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# Toward Cross-Race Dialogue: Identification, Misrecognition and Difference in Multicultural Feminist Community

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## Toward Cross-Race Dialogue: Identification, Misrecognition, and Difference in Feminist Multicultural Community

**T**his essay constitutes an experiment in turning Lacanian categories of analysis to social uses. Specifically, I adapt Jacques Lacan's three registers—the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real—to an analysis of some cross-race dynamics in feminist communities. I argue that the often unconscious desire to identify with, to *be*, the racialized other produces a number of the misrecognitions that complicate race relations among feminists. This tendency is especially noticeable in some comments by white feminists who appear to be idealizing and identifying with black feminists—an idealization that the black feminists whose responses I quote below do not find flattering, for it erases their complexity as subjects.

While the Lacanian imaginary offers a frame for analyzing such misrecognitions, Lacan's other two registers, the symbolic and the real, suggest ways of coping with the vagaries of the imaginary. To what degree does the symbolic block the imaginary tendency to reduce the other's complexity to an illusory perfection and wholeness? What role does the real play in an encounter with someone from a different culture? I approach these questions through a simulated "dialogue" between an Anglo reader (myself) and two Chicana feminists' texts: Cherríe Moraga's "From a Long Line of *Vendidas*" (1986) and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). Although they are, to be sure, literary transactions, these readerly dialogues are meant to model ways that imaginary, symbolic, and

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real processes inflect identification in the embodied conversations that take place in feminist communities.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the racialized fantasies of identification I explore here originate in white middle-class academic feminists like myself, and perhaps they say as much about the unconscious processes that construct whiteness as they do about cross-race relations.<sup>2</sup> I argue, though, that exploring these fantasies and uncovering their psychological and cultural origins can illuminate some of the impediments to communication between different racial constituencies within feminism, some of the sources of mistrust that have plagued organizers of feminist communities—whether these are academic women's studies departments or activist groups.

Reinforcing and complicating individual desires for identification is the tendency of communities to strive for solidarity—a collective form of identification. If cultural pluralism is an aim of multicultural community—and by pluralism I mean not just a principle of inclusiveness but an organizing principle that would give equal voice to all and enable the full expression of diversity and dissension—then identification poses a threat to pluralism. For identification, at both individual and community levels, tends toward an assimilation of difference to the same. The desire for identification moves the subject toward an illusory unity of self and other that erases difference and threatens the perception of the other as other.

Yet if one does not identify with the cultural other to some degree, does not make the conceptual leap to stand in her shoes, how can one

<sup>1</sup> In practice, of course, real, symbolic, and imaginary processes are always intertwined; I separate them artificially for purposes of analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Whether or not psychoanalysis, and particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis, can be expanded to address issues of race and class has been hotly debated. Elizabeth Abel finds that "introducing the category of the social into Lacanian discourse" is difficult "since this discourse collapses the social into a symbolic register that is always everywhere the same" (1990, 185). Hortense Spillers similarly critiques the universality of Lacan's categories, accusing Lacanian psychoanalysis of "imagin[ing] subjectivity hermetically sealed off from other informing discourses and [the] practices" of particular cultures (1997, 142). On the other hand, as Chris Lane argues, psychoanalysis can uncover "the fantasies organizing the meaning of racial and ethnic identities" (1998, 1). For discussions combining psychoanalysis and race, see the articles in the anthology edited by Christopher Lane (1998) and Homi Bhabha's "Of Mimicry" (1994a) and "The Other Question" (1994b). For accounts of psychoanalysis's troubled historical relationship with race, see Spillers 1987; Gilman 1993; and Walton 2001. For a Lacanian analysis of race, see Seshadri-Crooks 2000. Diana Fuss's comprehensive analysis of Freudian models of identification contains a chapter on race, Frantz Fanon, and identification as an instrument of colonization (1995, 141–72). For a wide-ranging analysis of identification and race, see Cheng 2001; for melancholic identification and race, see Eng and Han 2000.

be in a position to hear her point of view, to perceive things from her perspective? Feminists have argued both sides of this issue. Crossing disciplinary boundaries, I invoke the theories of standpoint epistemologists Sandra Harding (1991) and Paula Moya (2001) and feminist political theorists Seyla Benhabib (1992) and Iris Marion Young (1990a) to help me explore two competing needs of a pluralistic community: on the one hand, hearing what the other says in her own terms requires temporarily adopting her perspective; on the other hand, hearing what the other says in her own terms requires some corrective to the imaginary tendency to draw the other into identification and so confuse her perspective (and interests) with one's own. Aligning psychoanalytic ideas with principles of standpoint theory, discourse ethics, and political analysis enables me to approach the following question from a richer and more complex theoretical base: if imaginary processes of identification were sufficiently tempered by symbolic functions and by an acknowledgment of the real as it operates in community, could identification be modulated so that one could identify with the other's perspective without usurping or distorting it?<sup>3</sup>

### **Hazards of the imaginary: Race and idealization**

The comments of several prominent white feminist critics reveal a tendency to idealize African-American women. African-American feminist scholars have responded by pointing out what these idealizing statements elide, notably the historical context and material conditions in which African Americans become women. The sequence of white idealizing remarks and black critical responses gives the impression of a dialogue—but a failed

<sup>3</sup> Kaja Silverman (1996) theorizes "heteropathic identification," a movement out from the self to identify with the other's position that would preserve a perception of her as a separate subject. Jessica Benjamin (1995) explores some of the same questions of identification and difference that I do, but from an object-relations perspective. Diana Fuss (1995) and Doris Sommer (1999) warn against any attempt to use identification as a political tool for bridging difference because of its seemingly inevitable assimilation of other to self. Theorizing from a phenomenological perspective, Sonia Kruks proposes an ethic that balances "feeling-with" others with "respectful recognition" of difference as the basis for interracial feminist alliances (2001, 154, 172–76). She points out the dangers of white women's "excessive identification" with women of color, obscuring as it does differentials of power and privilege (158). On similar issues of cross-race identification and empathy, see feminist philosophers Sandra Bartky (1997) and Maria Lugones (1990).

dialogue.<sup>4</sup> I argue that unconscious processes of idealization and identification can generate cross-race misrecognitions and misunderstandings. Idealizing identifications tend to obstruct a perception of the other as the center of her own complex reality—as, in a word, a subject. And as black feminists' commentaries on white women's idealizing fantasies of them make clear, they do nothing to change actual power relations or to bring about economic and social justice. Indeed, white feminists' focus on the individual power of a black woman obscures and distorts the power differential between white and black women.

Because the white feminist idealizations I discuss below often pivot on a visualization of the other woman's imposing physical presence, Lacan's notion of imaginary identification becomes relevant. For Lacan, identification is always a visual transaction—"the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (1977, 2). The first identification occurs in the "mirror stage": the young child sees in his or her mirror image an ideal of bodily unity and assumes identity with it; that image becomes the core of the ego. And this process "will be the source of secondary identifications" (1977, 2). What enchants the baby at the mirror is that the image of its bodily form appears to have what it lacks; the human gestalt seems to promise unified being. The subject's first identification is itself, then, an idealization: that is, the bodily image in the mirror presents a unified ideal in contrast to the baby's felt experience of the body, which at this stage before the development of motor control is a jumble of sensations and impulses. The process that I will be calling idealization follows similar lines. Because the adult subject continues to experience herself as fragmentary and inconsistent, she hungers for that original illusion of wholeness and finds it, again, projected onto a human form in the external world: "It is in the other that he will always rediscover his ideal ego" (Lacan 1991, 282). As Yannis Stavrakakis puts it, the ego is forever dependent on the other "due to the need to identify with something external, other, different, in order to acquire the basis of a self-unified identity" (1999, 18). The telltale mark of idealization—and of the imaginary identification that, according to Lacan, necessarily accompanies

<sup>4</sup> Or, perhaps, to borrow Susan Stanford Friedman's terms, a series of "scripts of confession" on the part of white women and "scripts of accusation" on the part of black women (1995, 8–11; 1998, 41–43). A full account of these missed communications would need to be grounded in a historical study of such misunderstandings, such as Hazel Carby's account of the painful history of African-American slaves' relation to their white mistresses (1987) or Wini Breines's illuminating study of white and black women's very different understandings of the goals and events of the 1960s liberation movements in which they participated (2002).

it—is the perception of the other as a coherent whole, self-complete and self-possessed.<sup>5</sup>

What is striking in the examples of idealization that follow is that the body often figures as the site of the ideal; even when it is the black woman's mental qualities or cultural authority that the white feminist in question admires, she tends to perceive those qualities in terms of the racialized body.<sup>6</sup> In her survey of white feminists' readings of African-American women writers' texts, "Black Writing, White Reading" (Abel 1993), Elizabeth Abel includes her own reading of Toni Morrison's short story, "Recitatif" (1983). As Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, "Recitatif" was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races" (1993, xi). Because the story gives confusing and contradictory clues to the racial identities of Twyla (the narrator) and Roberta, its ambiguity brings to light, Abel writes, "the unarticulated racial codes that operate at the boundaries of consciousness" (1993, 472). Abel read Roberta as black, she says, because Roberta seems to be more "in the know" about the social scene—about current political and cultural life—than Twyla and because Roberta seems to inhabit a more imposing body. As a girl Roberta is apparently better mothered and better fed than Twyla; as an adult Roberta, like her mother, is large in stature (1993, 473). These details are in the text. But why should Abel therefore read Roberta as African American? The woman who hungers for what the other has—Twyla "perceives Roberta as possessing something

<sup>5</sup> Seshadri-Crooks (2000) discourages facile attempts to correlate the mirror image and the subject's body that would make race a matter of prediscursive bodily markings; she argues that it is the symbolic order, not the imaginary, that governs mirror-stage transactions. Silverman (1996) uses the Lacanian concept of sublimation to theorize idealization, arriving at a conclusion very different from mine about the effects of idealization on race relations. Cheng connects mirror-stage identifications to interpellation and race and gives cultural mirroring processes a celebratory turn (2001, 45–59). Elin Diamond (1993, 88; 1997) focuses on the projection involved in seeing in the other the perfected image of the self, and Shuli Barzilai emphasizes the oscillations between aggressivity and love in mirroring relations (Barzilai 1999, 90–99).

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Berlant (1991) writes that white bourgeois femininity hides the body beneath neutral clothing in an effort to meet the criterion of abstract disembodied citizen reified in the U.S. Constitution and culture, but, denied body, a white woman then fantasizes reembodyment through the appropriation of a black woman's body. See also Margaret Homans, who contrasts three postmodern white feminists' use of black women to represent embodiment with two African-American women's "identification of the black woman with her body" (1994, 90).

she lacks and craves" (1993, 473)—is read as white; Roberta, the one who has what it takes, is read as African American.<sup>7</sup>

Tania Modleski's account of her affection for the Whoopi Goldberg character in a series of Hollywood comedies foregrounds the body as a site of liberated power. After a sophisticated deconstruction of the Goldberg role as a product of dominant (racist) cinema that assigns masculine body language to Whoopi Goldberg in order to show that despite her best efforts at mimicry a black woman is "not quite/not white"—that is, not quite a woman—Modleski confesses to being drawn to Goldberg's character all the same. Although it makes her feel uncomfortably complicit with the racist strategies of dominant cinema, Modleski finds watching the Goldberg character "empowering" because her body language "represent[s] a liberating departure from the stifling conventions of femininity" (1991, 133).

The last comment suggests what Abel's interpretation also hints at: idealizations that fix on the body have more to do with the ideologically constructed position of the white middle-class idealizer than they do with the African-American object of idealization. Jane Stembridge, a white woman who was one of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's earliest staff members, explicitly identifies the lack in herself that makes an African-American woman the target of envy. Observing Fanny Lou Hamer's public presence, Stembridge writes: "[Fanny Lou] Hamer . . . knows that she is good. . . . If she didn't know that, . . . she wouldn't stand there, with her head back and sing! She couldn't speak the *way* that she speaks and the way she speaks is this: she announces. I do not announce. I apologize" (quoted in Giddings 1984, 301). It is the authority of Hamer's speaking voice that Stembridge admires, from a self-acknowledged sense of her own disabled function. As in body language, so in speech, U.S. middle-class women are socialized to be demure and unassuming, hedging statements with self-disparaging qualifiers (Stembridge's "apologies") and advertising powerlessness through soft tones and hesitant inflections (Henley 1977, 69). Stembridge concludes that Hamer has been trained differently from herself; she has not been "taught" to demean and diminish "herself, her body, her strong voice" (Giddings 1984, 301).

It would seem, then, that middle-class white women tend to glorify

<sup>7</sup> That a different reading is equally plausible is demonstrated by the interpretation of Abel's African-American graduate student, Lula Fragg, who reversed the attribution of racial identities: Fragg, following cultural, economic, and historical cues, read Twyla as black and Roberta as white (Abel 1993, 471–75).

the physical presence of the other woman because of specific deficiencies that they see made whole in her. When I idealize you, I see in you the qualities that I lack, the qualities that I would like to have. And regardless of the exact qualities that they admire in the other woman, they locate this idealization at the site of the body. Thus, it is social mastery that Abel locates in Roberta's body, in repeated phrases like "[Roberta possesses] a more compelling physical presence that fortifies her cultural authority" (474); indeed, Abel acknowledges that she sees "embodiedness itself as a symptom and source of cultural authority" (1993, 474).

Imaginary identifications such as these have the unintended effect of erasing the other woman as subject. Cross-race idealizations also erase the historical and political context in which she became a subject. For example, a white woman's wish to identify with a black leader and so possess her rhetorical mastery or the perceived power of her physical presence overlooks the situated nature of those qualities—ignores the possibility that black women leaders do not just "have" authority but have developed ways of inhabiting and projecting body and voice as resistance, as a political strategy within a context of racial oppression. A more substantial recognition of a black woman's authority and presence than the wish to identify with her would involve a study of the raced history that has produced black female gender roles.

African-American feminists Sheila Radford-Hill and Joan Morgan provide a historical context for the strong black woman role that casts a different light on white idealizations of a black woman's personal power and presence. Morgan locates the origins of the stereotype in slavery. The idea that black female slaves were strong enough to endure any pain and keep on going justified slave-owners' abuses, including rape. "The black woman's mythic 'strength' became a convenient justification for every atrocity committed on her" (Morgan 1999, 98). In the liberation movements of the 1960s, Radford-Hill points out, the same stereotype came in handy to both black nationalists and white feminists: a strong black woman could be counted on to bear the blows of sexism and racism and "still render service" (Radford-Hill 2002, 1086). The mythic identity that emerges from history to inform contemporary black gender identities is, as Michele Wallace defines it, "a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men" (1978, 107).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Morgan, Radford-Hill, and Kimberly Springer (2002) discuss the psychic costs of the



When white women idealize black women for embodying the strength that they themselves would like to have, then, they inadvertently champion and reinforce an oppressive, even damaging and dehumanizing gender identity. And, as Valerie Smith says, the "association of black women with reembodyment" is especially problematic, for it "resembles rather closely the association, in . . . nineteenth-century cultural constructions of womanhood, of women of color with the body and therefore with animal passions and slave labor" (1989, 45).<sup>9</sup>

Idealizing the racialized other has real-world political consequences. Abstracting a woman's personal strength from the social conditions that fostered her development of those strengths protects the white idealizer from having to confront the adverse material conditions that attach to being black in the United States and the daily insults and injuries of racism. As Ann duCille says in a different context, a white writer can "take symbolic wealth from the romanticized black body" while "retain[ing] the luxury of ignoring its material poverty" (1996, 110). This not-knowing bars the white idealizer from feeling any urgent need to change the racially skewed distribution of power and resources in the United States—or to give up the benefits that she derives from it.

Nonetheless, in opening up to scrutiny some of the unconscious processes of whiteness—the fantasy projections of racial difference that obstruct cross-race communication—the white academic feminists I have cited are performing an important service. As Abel explains, the purpose of such an analysis is to "deepen our recognition of our racial selves and the 'others' we fantasmatically construct—and thereby expand the possibilities of dialogue across as well as about racial boundaries" (1993, 120).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, once the white women have published their idealizing

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"Strong Black Woman" gender role from the perspective of those who have to live up to it. On the social construction of black women, see Davis 1983; Giddings 1984; Carby 1987; Collins 1990; Tate 1992; Ladner 1995; Brown 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Smith refers here to the ideology of slavery, but her reference to "reembodyment" calls up a whole series of historical precedents for the displacement onto black bodies of corporeal energies harnessed and repressed by white socialization. See hooks 1992; Lott 1993; Gubar 1997. All three discuss that variant of identification called cultural appropriation, or assimilation—well-named in hooks's essay title, "Eating the Other" (1992). For a discussion of the ideology of slavery to which Smith refers, see Davis 1983, 5–12; Giddings 1984, 43; and Carby 1987, 23–24.

<sup>10</sup> I analyze Jane Gallop's idealizing "dialogue" with black feminist critic Deborah McDowell in the longer version of this essay (Wyatt 2004) and in an earlier version of my discussion of white feminist idealizations of black women (Wyatt 1996). Gallop has been especially active in publicly exploring her fantasies about black women because, she says, she

fantasies, the black women who are their targets can respond as speaking subjects and so dispel their reification as venerated fantasy objects. The act of moving idealizing fantasies of the other woman into the public space of the printed word enables the dynamic of dialogue to work on and throw into process the static objects of private fantasy. In Lacanian terms, the white theorists have begun the process of breaking down imaginary identifications by inserting their fantasies of race into the symbolic order—and the symbolic is, for Lacan, an antidote to the distortions of the imaginary.

**"Like You/Not You": Cherríe Moraga's "From a Long Line of *Vendidas*" and symbolic identification**

In Lacanian theory symbolic processes function as a constraint on the idealizing, simplifying, and assimilative tendencies of imaginary identification.<sup>11</sup> In the following reading of Cherríe Moraga's "From a Long Line of *Vendidas*," I explore various ways that the dominance of the symbolic in a conversation between persons on different sides of a race border can curb identification and yet, perhaps, provide a bridge to difference.

The symbolic, the register of language and verbal interaction, functions through difference. On the level of language, signifiers mean through their difference from each other, and that meaning is always in motion as signifiers shift in relation to other signifiers. On the level of dialogue, each speaker reveals different aspects of herself over time: "The identity of the subject becomes a term that is always to be determined, always yet to be defined in a further movement of the signifying chain" (Boothby 1996, 354). This presentation of self as "the unfolding of a history" curbs imaginary identification by challenging the desire to see the other as static and complete (Boothby 1996, 354). In the cross-race dialogue I model through the following reading of Moraga's autobiographical essay, I perceive the speaker piecemeal, over time, each passage revealing a new and different aspect of her subjectivity. And Moraga's self-presentation as a multiple and heterogeneous subject—she is one of the women of color

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thinks they "are not just idiosyncratic" (Gallop, Hirsch, and Miller 1990, 364), implying that self-examination can reveal and possibly correct the tendency of white female academics to exoticize black women. See also Gallop 1992, 165–76.

<sup>11</sup> In titling this discussion I am borrowing, and reversing, the title of Trinh T. Minh-ha's essay, "Not You/Like You" (1990).

who originated the concept of multiple subjectivity—enhances the symbolic and invites a different kind of identification.<sup>12</sup>

Moraga's description of a telephone conversation with her mother gives me an opening for identification. After an alienating gap of separation, Moraga's mother calls her, and Moraga is about to accept her mother's return and declare her great love for her—"I am big as a mountain! I want to say, Watch out, Mama! I love you and I am as big as a mountain!"—when she hears the other phone in her mother's house ring. Her mother, returning, says it is Moraga's brother on the other line: "Okay, *m'jita*. I love you. I'll talk to you later," she says, and hangs up—"cutting off the line in the middle of the connection. My brother has always come first" (1986, 177). This scenario of rejection draws me into identification. My mother (I felt) loved me until my brother was born and then transferred all her love to him, forsaking me. But Moraga's next statement cuts me off from identification: "What I wanted from my mother was impossible. It would have meant her going against Mexican/Chicano tradition in a very fundamental way. You are a traitor to your race if you do not put the man first" (177). Moraga moves to a dimension foreign to me by placing her mother's betrayal in a cultural context that explains it: loyalty to the race is first and foremost loyalty to the Chicano male. My mother was a traitor to me, period. I am thrown out of identification, reminded of difference: I am Anglo, she is Chicana. Identification is not uniform and all-consuming but shifting: I am like her, then not her, moving in and out, making a partial identification.

The Lacanian symbolic order encompasses sociocultural structure as well as linguistic structure. Moraga likewise situates her own experience always within an overarching cultural order. She argues that gender must be understood "within a context formed by race, class, geography, religion, ethnicity, and language" (Moraga 1986, 187). And that idea does not remain at the level of abstract principle. Rather, Moraga thinks of herself in terms of "a complex web of personal and political identity and op-

<sup>12</sup> From their daily experience of crossing cultural borders and inhabiting the several competing discourses that demand their allegiance, feminists of color have fashioned a self-definition that is multiple, heterogeneous, and self-contradictory. Chicana feminists, especially, have insisted on that self-definition "as speaking subjects of a new discursive formation" in their writings (Alarcón 1990, 356), beginning with the 1981 publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, which Moraga coedited. Many African-American feminists also stress the multiplicity of identity, of course. Perhaps the preponderance of African-American targets of idealization in white feminist texts can be ascribed in part to a culture that has historically represented African-American women visually, as bodily presences. For the visual regime of race in the United States, see Wiegman 1995.

pression," each node of the "web" consisting of a nexus of social discourses (181).

This is the Lacanian symbolic, although Lacan says it differently: the signifier "I" situates the subject within a structure of sociocultural signifiers that governs the subject's relation to others. Or, as Shoshana Felman puts it, "Language . . . articulates a pre-established sociocultural system governed by a Law that structures relationships and into which [the subject's] own relations must be inscribed" (1987, 124). Although Moraga describes her experience and her culture in a more intimate and familiar discourse, she subscribes to this view, referring elements of her personal affective life always to the symbolic laws that govern her culture—or, as she says, to "the specific cultural contexts that have shaped her" (1986, 188).

What is the effect on cross-cultural identification? That is, how does an Anglo reader process Moraga's symbolic orientation? How does the overriding symbolic element shape reader identification?

Contemplating Moraga's cultural interpretation of her mother's behavior leads me to rethink my mother's betrayal. Although my first response protests absolute difference—"Well, my mother was a traitor to me, period!"—Moraga's symbolic orientation begins to shift my attitude toward my own mother's failure of love. As Moraga locates family relations within the boxed structures of male dominance—a male-dominant family structure within the larger male-dominant Mexican culture—I am led to think of my mother's rejection in similarly structural terms. My mother, too, was putting my brother first within a larger cultural structure where the male is valued over the female. To put it in Lacanian terminology, Moraga influences me to think of personal relations as the relations of subject to subject within a signifying structure that governs them both. And that symbolic way of thinking tempers my rage against my mother, so that it begins to shift from a dual relation—I hate her, I love her—to a more mediated view of mother, son, and daughter as they figure within a larger relational structure.

The nature of my identification with Moraga changes, too: having located myself in a family structure similar to hers, I experience not so much the initial totalizing identification with her individual rage and resentment—"I feel exactly the same as you"—as an identification with her position: that of daughter in a male-dominant family structure. This is a symbolic identification—not between two individuals but between two positions in a symbolic organization—"not accomplished by resemblance (projective identity) but by a parallel position in a structure" (Felman 1987, 116). Yet the partial identification is useful to communication between women whose cultural backgrounds differ. Identifying with Moraga

as underloved daughter, being "in" the text of her family experience—or at least in the entry hall—I am more apt to be engaged, more inclined to be open to what she says about her experience, than if her story seemed completely alien to me. I am still alert to differences, though, in part because bumping up against the actuality of what it means to be a woman in Mexican/Chicano culture continually throws me out of the comfortable place of identification.

### **The benefits of pluralism: Standpoint theory, discourse ethics, and partial identification**

Epistemologists Sandra Harding and Paula Moya develop standpoint theory in a direction relevant to the dialogic shift in perspective I have just described. According to standpoint theory, social location determines what one knows: persons in different class, race, gender, sexuality, and nation positions have different understandings of reality. Further, standpoint theory holds that more reliable understandings of reality can be generated from the positions of oppressed people: they do not have the stake that dominant persons do in maintaining a status quo supported by the reigning ideology. In order to survive they have to be able to understand the worldview of the dominants who control things as well as the knowledge generated by their own experience of the world; they therefore have access to a broader vision of social reality.

One might predict, starting from this premise, that feminist standpoint epistemologists would conclude that one is imprisoned in the understanding of the world determined by one's social position—and, as a corollary, that an unbridgeable gap exists between the knowledge of one in a dominant position and one in a marginalized position.<sup>13</sup> But Harding reasons, on the contrary, that someone in a dominant position can recognize that the knowledge generated by persons in oppressed positions comes closer to an accurate view of the way things work and therefore choose to base her own analysis on a theoretical framework produced from the other's marginalized standpoint (see Harding 1991, 287). And one can use the insights gained from adopting the other's theoretical perspective to undermine the system that gives one privilege in the first place. For example, one can become an antiracist thinker even if one begins from a privileged white middle-class woman's position. Moya's recent development of

<sup>13</sup> Joey Sprague provides a helpful summary of standpoint theorists who suggest ways of bridging this gap (2001, 530–31). Lisa Heldke's (1998) commentary on Harding's standpoint theory helped me to frame Harding's argument.

standpoint epistemology toward what she calls "post-positivist realism" indirectly describes the way that such a close acquaintance with one another's standpoints can refine a community's grasp of political realities (see Moya 2001, 445). And because some standpoints work better as explanations of the world than others, exposure to the other's standpoint can "reveal the contradictions and mystifications with which members of those societies live" (468). Seyla Benhabib (1992) takes up this notion of the enrichment in collective knowledge that derives from a multiplicity of perspectives and applies it to community decision making. Benhabib maintains that members of a community need to "reverse perspectives" and "judge from the point of view of the other(s)" before reaching judgment on an issue (1992, 32).

So far, my thinking about the benefits of cross-race dialogue resembles the concepts developed by Harding, Moya, and Benhabib. My partial identification with Moraga illustrates, as do their theories, the stimulus toward individual change and the enlargement of knowledge produced by the diversity of perspectives in a pluralist community. Occupying Moraga's standpoint as I interact with her narrative, I get a new, more inclusive view of my own standpoint. I begin to conceptualize my own subjectivity in the structural way that Moraga sees herself—as a node in a "web" constituted by the intersection of multiple discourses: not just "woman" but raced, classed, heterosexualized woman. It may well be painful to surrender the definition of myself as, simply, "woman"—one of the oppressed, one of the guiltless—in order to acknowledge my standpoint as raced, for in a racially stratified field of women I figure as a dominant, no longer innocent but occupying a position of privilege supported by the oppression of others. But viewing social realities from Moraga's standpoint during the course of my reading pressures me to do so. As Harding and Moya suggest, it is the opportunity to look at my own standpoint through the lens of the marginalized subject that enables me to see more clearly "the contradictions and mystifications" of my standpoint—among them a blindness to class and race that is a privilege of whiteness and that protects white women from an accurate knowledge of the power relations in which they participate.

What then would a psychoanalytic perspective add to feminist standpoint theory and discourse ethics? I would say, an increased insistence on the necessity of instituting formal discourse procedures and specific protocols to foreground the symbolic and enable the "concrete other" to speak—and to be heard.<sup>14</sup> And someone with a psychoanalytic background

<sup>14</sup> Since credibility is differentially distributed along the lines of power relations, resting

might also feel a higher degree of anxiety about the potential for appropriation in "thinking in the other's place" (Benhabib 1992, 133, 168).

### **Cultural assimilation, difference, and the real**

Both Harding and Benhabib conceptualize the act of thinking through the other's perspective as a purely cognitive act and so discount its potential for assimilation (Harding 1991, 294–95; Benhabib 1992, 168). But even at the level of the intellect, is there not a risk of assimilation? When I incorporate the other's theoretical standpoint is there not a danger of my co-opting it, subordinating it to the premises of my own conceptual schemas, even warping it into a support for my belief system—so that it is distorted beyond recognition? To acknowledge, respect, and protect difference, some reminder that "social differences by their nature are not entirely comprehensible" may be necessary (Sommer 1999, 27).<sup>15</sup> Under the rubric of the real, I will discuss one way that subjects of marginalized cultures have set limits on being known and have resisted appropriation.

The real is the most difficult of Lacan's registers to turn to political uses because it falls outside social discourse by definition. The Lacanian real is not the material world; what we perceive as "reality" is structured by the symbolic order. Rather, the Lacanian real encompasses that which is excluded from the symbolic order. It is there in the world, but it resists signification. It cannot be understood. The appearance of the real throws the subject's reality into confusion because the symbolic structures that the subject relies on to make sense of the world no longer work to generate meaning.

In a longer version of this work on psychoanalysis, race, and community, *Risking Difference* (Wyatt 2004), I explain how certain passages in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) block a non-Latina reader's comprehension. I offer a summary of that argument here as a paradigm for one means of resistance to assimilation. As I, an English speaker, read through Anzaldúa's text, I am able to process the interspersion of Spanish among the English words because the Spanish is

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on unexamined beliefs that certain kinds of people and certain ways of speaking command credibility and others do not, specific protocols are necessary to give weight to the speech of community members who do not belong to the dominant group. See Fraser 1989, 46–47; Young 1990b, 34, 1998, 410–16; Benhabib 1992, 168. See also Jodi Dean's (1996) proposal of "reflective solidarity" as a model for feminist communication across cultural difference.

<sup>15</sup> Doris Sommer's model of reading "minority" texts (1999) contributed in many ways to my discussion of strategies to block the assimilating tendencies of knowing.

sometimes translated and always minimal compared to the islands of English where I am at home. And my readerly pride is gratified by my seizing Anzaldúa's point that I am being asked to occupy the position of the border subject Anzaldúa's text describes—called on to code switch at a moment's notice, to move back and forth across a linguistic border. But certain long passages in dense and difficult Spanish resist me. I argue that to a non-Spanish speaker these passages function as the real: they are there on the page, but they remain opaque to meaning; they resist absolutely integration into a monolingual English speaker's symbolic system.

Strictly speaking, the Lacanian real is always outside the linguistic. Nonetheless, I would argue, these dense Spanish passages produce effects of the real on a monolingual English reader. To encounter a lengthy passage in untranslated Spanish is to encounter a sudden failure, a sudden break in the reader's symbolic system. Something is there, a concrete presence, but to an English-only speaker it is immutable into signifiers, outside the symbolic structures of cognition. There, inert, it blocks the reader's symbolic progress; it is, like the real, "the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization fails" (Žižek 1989, 169).<sup>16</sup>

What Anzaldúa describes in these passages (1987, 43–44, 72) is an experience that a Western frame of reference would classify as madness: for days she remained closed up in her room, scratching her face and tearing out her hair. But Anzaldúa wishes to understand her despair within a pre-Colombian cosmic scheme in which madness is a sign of being in the grip of Coatlicue, a Mesoamerican creator/destroyer goddess. Anzaldúa's use of Spanish can be read as a means of protecting her cultural standpoint, and with it her most intimate spiritual experiences, from assimilation to the binary oppositions of a Western reader's thought.<sup>17</sup>

In multicultural community, I would say that distancing strategies similar to Anzaldúa's refusal to reveal all to curious Anglo readers could baffle the drive toward the assimilation of difference. A woman who belongs to a marginalized culture might, for example, respond to a probing question with silence, or an oblique response, or an answer that

<sup>16</sup> Of course these passages constitute an impediment only for a monolingual English speaker; for a Spanish reader, they participate in the smooth circulation of the symbolic.

<sup>17</sup> Anzaldúa's work seeks to transcend dualities like English-Spanish (see Keating 1996, 70–71); she writes from a multilingual and multicultural perspective—indigenous, English, Spanish. Indeed, she identifies Spanish as the language of the conquistadors. And her intended audience is not necessarily Western readers like me. But from my position as an Anglo reader, an encounter with untranslated Spanish functions as the real.



does not answer, or even some explicit statement of withholding like Rigoberta Menchú's recurring refusal, both in her writing and in her personal appearances, to let herself be known: "I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know" (1984, 247; see also Sommer 1999, 119–20). Or take Patricia Hill Collins's seeming rebuke to those who would borrow an African-American standpoint: "Living life as an African-American woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing Black feminist thought because within Black women's communities thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions" (1995, 539). In the present context, the statement can be read as a check on white feminist enthusiasm for borrowing the marginalized other's framework—not so much a total shut-out of white feminist standpoint critics as a defense against appropriation, a healthy reminder that occupying the other's theoretical standpoint has its own built-in limitations, that historical and material conditions create epistemological differences that have to be respected.

As Diana Fuss states a central dilemma of multicultural community: "How can the other be brought into the domain of the knowable without annihilating the other *as other*—as precisely that which cannot be known?" (1995, 4). Acts of knowing have their own tendencies toward assimilation. Our best effort to "know" the other's experience or the other's point of view places us on the inescapable ground of all our knowing, integrating the new into cognitive structures established by our own prior experience. Some forcible reminder that cultural difference is ultimately unknowable can provide the necessary complement to Harding's and Benhabib's notion of adopting the other's perspective.

I do not intend to debunk the possibility of thinking through the other's perspective. The hope for multicultural feminist community implicit in Benhabib's, Harding's, and Moya's theories and in my parable of a partial identification with Moraga is that adopting the other's analytic perspective and way of knowing would not only increase one's knowledge of social realities but also establish enough mutual understanding so that the group could work together effectively toward a common end. It would surely be useful to forging a common purpose if members of a cross-race alliance could understand each other to a degree—and identify with one another to the extent of being able to perceive things from the other's standpoint. The trick is to put into practice the idea of identifying and understanding "to a degree." It is the multiplicity of diverse perspectives that enriches a community's collective understanding of social realities. Some "No Trespassing" signal like Anzaldúa's lengthy Spanish passages

can serve to keep a genuine cultural pluralism alive by disrupting the totalizing moves of identification and curbing the homogenizing tendencies of knowing.

### **Politicizing lack: A defense of multicultural community**

Because the impulse to idealize and identify with the other (racialized) woman is largely unconscious and so largely uncontrollable, it would likely survive such fixes from the symbolic and the real. But Lacan's work suggests a technique that may counter the pull of idealization. In Lacan's thought, the subject is constituted by lack. And lack, as I have said, is what propels imaginary identification and idealization. One attributes to the other the fullness of being that is absent in oneself and strives to acquire that fullness of being through identification. To arrest the process, one would have to recognize, accept, and own one's lack. And one comes to that recognition, Lacan says, by accepting the fact that the idealized other with whom one identifies is also lacking. For example, the structure of psychoanalysis produces the analysand's imaginary identification with the analyst, who is idealized as "the subject presumed to know." To "cross the plane of identification," to deidealize the analyst, the patient has to be brought to acknowledge the "desire of the analyst" (Lacan 1978, 273, 274). That is tantamount to recognizing the lack in the other. For lack and desire are coterminous in Lacan. Simply put, one is a subject of desire because one is lacking; desire forever seeks the elusive thing that will fill up the gap in being. To be confronted with the fact that the idealized other has desires and is therefore lacking is to realize that no one is whole and self-sufficient, so it is impossible to achieve even a temporary respite from one's lacks through identifying with the other's wholeness. One has to accept one's own lack as irremediable.

If we steal a page from Lacan and oppose to the largely unconscious impulse to idealize and identify with the racialized other a conscious, deliberate effort to recognize that she too is a subject of lack and desire, as we all are, then perhaps the focus can shift to what feminists of color *say* they desire and they lack. Audre Lorde, for example, speaks directly to white feminists when she says, "Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your back upon the reasons they are dying" (Lorde 1985, 119). Lorde here clearly articulates the difference in power and position between white and black

women and clearly states what people of color lack: social justice. And bell hooks voices what some black feminists desire: that white feminists participate in "a radical movement to end racism" (1984, 52). I want to argue here that grounding an antiracist politics in multicultural community can address some of the difficulties that white feminists and feminists of color have encountered in joint antiracist activism in the past.

I have been writing about multicultural community as if it were an unproblematic notion, but the ideal of community itself has been subjected to feminist critique. Iris Marion Young (1990a) argues persuasively that the desire for an imaginary unity characterizes communities as well as individuals, and with a similar result—the exclusion of difference. Young uncovers a desire for collective identification both in communitarian theorists and in the groups she studies. In the feminist groups she observes, for example, the insistence on solidarity—on mutual identification and affirmation—outlaws disagreement and difference of opinion, which are interpreted as "the destruction of community" (1990a, 311). The result is that difference is excluded: first, members of the group suppress their own differences in order to express solidarity; second, those who cannot identify with the others feel excluded (and, presumably, become disaffected and go away). Given an ethos of solidarity (a social version of identification) groups quickly become homogeneous.

In many academic circles the notion of interracial community is dismissed as naive, idealistic, and inevitably exclusionary. Cross-race alliances are envisioned for the most part as temporary coalitions organized around a single political issue and destined to dissolution; a preferred strategy for effecting social change is a shifting politics of identity like Chela Sandoval's "differential consciousness," where participants maintain fluid allegiances and move frequently between different sites of resistance to oppression (1991, 15; 2000, 59).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Feminists of color have been more successful than white feminists in forging alliances across race. Chicana feminists, in particular, have a long tradition of theorizing the politics of such coalitions. Cynthia Franklin points out that in addition to theorizing coalitional dynamics, *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981) and *Making Face, Making Soul* (Anzaldúa 1990b) "constituted new communities of and for women" that cross many of the borders drawn by identity politics (Franklin 1997, 9, 5). See Moya's and Sandoval's accounts of the origins and history of women-of-color coalitions and the writings on coalitional dynamics they produced (Sandoval 2000, 42.2–62.4; Moya 2001, 448–49). Among these theoretical writings on women-of-color movements, see Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Moraga 1981; Alarcón 1990; Anzaldúa 1990a, 1990b; Lugones 1990. More recent Chicana discussions of women-of-color feminisms include Saldívar-Hull 2000; Sandoval

I want to argue here, with Cynthia Franklin, that a "transformative politics" can emerge from multicultural community as well as the other way around (1997, 5). Idealization represents only the extreme case of what many feminists of color perceive as white feminism's neglect of "other women's lived experience" (Hurtado 2003, 268); multicultural community provides an opportunity for correcting this blindness to material conditions. I have offered the "dialogue" I imagine with Moraga as an example of the kind of interracial exchange between community members that can change the perspective of a white feminist. Moraga's narrative is thus persuasive and transformative because her articulation of oppression is grounded always in her "lived experience"—of her relationship to a particular mother and brother, of her particular sexual choices and their collision with her culture's values.<sup>19</sup> Such an exchange of personal information can effectively fill in the gap that women of color find in white feminists' grasp of material realities. And I would argue that women from different racial/cultural groups are more likely to invest energy and time in such cross-race conversations if they know they will be continuing to live and/or work together for an extended period of time. A self-revealing conversation like the "dialogue" with Moraga is unlikely to take place unless trust has been built up over time. To state the obvious, trust cannot be taken as a given between women of racial groupings formed by centuries of slavery, land theft, and racism. In my experience at a small college with a racially diverse faculty and student body, it is the continuity of relations over time that creates trust: the repetition of casual and serendipitous conversations between faculty members from different racial and cultural backgrounds—on stair landings, beside mailboxes, on the way to adjacent offices—builds trust gradually. Over time, conversations that go beyond work-related concerns to an exchange of personal experience become possible and can lead to a more immediate understanding of each other's "lived experience"—including the material conditions that attach to being a woman of color in the United States and the daily toll of affronts and injuries inflicted by racism. I would argue that women of different racial groups have a

2000; Moya 2001, 2002. While *This Bridge Called My Back* staged a dialogue across culture/race differences, its successor, *This Bridge Called Home* (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002), is even more inclusive, containing essays by whites and males. See especially essays in *Home* that address issues of multiracial community, by M. Jacqui Alexander, Gloria Anzaldúa, Hector Carbaja, Cynthia Franklin, AnaLouise Keating, Toni C. King et al., Kimberly Springer, and Indigo Violet.

<sup>19</sup> See Moya's analysis of the distinctive qualities of Moraga's "theories in the flesh" (2002, 48–57).

better chance of learning about the specifics of each other's everyday experience when they participate in an ongoing community than they would if the alliance were known to be strictly strategic and temporary.

In addition to satisfying the critique that white feminists ignore the concrete realities of being a woman of color in the United States, in addition to effecting a Lacanian cure for white idealizations that erase the lacks in the lives of women of color, such a shift in the social perspective of white feminists can lead to more effective political action. For example, my response to Moraga's analysis of her personal experience does not necessarily end with a shift of perspective, with a new understanding of my own standpoint. The pressure to notice that race and class are part of my gender position is simultaneously a pressure to take responsibility for both the privileged position itself and the race/class oppression that supports it—and, ultimately, a pressure to *do* something, to use the new insights to undermine the system that grants me privilege in the first place and to work toward a more equitable distribution of power and resources. I would suggest that cross-race dialogues in an ongoing community could likewise politicize its members.

African-American and white feminist analyses of interracial political alliances in the 1960s and 1970s enable me to make the case that more effective political alliances can emerge from such everyday knowledge of one another's lives. It is white women's ignorance of the material effects of racism, their "neglect of economic survival issues," that Benita Roth pinpoints as "the main stumbling block to joint work" in the 1970s (1999, 76; quoted in Breines 2002, 1123). Similarly, Wini Breines argues that although 1960s feminist socialist groups like Bread and Roses were genuinely antiracist, their antiracism was based on an "abstract theorizing" that "did not speak to [black women]," who continued to feel "invisible to white women." "Abstractness impaired white women's understanding of the reality of the lives of women of color" (Breines 2002, 1122–23). The root problem, writes Breines, was that "black and white women did not know each other . . . [they] had little connection with each other" (2002, 1122).

I would argue that the converse is also true: a political alliance to combat racial injustice is more likely to hold and to be effective if the allies can trust in one another's grasp of the concrete realities of living in a racist society. As a group of Boston black and white feminists write, "We need both a political understanding of racism and a personal-political understanding of how it affects our daily lives. . . . You simply cannot do political actions without personal interaction" (Cross et al. 1979, 11; quoted in Breines 2002, 1122–23). I would add that

the continuity of affectional ties and emotional support afforded by community can sustain a prolonged political action in the face of prolonged discouragement. In turn, antiracism based on the all-too-real lack of social justice could provide a more solid grounding for cross-race feminist solidarity than the imaginary yearning for identification.

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