Smith College

Smith ScholarWorks

Africana Studies: Faculty Books

Africana Studies

2016

Passing Strange: Embodying and Negotiating Difference in Academia

Daphne Lamothe
Smith College, dlamothe@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/afr_books

Part of the Africana Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Lamothe, Daphne, "Passing Strange: Embodying and Negotiating Difference in Academia" (2016). *Africana Studies: Faculty Books*. 6.
https://scholarworks.smith.edu/afr_books/6

This Book Chapter has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies: Faculty Books by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

12 ◆ PASSING STRANGE

Embodying and Negotiating Difference in Academia

DAPHNE LAMOTHE

Access to higher education has transformed my sense of self and life's possibilities. Likewise, I believe that taking part in institutions of higher education has transformed those spaces, making them more open to people of varied racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. The insights I've gained have been hard won, because the diversification of colleges and universities—and my own participation in that process—has been produced through acts of witnessing, self-inquiry, and analysis.

For me, as the product of a Haitian immigrant community in New York City, the path through life in the earliest years was apparently clear: good behavior and studiousness would lead to marriage; remaining in New York close to my large extended family; and reliable employment, perhaps as a nurse or teacher, possibly as a doctor or lawyer if I proved to be that ambitious. One could argue that I followed that map perfectly because I am a teacher (teaching being among the various other responsibilities of a college professor), am in a marriage that meets my birth community's unspoken heteronormative expectations, and have birthed two children.

Yet this cursory narrative obscures a number of detours I ended up taking: choosing to partner with a man who has no Haitian heritage, and who was raised neither Catholic nor on the East Coast, brought to our marriage its own set of cultural differences. My extended sojourn in California for graduate school opened up the possibility that I might at other points in my life choose to live away from my Haitian "village within the city" in southern

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Queens. And my commitment to and success within academia has afforded me the upward social mobility that my parents strove to attain, while at the same time introducing a new set of ideas, values, and demands that run counter to their socially conservative, communitarian (though they would never have called it that), and religious views. In other words, my education and my assumption of a role within the higher educational establishment have pulled me away from my family of origin in multiple ways, even as this very education has reinforced my core sense of self. It has also made tangible for me the premise that identities are composed of multiple, sometimes contradictory, selves.

In the seventies and eighties, I was a student in the city's Catholic schools from first through twelfth grade. At that time, Irish American and Italian American nuns and laypeople took on the responsibility of educating children even as the racial demographics of the neighborhoods they served underwent a steady transformation.[1] Each year brought fewer white ethnics and more black and Latino students into the classrooms. As part of the first wave of that change, I and the other black and brown students were still a minority, albeit a growing one, in those classrooms. My classrooms had not yet entered the era of celebratory multiculturalism, nor were they paragons of racial enlightenment. The topics of racial difference and inequality either were off limits or were met with nervous laughter, when, for example, my tenth-grade English teacher, Sister Brigid, read the part of Jim, the enslaved protagonist in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in an exaggerated *Negro* dialect. Incidents such as these were relatively infrequent. For the most part, our education emphasized memorization, repetition, and discipline (this last a synonym, I instinctively knew, for *obedience*). I was a quiet girl who found it easy to meet these expectations. Thus, my teachers rewarded me with the highest compliment: the assumption that I would go to a four-year college. For students like me, our teachers' vision of our futures remained largely unchanged from where they steered previous generations of students. After high school, those of us who were academically inclined would go on either to the local Catholic universities or perhaps to the great public City University system of New York. These institutions had done a commendable job of educating and increasing the life prospects of generations of poor and working-class New Yorkers, and my reputation as a hardworking and quiet student made it almost inevitable that I would follow this path.

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

My guidance counselor encouraged me to fill out my college applications for schools with familiar names. Yet for some reason still unknowable to me, I chafed against the perception that my horizon should be so limited. I had paid attention when a classmate, another black "bookworm" like me, made the decision a year earlier to apply to an Ivy League college and had got in. This idea came to her because of her friendship with the conductor of our school orchestra, and I recall thinking to myself, "If she was capable of doing that, why couldn't I?" I followed Deidre's lead and let her initiative pull me along and into the Ivy League.

In my first years of college, I worked my way through several possible majors, trying on sociology, history, and political science for size, fueled by the desire to major in something "useful" that would lead to a well-compensated career. I was, in other words, a typical undergraduate from a working-class background who saw higher education through a pragmatic lens as a gateway into the middle class. Lacking any idealistic notions of the ivory tower, I nonetheless settled on an English major simply because those were the classes I enjoyed the most and in which I acquired the best grades. More important, it allowed me to answer (with a measure of honesty) the question I frequently faced from home: "What are you going to do with that major?" I could imagine myself becoming a journalist, a teacher, or a lawyer, all respectable answers to anyone who questioned my mother's sanity in allowing me to leave home for school.

The idea of becoming an academic wormed its way into my consciousness just as unexpectedly as had the idea of applying to Yale. My decision was impulsive, fueled by two impressionable moments, one of perceived failure and the other of unexpected clarity. The first moment took place the summer after my junior year as I attempted to prepare for the law school admission test in a similar fashion to the way I prepared for the SATs. Taking practice tests from an exam preparation book had worked well enough the first time, and it was much more economical than paying for an expensive review course, so I committed myself to the task once again. My resolve lasted long enough for me to get to the logical reasoning section of the first practice test, which I found incomprehensible. Feeling backed in a corner, I wondered why I was putting myself through this hassle when I wasn't even sure that I had any interest in the law outside the fact that it sounded respectable.

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Putting the book aside, I recommenced my quest to imagine my future. The answers proved elusive until several months later, when I found myself sitting at the seminar table of a respected professor of Renaissance literature. I had taken two of her Shakespeare surveys the year before, and my awe of and appreciation for her brilliant lectures and lucid analyses brought me to yet another class. That day, as the class discussed the assigned text, I offered an interpretation that went somewhat against the grain of the discussion that had preceded. The details of that discussion—the focus of the conversation, the name of the play—have receded in time, but what remains entrenched in my memory is my professor's turning toward me, her pupils widening slightly, and her appreciative response: "I have never thought of it that way." The world stopped for an instant, and I had a moment of clarity. I was good at this! And so, at this particular fork in the road, my decision to apply to graduate school in English was not a dramatic departure from my predestined path, but it did feel as though I was participating in self-determination.

These stepping-stones, isolated moments when a supportive remark or a helping hand created an opportunity for self-reflection, happened periodically. There was the dinnertime conversation with my residential college dean, who encouraged me to consider the University of California–Berkeley because "it's good to explore the world, and you can always come back home when you're ready." He gave me tacit permission to venture even further from my Queens home, even though I knew that my decision to attend a residential college as an undergraduate had already caused my parents much emotional turmoil. The graduate student instructor in my senior year, whose gentleness I found reassuring, agreed to write me a letter of recommendation. I didn't yet know enough to distinguish between adjunct instructors, teaching assistants, and professors, so his confession that his word as a graduate student would carry less weight than that of his wife, a professor, was invaluable advice. His further encouragement that I ask his wife (my Shakespeare professor!) for not one but two letters was gratefully accepted. Looking back on it now, I imagine that they must have discussed my cluelessness, because when I gathered up the courage to go to her office hours, she took the time to walk me through the process of applying for graduate school. I had never spent so much time in her office before, nor would I ever again. But at that meeting, she guided me on how to decide

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

where to apply; whom else to ask for letters of recommendation; and how to present myself as a serious scholar, as opposed to merely a book lover with a good work ethic.

Moments of serendipity such as these followed me into graduate school and have continued to do so throughout my career. Only a few of the individuals to whom I'm so indebted looked like me, yet all responded generously when I was in need of necessary advice or feedback. Notably absent in all these memories is a mentor in the sense that the word is traditionally invoked: a single individual who takes you under her wing, dispensing wisdom and guidance and providing a gateway to her own network and contacts. The word carries with it the suggestion of a sustained relationship.

Once I entered the pre-professional world of graduate school, I was constantly reminded of the importance of having a mentor to guide me through the convoluted and often unspoken expectations of the profession. At national conferences for young scholars, I heard again and again about the significant role that mentors play in one's career development. How-to-succeed books sang the importance of drawing upon the wisdom and counsel of a trusted teacher. But throughout, my experience has been in equal parts (a) a struggle to figure out the social codes of the institutions in which I found myself, (b) a receptiveness to those moments when certain individuals proved willing to share their knowledge and insights with me, and (c) a combination of tenacity, curiosity, and openness to new ideas and experiences. I consider whatever professional success I've managed to achieve as much a product of my good fortune as a matter of meritocracy at work. At the time, I had no idea that the teaching assistant from whom I asked for a letter of recommendation happened to be married to a professor who was familiar with me. Although my residential college dean ate in the dining hall every evening of my four years at Yale, I had never shared a meal with him until fall semester, senior year, when he asked me about my plans for the future and planted the seed of the idea that I might give California a try. The classmate who inspired me to apply to Yale was mentored by our orchestra conductor and was encouraged by him; if not for *their* relationship, I would not have applied. I was lucky, I worked hard, and I paid attention.

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ORIENTATION AND ASSIMILATION: INTEGRATING DIFFERENCE WITHIN THE ACADEMY

When I enter the classroom these days, students and colleagues read my unaccented English and my visibly black and female body in particular ways. Until I reveal certain facts about myself, most assume that I am African American with cultural roots in the American South, and with an attendant experiential knowledge of southern history and culture. They assume that I grew up in a monolingual household and that I am either Protestant or not religious. Occasionally, I find myself wanting or needing to resist the impulse to pass as fully culturally American, whereas my experience in Haitian circles is typically one of failing to prove myself Haitian *enough*. To other Haitians and Haitian Americans, my New York City birthplace is less of an issue than my inability to speak Creole well, the rarity of my visits to my parents' birthplace, and the amateur quality of my Haitian cooking. And while I was acutely aware of American society's disdain and contempt for Haitian people, particularly during the influx of immigrants during the seventies and eighties who bore the stigma of the label "boat people," I suffered none of the insults and jabs directed at my cousins, who had just arrived. My Haitian identity is embedded in my Haitian American upbringing in an immigrant community in Queens, New York, more than it is in the immediate memory of a lived experience on the island. My African American identity is rooted in the same. For me, as a cultural in-betweener with a hybrid subjectivity, strangeness or outsiderness is the state in which I feel most at home.

In my junior year of college, I participated in a march through the central campus organized by the Black Student Association. As we walked, most sang the words to "Lift Every Voice" (what I would learn later is informally known as the Negro National Anthem) by James Weldon Johnson (lyrics, 1899) and Rosamond Johnson (music, 1900). Moved by the song's stirring rhythms and victorious message of unity, I turned to the person standing next to me and said, "I love this song. I wish I knew what it is called." She stared at me with incomprehension and then turned away and continued to walk in unison with the crowd. Although I also continued the march, I lost that momentary sense of cohesion, because I had revealed myself to be an outsider to this great African American tradition. While the experience was

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

relatively minor, the memory of it remains major, for I experienced it as a failure of an unspoken test of authenticity. Today, I recognize that, like most of my classmates, I was and am as much a citizen of "African America" as I am a U.S. citizen, and both involve learning expectations and customs along the way.

To be a black student at Yale in the eighties, much as it is to be a black professor at Smith College in the first half of the twenty-first century, is to be considered a part of a monolithic group that shares the same language, culture, and references. The irony is of course that as a scholar of the Harlem Renaissance, among other subjects, I now introduce students to the prodigious output of the Johnson brothers and other great African American artists. My job now is to transfer knowledge about this history and culture and these traditions to yet another generation of students. I consider these traditions to be as much a part of my legacy as is Caribbean culture and history, but my pedagogy and scholarship are necessarily grounded in book learning as much as lived experience.

I am the product of multiple histories and cultural influences. This fact doesn't make me special or unique, yet my experiences as a second-generation American make the processes of identity formation that much more acute and transparent, because the parts of the self do not line up seamlessly. Here W.E.B. DuBois's (1903) formulation of double-consciousness proves illuminating for his description of the condition as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on with amused contempt and pity" (11) and is an apt description not only of growing up black and American but also of having partial claims to and histories of exclusion from all of my identities: black/African/American/Haitian/daughter/mother/wife/professor. (This list is presented in no particular order or hierarchy other than one that I believe would make sense to readers of this essay. My point here is that the context determines how I perceive and present myself. There is no "I" except as conceptualized in response to one's environment and or social context.) And as Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) articulated in her description of the development of a *mestiza* consciousness that growing up on the borderlands of Mexican and Anglo societies produces:

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to (100)?

Anzaldúa's description of the hybrid subject in a state of continual transition resonates with my own sense of movement between the poles of Haitian/African/American. Yet I've also discovered that institutions, organizations, and communities struggle to acknowledge and accept the hybrid subject because their presence introduces an instability that disrupts the group's sense of wholeness. This is true on both micro and macro levels.

Occupying the borderlands, or the hyphenated space of the cultural in-betweener, has made me deeply familiar with the feeling of moving through the world as the "stranger," Georg Simmel's (1908) sociological formulation, based on observations of the European Jew of which he was one, of the individual who lives and participates in a community yet who is viewed as a partial insider, someone who is in the group, but not of it. The distances between national, cultural, social, and epistemological spheres can be vast, particularly for the young and unformed mind. While my upbringing made me unhappily yet intimately familiar with being a "stranger," my postsecondary education gave me the vocabulary, the analytical tools, and the perspective to make sense of those experiences.

DuBois's, Anzaldúa's, and Simmel's theoretical insights have provided the foundation for a deep and rich body of critical and theoretical literature on identity and cultural formation, yet they are at odds with how institutions of higher learning operate in their attempts to integrate students and faculty who represent cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity. These institutions typically construct notions of a monolithic group that embodies "difference" while also needing to assimilate the community's (white, upper-middle-class) norms. This approach often fails to account fully for the possibility of multiplicity and heterogeneity within the marginalized group. One way that colleges achieve this goal is by creating programs designed to meet the perceived needs of minority students, such as orientation activities intended to create opportunities of in-group bonding, and introducing students to

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the rigors of the college classroom. Of course, not all minority students come from challenged public schools and neither do all minority students need or want opportunities to bond with other minority students. But such programs do acknowledge that these activities are helpful to a majority of minority students. Another strategy is the creation of student organizations devoted to the pursuit of cultural awareness, social bonding, and political action. These efforts play an important role in the diversification of college campuses, yet they also have the potential to fracture the fragile bonds they attempt to create, particularly when they fail to account for heterogeneity within particular groups.

My own teaching and counseling of students reflect these insights about the complexities of cultural formations and identity. On my syllabi, I feature prominently essays by theorists such as DuBois and Anzaldúa and literature, music, and film that illuminate the insights of the hybrid subject and cultural in-betweener and articulate the complexity and multiplicity of black identities and cultures. I've found that students can have a mixed response to this pedagogical approach. Some welcome the introduction to a new analytical and theoretical framework; others look on these discussions of intragroup dynamics as a distraction from what they view as the real struggle: to gain an understanding of antiblack racism and oppression. My refusal to view these choices as either/or, but rather as both/and, grows from my conviction that there are multiple approaches to the study of African American history and culture that merit consideration. The discipline of African American studies is strong enough to allow for teaching and research that takes not only an activist approach but also theoretical, philosophical, and aesthetic approaches. More productively, putting different critical frames in conversation with each other can lead to a greater measure of insight and understanding. For example, African American feminist critics' insistence on the necessity of an intersectional approach to the study of race has created space for analyses of gender, sexual orientation, and class that deepen and complicate our understanding of racial formations. On a more personal level, just as I was empowered as an undergraduate student by my introduction to ideas and a critical vocabulary that enabled me to think through my experiences, so do I aspire to create a classroom environment that endows students with the analytical capacity and critical distance to make sense of their world(s).

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Colleges and universities create diversity and mentoring programs to increase the retention rates of students and faculty of color. Many individuals benefit greatly from these efforts to transform the academy into a more intimate and familiar space that feels welcoming, a symbolic home. The construction of any community, however, presupposes the drawing of boundaries that encircle some while excluding others. In my years as a professor, I have encountered black students who are bicultural, biracial, queer, adoptees raised by parents of a different race, and disabled, who feel pressured to hide or erase some crucial part of themselves in order to be accepted by the school's African American community. As we in our respective institutions work on creating more inclusive spaces, we must also emphasize the critical work we do in the classrooms to theorize and make transparent the complexities of how communities are built, as well as the politics of belonging and not belonging. Some of us have no choice but to be strangers. Some of us choose to be strangers, in the sense of seeking out unfamiliar territories and experiences. All of us need to develop the emotional and intellectual capacities to identify, name, navigate, and negotiate these intricate communal and social structures.

THE EMBODIED INTELLECTUAL

When in my late twenties, within the course of four years, I gave birth to my first daughter, finished my dissertation and earned my doctorate, started my first tenure-track job, and gave birth to a second daughter. I had no role models of how to balance these tremendous and labor-intensive responsibilities other than my own parents, neither of whom graduated from college but both of whom set a high standard of industriousness with their long commutes and work days and their strong sense of familial obligation. My circumstances as a young (female) parent professor forced me to cross multiple social spheres in just a few years, from Haitian to American, lower-middle/working class to upper-middle class, and African American to predominantly Anglo-American spheres. The realities of my entrée into a new and elevated professional class brought different challenges: not only a workweek that stretched well beyond the traditional forty hours but also the intrusions of e-mail and other digital media that brought the office into

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the home, on vacation, and on the sidelines of soccer fields and dance academy waiting rooms. Moreover, while I was a proverbial latchkey kid of the seventies, my generation of (middle-class) mothers carried with us raised expectations for active participation in our children's recreational lives and at school. I struggled with the choice either to contribute to my children's social ostracization if I failed to engage in the rituals of arranged play dates that were the norm in these social circles or to suffer the inevitable loss of precious time for class preparation, research, or writing when I chauffeured my children to their after-school commitments. The few fathers who sat on the sidelines or in the waiting rooms could slip away unmolested to take a conference call or finish reading a report for work; mothers, however, felt a clear and persistent pressure to contribute to the teams' and schools' community bonding. These domestic, professional, and social expectations compounded the challenges of my learning how to transform my thesis into a book and secure a publisher under the tyranny of the tenure clock's relentless ticking. My strongest impression of those earliest years as a junior faculty member can be described in two words: *overwork* and *exhaustion*. I rarely brought my children to the office, because I never saw another child in the building that housed my department. And at the same time, I always brought my office to my home and struggled mightily to keep the load from collapsing on me.

Colleagues who might have acted as mentors to me failed to offer immediate practical advice on how to juggle work and family. In some cases, they were simply too overwhelmed by work themselves to reach out to a junior scholar who didn't feel entitled to reach out first. In other cases, the particulars of how they managed when their own families were young and their careers were undeveloped had receded too far back in memory to be of any practical use. Circumstances as far ranging as day care arrangements in our town and the state of the academic publishing industry had changed so drastically since they had been assistant professors that they felt they could not offer useful, concrete advice, or so they told me. Being a professor, a mother, or both is demanding enough, but never more so when one has no role models or examples to follow. As I struggled to find my place and my voice within academia, one could convincingly argue that I suffered from a classic case of impostor syndrome in which I convinced myself that my professional successes were the result of luck and other external circumstances,

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and had little to do with my own innate talents (see Clance and Imes 1978). Yet it is also inarguable that the markers of my physical body—black, female, slight of stature, young, and occasionally pregnant—lent credence to the perception that I did not belong. In my first years as a professor, I was asked repeatedly if I was a student, and sometimes by my own colleagues! Alternately, when I am asked what I do for a living, my reply is often met with a murmur of surprised approval: "Good for *you*!"

Armed with the critical, analytical, and theoretical tools that I needed to comprehend the contingency and intersectionality of identity, the constructedness of imagined communities, and the way that power inhabits social structures, I am able to recognize that my state of not-belonging has changed from one of alienation to one of critical distance and engagement. In laypersons' terms, I have grown from feeling like a "stranger" to having a critical capacity to act quite purposefully like a "stranger," in Simmel's sense of being a member of the collective, endowed with the capacity to interrogate and confront the group's unexamined and unspoken assumptions.[2] If pushed, I might even go so far as to say that my status as stranger or in-betweener is an intrinsic part of why I found myself drawn to the life of the mind, because it cultivated within me the tendencies toward observation, critical detachment, and self-reflection, all key attributes of a scholar and critic.

Now in the middle stages of my career, I find myself more often than not in the position of supervising and guiding junior faculty and students of color. Rather than beginning from the assumption that I have the answers for how to best navigate the tricky waters of academia, I offer up my own stories of when I've failed or succeeded, and my thoughts about the reasons for these outcomes. I emphasize the emotional, personal, and situational conditions that informed the choices I've made and caution such people who speak with me to consider their own unique circumstances. I try also to render institutional structures and practices transparent and hope that this gives them the tools to discern their own pathways and goals. I hope that my contributions prove meaningful, but I'm OK with the possibility that they may be meager. The one truth that I've come to recognize is that sometimes a passing comment or interaction can be enough to lift a veil, open a door, and potentially transform a life. I offer my own pedagogical and mentoring practices, not as an example of the best model for responding to

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the diversification of institutions of higher learning, but to encourage college faculty and administrators to conceptualize, promote, and advocate for diverse student and faculty representation by placing ideas such as pluralism, heterogeneity, intersectionality, and hybridity at the center of their institutions' mission.

NOTES

1 In 1976, PBS presented a Bill Moyers–hosted documentary on my hometown titled *Rosedale: The Way It Is*. The film chronicled the sometimes violent struggles of the town's six thousand white residents in 1974 to keep Caribbean and African American people from moving into Rosedale. By the time my family moved there in 1976, Rosedale's white residents had effectively lost that battle. There were only two or three white families who still lived on my block, and within less than a decade, they too would flee.

2 "The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near. For, to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction. . . . His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it" (Simmel 1950, 402).

This content downloaded from 128.119.168.32 on Tue, 27 Aug 2019 02:09:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms