United States as were African Americans, most Asian Americans are voluntary, post-1960 immigrants and their descendants, and as a group they have not faced the levels of discrimination experienced by African Americans. Asian American household income exceeds that of White Americans, and Asian Americans have been dubbed "model minorities" based on their entrepreneurship, cultural assimilation, and success in education. Asian Americans, with the possible exception of poorer refugee groups, will thus be expected to follow the pattern described above in which their language variety will tend toward the most prestigious variety in society. The overall socioeconomic success and relatively assimilationist ideology of this group means that there is no group motivation to mark social difference through language.

Latino Americans were not enslaved in the ways that African Americans were, but some were forcibly incorporated into the United States, e.g., through the U.S. acquisition of the Southwest and parts of the West from Mexico in 1848 and the U.S. acquisition of Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898. Latino household income is lower than White American income, but U.S. Latinos are primarily voluntary immigrants or their descendants who have come to the United States to seek a better life, which aligns them ideologically with a mainstream U.S. ethos. This combination of historical and ideological patterns and current socioeconomic status in the United States would predict a level of linguistic distinction greater than that of Asian Americans but considerably less than the distinctions between varieties associated with Black and White identities. This is the case both linguistically and socially. Linguistically, Latino varieties of English (e.g., Chicano English in the Southwest, Puerto Rican English in New York, and Cuban English in Florida) do not vary from other varieties of English as much as African American English in terms of grammar, phonology, and vocabulary (Fought
Talking White can have immediate practical socioeconomic advantages for non-White individuals in terms of progressing through educational, government, business, and professional institutions. College students who speak in ways that approximate the speech of educated White Americans, for example, tend to be seen by their peers as speaking in ways that are appropriate for success in that institution. Such ways of speaking can be a key to social acceptance by Whites and for admission to an unmarked, middle-class status for individuals from working-class backgrounds. Such ways of speaking are highly naturalized in educational and professional contexts. They are perceived to be the natural and normal way of speaking in those contexts, rather than the contingent result of particular power relations in society. Ways of speaking that diverge from these socially constructed standards—e.g., African American or working-class English—are commonly seen as evidence that individuals are not qualified to be in those institutions and to gain access to the resources that such institutions control.

At the same time, however, ways of speaking associated with less powerful groups—non-Whites and poor or working-class Americans—can provide a resource for expressing pride in one’s identity and in one’s class or racial community. Maintaining such ways of speaking, despite the stigma they carry in the larger society, suggests resistance to dominant hierarchies in society and (partial) rejection of the evaluation system that devalues them (Morgan 1994). While “talking standard English” or “talking White” by non-Whites puts race into the background, using distinctively African American, Latino, or working-class ways of speaking can call attention to ongoing inequality that is characteristic of class- and racially organized societies. The maintenance of socially marked ways of speaking can thus help groups maintain local pride and solidarity in a society that otherwise favors White and relatively wealthy Americans.

Paradoxically, maintenance of socially marked ways of speaking can reinforce the very hierarchies that individuals are attempting to resist. While such ways of speaking can create local pride and community solidarity, they can hinder individuals’ ability to progress through the educational, business, and professional institutions that are routes to power and prosperity in U.S. society. This dynamic is typical of cultural hegemony (Williams 1977), in which dominant groups maintain power not through direct coercion but through controlling common sense, e.g., what constitutes "Standard English."

In such a hegemonic system,itized groups can unwittingly contribute to the reproduction of their own marginalization. If groups with less power "sell out" and adopt the norms and standards of dominant groups, they are implicitly agreeing to the superiority of those norms and standards. If they resist such norms and standards—and this resistance can be empowering at the local level—they face hurdles to success in education and other institutions. Lack of success in educational institutions, in particular, reproduces a marginal and powerless position within the larger system.

This hegemonic system, in which social inequality is translated into cultural terms of evaluation, tends to reproduce inequality through the actions of all groups in society. In summary:

Those in power in the system gain privilege from it and don’t question it; they treat it as natural and normal.

Marginalized groups who consent to the dominant evaluation system—by adopting its standards in place of their own—reproduce the system by paying homage to it, even though it discriminates against them.

Marginalized groups who actively resist the evaluation system experience a lack of socioeconomic mobility. At the local level, this resistance involves choice and is experienced as empowering. In terms of the larger system, however, this rejection of the language of socioeconomic mobility can be self-defeating. It lends support to the dominant ideology that speakers of racially or class-stigmatized varieties of English choose to remain marginal and are undeserving of the prestige and resources enjoyed by other members of society.

Language, ideology, and honorary White status

"Honorary White" is the term used to describe the implicit status that can be accorded non-Whites of high socioeconomic status whose behavior and ideology align with those of mainstream White Americans (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2002; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2006). Achieving "honorary White" status gives non-Whites a relatively high degree of acceptance in White-dominated institutions. While White Americans enjoy privileges and an unmarked racial status regardless of their behavior, honorary Whites must display the appropriate language, behavior, and attitudes on an ongoing basis to maintain the status, as it is contingent and can be withdrawn at any time. While great benefits can accrue to the individual "honorary White," the term is generally understood as pejorative by non-Whites, and honorary Whites are often seen by other community members as being sell-outs and disloyal to their communities. At the structural level, unquestioned acceptance of honorary White status, by either Whites or non-Whites, can reinforce racial hierarchies in society by accepting the existence of a privileged status reserved for Whites and honorary Whites.

The term and status "honorary White" were created in South Africa in the early 1960's to allow Japanese visitors and business partners to count as White. This shielded them from the most salient restrictions of apartheid, e.g., non-Whites were not allowed to stay in White hotels, use White swimming pools, or eat in White restaurants. The immediate impetus for creation of the status was a $250 million business deal between Japan and South Africa in 1962. South Africa did not want to alienate its new business partners through direct racist discrimination against Japanese representatives. More generally, the creation of the status recognized Japan's growing economic might. Although the commonsense notion of race centers on physical appearance, race is fundamentally about power differential,
and Japanese could not be assigned a stigmatized racial identity when they were so powerful economically.

The notion of honorary White status helps us to think about race in the United States in terms of ideology, power, and performance rather than skin color. The Japanese acquiring honorary White status in South Africa did not change their skin color. Similarly, honorary White status in the United States depends not on physical appearance but on socioeconomic success, communicative performance, and perceived ideology. Honorary White status has been extended to entire groups of Asian Americans, for example, based on perceptions of socioeconomic success and relative embrace of assimilationist ideologies. While some African Americans who have been characterized as honorary Whites have light skin, e.g., Colin Powell, or biracial identity, e.g., Barack Obama, these are neither sufficient nor necessary for the status. Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State under George W. Bush, for example, has relatively dark skin and features associated with African descent, but has been characterized as an honorary White based on her forms of speaking and self-presentation, her success in elite, White-dominated institutions, and her conservative political positions. In contrast, such light-skinned African-descent individuals as Malcolm X or Bob Marley are never characterized as honorary White because of politics and ideology. Malcolm X, for example, had very fair skin, but his Black empowerment ideology prevented him from being seen as honorary White. Reggae singer Bob Marley had both fair skin and a White father, but his Afrocentric music and political orientation made his racial identity unequivocally Black.

**Conclusion**

The concept of honorary White status highlights links between language, racial identity, and ideology that can help us interpret Mr. Nader's comments presented at the beginning of this chapter. When Mr. Nader referred to Obama as "half African American," he may have been only partly referring to Obama's Black-White biracial background. Instead, Nader may have been making reference to Obama's ideological positions and honorary White status. Nader follows this reference to Obama's race by criticizing Obama for not making the plight of the urban poor more of a campaign issue. He blends notions of class and race in this critique. Nader uses the term "ghetto," which invokes race, but the social ills that he enumerates - payday loans, predatory lending, asbestos, and lead - are more directly a function of poverty than of race. He then attributes this lack of attention to urban poverty to Obama's desire to "talk White." While "talking White" can refer to use of prestigious, "standard" English forms, it can also refer to an ideological perspective. "Talking White" and being "half" African American, in this case, suggest talking from a position of power and privilege from which the perspective of marginalized groups is relatively unimportant.

Nader also suggests that Obama doesn't want to appear like Jesse Jackson, the African American activist and one-time candidate in the Democratic primary. Jesse Jackson speaks African American English, rarely using a style that would be perceived as sounding White, and racial injustice is a frequent theme of Jackson's speeches. His speech and behavior draw attention to his distinctively African American identity, itself a symbol of a coercive history of American inequality. Jackson's frank discussion of inequality makes many White Americans uncomfortable, and Obama's popularity with White voters would have decreased if he had been associated with such direct discussion of inequality. From a common-sense, essentialist perspective in which race is seen as inherited physical appearance and essence, Mr. Nader's comments might seem like old-fashioned racism, and media seized on his comments as if they were just that. From a perspective in which race is about power, however, his comments suggest to us the effective roles of language and ideology in racial identities and performances.

Approaching race as being, in the first instance, about social hierarchies helps us to understand not only Nader's comments but the findings presented throughout this volume. Since race is not about fixed essences, but about power, history, ideology, and performance, we can see how racial meanings and identities are negotiated. These racial histories, ideologies, and performances help us to interpret empirical data such as intermarriage rates, perceptions of intergroup social distance, and the patterns and options for identity of multiracial individuals. Specifically, approaching race as being fundamentally about power helps us to understand the positive correlations between social class and racial identity of multiracial individuals. If race and social class are seen as simply two different perspectives on power and status, it follows that such multiracial individuals will tend toward identities that represent their overall positions and aspirations in power hierarchies, rather than ones that are tied specifically to their physical appearance or perceived ancestry.

**Notes**

Differential valuing of practices and identities can reproduce themselves long after the material differences in power in which they originated have diminished or disappeared. In the following pairs of synonyms, for example, the words left of the slash are perceived as more educated and sophisticated than the words on the right, even though they have the same meanings: dine/eat, reflect/think, depart/leave. This perception of superiority of "reflect" over "think" or "dine" over "eat" are a function of Norman French rule over Anglo-Saxons in England for several centuries following the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Norman French had political power over their Germanic English-speaking subjects. As Norman French and Anglo-Saxon English merged into Middle English, the French-origin vocabulary (e.g., "dine," "reflect," "depart") associated with the ruling class retained symbolic prestige, a prestige such vocabulary continues to enjoy today, more than 500 years after the disappearance of the Norman French ruling class.

2 The umbrella term "Asian American" veils fundamental differences in the demographic characteristics and experiences of various immigrant groups. While immigrants from Korea and India have tended to be highly educated and have U.S. household incomes that exceed those of White Americans, other groups, such as Cambodian refugees, have high rates of poverty and much lower levels of education and income.

3 Colin Powell was explicit about his assimilationist orientation - and its relationship to language - in a 1995 interview that appeared in the magazine *Ebony*: "We [African-Americans] can't walk away from the rest of America and go off into our own little world, and the book speaks rather directly and candidly to that. Our language is
English - the Queen's English. Don't give me any silliness about Black English or African roots. We don't live there; we live here. We've got to make our life and our future in this broader American society and we cannot separate ourselves" (Ebony 51 (1), November 1995: 100-05).

References


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