

Contriving Biomythographies of Blue Frogs

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I will start from the two pedagogical proposals which are grafted parasitically in the top and bottom margins of James Palermo's "flag." First, "attempts at multicultural education must first read and decipher the racist text of the student's lived experience," and, second, "[t]he idea that racism is somebody else's problem must be attacked." Though Palermo announces that grafting will be his major technique in exposing the duplicity and ideological contradictions of presumably pure and nontranslatable texts (that is, the racist discourse of Apartheid), it seems to me that in passing the knife between philosophical and pedagogical inquiry, between the deconstruction of signs and the meaning of our lives, *in vitro* fertilization and not grafting becomes his method. Once the sinister signs of racism are deconstructed, once presences are deferred, the seed of a new method is revealed to be reinserted in the fertile matrix of multiculturalism. Are we not still revolving within Plato's cave when we are deconstructing racism if our lives, bodies, and desires as raced subjects are excluded from analysis, if the pedagogical is confined to indexical signs at the margins of our road reminding us, philosophers of education, that we have to return to the schoolhouse after the long *travail* in the forest of language? Reading Palermo's flag to be unfinished (in its layers and methods) rather than flawed, my response starts where his analysis ends and, inverting the relationship between text and margin, grafts the philosophical on texts of our lives.

I feel attacked, arrested, by Palermo's command to think of racism as my problem. I think of the everyday words of racism a lot: as a postcolonial critic, instructor of educational foundations classes, parasitic resident of the "New South," and chronic addict to all kinds of prohibited beauty. I try hard to explain to my students the distinction between personal (psychological) racism and institutionalized racism; the idea that even if we are not the sovereign subjects of racist speech acts or practices we are still complicitous participants in racist discourse, beneficiaries of unacknowledged racist privileges, and so on. Yet when it comes to academic writing I retreat like my students behind the shield of personal locality, a retreat that sometimes can work as inoculation from responsibility: I have not experienced racism, so how can I claim the discursive privilege to speak *for* others, to speak *of* their experience of racism? Yet Palermo summons me to think not about the problem of others' racism but about racism as *my problem*. And his call collides with the guilty inertia of my discursive integrity.

I do not write academic papers about racism but I do write. "*She has the color of barley*, tell your friend in LA if he asks you again," I replied to him in anger. "That's how my mother speaks of my skin color." In the summers I even get the color of olive brown; never contemplated if it is a tint or a tan, an illusionary reflection of the Mediterranean landscape on my sweaty skin or a melanin imprint of the persistent sun. It lasts throughout the winters (if I stay there long enough), as if the DNA chromosome for my skin color disobeys heretically the category "Caucasian"

on my American profile, so, I conclude, there must be some truth in the Lamarckian theory about the imprintability of the genome; I always turn atavistic in my evolutionary theories when I try to negotiate the burden of my whiteness, an identity I was thrown into as soon as I arrived in the States rather than an identity I claimed or was born into. I also turn atavistic in my writing, regressing to my previous language of poetry, when I want to blur categories and transgress borders; I never trusted philosophy for this task. Probably because some of its most dominant tropes for epistemology, hermeneutics, and phenomenology — sometimes even the tropes of deconstruction — are indebted to, both enabled and imprinted by, a visual economy of dark versus light: the Platonic journey out of the cave and the turning of the student's eyes to the light; the Heideggerian metaphor for *dasein's* coming to/ in language as if coming to a "clearing"; Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perspectival perception (those shadow edges of our horizon where perception fails us, but it is exactly this failure that brings into our phenomenological — though not visual — field the presence of others).

Palermo's essay invites me to bracket my suspicion of philosophy's visual economy. Framing racism as a metaphysical problem and philosophical inquiry as the deconstruction of original signs that claim to represent presences, he argues that the understanding of race should break from the metaphysics of presence. Does not the deconstruction of racism, though, involve more than just an exercise in semiotics, a textual play of freeing up signifiers from signifieds, a paean to the unmotivated floating signifier? Can Derridean grafting teach us not just how to destroy originals but also how to invent new hybrid identities of ourselves as raced? When Jones is repainting the stripes of his flag to produce a flag that says "*I am not flag*," others are slicing and recomposing their bodies and identities in search of new ways to say "*I am*." When Jaspers deconstructs the American flag as the fetish of patriotism, when Derrida deconstructs the — untouchable by black hands — flag of Apartheid, when Palermo deconstructs the created consistency of Apartheid and points to its ideological contradictions, how useful can the negativity of this critique be for those who want to become and unbecome raced, eager to subvert not only the borders of metaphysical categories or reified signs but also the oppressive nativism of homes, families, ethnicities, and cultures? How helpful can the deconstruction of signs be for the reinvention of our identities? How commensurable is the aesthetic heresy of Jasper John's wooden flag with our students' struggle to transgress borders of race and to make sense of that transgression not as a "sell out" or "assimilation" but instead as an empowering becoming? Before the dashing of names and grafting of texts was invented by avant-garde artists or philosophers who tried to break from the metaphysics of presence, it has been and will continue to be the everyday practice of millions of people who, caught in diaspora and transmigration, forced or voluntary, stretch their necks, voluntarily or involuntarily, with pleasure or pain but nevertheless in a delightful monstrous stretch,¹ to become bridges between different others.

My mother always sent me to the "best" schools, which meant the ones in which I was the only Black female. This circumstance made my name become hyphenated by my peers as, "You know Nikki — the black girl" or in situations when...I became known as "the other one." I have no doubt that this is part of the reason I would break my neck to get the teacher call me by my "preferred" name rather than my natural-born, ethnic one [Ebonique]....The

year I became a “White girl” I would catch myself studying my White peers’ movements, voices, and gestures. Instead of proclaiming, “Girl, you so crazy,” I would say, “Oh my god, you are such a nut.”²

That was the year Nikki “persuaded” her mother to buy her blue contacts and blond coloring for Christmas and returned to school, after the break, to encounter acceptance by some peers and the label of “sell out” by others:

Black barbie! Wanna be! Turncoat! Sell out! These have been some of my nicknames throughout the past ten years of my education. It would not have struck such a pain in my pride, if these obnoxious “pet name” came from White people, but they did not. I could then rebuke that it is their mere jealousy and ignorance of a Black woman that causes their heart, mind, and mouth to overflow with nonsense, for my “inner” Black culture has taught me, with age and wisdom, that White people are my foes.³

Oscillating between a celebration of her self-invention, which performs on the “surface” of the body, mannerisms and nicknames, and a defense against accusations of assimilation, which retreats to “inner” culture and “true” name, the author finds that the deconstruction of rigid identities often collides with the search for a self: “I feel like an outcast with both races....I love all races, that is why I want to teach. Yet, I still wake up everyday and question if I am multi-cultural or anti-self-cultural.”⁴ Have we failed then to provide our students with a new language of race difference that breaks from the binary of resistance versus assimilation, a language that is not haunted by ghosts of origins? And if the purpose of autobiographic self-performances is to reclaim and restage the constructiveness of race, to fashion and not to recover, if we hyphenate our names in order to signify the multiplicity of our lived realities rather than to remember the difference of origins, why do we still find ourselves revisiting landscapes of childhood? Are “monsters” still nostalgic of a sense of wholeness?

It is often said, writes Trinh T. Minh-ha, “that writers of color, including anglophone and francophone Third World writers of diaspora, are condemned to write only autobiographical works”: “Living in a double exile — far from the native land and far from their mother tongue . . . autobiography can . . . be said to be an abode in which the writers mentioned necessarily take refuge.”⁵ Questioning the view of autobiography as a return to fossilized identities or a surrogate for home, Minh-ha argues that a traveler’s self-narrative is about becoming and un-becoming, a biomythography that invents new identities rather than an archaeology that discloses and recuperates lost ones: “But to preserve this abode, they would have to open it and pass it on.”⁶ Minh-ha points out that telling is already, inherently, a retelling. The “*re*” of this telling refers to *reciting* stories that others once told us, *relocating* these stories to a new geographical context, *redirecting* them to and *restaging* for a new audience, *rephrasing* them in the other’s idiom (that is not other to us anymore, we already speak in that). The dash of this retelling refers to the *differánce*, the double hinge of writing in translation; traveling and transculturation that introduces spacing and temporalization (deferrals) in the production of meaning. The paradox of this retelling is that in telling stories of ourselves as different we are already hybridizing our idioms, we are already borrowing and rearticulating the language of others whose assimilating grasp enacted the desire to speak of our difference in the first place. How can this restaging of race identities disrupt both Apartheid’s patrolling of zones as well as our own nostalgia for a lost or deeper self?

Within the North American “Asian Community,” I am sometimes called a banana; it is said that I may have a yellow skin, but I am white on the inside. I am considered ashamed of my yellowness, insofar as I apparently aspire to master the language, culture and ideology of white people....If I could rename myself...I think I would have to select a figure not female, not divine, not even human: the blue frog.⁷

The blue frog was Elaine K. Chang’s favorite childhood story, told to her by her mother over and over again the first years of their immigration from Korea to the United States. Asked by her daughter years later if she remembered the blue frog, the mother, blushing, informs her that the frog was, in fact, never blue but just an ordinary green one. She just had not mastered colors in English when she first told her daughter the story. And yet, the blue frog, born in mistranslation than preserved in translation, constitutes for Chang “a (by-) product of cultural and linguistic cross-fertilization.” The coding and recoding of his skin becomes an emblem for the *differánce* of transculturation. “Do blue frogs have a place in academic discourse?” asks Chang.

Unlike Minh-ha, I have no stories of blue frogs my mother told me to share with you. Unlike my students I have no personal stories to tell as a woman of color about the burden of blackness because, perhaps, I am not a woman of color, or because the stories I have to tell of race are not about color. On the other hand, I also feel that to modestly denude myself of the discursive privilege to speak of or for others and to retreat instead to a telling of “*petit récits*” about my “burden of whiteness” would be an ironic, dangerous, and dishonest rhetoricism that would trivialize racism as it would equate the existential burden of identity with the ethical violence of being the victim of racism. I can speak of race, but of a different kind of race.

In the case of Cyprus, race was a category imposed by the British colonizers in their first official census on the island’s population. It was used to divide, classify, territorialize, and eventually turn against each other the two biggest communities of the island, Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Greek Orthodox and Muslims. The picture of my grandparents on their first official IDs, issued by the colonial administration and marked by the stamp “British Subject,” are followed by an enumeration of formalized identity traits, such as, “Race: Greek Orthodox.” What can my story tell to Nikki’s search, Minh-ha’s call for passages, or to Palermo’s call to deconstruct the semiosis of racism? Well, at least for first time I can tell a story that semioticians of alterity and anthropologists of native voices will have a hard time classifying as a return to or exit from a fossil, for what I am saying here is that race was not a color identity for me. It was an imposed ethnic identity that made visible its artifactuality and force at the same time it claimed its metaphysical prerogative to discern the “differents” and legitimized its administrative force to separate, territorialize, classify, and control. Studying the edges of the picture of the upper, stiff, in serious-posture body of my grandfather, the viewer can see the edges of the elbows of other bodies, sitting next to him but cropped out by the photographic lens. If you add some imagination and time-travel ability to your capacity for discernible perception, then you can see them being asked to leave their homes to gather at the village square on a certain time, on a certain Sunday, to stand still, execution style, next to each other against the white wall and to have their pictures taken. Thus the colonial genealogy

of raced subjects tells more than what it was intended to say. It frames but leaves traces of that framing, traces which suggest that, (a) categorization according to race in the context of colonization was artifactual, (b) it was facilitated by the use of force, and (c) even if it was carried out through civilized practices, neutral “technologies of representation,” it unintentionally restaged conventions of oppression that stained permanently its proclaimed purity.

Johns’s restaging of the American flag exposes the unmotivatedness of the flag as a sign. Yet his “Flag” cites, parodies, and restages more the conventions of painting rather than the convention of the flag’s erection as a performative inauguration of colonial/state law and force. Perhaps Johns sacrilegiously cites or castrates the flag as the original sign of patriotism and God. Indeed, his flag is too heavy to raise, unless of course it is hung ceremoniously on the walls of a gallery to make the crowds of non-patriotic nonreligious viewers raise their heads in aesthetic awe. Yet even when it parodies both painting and patriotism, when it splits apart and multiplies through a series of nonflag-like flags the uniqueness and originality of patriotism, Johns’s writing works within the metaphysics of aesthetics and produces self-referential statements about art.

Yet this is exactly where the challenge of Palermo’s grafting of Johns’s flag on the text of Apartheid lies. At a time when the nontranslatable has become an indexical sign for the postmodern, Palermo cautions us to the metaphysical violence of territorialized idioms that resist translation, such as the idiom of Apartheid. Instead of celebrating Johns’s Flag as a model for subversive aesthetics, Palermo restages the genealogy of the flag in the historical context of the Apartheid and reminds us of the force involved in the patrolling of territories, bodies, and idioms, something missing from Johns’s semiotics. My only cautionary remark to Palermo would be to reinvent and graft the idiom of his own deconstructive method when he turns from the canvas of signs to the lived experiences and needs of students. Perhaps giving them multiculturalism’s critical tools to “see” racism or “seeing color, seeing culture” is not enough, when blue frogs are already searching for a monstrous grafting of identities beyond the discernability of the rainbow spectrum.⁸

1. “Monstrous” alludes to Donna Haraway’s term “monster” as a metaphor for hybridity in “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg and Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992.).

2. Nikki Thomas, Unpublished “Autobiographical Narrative,” 1998, 2.

3. *Ibid.*, 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

5. “Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Other Than Myself/My Other Self,” in *Travelers’ Tales. Narratives of Home and Displacement*, ed. George Robertson et. al. (London: Routledge, 1994), 10 (emphasis added).

6. *Ibid.*

7. Elaine K. Chang, “A Not-So-New Spelling of My Name: Notes Toward (and Against) a Politics of Equivocation,” cited in Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Other Than Myself,” 19.

8. Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Seeing Color, Seeing Culture,” in *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1994), 30.