

Studies in Feminist Philosophy

Visible Identities

RACE, GENDER, AND THE SELF



LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF

VISIBLE IDENTITIES

Race, Gender, and the Self

Linda Martín Alcoff

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For my sons, in admiration for the courage they've shown
in negotiating the complicated identities we have bequeathed to them,
and in gratitude for their ability to show me
the possibilities of a hopeful future.

Preface

Five months after the United States militarily invaded Panama in 1989, I flew back to see my family, and I brought my children, the youngest of whom had not yet been to meet his relatives there. My father, Miguel Angel Martín, drove us over to *Panama Viejo*, to the disheveled barrio where he grew up, and to the vacant lot where he used to play his favorite sport—baseball—which had by then been taken over for the greased-pole games (*palo encebado*) that young men like to play. To demonstrate his passion for baseball, my father loved to recount the story about the fire that destroyed his father's pawnshop in the late 1930s. A pawnshop was a lucrative business in those days, as small fortunes rose and fell around the turbulence of the canal-based economy, and the shop had gained a nice cache of gold jewelry over the years. My father worked there after school, and when the fire broke out, my grandfather called to him to get the jewelry, but my father first carried out two boxes of baseball cards.

My father no doubt loved the game for its pure sport, but there was also something of a colonizing effect in the way that baseball swept through Central America and the Spanish Caribbean in the early part of the twentieth century, just as cricket swept through the English West Indies. Later in life, after getting his Ph.D. in history at the London School of Economics, my father used to praise the orderly efficiency of British bureaucracy and unhappily compare it to the chaos of Panama. He was an anglophile all his life, spending every August in an apartment near the Old Curiosity Shop of Dickens fame, and naming his beach house "Chelsea." Though he did not marry an Englishwoman, he married first a North American (my mother) and then a Frenchwoman.

Still, like other colonials, he had ambivalent emotions in regard to his own country. Every single time we would pass Ancon Hill, the hill that overlooks *la Ciudad de Panama*, he would point out the Panamanian flag that has flown there since 1964, after a student struggle took down the U.S. flag that had symbolized U.S. dominance over the city. (Twenty-four Panamanians died in that event, which became a symbol of national resistance.) My father wrote his master's thesis

trying to prove that the coup that established Panama's independence from Colombia was not merely an imperialist-led plot to wrest control of the best land for canal construction but was initiated by Panamanians themselves. No doubt in this way he sought to establish, in effect, the dignity of the nation. And he was well aware from having spent many years in Florida as a student and later as a professor that his brown skin and Spanish accent did him no favors in the "land of the free," despite his accomplishments. With a master's degree, the only job he could find in the 1950s was riding a bicycle delivering ice cream.

During that visit in June of 1990, my father drove us over to el Chorrillo, San Miguelito and to the other poor neighborhoods in *Panama Viejo* that had taken the brunt of First World weaponry during the invasion. He pointed out the bullet holes peppered through porch walls, the piles of rubble where apartment buildings had once been, and together we watched the U.S. Army Humvees that still patrolled the area like vultures looking for scraps they left behind. Just as we turned the corner to leave, an Army Jeep pulled us over. Two *solderos estadounidenses* peered into our car, and then had my father get out and show them his papers. He was not on U.S.-owned Canal Zone property, just in a neighborhood close to the one he'd grown up in, stopped by two white foreigners in front of his daughter and grandsons and asked to prove he had a legitimate right to be there.

That afternoon, my father's identity had nothing to do with the fact that he was a professor of history at the *Universidad de Panama*, had published six books, or even that he still loved and followed U.S. baseball. He was a brown-skinned man driving a car with Panama plates. I knew he was humiliated to have this happen in front of me, and I was wishing he would also be angry, but he betrayed no emotion as he stood there in the sweltering sun while the soldiers chatted with each other in English while checking his car and papers.

This moment crystallizes for me the effect of social identity, precisely because it is so obvious that global capital and neocolonial political formations had overdetermined that encounter between the U.S. soldiers and my father. My argument in this book begins from the premise that structural power relations such as those created by global capital are determinate over the meanings of our identities, the possibilities of social interaction, and the formations of difference. Nonetheless, the focal point of power most often today operates precisely through the very personal sphere of our visible social identities. This should be no surprise, given that capitalism was a racial and gender system from its inception, distributing roles and resources according to identity markers of status and social position and thus reinforcing their stability. Social identities such as race, ethnicity, and gender remain the most telling predictors of social power and success, predicting whether one works in the service sector, the trades, or the managerial class, whether and how much profit can be had by selling one's home, how likely one is to be incarcerated, how likely one is to suffer sexual or domestic violence, and even how high one is likely to score on the SAT. Such facts do not displace the importance of class; rather, they reveal that class works through, rather than alongside, the categories of visible identity.

Although my eyes and face are more from my father's side, I have my mother's coloring, and that accident of fate has made a predictable world of difference in my

life. I was able to pass in places in Florida where my father would have been made to feel uncomfortable, especially when my voice and clothing helped me to blend in rather than stand out. In her comprehensive study of Latinos in the United States, Clara Rodriguez explains that "lighter Latinos . . . may be assumed to be white and consequently be better able to see how others are treated or that they are treated differently from those who are darker." But she also notes that "despite an individual's physical appearance as 'white,' knowledge of this person's Hispanicity often causes a readjustment of status . . . from 'I thought you were one of us' to 'You're an other'—and even an accent is heard where it was not before" (2000, 20). The ability to move across identities has been a useful but sometimes unpleasant experience, and the varied way in which different people view me is similar to the varied way in which my father was viewed as he moved from the university campus to the U.S.-patrolled neighborhoods of his hometown.

Though mixed identity and mixed families are normative in Latin America and the Caribbean, in North America, where racial identity is usually assumed to be unambiguous or "pure," mixed identity can cause cognitive dissonance and fragmented selves. This is a topic I will treat at some length in chapter 12. I raise it here only to indicate that the experience of having mixed or ambiguous identity teaches lessons early on about the fluid and at times arbitrary nature of social identity designations. A friend of mine has a son who is insightful even at the age of twelve about how visible features elicit different evaluative inflections: he has pointed out how the tone of voice his teachers use in speaking to him changes once they see him with his white mother rather than his African American father. As a "mixed race" boy in an integrated school, he also well understands how his choice of friends can alter his perceived identity. My goal in this book is to elaborate identity as a piece of our social ontology whose significance is still underemphasized in most social theory, but I want to underscore the fact that I appreciate and have in fact some direct acquaintance with the contextual nature and fluidity of identity as well as the extent to which identity ascriptions can be oppressive. My attempt to develop an ontology of identity is not meant to reify identities as unchanging absolutes but to understand their historical and contextual nature and, through this, to come to terms with their significance in our lives.

My own ambiguous identity has made me very conscious of the ways identity can open doors or shut them, yield credibility or withhold it, create comfort or produce anxiety. Just as Rodriguez claims for lighter skinned Latinos, those of us who have hybrid or mixed racial and ethnic identities have also generally understood the complex and problematic nature of social identity—its changeability and capricious social meaning—quite well. Identity designations are clearly the product of *learned* cognitive maps and *learned* modes of perception. Yet they operate through visible physical features and characteristics, and one cannot simply "rise above" or ignore them. As Frantz Fanon puts it, "I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (1967, 116).

There is growing concern over the political implications of social identities, especially ethnic, racial, and gendered identities, and this concern reaches beyond academic audiences to the larger public. Debates over multiculturalism, "political correctness," and affirmative action have at their center the question of identity's

political relevance. Many are concerned today that the United States is heading down the same road as the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, that is, toward intractable ethnic conflict. Academic attention to social identity is often accused of pandering to the selfish and divisive agendas of the practitioners of identity politics.

I fear that, in focusing on places such as the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, we are missing the obviously different nature of the problems here in the United States. In our country, many millions of people can trace their relatives back to slaves, and millions of others are from families who were brought here by commissioned agencies as cheap labor to work in fields, mines, and on railroads. Millions more found their political identities and economic status changed overnight through the U.S. colonial expansion and annexation of their lands. Ours is not a society of multiple ethnic groups with longstanding border disputes, but a society of *forced* immigrants, forced by conditions in our countries of origin that in some cases the United States has fought against and in other cases has aggressively supported and even engineered. The manifestations and conflicts of identity *here* need their own analysis, and it will be an analysis that will have much more in common with the rest of our hemisphere and less with the rest of the world.

Racism and sexism in the United States are directly and primarily responsible for the absence of a viable "safety net" for the most impoverished in this country. The ideology of individualism, so effective in arguing against programs to redress poverty, is as influential as it is because so much of the poverty is associated with nonwhites, especially nonwhite women. Racism and sexism have also played a critical role in the low level of unionization and the lack of a viable left. The linchpin that maintains this status quo is the social, cultural, and political division between white workers and people of color. If these communities were mobilized and united in purpose, the current ruling oligarchy would be in trouble. There can be no significant social change, or change in the political structure of our economy, without the united support and leadership of these groups. This, I believe, is our only way forward. Yet the public discussion about "identity politics," which has spread well beyond college campuses to a larger discursive community, has worked effectively to discredit much antiracist and feminist work being done today and sowed confusion about the relationship between class, race, and gender. The "progressive" academic community has thus contributed once again, perhaps not surprisingly, to the divisions that keep us from moving forward.

These are my background political motivations and interests; make of them what you will. Politics does not work as a criterion for an adequate or plausible theory, but it can show us where we should be cautiously skeptical about existing dogmas and "common sense," where we need to press harder, and it can certainly guide our choice of topics.

One of the major problem with using personal experiences or histories is that one has the tendency to make oneself the heroine or at least sympathetic in every narrative. Especially where "identity matters" are concerned, where the stakes are high and misinterpretations are so frequent, this tendency is even stronger. There is not much that is personal in the following pages, but where there is I have tried to combat this tendency, no doubt with mixed success. I used as my guide and inspiration the *Black Notebooks* by Toi Derricote, a work that provides a model of

honesty in this regard, even when the cost is quite painful. Having been born to parents of different races and ethnicities, and having grown up in the U.S. South during the era of civil rights, I do happen to have a history of such a sort that race figured prominently in my consciousness and in the consciousness of many of those around me. I have been privy to the kinds of “insider” conversations that occur on various sides of the racial border. And as a woman, and something of a “femme,” I also feel privy to a space of experience many men do not know enough about to really understand: the double day, the ordinary stress and guilt of the working mother, the sexual harassment that is a constant aspect of the working environment, the epidemic of sexual terrorism that is neither named as such nor addressed with effective deterrents, the daily cultural assault of condoned instrumentalized reductions of women to their appearance. These life experiences have both motivated and informed my feminism, which I define simply as a nonfatalistic attitude toward “women’s lot in life.”

There is truly a huge gulf that separates races and genders in this country, one that only a minority of people have been able to bridge. This book is a bridging attempt, or maybe its just a rickety raft thrown on open seas. Whether it is seaworthy will be determined by its readers.

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