'You May Not Know It, But I'm Black': White Women's Self-Identification as Black*

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This article shows ways in which five European American women intertwine and interweave the American discourses of race and ethnicity to talk about themselves as 'black.' This black identity both fits with their anti-racist desires and makes strategic sense in the context of their everyday lives. Important, the women do not deny the European side of their heritage, rather they embrace a multi-racial/ethnic identity. It is argued that the element of choice involved with American ethnic discourse, combined with a general shift toward the allowance of mixed identities, allows this identity construction to be understood as a sensible one. It is further argued that these women's constructions illustrate a type of identity configuration that has become a highly significant option in the United States.

Mezzrow, after his long years in and under Harlem, did truly think his lips had developed fuller contours, his hair had thinned and burred, his skin had darkened. It was not, as he saw it, a case of transculturation. He felt he had scrubbed himself clean, inside and out, of every last trace of his origins in the Jewish slums of Chicago, pulped himself back to raw human material, deposited that nameless jelly in the pure Negro mold, and pressed himself into the opposite of his birthright, a pure Black (Wolfe in Mezzrow & Wolfe 1990[1946]:390).

There is no 'right' to choose one's 'racial' ancestry, as race is currently conceived, but if race and ethnicity become progressively intertwined in a new way, it is possible that being Black will, in years to come, be more a matter of individual choice and less a matter of assignment by others (Blu 1980:210).

The American obsession, 'race' has been relentlessly discussed in both popular and academic United States circles for many, many years. Notable about the recent academic discussion, however, is the considerable increase in, and the mundane associated with, statements regarding the socially constructed nature of race. In the fairly recent past, assertions of race as a social rather than biological category were necessarily accompanied by considerable supporting argument (see, for example, Gould 1981 and Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin 1984:119–127). Now not only anthropologists, but also psychologists, historians, philosophers, literary scholars, cultural critics, sociologists, and biologists can make such assertions without a great need for referencing or explanation. Race has been called a myth (Higginbotham 1992), an invention (Early 1993), a socio-political category (Gates 1992), and put in quotation marks (Njeri 1993) with little or no prophylactic defense.

The acceptance in academic circles of race as socially constituted is certainly related to the general conceptual shift usually associated with post-modernism. The premise that reality is socially constructed, and the notion that physical, social, and psychological realities are mutually constitutive, are now (fairly) widely accepted. There has been considerable discussion of social constructionism in the work of feminist as well as gay and lesbian scholars, and the constructivist framework has been very important for many contemporary theorists of personal and social identity.

Scholarship on the construction of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity within the field of British cultural studies has both drawn on, and contributed to thinking and discussion in the American context. The writings of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Vron Ware, and Dick Hebdige are of particular note. Their work has made the point of the shifting nature of racial/ethnic classifications expressly. For instance, the discussion regarding the re-articulations in Britain of the category Black to include people of African, Caribbean, and Asian ancestries is compelling (see Gilroy 1987; Hall 1992).

An important development in recent work has been the scrutiny of 'whiteness' as racial category and lived identity. Ware (1992) and Frankenberger (1993, 1994) have refracted the discussion through the lens of gender, focusing on the question of race in white women's lives. With this paper I would like to build on this inquiry by adding an important, but undertheorized aspect: European American women who feel they are, at least in part, African American. We have tended to think in terms of the inverse, African Americans who talk about adherence to European American identity or about knowledge of 'white blood' flowing through their veins. Here, however, I will discuss how five European American women living in New York City identify with and as African American.

* You May Not Know It, But I'm Black

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I learned about these women’s views during 1990 and 1991 while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in New York City’s mainstream jazz community. New York is the occupational center for many internationally recognized jazz musicians. I carried out my research in the elite community of the successful musicians who played at or frequented clubs such as the Village Vanguard, Sweet Basil, Condon’s, Fat Tuesday’s, and Bradley’s. These clubs were recognized among jazz aficionados as featuring and fostering musicians at the apex of the mainstream jazz world. Audiences for first sets were generally comprised of tourists (especially from Japan and Europe) and relatively affluent New Yorkers. Jazz community insiders usually arrived for later sets. The majority of the musicians are African American; New York jazz community insiders include African and European Americans as well as some people with Asian or Hispanic backgrounds.

My research centered around the women of the community who, as non-musicians, were part of the integral support personnel within this artistic world (e.g., as jazz club employees, musicians’ managers and agents, journalists, fans, and wives). During this time, I ‘hung out’ with women at jazz clubs, chatted on the telephone with some of them (as most New York City women do with their friends) and conducted thirty semi-formal audi-taped interviews/conversations. The research was further informed by my participation as an employee prior to, throughout the course of, and subsequent to the fieldwork period in Bradley’s, not only an important jazz club, but also, in the words of a community member, a jazz ‘hang.’

My original intent had been to understand the meanings that jazz had for the women. I had a sense that the music and the world of the music might very well occupy a central position in the women’s constructions of their identities. In fact, I did find out that for many women jazz played a central role in who they felt they were, often in intriguing and enlightening ways. One of the biggest surprises to me, however, was the extent to which being a European American researcher in the jazz community is that while jazz merits enormous attention, it has received little because it is African American.

However, I certainly did not have the idea that European American women were constructing themselves as African American. Thus when Angela, who had always told me she was ‘Italian,’ originally mentioned that she was interested in genealogy and her own family tree, I did not really think much about it. Only later, when she came right out and said that she wondered herself whether she had ‘black blood’ and that was the reason she was so interested in genealogy, did I make any sort of connection. Yet I still did not consider that Angela’s personal construction might in any way typify a more general phenomenon. The bell did not ring until two more back-to-back, telling interactions occurred.

The first happened during an evening interview with Rosie, a European American woman in her early fifties. We were sitting at Rosie’s kitchen table, and the interview had been moving along sluggishly as Rosie was recounting the different activities she had done in support of jazz. After a phone call from Toni (a friend of Rosie’s and a woman whom I had previously interviewed), Rosie suggested we go over to Toni’s house to continue the interview, which we did. Another woman of the jazz community was with Toni, and thus there were now four of us: Rosie and Toni, both European Americans; Margaret, an African American; and myself. Rosie and Toni were trying to make sense to me of how they were different from mainstream America. Rosie finally said: ‘Some of us dropped out [of the mainstream] because you know, we had to. We were forced, we were women, we were black…’ Rosie was at this point cut off by Toni and Margaret’s laughter and Toni’s laughing repetition of ‘We were black.’

The next day I met with Winn, a friend of the three women from the night before. We spent the afternoon together – meeting at the bank, eating
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photographs on the walls of bead-ornamented Masai women, and an
extraordinary inventory of beads and bead jewelry.3 Winn knew quite a bit
about different beads and their origins. At one point, though, she inquired
about the origin of certain expensive blue beads. When the man working
in the shop told her they were Dutch trading beads from the 1700s, she
responded on the order of, 'You mean they're not really African beads?
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to think of these beads as European-trade inspired, and it was at that point,
I believe, that I started to take seriously the possibility that for these Euro-
pean American women, all that was African signified positive and desirable,
and all that was non-African did not (to put it in slightly exaggerated form).
In light of this, I started to rethink what had happened the night before.
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just an off-hand remark, but was to be taken quite seriously. I also coupled
this remark from Rosie with Angela's comments regarding her own 'black'
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keep her identity confidential by 'giving' her blond hair, I was told things
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people take and accept me.' I also began to think differently about the Afri-

lunch in a nearby restaurant, going to an African bead store, drinking coffee
and having perogis in another restaurant. Winn had already heard from
Margaret that I used a tape recorder for the interview and she wanted to
talk about what I was doing before she would even consider being formally
interviewed. One of Winn's very first questions was, 'How many black
women have you interviewed?' Not long after, Winn talked about how the
jazz club where I worked was a distortion because there were so many
white women and one was not seeing the important black women, for in-
derence the mothers and first wives of the musicians. Winn also advised and
warned me that my topic was a difficult one 'to stay righteous on' be-
cause interracial relationships posed a hidden agenda.
I was most taken, nonetheless, when we were in the African bead store.
It was a small store with West African music playing in the background,
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American who, as mentioned above, was interested in tracing her family
tree because she wondered whether she had any 'black blood.' On several
occasions Angela and I touched on this topic and one afternoon she and I
talked about this issue at some length. Angela considers it possible that
she has 'black blood' because no one in her family really knows about her
father's background. All that is known is that her father's mother had been
sent to the United States from Italy in order to marry a man with a very
Italian sounding name. Angela's idea is that perhaps this grandfather was
Sicilian since no one knows anything about his heritage. Being Sicilian,
she reasons, is meaningful since substantial African ancestry in Sicily is
something traceable to the days of Hannibal.
As testimony for her case, Angela draws attention to her physical features
saying 'look at my hair, look at my lips, look at my nose' and seems to find
it particularly meaningful that she has on occasion been mistaken for black.
As Angela recounts, she has been asked by a number of people whether
she and a good friend of hers, a light-skinned African American man, are
brother and sister. And while I had never really thought about Angela's
facial features or medium to light brown curly hair as particularly 'black,'
she seemed to delight on one occasion when I saw her after she had been
in the sun for one day and I remarked on her noticeable tan. As she said, 'I
told you. I told you about the

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LINDA was a thirty-nine year old Jewish American woman who also constructed her African American identity in terms of shared substance or 'blood' and highlighted physical issues. The difference here, however, was that rather than making the African ancestors near or particularly concrete, Linda relied on her understanding of general trends in human migration and an argument that one could classify as 'How do you know I'm not?' Linda told me the following story when I asked her if there were ways in which she felt like she was black.

I don't know ... George [an African American man] said something to me once about, we were walking someplace kind of cold and he said, 'I'm cold' and I said, 'Well so am I.' He said, 'No black people, they get really cold' or something like that. So I said, 'Oh then I must be black because I'm always cold too.' Then I, ... very recently too, ... I said to him, 'You know, you may not know it, but I'm black.' And he's like, 'Huh?' I mean I didn't quite get it either, but I think what I mean more is like what's the difference? So how do you know I'm not? I mean, what makes me not black, just because I don't look it. I mean I could sit under a sun lamp, would I be black because I look like you? I mean I was brought up over here and you were brought up across the street, that doesn't make you black and me white. You [i.e., George] were brought up in [a nearby city], well my cousin was brought up in [that same city] ... I mean what makes you black and me not? Just the color of your skin? Is it attitude? Is it acceptance? ... I mean George tells me he had some white ancestors. Well if my ancestors came from, you know, Israel or, or Hungary or Italy or whatever, they came by way of Africa. Am I more black than you or less black than you because I had an 'x' number of white people but only one black? ... I don't, I don't, I don't get it. I mean Indian, I mean you look different, are you different as a person? I don't, I don't really know.

Prior to my question, Linda had also maintained that the shape of her body 'is not what a white lady is supposed to look like' and indicated that with 'heavy legs' and 'backside' African American men are attracted to her. She also said, 'If I'm built this way and I'm attracted to them and that's what they're attracted to ... in me, then maybe we're supposed ...' Linda didn't finish this thought; she went on to another issue, but I thought her point had been made.

BARBARA was thirty-five years old and Jewish American. When I initially asked Barbara the question, 'Are there ways in which you have taken on African American identity yourself?' she let out a slight laugh and told me:

... Umhum, I used to always think I was black, I did. I don't know why, I just, maybe you know like if you have past lives or something like that, that maybe you were a different race in another life or something.

Thereafter, when I said to Barbara, '... so you always felt like you were black?' she responded with, 'I, yeah, I, I mean or I just never thought of myself as white. That's probably more like it, like I, it's not like I think of myself as a white person, you know ...' When I persisted, 'What part of you feels like you're black?' she told me:

I don't know. I mean I really don't know. But I remember, one time I was sitting in a club and, um, and you know Jules always has that off sense of humor, like just like slightly left of center. He said ... he was like being really weird, like 'I can tell that person laughing is a white person' or something. And I was sitting at the table next to him and he was cracking me up, but I wasn't even sitting, he was talking to someone else. And he looked at me and he goes, 'Wha-?' ... 'You're not white, you're black.' You know, you were like, 'OK, yeah, I, I know what you're saying.' So, I mean also Greg [Barbara's African American ex-boyfriend] used to say a thing like ... how a person acts and what they do is really whether ... this is really, this is going to sound really weird — whether they're black or white. And he, Greg has said to me like ... 'The way you think and the way that you deal with certain situations to me you're more black than a white person.'

TONI, also a Jewish American woman, was forty-seven years old at the time of the interview. I did not come right out and ask Toni, 'Are you black?' Rather, the following was part of her response when I asked her how she felt about 'racial relations' in the community.

I am a Jewish woman, I don't really consider myself white in the world anyway. I have very Semitic looks you know, and I, I don't feel, I don't feel that my ah, relationship with anybody is as a white person to whatever. I feel like other as a Jewish person. (Really?) Yeah. (See I'm not Jewish, so I don't know what, really but that makes you feel like an other?) Yeah, I don't consider myself white at all. I don't identify with white values. I consider myself on the edge of possible oppression at any moment. If anything I identify with, with a, a black people, or people who are also other because I know from my own personal life identity that racism can lead to some very ugly things and it wiped out 6 million Jews and 12 million other people during World War II. I feel that if somebody is being racially slurred, I feel, I feel that there's a great danger in that, just from my own — the fact that so much of my extended family was murdered during World War II.
Clearly, for Toni the fact of her being Jewish plays quite an important role in her self-identification as 'not white.' This had not been the case for either Barbara or Linda. When I had asked Linda if being Jewish had contributed to her feeling black in this society, she had told me, 'it's not that.' Barbara acquiesced to my question when I finally asked, but had volunteered the other issues first.

**JULIA** was thirty-three years old and Italian American. When I asked, 'Do you feel yourself that you are black?' Julia provided an interesting no and yes answer. In fact, Julia's statement is an excellent illustration of the way in which, as many scholars have argued, narratives of self are as much acts of the creation, maintenance, and negotiation of identity as they are acts of the reflection of identity.1

... Um, I don't feel that I'm black but one of the things that I, that attracts me about the black culture and I've told a lot of people this, is that there's, um, a certain warmth. Like a certain like downhome type of thing that I think I miss from the Italians. (You mean you had that like in the Italians?) I had that in the Italians but to grow up and find them so hateful and angry. You know it's like with this, ah, they've got attitudes now that they've gotten a little more, I don't know what it is, but they've gotten more away from their homeland. So they're turning into more of, maybe more American and they're extremely, I don't like the prejudice, I don't like that ... they don't even like people from their own towns. Because to me being Italian is open arms and welcoming. And I find that very much with black people. You know I think, um, I just find that warmth there. ... It's like a very warm type of a culture. And I find it to be, ah, something that I miss in my life, that I used to know I think. Or I expect to know. You know what I'm saying? There's like, like this thing like this, you know what it's like when you're Italian and you eat calamari, you know, everyone at the table – it's like that type of feeling. And in a way, in that respect I do consider myself more black. Because I think I'm more human.

**Discourses of Race and Ethnicity**

As these passages illustrate, the women utilize both the American discourse of race and the American discourse of ethnicity in constructing themselves as African American. Fundamental to the discourse of race is the notion of immutable, natural substance or 'blood.' As David Schneider's 1980 [1968] work on American kinship has demonstrated, shared substance or blood is a central notion in American conceptions of kinship or relationship in general. Articulated within the discourse of race, this blood takes on tenacious and 'mystical' qualities (Blu 1980). Historically, for instance, ideas of the strength and meaningfulness of 'black blood' are related to notions and laws such as the 'one-drop rule' by which one became socially and legally defined as black for any amount of known black ancestry (see Davis 1991; Sollors 1986). Karen Blu (1979, 1980) has also clearly pointed out that even though there is no clear correspondence among physical characteristics, genetics, and social racial classification, physical features and especially skin color, lips, nose, and texture of hair have been conceptualized as indicative of the underlying 'blood' and serve as powerful symbols of race in the United States. Thus, when Angela says, 'Look at my hair, look at my lips, look at my nose' or Linda queries, 'I mean I could sit under a sun lamp, would I be black because I look like you?' they are invoking the completely familiar symbolic markers of race.

At the same time, the women's narratives are permeated with notions derived from the American discourse of ethnicity. While the mutually constituting academic and folk notions of ethnicity are quite difficult to summarize and encapsulate, at least in part because of their fuzziness and heterogeneity,2 it can be safely maintained that American notions of ethnicity are infused with ideas of 'history and culture' and 'ways of doing and being' (Blu 1980). Thus, when Julia talks about what she likes about 'black culture,' equates the 'warmth' and 'feeling' one gets 'when you're Italian and eating calamari' with what she experiences in black culture, or when she indicates that the Italians are not what they once were and maybe it's because 'they've gotten more away from their homeland,' she is voicing rather classic statements in the American rhetoric of ethnicity. Notions of ethnicity are also displayed when Linda, who had queried using the logic of racial discourse about the sunlamp and skin color, asked in addition: 'Is it attitude?' Or, Barbara's explanation of how her ex-boyfriend had looked at the issue, as 'how a person acts and what they do is really whether ... they're black or white,' is clearly an ethnic rather than a racial explication.

An important facet of these constructions is the fact that the women interweave the discourses of race and ethnicity. As already noted, Linda includes aspects of both racial and ethnic discourse in constructing an African American-ness. Angela, whose conceptions of her own black identity are most clearly constructed from the discourse of race, also notes her youthful affinity with the black rather than white people in her neighborhood and that her friend tells her that what makes him say that she's black rather than white is about a feeling he gets from her. Toni says she does not
'identify with white values' (a statement aligned with the history and culture, ways of doing and being discourse of ethnicity) but also mentions her 'Semitic looks' and discusses 'racism' and the dangers which exist when someone is being 'racially slurred.' Most telling of the intertwining of the two discourses, nonetheless, is Barbara’s construction of being another ‘race’ in a past life. While Barbara’s past life comment would indicate a racial notion that she thinks, or thought, she was black, or at least ‘not white’ because of the way she thinks, feels and acts (which also is the way she described in her narrative that others seemed to see the issue). Barbara was not completely convinced of the reality of past lives, but she talked of times when you meet someone and ‘you just look at them and they look at you and [you] feel like you’ve met them before’ as a ‘flicker’ of a past life. Thus, even her ‘past life’ comment is intertwined with threads of the ‘ways of doing and being’ of ethnicity discourse.

Having described this basic discursive terrain of the women’s narratives, I will turn to the specific contexts of their lives. After presenting this material, I will be able to elaborate more profitably on the importance of the intertwining of the discourses of race and ethnicity in these constructions.

In the Context of Specific Lives

Angela, Linda, Barbara, Toni, and Julia are all active in the world of jazz. Four of them work in paid positions within the community; the fifth works elsewhere, but she often participates in varied voluntaristic activities in support of the music – as do the others. The jazz community is an environment wherein work, social, and family life tend to merge. For all of these women, social life revolves virtually completely around jazz and other members of the jazz community, and all of them have been involved in a romantic relationship with someone from the jazz community. As Toni expressed it one night when she was in Bradley’s: ‘There are people in here I love, people I hate, people I used to love that now I hate, everything, my whole life.’

It is important that the women are active members of the jazz community. Within New York’s mainstream jazz community: (1) the majority of the musicians, as a rule the most highly respected members of the community, are African American; (2) the music, the key symbol and practice around which the community is organized, is recognized as African American; and (3) there is a general tendency to place higher value on what is perceived as African American than what is perceived as European American in origin or form. As one of the African American women I interviewed put it, ‘Jazz is not a Eurocentric thing.’ Thus, these European American women are active members of an African American oriented community. As bell hooks might say, the women participate in a social context where white is not what’s at the center.

Given this context, it is certainly possible that constructing oneself as African American is a way to enhance one’s status. Constructing oneself as African American may also enhance feelings of belonging. Judith, an African American woman of the community, said this regarding the women’s constructions:

So when Euro-American women take on certain things ... if you’re around certain people, ‘it’s like if you go to a certain part of the country and you’re there for a while, you’ll pick up the slang. You might come back with a Southern accent if you’ve been somewhere for a while, or sound like you’re from the Midwest ... or sound like you’re from London. I mean it just, I think that’s natural ... I don’t think for most people it’s like a conscious effort in that regard, you know. Um I think that ... it’s just being a product, we’re influenced by an environment you know. Now it’s a conscious effort when someone is trying to deny who they are or they’re trying to truly be somebody that they’re not, which is unnatural to who they, who they are. You know, where they came from ... I mean it would be very unnatural for a WASP [white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant] woman who comes ... who’s you know, a Dupont or a Morgan or something like that ... to talk in a way or to, ah, use certain gestures that are completely out of keeping with the norms of you know, ... where she’s from, what boarding school she may have gone to, where she was educated, the fact that she’s been to the Sorbonne or whatever you know. I mean it would just be, it would be fake, it would be phony ... But ... you know, I’ve heard it from a lot of women. You know, well, you know, I’m white on the outside but I’m black on the inside. ... And, you know, to me, that’s looking for acceptance and it’s an apology for not being a part of the majority, you know. And I think different groups of people do that naturally. You know, people naturally want to belong and a part of that jazz community thing is a sense of belonging.

It is well established that in the United States individuals do deploy ethnic identities selectively and that matters of personal and social status are central in strategic choices. For instance, in discussing the question of Creole
identity in Louisiana, Dominguez has maintained that since a person’s family
genealogy usually included individuals of ‘different national origin, social
class, and in many cases even racial origin,’ identity involved selection (1986:
262). And as she wrote, ‘status ... is frequently more of a determining factor
in group membership than genealogical ancestry’ (1986:263).

The construction of an African American identity by European Americans
was quite common within the mainstream jazz world. For instance,
of the thirteen European American women I formally interviewed, at least
seven had in some way taken on African American identity. I also have a
sense that an identification with and as African Americans may also have
occurred for men. Although my own research was highly focused on women’s
sense of self and identity and I do not have sufficient data to comment mean-
ingly on men’s constructions, this sense that men also identify with and
as African American is bolstered by conversations and observations during
fieldwork as well as by Monson’s (1995) comments regarding European Amer-
ican men’s identification with African-American-ness in music, and particu-
larly in the world of jazz. It is also important to point out that Milton Mez-
zrow, described in the opening quotation as pressing himself into ‘a pure
black,’ was a jazz musician. Mezzrow’s autobiography, chronicling events
in his life from his birth in 1899 through the 1940s, contains powerful test-
imony regarding his identification with African Americans and his life as a
clarinet player. Aspects of identity are always – or at least almost always –
simultaneously gendered. There are also very important matters to sort
through regarding gender, sexuality, and racial issues within the jazz world
as well as in terms of the larger reception and social placement of the
music (see Monson 1995). Thus, very interesting complications and nuances
difficulty between the identity constructions of European American men
and those of the women undoubtedly exist. I must allocate those complexities
to future articles and research, but I do want to simply note that a facet to
consider about Angela, Linda, Barbara, Toni, and Julia and the way they
form their self-identity is that four out of the five have been involved in a
long-term relationship with an African American man. I point this out be-
cause in terms of ethnicity, there is evidence which suggests that it is not
particularly unusual for a woman to take on the ethnicity of her partner
(e.g., Chock 1986). Importantly, however, during the time of my fieldwork
a number of the European American men of the community were also in-
volved in relationships with African American women, as had been Mezzrow.
What strikes me as important to keep in mind at this point about the con-
text of these women’s specific lives is that the jazz environment I studied
was one in which African American individuals and cultural practices were
highly valued and in which work, social life, and family life tended to merge.

Music worlds have been important sites for the crossover of black culture
to white.9 Scholars have pointed to the ‘theft’ and to the racism frequently
involved in the process (Lott 1993; Monson 1993). Many members of the
jazz community were highly conscious of the history of racism in the world
of jazz, and existing inequities in terms of who owned and worked in the
various aspects of New York’s jazz business were frequently mentioned. It
was not an environment where one overlooked race. Thus it was fitting
that one of the first questions Winn, the woman I had accompanied to the
bead store, had asked me was: ‘How many black women have you inter-
viewed?’ Like Winn, the European American women whose responses I
have included in this article tended to pay attention to race. They were
not color-power-evasive in the terminology of Frankenberg’s (1993) ana-
lysis. With the possible exception of Linda, these were not women who in
any way denied the existence of racism, nor did they deny the existence of
the power and privilege accorded to, and associated with, whiteness in
American society. Julia, for instance, told me a long story of the negative
reaction and slander she encountered when she brought a black man to a
party of white friends and of an instance in a club where men she assumed
were Italian reacted to her as a ‘disgraziada’ [no good bitch] when they
saw that she was associated with the black musicians. As Toni also told me:

So anyway, you know, we’re living in a world where the major psychosis is
racism and it’s something that one is aware of all the time, every moment of the
day and night. And choosing to align yourself with something other than, than
what’s portrayed as the, ah, appropriate thing for white people to, is always a
danger because you’re accepting the same danger as they’re in – which is great
at this moment in history. I mean that’s not really enough, not nearly enough to
say about racism by all means. But that’s a little piece of it. I think that racism is
the worst thing that was ever invented in the world. My kids have, have said and
done every ... thing you can think of at some point in their lives ... but none of them has ever said a racist remark because they
know how, how deeply I’ll ... Because it’s very serious to me, I feel that it’s not
just something light; that’s what’s killing this society.

And as she said at an earlier point in the interview:
... we’re living in America in an extremely racist society where, ah, you talk racism, you know, like at your mother’s breast and where the rest of your life struggle is a fight against the racism that’s so inside your bone marrow that even with the most, greatest grasp of the irrationality of it, you’re fighting it every minute because it’s so internalized, ... I really want to stay growing and stay principled and stay in my own fight against the racism that I’ve been taught because I want to stay, um, correct ...

Even though the women speak in terms of anti-racist desires and I believe they acted in the best of anti-racist faith, it is possible that some people will align the women’s constructions and actions with the commodification or appropriation of blackness. I sense that Ruby, an African American woman of the community, was skirting this issue when she expressed the following queries to me:

I know I met this woman ... at the African exhibit somewhere, or the African festival. ... But if I go to the Museum of Modern Art to see something, will I see those same people there? It’s like if it’s black, it’s like, let’s be a part of it. I don’t, I don’t know what, why, what the connection is. Just to be involved with the black, African American? ... I don’t know what it is that people are, just like, just latch on it, be a part of it. I mean if you like ... if you have a genuine like for something, then go on and do it. But if it’s just like that’s the only thing you do? I mean these people, women are Italian and Jewish (right, right) you know, what do they do in their own lives, you know other than, you know, support things that are African American? I don’t know. But I do see that.

Bell hooks has discussed some of the problems involved in the commodification of blackness (1990; 1992), she has also identified the subversive potential of ‘loving blackness’ (1992:9).[11] Margaret, the African American woman who had laughed with Toni when Rosie made the ‘We were black’ statement, talked about Winn in this way. Winn passed away before the end of my fieldwork. Margaret, who had known Winn extremely well, volunteered the following.

Because see Winn, as me and [another African American] sorted out last night, she was not a white woman. Winn was black. ... Because when you love something or someone so deeply, you become them. So as far we’re concerned Winn was not white. Because she understood the philosophy, the lifestyle of the black man, woman and child. And she lived it.

You May Not Know It, But I’m Black

Importantly, as much as Angela, Linda, Barbara, Toni, and Julia embraced African American identity, they did not reject or discard their Italian or Jewish backgrounds. Rather, they wove the other ethnicity into the equation. Linda, for instance, said, ‘Well if my ancestors came from ... Israel ... or Hungary or Italy or whatever, they came by way of Africa.’ Or, Barbara’s past life notion (‘a different race in another life’) clearly allowed her to also retain her present race.[12] In Julia’s response presented above, she talked about how she felt like she was discovering in black culture what she had known and now misses ‘from the Italians.’ She also told me:

But, ah, oh that’s right, you were asking about the black culture. Yeah, I actually have, I’ve started to like look into a lot of the cooking stuff and I love turning people on to Italian food and I love being Italian. I have no problems with it. I don’t think it’s better, I don’t think it’s worse. It’s just that, I just think it’s a great culture. (So you love being Italian, I mean you ...). I love being Italian. ... I love cooking, ... you know, like, if he [Julia’s African American boyfriend] comes off, home from the road, like I’ve got this dinner cooked... I don’t press his shirts and shit but I’ve got the food out. Like this afternoon I went over his house to meet him and I had like, I bought him a little bottle of vodka for the plane because he told me he likes to get drunk and fall asleep. I made him, I brought him food. You know, ... because I – to me that’s like part of being It-, an Italian woman. I make lasagna, you know, and all this bullshit. And he happens to like other food. Like, like one time I made this ... meal and he said to me, ‘Don’t you have any corn bread?’ Me, like why the fuck would you want any corn bread with this meal? You know, I made him ... some real Italian dish. ‘Oh, let’s have some cornbread.’ Of course, you learn how to make cornbread or you try to. You know, like the other night I made rice and beans for the first time in my life. Never in my life ..., I never cook rice, I make pasta. So he likes brown rice, I made him brown rice and beans... He loved it. But it’s, it’s yeah, ... it certainly is an opening up, you know, you like, you learn a whole different type of thing.

Julia’s comments here were echoed in the words and behavior of Angela, who of all the women seemed the most convinced of definite, close black ‘blood,’ had an allegiance to being Italian similar to Julia’s. She by no means rejected her Italian background. In fact, as a regular matter of course she talked about doing things because she was Italian. For instance she told me she would always bring a gift when invited to someone’s home because I’m Italian and that’s what Italian people do.’ Or, one evening when we
were out, she and an African American man exchanged a big, warm hug. Angela's statement to him was that he must have some Italian in him to hug like that. In talking about the then recent film *Jungle Fever*, Angela passionately stressed how she hated the way director Spike Lee 'always depicts Italians as dumb oafs.' Thus, while Angela clearly saw herself as having African ancestors, she also saw herself as Italian and stood behind her Italian heritage.

Or, as Toni encapsulated this issue:

I don't have that identity with white Anglo value system or family. I didn't have that when I was a child. I grew up feeling different and I still feel different. And I, I feel that identifying with a black community is very apropos in my case. I mean who am I going to identify with, some white German people that killed my great grandfather? I mean that would really be ironic, you know, if I thought I was the Brady Bunch [a 1970s television program about a large, white, happy family]. Then I'd really have a problem.

At this point a brief aside must be made to address the issue of whether the women's Jewish and Italian backgrounds account for their sense of black identity. I have asked myself that question. It is not that I am particularly surprised that the women have those backgrounds, since a great number of people in New York City have Jewish or Italian backgrounds. But there is a history, and its accompanying discourse, which places Jewish, Italian, and Irish people outside the mainstream of 'white' America, and Toni, in fact, talked of always feeling 'other' as Jewish. Yet, it is important to remember that as a general rule, people of Italian or Jewish backgrounds in New York City are white people. Toni had also discussed the consequences of choosing to align yourself with something other than what's portrayed as the appropriate thing 'for white people.' As Karen Sacks (1994: 86) has stated in reference to her own New York childhood: 'By the time I was an adolescent [1950s], Jews were just as white as the next white person.' As Frankenberg also wrote regarding her research: 'The specifics of the women's backgrounds and identities enabled me to call into question certain elements of "popular wisdom". These interviews did not, for example, suggest that one experience of marginality — Jewishness, lesbianism — led white women automatically toward empathy with other oppressed communities ...' (1993:20). Moreover, in New York City around the time of my research, some of the most vocal and violent 'racial incidents' occurred between African Americans and Italian or Jewish Americans. Given these considerations, I take the women's anti-racist sentiment fostered and reinforced by their involvement in the African American oriented jazz community as much more influential than their Jewish or Italian backgrounds. Also, four of the thirteen European American women I interviewed were Anglo-Americans and their 'Anglo' background did not rule out identification or affinity with African Americans. One of these was Louise. I had known Louise casually for a number of years and quite honestly I had never been sure whether she 'was' white or black. Louise was one of the first women I interviewed and I was too shy (and naive) to ask her. I also received no definitive clues during the hours we spent talking. When I finally asked her many, many months later about her background, she told me of various Northern and Western European countries as well as Protestant, and finally said 'WASP head to toe.' The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant reference here connotes 'very white.' I believe that one could argue that Louise clearly had a cultural affinity [read: ethnic identification] with African America, but did not construct her identity racially this way.

The notable point about the identity configurations of Angela, Linda, Barbara, Julia, and Toni is not that they are of Italian or Jewish heritage, but that they have embraced African American-ness in addition and constructed bi-racial/ethnic identities. In doing so, they are completely in line with a general trend in American society. The issue of multi-racial/ethnic identities has been at the forefront of the debates, reported in both the academic and popular press, regarding the U.S. year 2000 census.13 As McKenney and Bennett wrote: 'One of the major issues facing the Bureau of the Census is the classification of persons of mixed racial parentage. Organizations representing persons of this population argue that census procedures, in fact all government statistical and administrative systems, do not allow them to report their true identity' (1994:23).

There is abundant evidence of the shift toward multi-racial/ethnic identities in the popular press. In *The New York Times* popular musicians Lenny Kravitz and Mariah Carey have been respectively referred to as 'half-black, half-Jewish' (Marin 1993) and 'bi-racial' (Dyson 1994). *The New York Times Magazine* has also referred to Lani Guinier as 'half black, half Jewish' (1994:41).14 Magazines like *Interrace* ('America's First and No. 1 Magazine for Inter-racial Couples, Families, People') have been published. In the fall of 1993 *Time* published a special issue on 'multicultural' America with a cover image of a woman's face 'created by a computer from a mix of several races.' We were supposed to understand this image of a beautiful young
woman as 'a remarkable preview' of the future. As I see it, our conceptions are now very different than those inherent in a one-drop rule as well as the 'tragic mulatto.' (see Giles 1995; cf. Marriott 1996). Mixture is now being celebrated.

I purposefully chose the cumbersome formulation of 'multi-racial/ethnic' in the paragraphs above. I did this to indicate the combination of racial and ethnic notions. In an earlier section of this paper, I illustrated that Angela, Barbara, Linda, Julia and Toni interwove the discourses of race and ethnicity in their constructions of themselves as black. In this as well, they are completely in keeping with general trends. The interweaving of the discourse of race with the discourse of ethnicity is a general phenomenon and is quite evident, among other places, in the academic literature. Werner Sollors, for example, has written that race 'is merely one aspect of ethnicity' (1986:36). Kimmel has maintained, 'race is becoming just another ethnicity' (1993:573). And the increasing popular usage of the terms 'African American' and 'European American' as opposed to 'black' and 'white' is, of course, telling.

There is an important and crucial ramification of this intertwinement of the discourse of ethnicity with the discourse of race: the question of choice. There is the very different placement of choice or consent within racial discourse and ethnic discourse. Within our traditional conceptions there has been an element of choice in terms of one's ethnicity but not for one's race. It has been considered a matter of choice as to how much one identifies with and involves oneself with one's own ethnic (read: cultural) traditions or heritage. Race, on the other hand, has been conceived as a category in nature that one either is or is not. And, while we do often include a notion of shared biological heritage in addition to history and culture in our conception of ethnicity, the differences in the aspect of choice and notions of shared substance between racial and ethnic discourse are crucial.

The point is, as the article's opening quotation from Karen Blu indicated, when conceptions of race and ethnicity become intertwined, the possibility of being black as a matter of individual choice is opened. It is the combination of the two discourses which creates a discursive space in which choosing to be black is possible. Angela, Linda, Barbara, Toni, and Julia utilize that discursive space.

**Conclusion**

As I understand what Angela, Linda, Barbara, Toni, and Julia have done, they have selected to be black in an everyday context where that carries status, and they have done so by drawing on American cultural discourses that make that possible and sensible. Nonetheless, most Americans probably consider these women's constructions unusual. We are simply not accustomed to white Americans (who do not fit in the traditional 'black passing for white' category) talking about the ways in which they are 'black.'

My question is whether this will remain true. I believe we are on the brink of a change. The position that race is a socially constructed category has moved beyond the academy (Marriott 1996) and concrete information indicating that the lines between white and black are not clear cut is being disseminated. For instance, one no longer only hears that African Americans have a considerable amount of European American 'blood,' (often stated as averaging 25%) but also that European Americans carry an average 3% of African American blood (Piper 1992; Dominguez 1986). Even People magazine has published the news (see Dominguez 1986:2).

It also seems to me that acknowledgement of African and African American contributions to American sociocultural traditions is on the increase and that this information has also moved beyond the academy. In the present environment, few people can really escape hearing about Elvis Presley's 'roots' in black artistic traditions. One need only watch mainstream television to learn of Elvis' stylistic borrowing from black musicians. The mainstream cinema box office has also provided Americans with news of the black cowboy (see Slocum 1993). Posse, for instance, a 1993 film directed by Mario Van Peebles was thoroughly in keeping with the genre conventions of the American western, except the plot revolved around black cowboys and the problems faced by a black frontier community. The film also closed didactically with the printed message: 'Although ignored by Hollywood and most history books, the memory of the more than 8,000 Black cowboys that roamed the early West lives on.'

Similar to what the women of the jazz community have done, I believe we will see other European Americans with anti-racist desires drawing on such information and constructing themselves as (at least partially) African American. Embracing an identity in line with political beliefs, or having to become 'blood brothers,' may be a peculiarly American and problematic way of doing things (Erickson 1995). However, it does tend to be the American way. I find it telling that Piper would write: 'The ultimate test of a person's repudiation of racism is not what she can contemplate doing for or on behalf of black people, but whether she herself can contemplate calmly the likelihood of being black' (Piper 1992:19, italics in the original).
In the 1990s one need not follow the course of clarinetist Mezzrow who, over 50 years ago, drew on existing racial discourse and 'did truly think his lips had developed fuller contours, his hair had thickened and burred, his skin had darkened' (Wolfe in Mezzrow & Wolfe 1990:196:390). One can now draw on racial discourse or ethnic discourse, and, facilitating the possibilities, on an intertwined combination of the two. Moreover, given the climate of acceptance of 'mixed' identity formations, people can take on partially black identities, for instance, accepting distant or close black relatives, or the probable 5 percent make-up based on being a white American and/or taking on the 'history and culture' aspects of a mixed African European ethnic identity. It may be that certain people will have greater access to particular twists, for instance, Sicily and Hannibal for Italians, historical ideas of a separate race for people with Irish or Jewish backgrounds, and the American history of black/white interaction for Anglo-Americans. But between the 5% concept as well as the cultural identity/affinity connection, the possibilities are vast.21

This does not mean that I necessarily see in this the termination of racism. Anti-racist sentiment can sometimes have a racist effect, and white identification with blackness can be problematic.22 As Erickson points out, there are problems with 'romantic white fantasies of oneness with blacks that tacitly erase all differences of historical and social experience' (1995:184). It is also true that the utilization of the discourse of ethnicity does not necessarily mean the erasure of racism (Harrison 1995). Social distinctions and discriminations previously inscribed with racial discourse can be achieved with ethnic discourse. As Hall wrote about Britain in 1992, 'ethnicity ... is one of the core characteristics of British racism today' (p. 256). Nor do I necessarily expect the withering away of whiteness (see Roediger 1994). We will undoubtedly continue to see versions of hyper-whiteness as well as various outcroppings of white supremacist activities. More significantly, whiteness may continue to be with us because what is happening now will eventually constitute a change in our traditional boundaries of whiteness (see Hyde 1995).

In her discussion of why it is that white Americans have not acknowledged or accepted their probable 5 percent African ancestry, Piper implicates the one-drop rule. As she reasons, it is because of the one-drop rule that 'a white who acknowledges any African ancestry implicitly acknowledges being black – a social condition, more than an identity, that no white person would voluntarily assume, even in imagination' (Piper 1992:18). As I maintain, we have currently moved away from conceptions inherent in the one-drop-of-black-blood-makes-someone-black-rule, and thus, to follow Piper's logic, white people may be willing to take on black identity since it could be done without giving up white identity.

As a matter of fact, for a number of people, not giving up white identity may be the important part of the issue. The American media often announces various predictions of how in the near future, 'people of color' will be the majority population in the U.S. and white people, 'the minorities.' In a recent (July 1996) New York Times article on multiracial identity and census category issues, sociologist Mary Waters was quoted as saying that her 'pet theory' was that the definition of white was going to become more encompassing and 'that may be the only thing standing in the way of whites becoming a minority by the year 2040' (Mathews 1996:7). I take this comment to mean that the type of changes Waters suspects for the boundaries of whiteness are ones which work in the interest of people who are now already defined as 'white.' Waters has made trenchant comments regarding symbolic ethnicity and the perpetuation of racism in the past (see Waters 1990). I believe her point here is also well taken and should give anti-racists pause.23

I appreciate the anti-racist basis of the women's constructions of black identity presented in this paper. I do not see them as active reinscriptions of whiteness; I see their subversive potential. But clearly, the same type of identity construction could ensure the longevity of whiteness. Thus, these women's constructions, derived from the intertwining discourses of race and ethnicity and part of a general trend toward mixed identities, are an important illustration of one of the most strategically significant options many Americans now have when they go about constructing the reality of their ethnic identities: To be white and black, both racially and ethnically.

Notes

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1 See Allen 1994; Erickson 1995; Frankenberg 1993; Roediger 1992, 1994; Ware 1992. See also the May 18, 1993 Village Voice 'White Like Who? Notes on the Other Race.'
2. All informant names are pseudonymous.

3. To be most accurate I should write that I thought of the music as West African and the women as Masal. Both the music and the photographs may have been produced in New York studios, of course they may have been produced in New York studios but still have been African...


5. See Glazer & Mowinckel 1975; Sollors 1986; Stern & Cicela 1991; and Williams 198 it for varied discussions of academic and folk notions of ethnicity.

6. See also Fischer 1986; Nagel 1994; Sollors 1986; and Waters 1990.

7. See hooks (1990:157) for the original of this paraphrase.

8. Judith clearly identified herself as African American and took that stance throughout the interview. Also, I had always thought of her as African American (I had known her as an acquaintance for a couple of years before conducting the interview). Yet, pertinent to the topic of the present article and important to note, at the end of the interview she showed me a photo album and upon seeing a picture of her mother, I asked if her mother was 'white' or just incredibly 'light-skinned.' Her response was first to say 'incredibly light-skinned' then she changed it to 'white.' Thereafter she added that it was complicated. Whatever it was, it was not clear-cut.


11. Women often utilized the narrative convention of stumbling into the jazz world to describe their initial involvement in the jazz community. It was noticeable to me, however, that many of the women had been involved in other African, African American, or Afro-Caribbean oriented contexts. I understood involvement in the jazz community as both in line with and fostering of anti-racist sentiments.

12. Ashley David, who has conducted fieldwork with women involved in African dance, indicated to me that she has also encountered the black identity in a past life construction.


14. Lani Guinier became a controversial public figure when she was nominated by President Clinton for the Civil Rights division assistant attorney general. She was vilified as a divisive 'Quota Queen' and her nomination was subsequently retracted.

15. For incisive comments on this special issue of Time, see Goldberg 1995.


17. The primary way that white identifications with blackness have been understood is in terms of rebellion and pathology, i.e., as aberration. For instance, Mailer's 1957 'White Negro' essay indicating the (at least) metaphorical identification of white, troubled, bohemians of the 1950s with being black, is often cited and discussed (Monson 1993; Ross 1989; Shoemaker 1997). The contemporary representation of wiggers seems to be following in these footsteps (see Braithwaite 1995; Carroll 1994; Soulkanov 1993). But see also Peshkin's (1991) work on identity in a multi-ethnic school environment.


