

Tripping Over Our Tropes:
Of “Passing” and Postmodern Subjectivity—
What’s in a Metaphor?

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Who . . . can afford transition, whether that transition be a move from female to male, a journey across the border and back, a holiday in the sun, a trip to the moon, a passage to a new body, a one-way ticket to white manhood? Who, on the other hand, can afford to stay home, who can afford to make a home, build a new home, move homes, have no home, leave home? Who can afford metaphors?

—Judith Halberstam

Teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have struggled for nearly two decades now with what is repeatedly referred to as the “impasse of postmodern agency,” and/or the “crisis” of postmodern subjectivity (see, for example, Faigley; Jones; Trimbur). How, the question goes, are we to teach writing when postmodern understandings of decentered and discursively produced subjectivity dissolve both teacher and writer into “effects” or “functions,” rather than “agent[s] of discourse” (Trimbur 119)? How, more broadly, and to many of us more importantly still, are we to teach for “critical consciousness” when we are always already implicated in, and thus to a certain extent necessarily oblivious to, the very systems of power we would (and would ask students to) critique and resist? Lester Faigley once called such questions the most “vexed” in composition studies (22), and while there were numerous attempts from the late 1980s through the 1990s to relieve the vexation by bringing our conceptions and pedagogies of writing in line with our newly gained theoretical knowledge *about* writing and subjectivity, the proverbial dawn of the new millenium found the old questions haunting us still.

The problem here, according to Faigley and to rhetoric and composition renegades such as Victor Vitanza, Geoffrey Sirc, and D. Diane Davis, is that composition “is a control freak,” dys/functionally obsessed with mastering and containing both writing and the self (Davis 8). “Shortsighted and rigid” (Davis 7), composition (or at least the typical composition course) has conveniently sidestepped purportedly accepted postmodern theoretical insights about the instability of texts, and ultimate textuality of selves, these theorists argue, to continue to reward instead only writing that is marked by the “modernist” features of autonomy, unity, and the appearance of authorial intention.¹ One means by which some compositionists have sought to redress this pervasive contradiction is to forge metaphors that more aptly reflect and enact a writing/subjectivity that is of and in the “postmodern condition.” Faigley, for example, has suggested we look to political theorist Iris Young’s “urban subject” as a metaphor for “the momentarily situated subject” who is “open to unassimilated otherness” (239, 233). Davis chooses laughter as an ideal rescue trope, for its ability to break us apart and expose the autonomous, authorial self as a fiction, while many others, within composition and well beyond, have called upon tropes of “performance and theatricality,” or on metaphors of “traveling” or “border crossing,” to evoke the labile, dissimulative, and transient status of selfhood.²

Closely related to these last efforts are some recent attempts to refurbish the term “passing” as a metaphor for contemporary subjectivity. In this essay, I would like to examine these attempts, with a particular focus on Pamela Caughie’s work on passing and pedagogy, which culminated in her 1999 book, *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility*. I have chosen to focus in such detail on Caughie’s work not only because it is by far the most extended articulation of passing conceived within a pedagogical framework to date (where “pedagogy,” not incidentally, is itself broadly conceived as both “teacherly” and “scholarly” endeavors), but even more so because it is also an especially provocative embodiment and illustration of the more general difficulties, risks, and challenges that will always attend our efforts to reconfigure and redeploy loaded cultural tropes. (In short, I have chosen to focus on Caughie’s work because I find it quite simply deserving of extended commentary that it has thus far not received.) Before this examination can begin in earnest, however, I will need to elucidate and contextualize the basis of Caughie’s own complex arguments.

Like the composition theorists mentioned above, Caughie is responding, at least in part, to the contradictory situation writing teachers find

themselves in when “traditional writing courses” cause us to “resuscitate in practice . . . the very subject we dismantle in theory” (“Let” 115). However, to Caughie, “not just traditional writing courses” but the very “practice of writing itself may resist the radical insights of postmodern theories”: As far as writing *always* makes us appear to “speak for ourselves and others,” it forces us to act “as if we were immune to the performance” of our own stability, Caughie says, “putting us all in the position of passing” (“Let” 115). Such an understanding of writing thus leads Caughie to assert that the metaphor of passing can and does describe our subject positions more generally (113); that is, for Caughie, we never act “from a discrete or prior position” (180), but rather momentarily take up and occupy various linguistic/textual sites. To take any position at all, even “our own,” is to temporarily “pass” into the space of and become that positionality. We are thus always already passing, “even or especially when we seem to inhabit our most natural position,” for even that “natural” position is only a transitory “effect” of the scene of writing or speaking in which we are engaged (129).

What becomes immediately apparent and most important here is that Caughie’s theory of passing departs deliberately and significantly from its historical and still thoroughly entrenched meanings. Historically, of course, passing has been equivalent to “passing *as*” something we “are” not; it has signified the perpetration of an assumed and somehow “false” identity. “In its traditional sense,” Caughie herself reminds us, the practice of passing is surrounded by “pejorative connotations of deception, dishonesty, and betrayal,” and refers to the acts of “assuming the identity of another type or class of person” (usually white and/or male and/or heterosexual) for social, economic, or political gains (“Let” 113). In her reconfiguration of the term, however, passing loses this affiliation with falsity, and with “as.” Because we are always already passing, passing for Caughie is not deception or “self-denial”; it is the very condition of being a self (“Let” 129; *Passing* 22). As Walter Benn Michaels explains in a different context, today’s performative conceptions of the subject make passing in this newly configured sense unavoidable, and passing in its former sense of passing *as/for* “something else” unfeasible: If, “in the logic of social constructionism,” identity becomes “identical to action,” Benn Michaels elaborates, “it is impossible not to *be* what you are passing for” (133, 142).

Yet, Caughie is hardly so easily dismissive of passing’s legacies.³ While she does maintain that we can (and must) understand her use of passing without reference to its origins, as an “adjunct” term exterior to

its former uses rather than derivative from them (*Passing* 13, 49 n.4), she also is openly troubled about the risks of attempting to redeploy the figure in this way, stating in the early pages of *Passing* that her recurrent concerns over how such efforts would be received and (mis)perceived nearly caused her to abandon her project altogether (5, 8). Specifically, Caughie allows that any attempted redeployment of passing potentially erases the “specificity of a group’s oppression,” as well as the “real material differences” that historically have made passing either a necessary or unnecessary, possible or impossible act (22–23). She acknowledges, for example, that historically only one race has had a consistent, coerced impetus to pass, and that passing-subjects (or subjects trying but failing to pass) have often faced, and face still, “social, economic, and even physical consequences”—including death—for their transgressions (5, 132). Moreover, given the time-honored phenomena of whites passing as black, or men passing as women, Caughie grants that passing serves disparate functions for differently positioned subjects, and she concedes the “always slippery difference” between “the strategic adoption of a politically empowered identity” and the potentially “disempowering appropriation” by an already privileged subject of a marginalized identity position (137, 25).

Ultimately, however, despite her awareness that passing is a term and social practice with a troubled and troubling history, and despite her concomitant knowledge that no word ever “forgets where it has been,” Caughie takes the risk to “treat the word and its history as a ‘resignifiable narrative’” (14, 20). She makes this choice both to refuse the oppressive and constraining “logic of identity,” and to mine the potential of the risk, or even of the “crisis,” that will undoubtedly attend her intrepid use of this knotty term (24, 37). Caughie asks us to be willing to suspend these inevitable moments of crisis so that we can productively confront her reconfiguration of passing, rather than merely pass it by; she asks us to endure crisis long enough to explore “what ethical and political possibilities are opened up” by conceiving the self via this term (216). Most importantly perhaps, Caughie asks us not to stop there, but to “continually pose the question of the limit,” to question the potential boundaries—the very legitimacy and ethicality—of her use of passing, even as we push those boundaries to the brink (46, 199). In large part, I consider my essay’s discussion to be a response to Caughie’s own fearless call for interrogation and action.

In and as my response, then, I would like to further flesh out Caughie’s attempted reconfiguration of passing and examine it alongside

some of the recent and more thoroughgoing discussions of *where* passing *has been* in order to begin to pose the question of its efficacy and ethicality as a metaphor for the subject. It is important to note at the outset, however, that my point will not have been to arrest the movement of passing, to prohibit the passing of passing, if you will, into other contexts and uses (as if such a prohibitory act were even possible), but rather to more completely expose the histories that are still embedded in and potentially repeated by Caughie's use of this term. I must also acknowledge here that I believe the repetition/citation of problematic terms or constructs is both unavoidable and can become an act of radical resignification in its own right. That is, I recognize and myself contend, with Judith Butler, that while the repetition of a historically burdened term does risk reconsolidating trauma, it is also a means—perhaps the only means—by which we “[break] with historicity” to spawn new and powerfully reappropriative uses of such loaded figures (*Excitable* 36–37). (The redeployment of the term “queer” serves as an obvious example.) However, I also believe, again with Butler, that there is a specific key to this type of subversive repetition, that the “political possibility of reworking the force” of an injurious or burdened term emerges only in re- or misappropriations that manage to repeat “without precisely reenacting” the original trauma (*Excitable* 40–41; see also *Bodies* 223). It is according to these particular and particularly exacting criteria that I seek to examine the effects and effectiveness of Caughie's use of passing as a metaphor for subjectivity and for writing. Ultimately, I will suggest that if writing theorists and teachers continue to be interested in and committed to formulating metaphors for the postmodern (writing) subject that are ethically sound rather than disempowering, *and* that evoke and enact that subject's discontinuity and displacement, we actually need to fashion metaphors that embrace the notion of “original” or “prior” position—the very notion that Caughie's and countless other postmodern theories of subjectivity disallow.

Risking Passing: Writing and Teaching Across Lines of Difference

Caughie is particularly concerned with the ethical and political possibilities opened up by conceiving of *writing* and *teaching* selves in terms of passing. In addition to noting that both traditional writing courses and the mere act of writing work to resuscitate the unified subject, Caughie suggests that certain aspects of “postmodernism” itself, ironically, also contribute to our own and our students' efforts to reclaim the sovereign author/subject. Specifically, Caughie suggests that some contemporary

feminisms, and “multiculturalism” in general, have led to a “policing” of identities that creates anxious student-writers “unwilling to risk themselves in their writing” (189). In the identity-obsessed multicultural classroom, Caughie fears that students “feel they must get it right, say the right things, make the right moves”—forge a secure and careful position from which to speak—and are thereby denied postmodernism’s insights about the inherent “multiplicity of subject positions” (189). In contrast, Caughie suggests that if we are mobilized by the knowledge that we are always already passing, we can encourage our students to write without apprehension across lines of difference and into what is new and unknown. “Coming to terms with the precariousness of . . . identity,” Caughie summarizes, “opens up the possibilities of passing or, in Toni Morrison’s words, ‘becoming’: that process of entering what one is estranged from” (198). In short, Caughie finds her passing trope ideally suited to at last enact in teaching/writing practices what we have so long claimed in theory: that writing is “the site where subjectivity emerges,” and, as such, is a means by which writers can “move out of the constraints of socially and culturally prescribed identities” believed to be singular and stable (169).

Accordingly, Caughie calls for a (re)structuring of writing assignments that would provide students “occasions for *working through* rather than *taking up* subject positions,” assignments that would “tap into those opportunities for passing,” rather than reinscribe an originary, unified self at the center of the composing act (189–90, 198). As a brief example of such an assignment, Caughie shares a student journal-entry-response to a class viewing of the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*—a response she describes as marked by “confusion,” “hesitancy,” and “qualifying quotation marks.” Such textual features, Caughie believes, serve to demonstrate that this student has experienced through her writing the “self displacement” that *is* subjectivity; they indicate that she has learned that her “natural” response to the film’s questions of racialized identities may be reflective of multiple and contradictory cultural meanings (“Let” 123, 129; *Passing* 191–92, 198). Juxtaposed to this student’s halting and tortuous response is the work of a second student—work that Caughie admits is more “sophisticated” in both its expected linearity and assuredness. But Caughie argues that while the second student’s writing is by academic standards “better,” its greater “savvy” and security actually rhetorically suppress the “nature of writing” and of subjectivity itself: “The second student found a secure position from which to write,” Caughie explains, but “the first wrote through some precarious posi-

tions.” Writing for the first student, in Caughie’s view, was thus “a performative process that provided an *experience* of subjectivity as passing” (*Passing* 198).

Caughie calls for a restructuring of writing assignments that would both reflect and facilitate this experience of subjectivity as passing, as well as a restructuring of pedagogical and critical/scholarly practices more generally, a restructuring that would allow teachers and theorists, too, to risk passing across prohibitive lines of difference. In fact, an overarching concern of Caughie’s in *Passing and Pedagogy* (and what will soon become mine as well) is with what she terms the “caveat syndrome”: the practice whereby (usually more privileged) critical researchers and theorists name and situate themselves in relation to the (usually more marginalized) groups/subjects of their study—that is, the “As a middle-class white feminist . . .” construction (30). Though this academic convention originated as a means through which scholars could reconstitute research and criticism themselves as always interested and partial, and/or as a means by which they could at least admit, if not dismantle, their own complicity with structures of power, Caughie decries this careful positioning as self-interested and protective. More to the point, she decries it, once again, as protective of “the self” that postmodern theories have long called into question. Because the act of claiming *any* position as the more “stable” one we start from and return to denies and precludes subjectivity-as-passing, Caughie characterizes even the most well-intentioned attempts at critical self-positioning as attempts to “revive the humanist subject”—even those critical postures that strive to “guard against” the potential incursions of “speaking as and speaking for” marginalized groups to which the speaker/writer does not “belong” (“Let” 128; *Passing* 188, 199). Rather than open up a space for ethical action, such postures, in Caughie’s view, actually refuse both risk and advocacy, *and* refuse “the very self-displacement our forages across identity lines are supposed to foster” (*Passing* 37). In short, to Caughie these are postures that deny that we are only ever our “postures,” our acts, and that venture instead to undergird or controvert those acts with something that we *are*.

The “caveat syndrome,” in Caughie’s view, is thus not so much a caution motivated by care, as it is a cautiousness that reveals and reenacts our desires for the secure and essential self. Understanding all subjectivity as passing, however, renders the caveat syndrome obsolete and allows us to eschew the customary (but in Caughie’s view unnecessary and contradictory) uneasiness over intrusion and appropriation that usually

accompany acts of “speaking as” or “speaking for.” Since “there is no taking a position without passing” anyway, Caughie feels we can and must give up our “desire for a guarantee of meaning and ‘positional correctness,’” and take the risk of speaking, writing, and teaching across lines of difference without apologies, defenses, anxious guilt, or qualifications (39, 46). In Caughie’s reconfiguration of passing, “one cannot worry about being exposed as either the real thing or the fraud” because passing now “contaminates the distinction between the two” (180). Thus liberated, we can boldly teach and write without misgivings about our positions and their implicatedness; we can teach/write “about the other as a cultural double or metaphor,” as “a rhetorical space to be explored” rather than as (another) “preexisting subject.” (84). When there is no “real” to stand in judgement of the “fraud,” we have no choice but to give up “the fantasy of a safe position” and, as Caughie says simply, “go all the way” (26, 30).

The ready critique here is the one that Caughie has already anticipated: that this re-understanding of passing is a glaring refusal both of where the word has been and of where real, human subjects have been, and are still, with respect to historical formations of power. To a certain extent, I support (and am advancing) this critique. Yet, I would like to take this critique a step further to suggest that Caughie’s identification of this loaded term as an all-purpose trope for postmodern writing/subjectivity is problematic not simply because “passing” cannot forget where it has been, but because Caughie’s use of the term does not depart from, but rather *precisely reenacts*, to use Butler’s terminology, passing’s “original trauma.” If we examine now some of the history and nuances of both racial and gender passing, we will have a framework for discerning the extent to which Caughie’s “reconfiguration” of passing shares with passing in its original sense some of that act’s more problematic qualities: most perniciously, the denial of a culturally specific *prior location* that I am asserting is necessary to consider, not only so that we may remain alert to the risks of “disempowering appropriations,” but in order to adequately theorize the postmodern subject’s discontinuity.

The Promises of Passing

As Caughie’s own earlier overview of passing has suggested, passing in its original sense is most commonly understood as an attempt to access the power or privilege of a dominant group via the denial, evacuation, or even total disappearance/figurative death of a former, marginalized self understood as primary and “real.” As a disappearing act of negation, then,

passing is often seen as a denial and betrayal not only of one's former self, but of one's family, community, and cultural history, and thus is frequently understood to result in profound anxiety, alienation, guilt, and loss for the passing subject despite her/his economic and social gains (Somerville 83, 133). Even in cases of occasional or circumstantial passing, rather than passing as a way of life, or in cases of "being passed"—of being perceived as passing in certain contexts whether one is attempting it or not—passing still succeeds by a process of erasure that must obliterate the passing subject's ambiguity and the perceiver's doubt for whatever the pass's duration. That is, even if only temporarily, and irrespective of intent, passing must achieve total absorption, must "cohere into something akin to identity," in order to have taken place (Halberstam, *Female* 21).

Given this (conventional) description of passing, it is easy to see why the act would be derided both by those who want to solidify marginalized identities for cultural and political reasons, and by "post-identity politics" theorists and activists who would rather destabilize identity altogether, for passing is an act that at once effaces historical, cultural, and communal identity, and, though fundamentally reliant on identity's instability, reconsolidates a unified self through the necessary eradication of ambiguity. As Sandy Stone states unequivocally, "Passing means the denial of mixture"—the ability to be accepted as a "natural" and full-fledged member of the (singular and unified) identity-category/group of choice (352). Thus, for Stone, rather than opening up possibilities for identities that are multiple, precarious, and dis-continuous, the process of passing (in its traditional sense) actually "forecloses the possibility" of a life grounded in what she calls "*intertextual* possibilities" (352). Though Stone is discussing transsexual passing specifically, she concludes that, whether it is the transsexual passing as his/her chosen gender, the person of color passing as white, or the closeted gay or lesbian passing as straight, passing can only amount to "chosen invisibility" and chosen silence, and, as such, is "an imperfect solution to personal dissonance" (352, 354). She calls on transsexuals to "take responsibility for *all* of their history, to begin to rearticulate their lives" as something more powerful than "a series of erasures" (354).

Stone's conclusion suggests that passing, as trope or act, may also work to eradicate ambiguity not only through an erasure of incongruous histories, but through the positing of only two possible poles (Rust 23; Somerville 133–34). As Siobhan Somerville observes in *Queering the Color Line*, narratives of racial passing, like narratives of the transsexual's

passing/becoming, most often revolve around and stress the “temporal separation of ‘before’ and ‘after’” (though the “before” is censored/erased) and a concomitant “disjunction between . . . ‘black’ and ‘white,’” thus (and again like the transsexual’s journey) maintaining the notion of only two conceivable, and polar opposite, identities (133–34).⁴ Judith Halberstam finds the notion of passing, tethered to this land of twoness, “singularly unhelpful” to describe identity as the more fluid, multiple, and context-dependent negotiation that it often is: “What of a biological female who presents as butch, passes as male in some circumstances and reads as butch in others, and considers herself not to be a woman but maintains distance from the category ‘man’?” Halberstam asks. To understand such modes of subjectivity, she continues, “we would need to do more than map psychic and physical journeys” between two, and only two, points of absorption, and think in “fractal,” “geometric” terms about enactments of self (*Female* 21). In short, critics such as Somerville and Halberstam suggest that passing’s limited and limiting notion of an either/or twoness precludes the possibility of a “third term,” which, as Marjorie Garber reminds us, is not—and must not be—something so concrete as a term at all, but a *process* of identity’s becoming that calls attention to rather than covers over multiple, disparate, and yet simultaneous ambiguities (11).

As passing historically has been equated with the refusal of admixture and ambiguity, so has it been associated with the seamless blending that is the very hallmark of U.S. assimilationism. While the end-result of passing for the transsexual is his or her disappearance into and emergence as the “other” gender, the end-result of racial passing has often been the racialized subject’s disappearance and emergence/immersion in the vast, unmarked (because assumed white) American middle class. As Gayle Wald explains in *Crossing the Line*, the traditional passing narrative frequently centers around the “ideal” black subject who manages to access social and economic privileges despite his or her (less visible-to-entirely unmarked, but nonetheless) “real” race, and who, having done so, may then serve as a model of bourgeois respectability for other black subjects (84). Because the “promise of passing” was/is nothing less than the “transcendence” of race via “class and social mobility,” Wald finds passing inextricably tied to the liberal ideology upon which the “American Dream” of success within the “melting pot” depends—that is, to the ideology of cultural homogeneity that takes access to and inclusion in the undifferentiated mass as the apex of achievement (84, 86–87; see also hooks, *Yearning* 15–16).

While passing in these most common and conventional interpretations clearly amounts to little more than a regressive reinscription of both culture and identity as monolithic, there are other interpretations of passing that are less willing to dismiss it as a politically viable strategy. As Wald points out, for example, though often read as “a mere flight from black identity,” passing has also been “a way of circumventing the limitations imposed upon African Americans’ social, economic, and geographical mobility” (90). It has been an act of “acquiring by guile what racially defined subjects rightfully deserve but are unjustly denied”: a cunning “method of redistributive justice that exploit[s] white supremacy’s own contradictions and vulnerabilities to construct alternatives to racial hierarchy” (144–45). Elaine Ginsberg concurs, writing in the introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* that “passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress” (16). What Wald and Ginsberg (and others) suggest, then, is that passing is a strategic and potentially transgressive act, a move from margin to center that appropriates positions and privileges deemed unavailable to the passer, and, in that process, reveals the center’s very instability, its *inability* to guarantee the exclusions upon which it depends. The mere possibility of passing, in these alternative accounts, attests to the arbitrariness and permeability of a “color line” deemed absolute, and, by extension, reveals the mutability of both constructions of identity and of power (Somerville 83; see also Ginsberg; Schlossberg; Wald).

As Ginsberg’s description above begins to make clear, however, passing, even in these more celebratory accounts, can only be understood as a limited because *individual* act, one that works the existing system for *personal* gain rather than dismantling or even altering it (Schlossberg 3). As early as 1934, in fact, Langston Hughes critiqued passing “as an individualized practice that fails to address the collective nature of racial discourse” or the necessity of collective agency (see Wald 7). Even more significantly perhaps, passing is not only an individualized act in that it is committed by individuals for personal gain within an existing power structure, it is an individualized act in that it is only an option *for a few individuals*. That is, while the mere possibility of passing may attest to the permeable and fictive nature of the color line, that same “fictive” color line nonetheless renders passing an impossibility “for the great majority of racially despised and degraded people” (Wald 8). Passing might thus

be a crossing of the line that ultimately contributes to a redrawing of the line between those “who can demonstrate themselves to be deserving of equal treatment,” and those whose inability to pass *or* “flagrant refusal to conform serves to . . . justify their continued marginalization” (Wald 96).

Such arguments clarify quite pointedly that the power of racial boundaries “supersedes the fluidity and arbitrariness of racial representations” (Wald 10). This grim social reality leads Benn Michaels to assert simply that “it doesn’t make sense to think of race . . . as a social construction,” because racial identity is inscribed and legible on the body and thus is “irreducible to action” (142). Moreover, even if we understand these bodily inscriptions as themselves always produced and mediated—that is, as legible on the body at all only because of the terms, categories, and codes of racialized discourses—that insight does not negate the constraining operations of the available categories themselves. As Halberstam writes, the “revelation” that various identity categories are “constructs” does not serve to “relieve the effects of that construction” (*Female* 119). Identity and its effects are often quite literally inescapable.

Yet, identity *is* easier to escape for some than for others, and it has long been “the prerogative of white people” and members of other dominant groups “to ‘try on’ black [and other marginalized] identities” to various ends (Wald 167). While many critical theorists denounce this type of center-to-margin passing because of its comparative ease and often experimental or provisional nature, and also because of the sense of entitlement it displays and reproduces (the passing white subject is at once free to move to the margins *and* free to retain the power or privilege associated with the dominant position, for example), other (and sometimes the same) theorists remind us that such center-to-margin moves can also become powerful oppositional acts. These theorists note that disaffiliations from white identity, for instance, and their attendant “valorization of raced and classed marginality,” have often stood to indicate “countercultural resistance and rebellion” (Wald 20, 167). From 1920s Jewish Jazz musician “Mezz” Mezzrow’s self-proclaimed desire to “become” a “Negro musician,” to John Howard Griffin’s famous passage into black life as chronicled in *Black Like Me*, to today’s widespread embrace of rap and hip-hop music and culture by white youth, “passing” for white subjects has long served as what Wald terms “a form of politico-cultural dissent”; it has been a means through which whites have “symbolized their alienation from cultural norms,” or indicated their “solidarity with the struggles of marginalized African Americans” (Wald 20, 53, 167). But it is also and immediately important to note, as Kobena

Mercer has, that this “symbolic” alienation is often just that. Mercer posits, in other words, that “passing” whites’ apparent “valorization of raced and classed marginality” may actually amount to little more than a hyper-valorization of “the emblems” of disaffection and “outsiderness”—a “strategic self-othering in relation to dominant culture and norms,” yes, but not one that necessarily translates into political solidarity with marginalized peoples (207–08; see also Wald 77). Moreover, as suggested above, white cross-racial identification may itself be a racist act, one rooted in the desire—and systemic conditions that make it possible—to “appropriate black ‘experience’ without compromising a presumed white entitlement to speak for this experience, one that wants to lose itself in the ‘other’ without losing control” (Wald 180). As both Wald and bell hooks point out, the black separatist or black nationalist rejection of well-meaning white allies in the latter part of the 1960s may have come as a direct response to this “mimetic desire,” this perceived “yearning” on the part of liberal whites “to possess the other” (Wald 180; hooks, *Black* 30). That white passing—even in seemingly “genuine” cases of cross-racial identification or forthright forms of empathy and political alliance—is burdened by this long history of appropriation, and cultural imperialism makes its recuperation as a strategy of resistance difficult indeed.

Mercer warns, however, that it is often “difficult to distinguish an exploitative appropriation of black culture from an enabling or empowering identification,” difficult to discern when an identification “impl[ies] objectification, and when . . . it impl[ies] equality” (215, 210). Furthermore, given the complexity of racial relations and the deep “ambivalence of white identifications with black people,” Mercer reminds us that it is also quite simply the case that the *same* act of identification may be both exploitative *and* enabling, both fetishistic *and* a genuine expression of political solidarity (215). Ultimately, then, Mercer asks us to resist reductive interpretations of white cross-racial identification that posit a “complicity/resistance” binary, suggesting that such a structure at once forecloses the potentialities of racial transgression and coalition building, and reasserts the dichotomy of racial division itself (215; see also Wald 15, 78). Marion Rust, writing in Ginsberg’s collection, similarly warns against “collapsing” the effects of passing into “the racist paradigm that pits integrity against compromise” (35), and Wald argues that the reductive “dualism of ‘subversive’ or ‘complicit’” not only “echoes the binary logic of race,” but reveals sentimental aspirations for a purity of politics and resistance that postmodern theories of power have effectively deemed unrealizable. That is, like Butler, Althusser, and Foucault, Wald

reminds us of the “inevitable complicity of resistance,” and maintains that if racial passing—white, black, or otherwise—has worked the impurity of the color line to some “impure ends,” it is only because all moments of agency are constrained by and “staged within the context of dominant definitions and ideologies” (8, 10, 120). The study of passing narratives and passing practices, Wald writes, is valuable precisely because it can “elucidate how subjects negotiate agency, identity, and ‘freedom’ within the terms of the dominant discourses that circumscribe their choices” (20). The promises of passing are many, Wald’s argument seems to suggest, but a truly clean escape has never been one of them. To expect passing to pass out of the extant field of power relations is to expect the impossible.

Passing it Back to Caughie: Passing Over Location

Given the inevitable complicity of resistance and of all attempts at resignification, it is perhaps unnecessary, or at least redundant, to suggest that Caughie’s reconfiguration of passing cannot divorce itself from the troubled history, and many disturbing implications, of the term that I have reviewed above. Caughie herself is well aware of this particular difficulty, after all, and of other dangers and risks besetting her new use of passing as trope. So, though itself a valid argument, it is just a bit too easy to read Caughie’s work against passing’s earlier and ingrained meanings *only* in order to suggest that, given its past, passing simply cannot be the “resignifiable narrative” Caughie wants it to be. Again, it is not my intention to make such a claim. (Or, more accurately, it is not my intention to *stop* with such a claim.) Instead, I have provided the overview of passing above in order to frame and offer what I hope is a somewhat more complex critique of Caughie’s work, and that is that her particular repetition of passing falters in its project of *reconfiguration* precisely because it *does not do the work of reconfiguring* but, rather, too faithfully repeats some of passing’s original and most deleterious effects.

First, and most obviously, in her recommendation that we divorce passing from its complex history, read it without reference to its problematic origins and evolutions, Caughie may reenact the disassociation from (personal, bodily, familial, communal, cultural) history upon which both racial and transsexual passing have often depended. Even more troublesome, however, and what I will focus on henceforth, is that in her denial of prior location, her related denunciation of what she terms “the caveat syndrome,” and her wholesale endorsement of speaking without reservation across lines of difference, Caughie may reenact the incursion and

appropriation that are associated with white passing. More specifically, because passing for Caughie *is* the mode of entering what we are estranged from, of opening up the other as a “rhetorical space” to be explored, I believe her “new” use of the term resonates a little too closely with what Wald, hooks, and others expose as moments of white passing where the desire and goal is to colonize, possess, or become what is Other—and for the sole benefit of the dominant subject.

Caughie’s contention, again, is that while “subjects are positioned,” one does not act “from a discrete or prior position” (180). This dissolution of an original, “real,” autonomous location, for Caughie ensures an “authorial” self-displacement that in turn guarantees an inevitable distance from an equally displaced and textualized Other. In somewhat different terms, if speaking/writing brings us into being, and neither we nor the “Other” are preexisting subjects but only our discursive incarnations, “our” speaking/writing *as or about* the Other can be neither a manifestation of a fraudulent “self,” nor an intrusive appropriation of something that is not rightfully “ours” to speak about or know: “our” speaking/writing can only ever *be* rhetorical exploration that opens up possibilities for further becomings in and as text (84). Engaging hooks directly, Caughie admits that such textualized “theories of displacement” risk identity “tourism” and a reinscription of cultural imperialism, as they seem to construct the Other and her culture as mere suggestive spaces of aesthetic play and discovery (85). But Caughie is again willing to take this risk, because ultimately she feels we risk far more when we *refuse to risk*, when we refuse the precariousness of identity and identification in order to establish a “correct” speaking position. “When,” Caughie asks, does the academic “imperative” to name and situate in order to “unlearn our own forms of privilege” really allow us to *unlearn* that privilege—to “change the nature of what we know and think”—and when does it simply “reveal our desire for a ‘safe’ participation in otherness,” a participation so demarcated that it actually solidifies the privilege we are purportedly interrogating? (85). The mad “rush to defend ourselves,” and to defend our scrupulous intentions as we represent the Other, Caughie argues, results in a cultural criticism that ends up revealing more about the guilt-inflected political status of the writer, and, more generally, about the “identity dilemma” in academe *post*-poststructuralism, than it does about the actual cultures or subjects we write about or study (84–85).

In this rush to defend ourselves, Caughie maintains, drawing on performance artist Karen Finley, we ultimately “[lose] our inventiveness for the sake of appearances”; we tether ourselves rather than teach, limit

rather than learn, “[renege] on the promise of our theories,” and “[foreclose] on the ethics of passing” (9). While Caughie does acknowledge that the “ethics of passing” will change depending upon both context and the subjects involved—that is, while she notes the aforementioned “always slippery difference” between margin-to-center political reappropriation and center-to-margin appropriative intrusion—this difference, slippery though it may be, is not for Caughie of primary concern. Instead, and as should be amply clear at this point, *she privileges the willingness to risk above all else*, and thus “the important distinction” is *not* “between the politically effective and the culturally appropriative,” nor even “between those acts that benefit others and those that serve only one’s own interests,” but between “those who insist on such distinctions” in the first place, and those willing to “act without such guarantees” (25–26).

These are exciting and compelling arguments and calls for action, to be sure. They are arguments and calls for action consistent with postmodern theories of the self, and with today’s “multicultural,” “global” societies. It is my contention, however, that the differences between self-interested appropriations of marginalized positions and strategic reappropriations of power for collective political purposes remain of the utmost importance. To figure these differences as merely “slippery” is to position ourselves to slide down their slopes at our own, and others’, intense peril, for it is to potentially reenact long histories of colonization that are still in the making, and perhaps only taking new and more insidious forms in this particular “multicultural” moment. As both Wald and hooks again point out, ours is a moment wherein identification with difference and transgression of “borders” have become not only theory’s catch-phrases, but “part of the logic” and an “imperative” of global capitalism itself (Wald 79). Ours is a moment when the commodification and consumption of “otherness”—what hooks has tellingly called “eating the other”—knows no bounds; a moment when whatever history, whatever specificity, “whatever difference the Other inhabits” is a consumable, subsumable product available for “exchange” (*Black* 8, 31). As such, ours is perhaps a moment not—or not only—for taking greater and more significant “risks” as we speak across lines of difference, but for attending to and honoring those risks by continuing to speak with care, contextualization, and critical attention to our own positions.

For Caughie, the displacement of the self and the denial of the subject’s prior location obviates the need for this careful positioning, but such a stance, while no doubt liberating for the privileged writer,

obfuscates not only the specificity of the Other's history but the related *specificities* of multifarious and often less-obvious forms of domination. As hooks explains in the *Black Looks* essay bearing the title "Eating the Other," racist and imperialist acts that somehow manage to achieve greater subtlety or newfangled modes of expression are no less tied to a history (and present) of coercion and control than their more openly racist and colonialist counterparts. To illustrate this phenomenon, hooks relates an incident that occurred during her time at Yale when, walking down the streets of New Haven, she overheard a group of young white men talking about their desires "to fuck as many girls from other racial/ethnic groups" as they could before graduation. While such a conversation is obviously both misogynist and racist in the extreme, hooks argues convincingly that it is actually quite likely that these boys see themselves and their desires not only as *non-racist*, but as "progressive": veritable reflections and affirmations of a contemporary "cultural plurality." "Unlike racist white men who historically violated the bodies of black women/women of color to assert their position as colonizer/conqueror," hooks continues, "these young men . . . choose to transgress racial boundaries . . . not to dominate the Other, but rather so that *they* can be acted upon, so that *they* can be changed utterly." Hooks suggests that this narrative of desire—the "desire to make contact" with the Other "with no apparent will to dominate"—"assuages guilt" by deflecting attention from "structures of domination" and placing emphasis instead on the seemingly more benevolent structures of "seduction and longing." The boys' objective, that is, is not necessarily, or not only, to possess the Other, but to be transformed, to "make *themselves* over," to leave behind the ordinary, mundane, and familiar and move out "into a world of difference." Of course, such fantasies "irrevocably link them to collective white racist domination," hooks concludes, but these young men may well *believe* their desires are symptomatic of positive, even enlightened "change in white attitudes towards non-whites" (24–25; emphasis added).

I recount hooks' anecdote in detail to illustrate the ways in which Caughie's denial of a prior subject position, and the "passing" into otherness without "caveats" that it affords, potentially restages this scenario wherein the other is "unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier," and wherein the purpose of exploration is the reconstitution, self-alteration, even "transcendence" of the already privileged subject (hooks, *Black* 23–24). In hooks' scenario, "One dares—acts—on the assumption that the exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other" will transform the yearning, desiring (male) subject (24–25). In

Caughie's configuration of passing, one "acts without guarantees," "risks" endlessly in order to "become," "explore," "enter what one is estranged from," and "change the nature of what one knows and thinks." This is precisely the language and the legacy of certain formations of white passing, wherein the (usually male and middle-class) white subject's desire and "ability to access passing" become his or her means of "leaving actual and metaphorical 'homes'" in order to "[discipline] the 'other' as object of knowledge," *and* in order to use the knowledge gained, and the Other herself, as the vehicle for his own transformation (Wald 16–17).

I must clarify here that I am certainly not suggesting that the transformation of the dominant/privileged subject is not itself of central importance at this time in our history. As Gayatri Spivak has written, it is imperative that "the holders of hegemonic discourses . . . dehegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other" (*Postcolonial* 121); the dominant subject must be able, as hooks more simply states, to "shift locations" in order to see the world differently and anew ("Representations" 52). Yet, this dehegemonization/shift is not likely to occur when the relationship between the privileged subject and his own desire is deemed irrelevant or left uninterrogated. The "desire to become like or merge with the periphery or margin *that one's own power has established*," Caren Kaplan writes in her study of postmodern discourses of displacement, *Questions of Travel*, not only "demonstrates the pitfalls of theoretical 'tourism,'" but, in so doing, potentially repeats exploitative patterns of racism, sexism, and colonialism (66; emphasis added). With these historical dynamics in mind, Kaplan argues that subjects "with cultural and social centrality need to investigate the grounds of their strong desire for rapport and intimacy with the 'other,'" and that only this type of investigation can change the "terms of inquiry" *from* desiring "to becoming accountable for one's own investments" (169). Rosi Braidotti makes a similar argument in *Nomadic Subjects* when she warns that cultural critics "cannot take shortcuts" through or past the unconscious, but must consistently work to discern between and negotiate among our "unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices" (31). To refuse to name, or even to look at, our desires to become the Other—or, more to the point here, *to become different in the place and light of the Other*—is to deny long histories and contemporary enactments of both betrayal and alliance, and is thus to minimize the likelihood of equitable, mutually beneficial alliances of the future (Kaplan 169).

Another clarification: just as I do not want to argue here that the dominant subject's transformation is somehow unimportant, so do I not want to argue for his or her need to be silent, or to speak only with such trepidation and guilt that critical analysis itself is undermined. It simply must be and remain possible, as hooks attests, for all scholars, even or especially scholars "who are members of groups who dominate, exploit, and oppress others," to do "crossover" work if we wish to expand rather than limit "the parameters of cultural production" (*Yearning* 124; *Black* 31). The refusal to speak forcefully out of fear of impropriety is, as Caughie argues, a refusal of advocacy, or what feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff has called a "retreat response" that at once abdicates responsibility, "undercuts political effectivity," and implies that knowledge and authority are based only in experience (106–07). In other words, I agree with Caughie that there are moments when the "mad rush" to name and appropriately place ourselves becomes unproductive, moments when, as Jeffrey Gray writes, critics "go to such lengths to acknowledge situatedness" ("white female critics writing about black texts" is Gray's target group) that they "virtually disqualify themselves as critics" (56, 58; emphasis added). What Gray characterizes as the recent "autobiographical excess" of criticism, the compelled "recital of historical/positional categories" given "under duress" and "to expiate guilt," does risk precluding "any engagement at all with the subject matter" (52, 58, 70, 73). We wind up sounding, to borrow a humorous phrase from Wendy Kaminer, like members of a "postgraduate twelve step group" (xxiii–iv), endlessly offering testimonials about who we are and where we've come from (hi my name is Karen, and I am a queer middle-class white feminist, cross addicted to critical cross-cultural analysis), endlessly setting up borders, making identity slots, telling and retelling only our own stories out of fear that we have no right to comment on someone else's, no right (as there is no right in twelve step groups) to "cross talk." Such a fear-based stance obliterates the progressive potential of what Edward Said, following Antonio Gramsci, calls the entire "intellectual vocation": "If one believes," Said has written, "that an intellectual vocation is socially possible as well as desirable, then it is an inadmissible contradiction . . . to build analyses . . . around exclusions, exclusions that stipulate, for instance, that only women can understand feminine experience, that only Jews can understand Jewish experience, only formerly colonial subjects can understand colonial experience" (qtd. in Shankar 211 n.33).

While we do not want to refuse identification and advocacy, however, nor retreat from producing the trenchant, politically relevant analy-

ses demanded by the academic “vocation”—while we do not want to reduce or confine *critical* analyses to *experiential* analyses—we also do not want to posit a “wholly protean” critic capable of “adopting endlessly shifting, seemingly inexhaustible vantage points” because we believe none of these vantage points are “owned,” but are only ever features of a text (Bordo 226). To figure all subject positions and lived experiences as mere textual spaces that, as such, are open to any and all exploration (Caughie’s own and a common postmodern move) is, first, as I hope I have shown, to potentially replicate the white/colonizing mentality that privileges the benefits to and knowledge gained by the already privileged critic/“explorer.” It is thus also an act that, ironically, keeps the critic at the very center, rather than propelling the critic into the margins he or she so covets. As Kaplan explains, when theorists construct a textualized “no man’s land”—an unpopulated region of academic terms, metaphors, and other imaginative practices divorced from and vacated of actual histories—the subject position *of the critic* in the formation of that theory is effaced and thereby reconsolidated (66). That is, while Caughie suggests that naming and situating privilege demarcates and thereby preserves it, I am suggesting that refusing to articulate privilege due to the conviction that it is only one textual position among (m)any, allows the critic to remain as transparent as ever, to remain the universal owner of all discourse and modes of representation—still (see Spivak, “Can” 271–74). As Bordo and Donna Haraway have each argued at some length, the postmodern ideal of protean critic capable of “being everywhere,” and traditional philosophy’s ideal of critic with a “view from nowhere,” or “God’s eye view” (Bordo 227, 39), are actually “perfect mirror twin[s]” of one another: both are totalizing constructs that “deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective,” and thus “both make it impossible to see well” (Haraway 191).

Finally, to reduce all lived experiences and subject positions to textualized features is not only to keep the critic transparent in the production of discourse and knowledge, but is to falsely equalize all acts of representation. The premise from which Caughie’s arguments proceed—that is, that in “poststructuralist terms” the acts of speaking for/representing oneself and speaking for/representing others are so close as to be indistinguishable—distorts and denies historical and enduring power relations (Alcoff 101). As Alcoff clarifies, “The problem of speaking for others is more specific than the problem of representation generally and requires its own particular analysis” and unique “interrogatory practices.” Alcoff argues, in other words, that while it is undoubtedly

the case that in speaking for “ourselves” we represent ourselves in certain and misleadingly “unified” ways, “create” ourselves “as much as when [we] speak for others” (Caughie’s central claims), the act of speaking for others, attended as it usually is by disparities in cultural/discursive authority and control, remains fraught with special challenges (101, 111). In the simplest terms possible then, what Alcoff, Haraway, Bordo, and Kaplan (and I) are suggesting is that in many contexts, such as that of critical theory, who is speaking—or, more accurately, the position from which one speaks—still matters, even thirty years after the dissolution of the sovereign subject. How, then, might we speak so that we might do more, and significantly less, than “simply recreate the imperial gaze” (hooks, *Black* 8)? More specifically, what kinds of critical practices might we engage in that would redress some of the excesses of autobiography that Gray and Caughie herself rightly assess as limiting to criticism, but would also counter those “versions of representation” that (like Caughie’s) “reduce all traits and continuities to features of a text” (Gray 70)? One critical practice/response might be to fashion metaphors for the subject that continue to deny its unity and stability without fully obliterating the effects of position—a position that, I maintain, is “prior,” in the sense that it has constituted the “I” who is speaking, *and* in the sense that we may never fully leave its traces behind.

Incomplete Pass: The Incongruous Promises of Drag

In the foregoing sections, I have argued that, in its lack of concern for and attention to the specific prior location of privilege, Caughie’s reconfiguration of passing too closely repeats, and thus retains, some of the most problematic, colonizing aspects of “white passing.” I would now like to develop my concluding proposition that this denial of prior location, which characterizes Caughie’s and so many other postmodern understandings of and metaphors for subjectivity, is dangerous not only because it conceals the enduring effects of sociocultural histories on the formation of the subject, but because it actually (and again ironically) *obscures* the very ambiguity and multiplicity of selfhood that it seeks to evoke. Thus, I will argue that, in addition to allowing us to remember and respect historical and current power dynamics, accounting for prior location may have the unexpected benefit of helping us to more powerfully theorize the *discontinuity* that, we repeatedly assert, is the very condition of postmodern selfhood. I will make this point by juxtaposing passing to what I see as the greater metaphorical potentialities of “drag” and other queer enactments of identity.

Passing in its traditional sense, as Stone and others have reminded us, succeeds by denying mixture, “intertextuality,” and incongruity. As Valerie Rohy writes, passing is not “performance or theatricality, the pervasive tropes of recent work on sex and gender identity, nor is it parody or pastiche, for it seeks to erase, rather than expose, its own dissimulation” (226). Or, even if/when passing *is* a performance—and even a performance that depends upon such disjunctions as those between “being and seeming,” “authenticity and inauthenticity”—it is a performance that must never be detectable as such, that can never *expose* the very disjunctions it invokes (Rohy 226–27; see also Brown 217; Epps 112). Passing is “conditioned on anonymity and privacy,” Wald summarizes; the passer “cannot publicly declare ‘I am passing for white’ without thereby compromising the very enterprise that is named by such an utterance” (119). Thus, while the *possibility* of passing may “reveal” the fictive nature and instability of identity lines and categories, the *act* of passing can only ever be an implicit, even clandestine, critique of those categories to the extent that it must never actually stand revealed. Passing “*threatens* to call attention to the performative and contingent nature of all seemingly ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ identities,” but—itself ever-threatened by its own unmasking—remains stuck at this level of a necessarily insurmountable imminence (Schlossberg 2; emphasis added).

The limits of passing as a transgressive act, both traditionally and in Caughie’s re-understanding, are therefore a function of the degree to which passing blots out (rather than calls attention to) incongruous histories, or prior location, obliterates (rather than exposes) all traces of the transformation upon which its believable enactment *as* passing depends. As Butler and Halberstam have both argued, however, subversive repetitions are conditioned upon and actualized only through moments of *exposure*. Halberstam, for example, writes that passing “lapses into transgression when the pass fails to hold,” when it slips into *ineffectuality* rather than convincing coherence (“Between” 59). The radical act, in short, is not passing, but *not passing*, or not quite passing—the transgressive moment, a moment of incongruity wherein the pass can be seen, exposed as a most discomfiting *because near*-perfect fit. While *seeing passing* in its traditional sense is understood to, and often truly does, compromise or foreclose its possibilities, in another sense, as Brad Epps confirms, “see[ing] passing might not so much close passing down as open it up, give it over to dissemination” (115). To see passing is to *queer it*, to actualize it as a polyvalent and polymorphous act, and thus to allow for more complex conceptions of subjectivity—conceptions of

subjectivity that might (still) be ideally theorized through recourse to those pervasive tropes of recent work on sex and gender identity: performance, theatricality, and drag.

“In contrast to passing,” Amy Robinson writes, “drag calls attention to the act of impersonation and foregrounds its status as imitation.” It “designates a way of looking at identity that catalogues dis-continuity and disjunction” (726–27). Drag, of course, as Butler has warned, is not automatically or “unproblematically subversive,” but, once again, “serves a subversive function to the extent that it *reflects*,” calls attention to, lays bare its mimetic qualities, and, by proxy, the impersonations upon which *all* gendered identities depend. It is the “hyperbolic gesture” that crucially distinguishes drag from passing, then, and, in its exaggerated theatricality, sends up in order to reveal the laws and conventions that circumscribe all identity categories and compel their continual elaboration (*Bodies* 231–32; emphasis added). Drag is thus subversive only to the extent that it exceeds and becomes something other than passing, to the extent that it visibly mocks both itself and the normative constructs it cites in order to defy.

This interpretation of drag’s transgressive potential is by now fairly commonplace. Drag is understood to mirror and thus expose the performative status of even ideal genders and other dominant, fully naturalized identity categories. However, central to and, I believe, new within my argument is that drag also reveals that “something else” came *before* its enactment—that it is transgressive not simply for its ability to call attention to the illusory status of “natural” identity categories, but for its ability to call attention to discontinuity, precisely by highlighting the process of transformation itself. Drag as well as other visibly confusing gender-queer identity formations or performances refuse stability, allowing for and embracing “more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification” than passing-dependent identity formations such as “transsexual” (Halberstam, “Telling” 20). Unlike transsexualism or even passing-transgendered enactments of self, which tend to erase the now-coherent (or coherent-appearing) subject’s complicated past and the changes that have yielded his or her current identity’s stability, drag—and *legible* queerness of all kinds—allows for a past as something “else” and a present that remains ambiguous (20). These are identity formations that are able to withstand the “inherent instability of identity” itself without rushing into passing’s polarity-reliant unity and uniformity (*Female* 164, 170). When we can read and recognize the queerly *incomplete* pass staged by drag, we witness and are forced to wrangle with an

unsettling “glory” of contradictions; we are allowed the “dream of transformation” (22, 35) that Caughie’s theories seek and celebrate, yet—and most importantly, perhaps—we are allowed only a dream endlessly deferred, a transformation that refuses to be seamless and so remains ever imperfectly resolved.

Thinking back to Caughie’s two students, then, and reading her first student’s hesitant and wavering writing attempts within the foregoing description of drag, we can readily discern the ways in which drag, or any incomplete, un-actualized pass, would serve as a more apt metaphor for that student’s “postmodern” writing experience, and for postmodern writing/subjectivity more generally, than “passing” ever will or can. That is, if we agree with Caughie that her first student’s writing is so generative because she is working through, rather than taking up, subject positions, because she is experiencing self-displacement and the precariousness of identity, we might interpret that her writing is a productive endeavor not because this student is experiencing subjectivity as passing, as Caughie suggests, but precisely because she is *failing to pass*, slipping, revealing the irresolution of her positions, the interferences of the old with the new. Drag is a metaphor and mode of subjectivity that allows for and calls attention to these “in between spaces,” to the “lack of fit” that in turn “makes room for [the] polymorphous [and] contradictory” (Brown 217). Caughie maintains that her “reconfiguration” of passing achieves these very effects; yet, to the extent that her theory, too, obliterates prior location, it again fails to do the actual work of “reconfiguring” and, instead, repeats traditional passing’s denial of ambiguity and discontinuity. While notions such as previous or “prior locations” are quintessential pomo-no-nos, they may be exactly what we need to *see*, to *expose*, the acts of transformation that constitute, and reconstitute, “postmodern” selfhood, and thus to adequately theorize the discontinuity that is its very hallmark. The mere idea of “displacement,” in other words, so prevalent in postmodern discourses, requires a simple acknowledgment of the prior position *from which one shifts*, for as Haraway notes, “one cannot relocate in any possible vantage point” without being somehow “accountable for that movement” (192). Thus, rather than prohibit movement, the allowance for prior position actually *highlights movement*, reveals and calls attention to the process of relocation itself and to the alterations in subjectivity any such shifting brings.

Moreover, and more concretely, if we hope to engender epistemological, intellectual, subjective “shifts” in and for our students, we must first lend credence to, work from and work on, their “original” positions.

As hooks proposes in *Teaching to Transgress*, this alertness to positionality need not result in the paranoid hyper-awareness of identity that Caughie, Gray, and Kaminer fear has come to characterize the “multicultural” classroom and multicultural theoretical enterprises more generally, but instead could provoke substantive dialogue by encouraging us to ask hard questions about the relationship of positionality to both the production and acceptance of what counts as knowledge. For example, hooks invites us to ask students, “what moral questions are raised when they speak for or about a reality that they do not know experientially, especially if they are speaking about an oppressed group” (89). While acutely conscious of the ways in which experiential authority has been used to authenticate knowledge, and silence or exclude other (critical) perspectives, hooks nonetheless wishes to respect what she calls the “particular knowledge that comes from suffering,” the specific and complex way of knowing that “can rarely be voiced and named from a distance” (89). George Haggerty similarly notes that some groups “have been victimized on so many levels and in so many ways that they cannot defer to others . . . who only imagine, however theoretically profoundly,” the ways in which occupying certain subject positions would figure into, and radically refigure, their lives (15). That is, hooks and Haggerty seek to remind us that certain aspects *and consequences* of identity are rarely ever freely chosen, are not freely passed into at will. They seek to point out—since we have been speaking of metaphors here—that identity is often and for many subjects “like being mugged by a metaphor.” This is Wahneema Lubiano’s striking description of “what it means to be at the mercy of racist, sexist, heterosexist, and global capitalist constructions” of skin color, gender, sex, sexuality, and other imprints of difference that constrain a subject’s cultural positioning (qtd. in Palumbo-Liu 767). In short, these critics remind us that, given the power of identity’s constitutive properties, and the exceptional violence that regularly attends certain subject positions, there are simply certain boundaries that metaphorical or “imaginative bridging cannot overcome” (Lakritz 12). And it is perhaps through this insight, through this discerning attention and response to Caughie’s very own “question of the limit,” that the dominant subject is transformed.

Conclusion: (Dis)locating Identity As We Mind Our Metaphors

Throughout this essay, I have argued that a conception of “prior” positionality remains ethically necessary, and that such a conception actually facilitates, rather than hinders, continuing efforts to theorize and enact the postmodern subject’s discontinuity. Yet, I have also sought to

demonstrate that to argue for the legitimacy and necessity of notions such as prior position is not to arrest the movement of subjects who attempt identifications across lines of difference. With hooks, I acknowledge that “If we really want to create a climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate.” However, and again with hooks, I contend that this does and cannot mean that all crossings are of *commensurate effect*, for there will be many occasions when center-to-margin movements simply “perpetuate existing structures” (*Teaching* 131). I have argued here for continued, rather than waning (as we lapse into valuing risk above all), attention to this dynamic in particular, and for similarly enduring and careful attention to the distinction—which Caughie dismisses—between strategic co-optations of positions of power and potentially invasive, colonizing appropriations of marginalized positions. Essentially, I have argued that the position of privilege must remain a privileged site of interrogation and articulation, that histories (and a present moment) of domination, oppression, and suffering prohibit not *speaking* across lines of difference *per se*, but speaking across lines of difference as if all speech acts or forms of representation have somehow been equalized after the dissolution and complete textualization of the subject. As Caughie herself writes, “Buying into postmodernism does not mean accepting a certain theory of the subject so much as it means working through what ‘subject positioning’ means”; it means “not stopping with the postmodern ‘truth’ of subjectivity as performativity, or as passing, but asking what ethical and political possibilities are opened up by the self conceived in these terms” (*Passing* 216). As I stated at the outset of my discussion, this essay’s exploration has in large part been a response to Caughie’s own call for interrogation, but a response that focuses on the opposing—and, I think, necessary—questions (which Caughie also invites us to ask) about the ethical and political *constraints* upon, the limits of, conceiving of the self via such troubled tropes.

Admittedly, though, we teeter along a fine line here, when accounting for positionality itself risks resolidifying understandings of the subject as singular and unified, and/or as representative of common, categorical experience. Kaplan makes this point with especial lucidity when she warns that constructs such as “position” and “location” will fail to be useful either when they are “construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities,” or when they are “imbued with a universalizing standpoint” (25, 187).⁵ But, to conceive of and account for location/position, we needn’t posit a “kind of kernel or core of identity”; we can

think, as James Clifford advises, of “something more polythetic, something more like a habitus, a set of practices and dispositions” that are brought from, reflective of, and in large part constituted by a “prior place,” but that nonetheless remain fluid and permeable (115; see also hooks, *Black* 30–31). Moreover, as Clifford here implies, and as Kaplan confirms, we can (and, indeed, must) think of location/position as intersectional, rather than singular and univocal—as a type of “axis” that is itself “discontinuous, multiply constituted, and traversed by diverse social formations.” When our positions are theorized in this way, identity becomes not “the monumental erection of a stable site,” but a temporal and spatial location that, as such, can account for “power and its historical effects” (Kaplan 182–84; 187). When “position” is theorized as a place in relation to and still bearing traces of various, specific histories, it can actually help us to deconstruct “the notion of shared or common experience,” rather than to reify singular and unifying understandings of gender, race, class, sexuality or any other aspect of identity (Kaplan 25).

Though an admittedly risky and potentially reifying move, then, the argument that we must remember and account for prior position, and that we must take special care when speaking across lines of difference from a position that has been constituted by certain forms of privilege, is not, or need not become, another attempt to confine and stabilize the properly placed subject. As Kaplan again makes clear, “a politics of location” seeks not to (re)interpellate the subject, but only to “[alert] us to the interpellation of the past in the present” (187). Similarly, the insistence that we interrogate our terms/metaphors (the proposition from which this essay began) is not a demand that we suspend efforts to develop new tropes for subjectivity, but only that we remain attuned to the “residual effects” of the histories that gave rise to and thus still inhere in contemporary terminology (Somerville 166). As Somerville writes, “Current contestations over race, gender, and sexuality enact a productive search for new language and models of subjectivity. At the same time, the affirmative potential of these debates may be at risk if the analogies that enable that denaturalization are left uninterrogated” (175). Attempts to denaturalize identities, or unified understandings of subjectivity, and the concomitant struggle to find and fine-tune new language, metaphors, analogies—new “styles and forms of representation . . . suitable to our historical situation”—may indeed be “part and parcel” of working within the postmodern condition (Braidotti 16). Yet, as this discussion has sought to demonstrate, any work of elaborating new terminology “suitable” to our historical moment must wrestle with the fact that this current

moment is reflective of and still tautly linked with other moments that have both preceded and enabled it.

Finally, though, as we are engaged in this difficult work, we might grapple as well with our own motives to develop ever-new metaphorical models in the first place. We might ask, that is, *why* this persistent postmodern “longing for adequate representations”?—a longing, we might also note, that seems so at odds with the anti-representative spirit of postmodernity itself (Bordo 229). We could, for example, interrogate our continuous search for novel metaphors in light of Kaplan’s exposure of the deep residues of modernism’s “conquering spirit” within “postmodern” discourses of displacement: “Modernism always posits a progressive development that erases the past” (59). In the modernist mentality, it is the “quest for better models, new forms, fresh images” that compels the restless seeker “to move further and further into what are perceived to be the margins of the world” (34–35). Or, perhaps the apparently unremitting quest for more fitting and generative terms for postmodern subjectivity is less a conquering, expansionist move than a defensive, preservationist one. As Foucault has famously posited, the excessive dissemination of discourse is most often a manifestation of the will to knowledge, and of technologies of power, management, and control. What I am suggesting by comparison, then, is that this incessant need to name, map, and endlessly refigure the postmodern subject performs an infinite, narcissistic return *to* this subject, performs our refusal, really, to rid ourselves of ourselves. Our efforts to dissolve the subject once and for all through proper naming may thus have the ironic effect of perpetually speaking this subject back into existence, ensuring, we vainly hope, that we will not yet disappear.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Faigley; Vitanza; Sirc; and Davis.
2. Though the metaphors of travel and border crossing have only fairly recently entered composition’s conversation (particularly through Gregory Clark’s *College Composition and Communication* essay, “Writing as Travel, or Rhetoric on the Road,” Elizabeth Socolow’s brief response to Clark, “Travel and Transience,” Nedra Reynolds’ extended response to, and critique of, Clark in her 2000 *JAC* essay, “Who’s Going to Cross this Border?,” and then Clark’s

response to both responses, “Writing on Tour: Rethinking the Travel Metaphor”), what Reynolds describes as a general “fascination with ‘movement’” and “movement metaphors” (541, 543) has for the last twenty-five to thirty years become a veritable hub of many contemporary theories (see also Epps 92–93; Halberstam *Female* 170). As Brad Epps says, contemporary theoretical discourse is suffused with figurations of movement: the “nomad, the schizophrenic, and the cyborg,” “labile subjects, multidirectional identities, [. . .] plural positionings; displacements, disseminations, and destabilizations” (92). The prevalence of such terminology has led feminist theorist Caren Kaplan to classify “travel” as “a kind of *ur*metaphor” in a vast amount of “Euro-American criticism,” and particularly within postmodern and postcolonial discourses that celebrate conditions of displacement (131, 26; see also Halberstam, *Female* 170). “[P]erformance or theatricality,” as is well known, have become “the pervasive tropes of recent work on sex and gender identity” (Rohy 226).

3. Incidentally, neither is Benn Michaels’ dismissive of passing’s history. In fact, his work critiques this too-easy “logic of social constructionism”—a critique I will return to in a later section of this essay.

4. I would like to emphasize here that both Somerville and I are speaking of the most common and familiar narratives and acts of racial passing, and particularly of racial passing in a U.S. context where the black/white binary has structured racial discourse and all other racial categories. As Elaine Ginsberg points out in her introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, however, “Although the discourse of race passing and discussions of race passing narratives traditionally assume a black/white binary . . . complications of that binary in fiction”—and, I would add, in the real life practices of passing subjects—“believe any such simple assumptions” (11). An essay in Ginsberg’s collection by Julia Stern, for example, examines the more complex act of character George Harris’s passing as “Spanish” in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. A “very light mulatto” slave, George Harris chooses to darken rather than lighten his skin, and escapes from his owner by “becoming” a “Spanish gentleman,” effecting what Stern calls a “triple transformation of race, nationality, and class” (103–04).

5. That such constructions are universalizing and identity-stabilizing have been two of the most recurrent and pointed critiques of feminist efforts to theorize what has variously been called a “politics of location” (a phrase traced to Adrienne Rich), “positionality” (traced to Alcoff), and “standpoint epistemology” (traced to Nancy Hartsock). Additionally, these efforts have often been criticized for privileging gender or sexual difference as a primary determinant of location, position, or standpoint, while downplaying or neglecting altogether other constitutive and always intersecting elements of any identity. (See Kaplan’s final chapter, “Postmodern Geographies: Feminist Politics of Location,” for a review of these feminist efforts and their subsequent critiques.)

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