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Now You See Me, Now You Don't

By BETTY SASAKI

"MY NAME IS BETTY SASAKI, and I am a Spanish teacher." This is the line I was tempted to write on a sign and hang around my neck shortly after arriving at the small New England college where I currently work. Except for my colleagues in the Spanish department who had hired me, each person I met invariably assumed that I was the new person in East Asian Studies. Each time I would respond, "No, I'm the new person in Spanish." And each time, with varying degrees of embarrassment, unconsciousness, or confusion, they would laugh and say something like,"Oh! Isn't that funny—you're Japanese but you teach Spanish." Or, "Oh, are you part Hispanic?"

In the summer following my first year of teaching, I was invited to a potluck by a colleague from another department. The table was loaded with an assortment of scrumptious looking dishes, including a tray of sushi, one of my favorite foods. As I was reaching for the sushi, I heard a voice behind me say, "You might not want to try that. I'm sure it's nothing like *real* sushi, nothing like yours. I really don't know how to make it." It was the hostess, humbly and anxiously disclaiming the authenticity of her culinary experiment in the face of what she believed to be my inherent expertise on the matter. "Inherent" because I was Japanese-American, or because I was a woman who cooks? Probably both. "Don't worry," I assured her, trying to diffuse the awkwardness between us, "I don't know how to make sushi, I only know how to eat it." After our brief bout of nervous laughter, however, we found ourselves standing around that table of food starving for something to talk about. She finally smiled uncomfortably and excused herself. I proceeded to enjoy her sushi, wondering, as I ate, whether I had offended her somehow, whether she had believed me, and whether, after our short exchange, she would be willing to give me the recipe. I also wondered how she would have responded had she found me hovering over a plate of *zwieback* or *verenika*, two other "ethnic" foods that my German-born grandmother used to prepare for us on special Sundays?

In the four years that I have been at this college, I've compiled a collection of such anecdotes because they are telling examples of both the anxiety and the ambivalence generated around my difference. Such anecdotes are all the more problematic to the extent not only that they expose the pervasive presence of

ethnic stereotyping, but also that they point out the ways in which the process of "other identification" is informed by an understanding of difference as both an excess and a lack. On the one hand, from an institutional perspective, I and "others" like me constitute a victory in the college's struggle to diversify—a worthy struggle, to say the least, but one which often operates on the assumption that diversity necessarily and "naturally" equals inclusiveness. Consequently, my status as an Asian American becomes a missing piece in the not quite complete family portrait that the college community would like to have of itself. Within the frame of this picture, my place among the family is already determined by the good intentions and hopeful expectations of those who are more than willing to make room for their newly adopted member. On the other hand, however, my multiple positions as a woman of color, with a German as well as an Asian heritage, who, in addition, teaches Spanish, become excessive when they don't quite fit familiar categories of "otherness." As my initial anecdotes suggest, my failure to meet the expectations of my colleagues generates anxiety because the different aspects of my identity seem to overflow the boundaries of the picture frame. Because I am suddenly neither easily quantifiable nor easily knowable, I often experience a subtle tightening of that welcoming embrace, a tightening which lends a dimension of confinement to the initially well-intentioned gestures of inclusion. As a result, I become either a curious oddity (an Asian who teaches Spanish) or an inauthentic version of what a "real" Asian American should be. What both examples reveal is the way in which, because of my visible and invisible differences, I am seen as what Ruth Frankenberg calls a "memorable sign"—one which from a white perspective is "simultaneously over- and under-visible" (6). To be (seen) or not to be (seen); to see or not to see: those are the questions, the confusing and compelling questions that underscore the need to problematize the process of "other identification" that takes place in any community aspiring to greater cultural diversity.

During my second year at the college, I was approached by an administrator who, concerned by the rise in racial tension due to the Rodney King incident, asked me a question that, since then, has been addressed to me frequently: "How can we better accommodate our minority students?" Before I could formulate a response, he posed another, which seemed to answer the first: "Do you find that the Asian American students are seeking you out?" Momentarily overwhelmed by the nature and velocity of his inquiry, I stared blankly at his expectant face, a blankness which prompted him to further explanation: "Since you are one of the few Asian American faculty members on campus, I was hoping that the Asian American students would perceive you as a role model, someone they could approach and talk to about their problems and experiences here."

I struggled for the right words, the appropriate tone, one that would neither offend, nor betray how offended I was. Having read the visible signs of my

body, he had already assigned me the role I was to play in the college's multicultural family romance. In my discomfort, I felt paradoxically both that I wanted to disappear, and that I was disappearing, or being "disappeared." "I teach Spanish," I reminded him "so I see a lot of students: white, Hispanic, African and Asian American, if they're in my classes. Since I have only been here a year, and there are only a few Asian American students who take Spanish to fulfill their language requirement, they most likely don't know me, nor do I know them." Now, it was the administrator's turn to stare blankly at me—a blankness which I read with mounting anxiety as the awkward silence between us expanded like a balloon ready to burst. He had not expected this response, which made me suddenly unfamiliar to him. He was looking at me, yes, but I could tell that he did not see me.

Who is it that the administrator did not see? And who is it that he saw before I answered his question? Both questions posit identity in terms of seeing, and it is precisely this emphasis on the visible that needs to be problematized within its function to an institutional community that operates on the family metaphor. The family metaphor upon which many small institutions are modeled is both compelling and problematic. Compelling because it assumes a harmonious and caring relationship among its members; problematic because that very assumption can mask or deny the very real political dynamics of power that inform any institutional hierarchy. Moreover, such masking, while preserving an appearance of harmony, ultimately complicates, and often impedes, the formation of genuinely mutual relationships among community members.

In the anecdote related above, there is, on the part of the administrator, an acknowledgment of the political dimensions of community unrest and discomfort. Those dimensions are undermined, however, to the extent that they remain within the realm of the private, informal conversation. The informality of the encounter creates a space of intimacy, or pseudo-intimacy, outside the public, official discourse of the institution. Within that space, the administrator assumes a familiar and familial relationship to me—one that allows him to see me simultaneously as different and same. Different to the extent that I am an Asian American woman with a racially visible affiliation to "another" culture; same to the extent that I am, nonetheless, a "family member" enjoined to mediate in a family problem. Ironically, the gesture of inclusion, of inviting me to participate in solving the institution's problems, is preceded by, or results from, identifying me as excluded, as marginal, and different. It is, however, precisely the fallacy of intimacy that masks the initial racialized identification by creating the illusion that the administrator and I share equal positions because we might share equal concern. The further paradox is that my standing as a "good" member of the community is dependent upon my willingness both "to be" what he expects me to be and to place my "difference" and my "sameness" in the ser-

vice of bridging political dissonances and preserving community harmony. The place of pseudo-intimacy becomes, then, to borrow Homi Bhabha's term, "a space of splitting" (44)—one in which the invitation to identity carries with it the implicit requirement that I disconnect from myself.

The complexity and confusion generated around my earlier question, about whom the administrator saw before I responded to his query, underscore the multiple levels, conscious and unconscious, at which identification takes place. I would like to turn now to the question of who it is he did *not* see at the end of our conversation. This same question is equally implicit in the first two anecdotes. By "who" I don't mean to imply that there is some essential or authentic self that went unseen or unacknowledged by the administrator. On the contrary, my "disappearance," so to speak, was the result of my response, one which defamiliarized me, or, at least, the administrator's version/vision of me. Because my responses to all three of the interlocutors in the above anecdotes fail to mirror their assumptions about who I am, as an Asian and as a kinswoman, I disrupt their gaze and interrupt the "cultural fiction" of family in which I have been cast.[1] Consequently, the administrator did not see me because he did not see himself reflected in me: an operation of failed identification, which resulted in his disengagement. Suddenly neither same nor other, I am momentarily undefinable and invisible, too much and too little. My disappearing act, which ironically occurs when I attempt to identify myself, destabilizes the essentialist notion that my visible racial markers are a sign of some authentic Asian identity. At the same time, it brings to light the often unproblematized premise that my interlocutors' whiteness constitutes the normative measure of my difference. The double vision and viewing in this type of identity negotiation points out that racial identity is, as Frankenberg observes, "relational, made through the claiming and imposition of sameness and otherness" (4). Moreover, to claim the disappearing act as mine is, in this context, to posit identity formation as a process that is "dynamic, temporally expansive, centrally concerned with self-revision" (Butler "Collected" 443). The reformulation of identity as a process concerned with self-revision in relation is also an important recognition of the performative and constructed nature of all identity categories, one that allows that identity be both "formed and formative" (Butler "Collected" 445), an ongoing process of becoming. Any attempt to identify another by visible markers, or to specify what another should signify in a given sociocultural (con)text, is to foreclose the possibility of diversity and change.

1. In her critique of heterosexuality as a compulsory system that sets itself up as "the original, the true, the authentic," Butler establishes the constructed nature of gender identities ("Imitation" 20). The legitimacy of these identities is established by the repetition of socially scripted acts, the performance of which ensures the propagation of and belief in what she calls the "cultural fictions" of heterosexual gender norms. Butler's notion of the performative and constructed dimensions of gender identities offers a useful theoretical lens for examining the equally constructed nature of racial and racialized identities, especially within the institutional use of the family metaphor.

More recently, in a discussion on race with my students (all of them white), I recount the same anecdotes discussed above and then ask them if they think these anecdotes are examples of racism. In the silence that follows I watch as each of them averts his or her gaze from me, as if, by calling attention to my racial identity, I have suddenly become a light too bright to look at directly. Sensing a mixture of discomfort and pensiveness, I wonder, for a moment, if I have gone too far, if I have abused my authority by ironically using my subject position to turn myself into the object of discussion.

"No," I hear a voice say, snapping me out of my thoughts. It is a student, responding to my initial question. "I don't think those are racist examples," he continues, "because they were not intended to be hurtful. They were not motivated by hatred." I see a couple of heads nod in tacit agreement, but, before I can respond, another student speaks. "I disagree," she says. "Maybe they didn't *mean* to be racist, but their comments indicate their ignorance about another culture." "But," another student counters, "most people in New England don't have much contact with other races or cultures. That's not something they can control; it's not their fault they live where they do." As the discussion moves away from the specificity of my experience to the more general realm of racism, I notice how my students become more comfortable, vocal, and articulate. Despite disagreements as to the definition, they have found common ground—all of them are opposed to racism.

From their thoughtful responses, certain premises about what constitutes racism become apparent. On the one hand, the assertion held by about half the class defined racism as an act or comment motivated by a conscious hatred of the other. It is based on the premise that one's conscious intentions inform the meaning of what one says, creating a false syllogism of sorts, that goes something like this:

a) If the visible differences of the racial other bring on a comment

b) but the racial or racist aspects of the comment are neutralized, or veiled, by insisting on the non-intentionality of the speaker

c) then the initial visible difference is also neutralized, or veiled, in the discourse of intentionality, which completely sidesteps the issue of racialized perceptions.

In this formula, I point out to them, the perceived "other," or receiver of the comment, magically "disappeared," even though, paradoxically, it was her hypervisibility—her racial markers—that brought on the comment in the first place.

This brings me to the second premise, held by the other half of the students, which posits racism as the product of one's ignorance about other cultures. As one of my students asserts, "Knowledge will eradicate racism." While I appreciate her optimism and forthrightness, I add, "Knowledge about what or whom?" From this perspective, I explain, the racial markers of the other are "seen" as

another type of sign—one whose meaning is fixed and, therefore, "learnable" or "translatable" into the language of the perceiver's experience. Rather than *deleting* or *erasing* the hypervisibility of difference, one ends up appropriating that difference to fill in the gaps of his or her own world view. In this formula the perceived other is still objectified as a knowable and quantifiable fact. It is one thing, and an important one, to learn about another's culture, race, class, gender. "But," I ask my students, "what do you know about your own?"

It is at this point, when I pose this question, that the animated discussion falters, and I watch my students avert their eyes from me once again. From where I sit at the front of the room, I know they look away not only because *they* see me as "other," but also, and perhaps more importantly, because *I* see them as "other." By asking them to look at their own whiteness, I am asking them to see themselves, for a moment, *through* my eyes, rather than *in* my eyes, and so I have denied the reassuring reflection of themselves they expect from their teacher. That mirror cracked, I sense that their view of both me and themselves has shifted out of focus as their apparently seamless, unified, and coherent picture of who they are, or who they believed they were, is momentarily filled with the fault lines and fractures of their own alterity.

Seeing them now as they look anxiously at their watches, I realize that the class hour is almost over and wonder how I am going to conclude the discussion. Should I voice the words of María Lugones that keep running through my mind?: "You do not see me because you do not see yourself. And you do not see yourself because you declare yourself outside of culture" (391). Or the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, "Whites not perceiving themselves as white presume their universality; an unmarked race is a sign of Racism unaware of itself, a 'blanked-out' Racism" (*xxi*). "Excuse me," a student says tentatively, "but I've got lacrosse practice in 5 minutes. I've got to go."

As they pick up their books and head toward the door, I watch as each of them disappears from my sight. I feel, on the one hand, relieved to be alone, to not be seen, and, on the other, anxious and frustrated by what I perceive to be my students' resistance or inability to see. Turning toward the board with eraser in hand, I pause as I reread the words scrawled in white chalk across the hard, black surface: "Racism," "intentionality," "ignorance," "unconsciousness," "visibility," "invisibility," "whiteness," "education."

"Why erase them?" I think. "Why not leave them up there for the next class of students to ponder over and think about?" Without using it, I put the eraser back in its place. Recalling Gayatri Spivak's imperative that "our lesson is to act in the fractures of identities in struggle" (180), I gather my things and, as I walk out the door, I make sure it stays open and that the light is still on.

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