



8. *Brown to Blonde at Gay.com: Passing White in Queer Cyberspace*

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I am in love with the image and idea of white manhood, which is everything I am not and want to be, and if I cannot be that at least I can have that, if only for the night, if only for one week or the month. (Shepherd, 1991)

I would love to be white. Not forever, but perhaps a weekend. Don't you ever get sick of being a minority? . . . I have posed this question to other minority artists, and get stumped by answers like "No, not ever have I ever wanted to be white." And I just don't buy it. Why would you not want things to be easier? (Cho 2005)

So much social, economic, and cultural capital is invested in the idealization of white bodies (and in the devaluation and denigration of non-white ones) that neither Shepherd's confessional yearnings nor Cho's caustic daydream is surprising—nor are the disapproving reactions from those whom find their declarations uncomfortable, even upsetting. Fantasies and anxieties about the realization and loss of whiteness inform the configuration of social relations and production of knowledge in much of the contemporary world. Since at least the fifteenth century, white has connoted purity, virginity, beauty, and even Godliness in European nations, and the accident of white skin has authorized its bearers to claim, conquer, and colonize the lands and cultures of non-white peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Whiteness, writes Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, is a "master signifier that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference" (2000: 3–4). Through the production of Orientalism, non-white subjects are characterized as a function of the white subject and are allowed no autonomy, and purpose except as a means of knowing the white self (Said 1978). Consequently, white people are systematically privileged and enjoy "unearned

advantage and conferred dominance” in Western societies (McIntosh 1992: 74). They “create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they construct the world in their own image,” and “they set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail” (Dyer 1997: 9). Frantz Fanon concludes: “Sin is Negro as Virtue is white” (1967: 138).

There are longstanding rituals through which white people are able to perform non-white racialized ethnicities (e.g., casting white actors in Asian roles in films, donning kimonos or turbans to play Japanese or Indian at costume parties) and for non-white people to perform exaggerated expressions of racialized identities (e.g., American Minstrel shows, representations in television and film), but not many choices exist for a Korean-American comic like Cho or an African-American like Shepherd to assume white racial identities. The advent of cyberspace provided a new venue for non-white people to experience racial crossing into whiteness—an experience that was part of a parcel of opportunities being trumpeted by queer, feminist and cybertculture critics anticipating the liberating potential of virtual worlds (Turtle 1995; Plant 1996; Sunden 2001; Gross 2004).

In November 1998, I engaged “race” play in cyberspace as a way of examining claims about its revolutionary promise, and of racial crossing. For five consecutive days, I participated in conversations in the “Toronto” chat rooms at gay.com, and kept a journal of my online interactions. Selecting a gay website feature to consider the operation of “race” in cyberspace made sense for several reasons, including my own ties to and investments in queer culture, and the fact that queer scholars were among those leading the celebration of this technological advance. Many of them, including Larry Gross, for example, imagined that for queer men and women, the net would present more opportunities to inhabit sexual desires and identities, connect and create community, and refuse gender and class restrictions that structured their offline, “real world” lives (2004). A focus on chat rooms also seemed appropriate. As Lisa Nakamura observes, “cyberspace is a place of wish fulfillments and myriad gratifications, material and otherwise and nowhere is this more true than in chat spaces” (2002: 32). Textual chat spaces, she says, “encourage users to build different identities, to take on new identities . . . to describe themselves in any way they wish to appear (Nakamura 2002: 32).

My chat room experiences did not prove to be as liberating an event as proclaimed in the cyberutopian rhetoric. Although opportunities to unfix and reconstitute meanings of identities and social markers were certainly available, processes of racialization were evident in and seemed to have an important structuring influence on the organization, flow of dialogues and relationships between users in the chat rooms. Returning to review the site seven years later, in 2005, I also found that whatever potential may have

existed for dominant, colonial narratives of “race” to be displaced or undermined in cyberspace are fading (or have faded). Changes to gay.com’s chat services since 1998 appear to have further reinforced racial categories and ensure the reproduction of “real life” racism. In this respect, the development of virtual worlds has been shown to be not unlike other technologies, merely mimicking dominant socioeconomic relations rather than challenging them.

What also emerged from this study of the chat rooms were compelling insights about desires for passing white. Very often, racial crossing from non-white to white is read as evidence of investments in racial imagery and symbolism. This presumption underlies the outrage expressed by Cho’s friends about her wanting to be white for a weekend and the persistence of epithets to describe non-white people accused of “acting white” (e.g., “coconut” for South Asians, “banana” for East Asians). But analysis of the operation of “race”-racism in the gay.com chat rooms suggests that passing white is not simply the exercise of desires by non-white people to become white or fetishize whiteness, but, rather, to experience the privileges afforded to whiteness. Passing white expresses longing for the experience of racial disembodiment that cyberspace promises, but does not ultimately appear to fulfill.

Toronto@gay.com, 1998: Identity Play (and Its Limits)

“Race” traps the body in real life. It attaches meanings to skin, hair, and bones that have been organized around the ambitions of colonialism/imperialism, capitalist exploitation and psychoanalytical differentiation, and which have proven difficult to destabilize. Ideologies of “race” are so purposefully and intensively repeated and circulated in Western cultures, whether through institutional practices (policing, education, etc.) or the production of popular culture, that despite overwhelming evidence that “race” is a lie, its mythological links between skin and thought continue to shape most (if not all) aspects of living in most (if not all) parts of the contemporary world. But early on in the development of virtual worlds, optimists hoped that cyberspace might offer opportunities to usurp “race.” In 1995, Sherry Turkle observed, “in simulation, identity can be fluid and multiple, a signifier no longer clearly points to a thing that is signified, and understanding is less likely to proceed through analysis than by navigation through virtual space” (1995: 49). This fact, cyberutopians argued, would create conditions that diminished or refused the structuring power of narratives of gender, “race,” class, and sexuality.

In November, 1998, chat rooms at gay.com allowed, even encouraged, users to actively shape their identities, to create and recreate themselves, whatever the motivation: to express anxiety, to deceive, to fulfill deep-seeded

fantasy or indulge more fleeting pleasures, or to engage idle curiosity. Entering a gay.com chat room involved only a few steps: setting the Web browser to gay.com and clicking the “chat” icon. Users were then directed to a tree menu of room locations, which in 1998 consisted of a limited number of geographic regions, countries and cities, including Toronto. Due to the high volume of traffic, Toronto was assigned three rooms: Toronto 1, Toronto 2, and Toronto 3. As the first room filled (fifty chatters were allowed entry to each room), users would enter the second, and so on. During the five consecutive days that I entered the rooms Toronto 1 was always full, but the population sizes of Toronto 2 and 3 varied with the time of day (late evenings and nights were more active). Once the list of cities appeared, users only had to submit a “handle” (a name identifier) of their choosing to enter a room. Users could also—but were not required to—compose a tag line describing themselves.

Bragh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons suggest that internet interactions are analogous to those one sometimes has with “strangers on a train,”

in which one opens up and self-discloses intimate details to the stranger sitting in the next seat, details that one might never have told one’s colleagues at the office or even one’s family and friends back home. (2002: 35)

My single sentence tag-line description presented only the aspects of myself that I wanted to share at the moment of participating in the chat, details which could change with each entry into a chat room. “Online queerness pushes you to push,” suggests Jacqueline Rhodes, “to follow your desires to (il)logical conclusions” (Alexander et al. 2004: 28). The possibility of imagination, the sense of boundlessness, the absence of the more rigidly policed social regulations of the world, and the play of language and identity permit new excursions, the release of inhibitions, travel into unexplored bodies; virgin, slut, whore, prude, pervert: some, all or none—online, performance of any, some or all of these and other personalities seemed possible.

In real-life encounters between queer men (between any sighted individuals, for that matter), the moment of meeting is usually the same moment in which racial identification is rationalized. With no visual or aural clues as clearly and readily available in chat rooms (in 1998), control of the terms of representation would appear to rest with the users themselves. But the absence of visual and aural signifiers, or descriptors identifying “race”/ethnicity, does not actually make users “race”-less. As Nakamura points out, “the decision to leave race out of self-description does in fact constitute a choice: in the absence of racial description, all players are assumed to be white” (2002: 33). Campbell also believes this presumption “indicates these channels are implicitly understood to be white spaces rather than raceless spaces; that is, white is viewed as the norm in these particular online communities”

(2004: 81–82). Their analysis is strongly supported by several empirical studies of cyberspace conducted in the United States, all of which conclude “white” is viewed as the “normal” racial condition of cyberspace users¹—but not entirely by my experience in the Toronto chat rooms.

In the absence of information stating my “race” or ethnicity, some men with whom I engaged in conversations at gay.com appeared to assume I was white. But whether due to the particular demography of Toronto (a city where half of its resident population of five million consists of non-white peoples), the influence of prevailing Canadian discourses on multiculturalism that encourage strong ethnic identification, more equitable access to internet technologies in Canada, or some other reason, most of the users with whom I interacted did not seem to immediately assume I was white. This response did not mean, however, that Canadian chatters engaged a more critical understanding of “race” than their American counterparts. Rather, they tended to insist that users be “transparent” in naming one’s racial identity.

Four main strategies were employed to encourage, if not ensure, racial identification in the Toronto chat rooms at gay.com. First, many users adopted handles that indicated ethnic or racial identities, e.g., “Chinese23,” “Blackboi20,” “FlyWhiteGuy,” or “PakiStud,” or suggested them, e.g., “Chc18dream” (chocolate dream) or “Brown_dt” (Brown, downtown). Second, some used the short descriptor profile to state their own identities or racial preferences. Information listed in this space typically included three items—age, height, body weight/type and race/ethnicity—and sometimes others: penis size, chest width, sexual position preference (top or bottom), and hair and eye color. Sometimes, the latter two items substituted for mention of race/ethnicity (e.g., “bl/bl” would read as blue-eyed blonde, i.e., white). Often, messages such as “white guys only please,” “looking for Asians,” or “any race ok” would appear. Third, users avoided asking for “race” information by offering to send or requesting pictures sent through e-mail; by far, the most common request was for “face pics.” Fourth, chat room users who did not identify “race” or ethnic markers were prodded to do so. When I did not indicate a racial identifier, usually my chat room encounters at the Toronto gay.com chat rooms began with or eventually arrived at this inquiry: <What’s ur background?>. When I still didn’t include information about race or ethnicity in response, a more pointed question would follow, such as “So you’re white?” or “What is your race?” Inquiries for “Stats?” also demanded a particular form—height, weight, build, hair and eye color, and sometimes, penis size, ethnicity, and chest size—to which chatters are expected to comply. If information about any of these items were left out, chatters would again pose a more specific question, requesting clarification.

Such demands for racial identification may be read as merely attempts by chat room users to more clearly imagine interacting parties and advance fantasies. But the flow of dialogues in the chat rooms often revealed the persistence of racism in organizing online interactions. For example, reactions to answers stating a non-white ethnicity were almost entirely limited to three types, whether my correspondents were white or non-white. A few users continued our conversation, some expressed enthusiastic appreciation, and a third group dismissed me immediately. On several occasions, long and engaged, flirtatious, even salacious chats would reach an abrupt end once I confessed non-white ethnicity. Several conversations took this form:

<badPup> What's ur background?

<Garf23> Indian

<badPup> Oh

<Garf23> "Oh?"

<badPup> Not into that Sorry

badPup's response was among the more polite dismissals; on very many occasions, no disappointments were expressed, no reason given. Chatters would simply end the conversation, and a notice that "*badpup has left the chat room or is ignoring you" would appear as the last entry on my private chat window.²

Toronto@gay.com, 2005: Pictures, Power, and Capitalist Expansion

Changes implemented to the gay.com chat services since 1998 have only encouraged processes of reification, and the reproduction of "real life" racism through their interface. In 1995, Tom Reilly, the founder of PlanetOut, the parent company of gay.com declared, "traditional mass media is cost-intensive. . . . The Internet is the first medium where we can have equal footing with the big players" (cited in Gross 2004: x-xi). Reilly's dream has been realized. According to Nielsen Net Ratings, in June 2004, gay.com ranked second in terms of average time online per person and sixteenth in terms of visit per person among all websites measured. On November 8, 2005, there were 6, 033, 363 registered members at gay.com.² PlanetOut's success with the site has been accompanied by the hyper commercialization of its main features, and the format of the chat rooms has been organized around a primary interest in profit generation. Access to many sections of the site, including most elements of the chat room feature, is now tied to purchase of a "Premium" membership (in November 2005, the fee was set at \$19.95 per

month, with various promotions available for members willing to commit memberships over longer periods). New general memberships are free, but involve an elaborate registration process and allow only partial access to profiles, pictures and contact information. Both the financial investment and the demanding registration process requirements promote the creation of a stable identity. In 1998, the structure of the chat room interface at least permitted, some would say even encouraged, identity play. Limits to play were not by the technology per se, but by the cultural conditions in which it was used. Eight years later, the form and flow of the gay.com chat rooms more aggressively reinforce stable identities and actively resist identity play.

In 1998, each visitor to a chat room could assume a new identity with each entry into the space, but now chatters must take out a new membership for each identity assumed. Users must also register profiles and select from a range of limited menu items. They are not required to complete all information requested—and many users do not provide fully complete profiles—but the presentation of a form with boxes to check seems to compel most to do so. Users must declare an age, gender, sexuality, height and weight, characterize their build as “athletic,” “average,” “chubby,” “curvy,” “large and solid,” “muscular,” “overweight,” “slim,” “voluptuous,” or “Other,” and select their personality from a short list of options: Bitchy, Extroverted/Social, Flamboyant, Flirtatious, Funny, Intellectual, Introverted, Loving, Romantic, Serious. Their mannerisms may be “Masculine/Butch,” “Feminine/Femme,” or “In the middle.” Their politics “lean left” (or right), are “Way left” (or right) or “In the middle,” or they might “Avoid politics” or “Prefer not to say.” Finally, choices to identify a “race”/ethnicity are limited to the following: African/African American/Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latina/Latino, Middle Eastern/North African, Native/Japanese, White/European, Mixed/Multi, or Other. (Having been born in the Caribbean to parents descended from Indian indentures, which category do I now pick in the gay.com chat rooms: am I “Asian,” “Black,” “Latin,” or “Other”? Each category carries a different set of burdens, and each will position me differently in the chat rooms.) This menu-driven interface, which has become the normalized structure throughout the World Wide Web, enforces a sense of personal identity that progressively works by

narrowing the choices of subject positions available to the user, an outcome that seems to fly in the face of claims that the Internet allows for a fluid, free, unbounded sense of identity than had been available in other media—or, indeed, in the world—before. (Nakamura 2002: 104)

Against the model of “multiple self” imagined by Turkle and others, the menu structure obliges users to declare essentialist identities.

Reification is also accomplished through the adoption of specialized fetish rooms. In the United States, “race” or ethnicity-specific rooms are not the norm, although Spanish-language rooms are included in most major cities.⁴ But in Toronto, alongside six rooms marked by geography (East, North, etc.), one for HIV-positive men, one for “Mature” men, a “real-time” room and a bisexuals’ room are three focused on fetishes: “Leather,” “Bears,” and “Asian.”⁵ Another important shift has been the addition and prioritization of pictures. Throughout, the World Wide Web has become a graphics intense medium that has merely mimicked systems of gendered and racialized representation that are typical of older forms of media. At gay.com, most users now post pictures and many (if not most) limit their online interactions to users with pictures attached to their detailed profiles; as declared in the title of a recent study, “your picture is your bait” (Brown, Maycock, and Burns 2005).

All of these changes, especially the addition of pictures, have made racial crossing a much more difficult prospect—one that requires active deception on the part of users (e.g., posting pictures which do not clearly signify “race”/ethnicity or which are not their own)—but they have not rendered it impossible. In fact, the construction of more distinct borders between “races” may also work to simplify the process of crossing: as opportunities for taking on more fluid identities have now disappeared, users wanting to “pass” as a particular “race”/ethnicity now have access to a more structured format in which to constitute themselves. Racial crossing and “passing white” in particular therefore remain interesting events and compelling objects of analysis.

Passing White: Resource Access and the Exercise of Agency

In one of her studies on white people engaging racial passing in cyberspace, Nakamura observed that “many users masquerading as racial minorities in chat spaces tend to depict themselves in ways that simply repeat and reenact old racial stereotypes,” including, for example, “users masquerading as samurai and geishas, complete with swords, kimonos, and other paraphernalia lifted from older media such as film and television” (2002: 107). This type of play, she says, “reenacts an anachronistic version of “Asian-ness” that reveals more about users’ fantasies and desires than it does about what it “feels like” to be Asian either on- or offline” (2002: 107). Passing white, however, may serve a different purpose, not exclusively an exercise in fantasy or anxiety production, but an opportunity to experience the material and cultural privileges afforded to white people. Unlike its reverse ritual, racial crossing from non-white to white may not be primarily motivated by fetishistic conscious or unconscious desire, but by struggles for access to resources and for experi-

ence of cultural and political agency.

Accessing Resources

One of the reasons queer scholars cheered the development of cyberspace was their expectation that virtual spaces would be better able than bars or clubs to provide affirmation for “many who do not find themselves welcomed or validated by the increasingly commercialized and mainstreamed institutions of the newly respectable GLBT communities, including marginalized sub-culture groups” (Gross 2002: xi). Keith Dorwick argues,

One thing online communication has changed radically is that men can now speak to men they’d never speak to in the bars. The social barriers between races, between “hot men” and “dogs” or “trolls” and between younger and older men are much lower online. (Alexander et al. 2004)

But characterizations of chat rooms as more egalitarian spaces do not hold up on more attentive examination. Anxieties about race—held by both white and non-white men—may sometimes determine who is solicited for conversation, friendship or sex in bars, but they perform the same function in cyberspace as well, as evidenced by the shutting down of conversations after responses to the “background” question confirm non-white racial identity and, also, by the preferred status afforded to white men.

Of the many identities I adopted in the Toronto chat rooms at gay.com, blue-eyed and blond haired “Robbie” was easily the most fun to inhabit. Robbie fit my own physical description except, importantly, that he was blonde and blue-eyed, I enjoyed the most attention from other online chatters than in any other representation of myself. I was overwhelmed with requests for private window conversations and many times I was chatting separately but simultaneously with five or six of the thirty users in the room. Changing only information about hair and eye color to indicate a white identity, I was invited to participate conversations with many more men and have an altogether different experience than when my descriptor indicated that I was non-white. Others engaged in similar projects have reported similar experiences. For example, one Taiwanese-born college student posting to a Bulletin Board System based in Orange County, California, also found that immediately after changing his ethnic identity from “Chinese” to “Caucasian,” he received more queries and invitations to chat (Tsang 2000: 435). Tsang also reports that consequent to their experiences of queer spaces on the Web, many non-white users refused to identify themselves, or identified themselves as “Other” or “Mixed” when given a choice, “in the hopes that their chances [to interact with other men] would be improved” (2000: 435). In the physical world, non-white men have often been refused entry to white-

dominant gay bars and clubs; in cyberspace, self-identification as white often serves as a qualifier to access conversations with other users.

Exercising Agency

Interactions in the Toronto gay.com chat rooms make clear that the act of passing white is also an attempt to experience another kind of privilege of whiteness: the opportunity to be viewed as active, dynamic and complex agents. Dominant processes of racialization fix identities for non-white people in ways that generally do not apply to white people. Writing about gay bars and clubs in the real world, Mercer and Julien observe that representations of non-white men are “confined to a narrow repertoire of types—the supersexual stud and the sexual savage on the one hand, the delicate and exotic “Oriental” on the other” (1991: 169). Choices placed to non-white men appear to oscillate between the two:

Far too many of the white men I see in [. . .] clubs look at me as if to say, “I couldn’t sleep with you. You’re black. Or they desire me because I am black. (Shepherd 1986: 54)

These representations, rooted in the experience of colonialism and empire, are circulated again in cyberspace. Toronto resident “Marshall,” a twenty-six-year-old Asian male who regularly goes online, references a common experience among non-white men:

I find that a lot of guys won’t consider me because of my background . . . a lot of guys are not into Asians, or, if they are, are only into submissive Asians, but I’m a top. [. . .] I’ve had guys say to me . . . “if I were into Asians I’d totally get with you.” I don’t exactly consider those compliments, but they’re part of my reality and so I deal. (Cited in Sanders 2005: 83)

Similarly, “Big_Wolf” says of his experiences on IRC, “if they suspect or find out you are black MANY immediately go to the penis size thing” (Campbell 2004: 79).

Byron Burkhalter makes the important point that racial identification occurs differently online. “Stereotyping in face-to-face interaction follows from an assumed racial identity,” but online interaction, he says, “differs in that the imputation tends to go in the other direction—from stereotype to racial identity” (1999: 73). In real-life situations, the complex, multidimensional realities of racialized peoples also serve to reveal race as a lie. Online, however, fixed stereotypes are the means through which users are received in interactions. “In online interactions,” Burkhalter points out, “perspectives resist modification because participants confront an immutable text” (1999: 73). There are of course occasions when the exploration of conversations in

cyberspace might engage chatters in critical self-reflection—a user might be surprised about his interactions and be challenged to rethink race-based presumptions. But this happens in the real-world bars as well, and I would even suggest that spontaneous acts leading to confrontations with and challenges to “race”-based expectations may be more likely to happen in bars than cyberspace. For example, suppose that I believe that I am not interested in forming friendships or relationships, or having sexual encounters with Japanese men. I might, however, walk into a bar and encounter an Japanese man whose gestures, body, or manner are attractive to me. Such a real-life meeting might challenge my imagination to be less fixed, resolve sub-/unconscious desires and undermine my investments in “race.” If I come to a gay.com chat room with same belief, I simply shut off the possibility of speaking to men identifying themselves as Japanese, allowing no opportunity for challenges to the same investments in “race” to proceed, untroubled.

Insofar as racial identification is concerned, white men are generally not subject to this fixing gaze. As Dyer observes about his study of white representation:

One cannot come up with a limited range of endlessly repeated images, because the privilege of being white in white culture is not to be subjected to stereotyping in relation to one's whiteness. White people are stereotyped in terms of gender, nation, class, sexuality, ability and so on, but the overt point of such typification is gender, nation, etc. Whiteness generally colonizes the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race. To be normal, even to be normally deviant (queer, crippled), is to be white. White people in their whiteness, however, are imaged as individual and/or endlessly diverse, complex and changing. (1997: 11–12)

When I represented myself as any kind of non-white man in the chat rooms, my “race” almost always figured into users’ reactions. Whatever kind of non-white man I claimed to be, even opposed reactions referenced “race”; some respondents shut down conversations because I was non-white, others pursued me because I was Black/Indian/Chinese, etc. But as blonde, blue-eyed Robbie, I was “normal,” a complex human whose behavior and personality were not necessarily read through racial tropes. No longer trapped in my skin, I was neither repulsive nor alluring because of it. I was not a member of a group but an individual. I was not a “type” and I spoke for no community but myself. Raced white, I accomplished what Peggy McIntosh identifies as an ultimate achievement of whiteness: the belief that everything a white person does may be accounted for in his/her individuality (1992: 70–81). I was imagined as white people were imagined to be: endlessly diverse, complex, and changing (Dyer 1997: 12).

Conclusion/Epilogue

My experiences as “Robbie” seemed to achieve the kinds of experiences imagined by Shepherd and Cho, and revealed motivations for “passing white” and occupying white identities that were similar to their own. Passing white, whether in a chat room for a few hours, over the course of a trouble-free weekend, or, as Shepherd coyly suggests, for “just one night” if not all eternity, appears to be neither an idle expression of identity play, nor a pronouncement of faith in white supremacist mythologies. Those wishing to “pass white” may have no actual desires to inhabit or be with white bodies; I never imagined what “Robbie” might look like, nor was I motivated to undertake this project by conscious desires for white men in particular. Instead, as demonstrated in the analysis of the Toronto chat rooms at gay.com, this act more likely conveys a longing to experience the cultural, social and political privileges afforded to whiteness.

Although Shepherd introduces his “On Not Being White” essay as a reflection on his “obsessive attraction to white men” (1986: 47), he provides no explanation other than a yearning to enjoy the same kinds of liberties enjoyed by them. Shepherd writes, “As a child I would go to sleep wishing that when I awoke I would be white” (1986: 48). Yet, his imaginative energies are less spent on visualizing himself in a white body than in fleeing the restrictions placed on his movements because of the cultural meanings attached to blackness:

The burden of my identity, one of the many burdens of my identity, has always been the burden of not being white . . . I was the wrong one: wrong lips, wrong nose, wrong self

I’ve had notions, negative each one, images of what it is to be *seem* black: to look black, to talk black, to walk black. . . . If one didnot say those things, wear those things, if one didn’t do things that way, then one would never, could never be branded with that word, that awful word; though of course one was. (1986: 47–49)

Shepherd may want to sleep with white men, but says nothing about what he likes about their bodies. They are described as “beautiful” but no details describing what exactly he likes about white bodies. No yearning is expressed to touch white skin, no allusions to phenotypes associated with white men.

Sexual desires are the consequence of a complicated mess of personal experiences, social relations, and conscious and subconscious anxieties; for Shepherd, a yearning for political liberation is clearly part of that mix:

If I am seen with a beautiful man, not only am I thus one who can acquire a valuable prize but I am by the same operation (as a man having it both ways) transformed into such a prize myself, sought after and acquired by the man I am

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with. . . By being seen with him, I am made an honorary white man for so long as I am with him. Suddenly I am part of the community. So by being with him I manage almost to be him. (1986: 54)

Writing two decades later than Shepherd, Cho gets right to the point about what motivates her daydreams of becoming white:

What if I didn't have to bend anything? What if there really was a level playing field? I would love to see how far I could actually go. What if all I had to show off was my mad skills? Wouldn't I really be able to fly then? (margaretocho.com/blog, January 23, 2005)

Cho doesn't actually want to be white, just enjoy access to the privileges it affords. Similarly, Shepherd concludes:

My dream? Finally to be 'myself,' relieved of the baggage of my history both as an individual and as a member of an oppressed race and caste, relieved of my self-despise in the shining warmth of the beloved's blond approbation. (1986: 56)

Passing white in cyberspace makes a similar promise to Shepherd's beloved blond: temporary comfort from—but no absolution from—the inflictions of "race."

Notes

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1. In her study of a social-oriented MUD (multi-user dimension), Kendall observed that when "black participants must state that they are black in order to be recognized as such, [online] anonymity carries with it a presumptive identity of whiteness" (2002: 210). John Edward Campbell reached the same conclusion in his study of gay-themed IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels. Asked whether he identified his "race" online, the only self-identified African American included in Campbell's study replied, "yes, sometimes . . . sometimes they go on thinking i'm white" (2004: 80). Nakamura's own studies of racial impersonation and identity tourism also conclude that when race identification was left out of descriptors, "all were assumed to be white" (2002: 5).
2. One explanation for this kind of reaction is to be found in the perpetuation of beauty myths that idealize phenotypes associated with whiteness. As suggested in *Shared Lives*, a collection of oral histories about gay Asian men in Toronto, "gay culture focuses on the white male, who is usually blonde, blue-eyed, tall and muscular. We come to believe that this is the look we should all be seeking" (Gay Asians Toronto 1996: iii-iv). "Seeking" in this context suggests both self-representation and desire for sexual partners. Although there is certainly a broader range of ideal types than the blue-eyed blonde model, it is also true that in mainstream gay cul-

ture, dominant representations of “ideal types” mostly correspond to degrees of whiteness or to the desires of white men.

3. This represents the number of searchable accounts, as stated on the gay.com website. It may include accounts that are dormant, or different accounts registered to the same user. Nielsen net ratings data are also taken from gay.com’s promotional material.
4. The lack of ethnicity-specific rooms at gay.com is also a consequence of the proliferation and intensified specialization of ethno-specific sites elsewhere, to cater to men interested in black men, Arab men, etc.
5. There is a “Men of Color” room available in Ohio, but its title and form suggest a different political engagement (for meetings, friendships, camaraderie between non-white men) to the Toronto rooms.

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**Au: see
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