Assumed Identities

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> We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made. . . . Self-knowledge—always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery—is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others.
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> Craig Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*[1]

One would think that the topic of identity (post-, or otherwise) would have been exhausted by now. When the word is mentioned these days, it tends not to meet with a straightening of the back and a defiant stare, nor even a wince and an evasive move, but rather a resigned sigh—"Oh, *that* again?" The constant probing, critiquing, stretching, shrinking of the term over the past two decades seems not to have resolved anything. At best it has marked off a set of common problems and positions to which one refers from time to time when the occasion calls for it. I shall not rehearse all those moves and arguments—they are well enough known. Suffice it to say that identity politics has acquired its own identity, which has made any inquiry into identity a suspect act that stands outside the decorum of polite academic talk. Identity politics has been reserved now to name a particular *bad* politics that intrudes upon what is taken to have been a polite consensus on how to seem not to do identity politics while all the while doing them.[2] It is minorities (sexual, racial, ethnic, class, and so on) whose articulation of identity is seen to be not only annoying, but impolite, for their voicing of these concerns forces others to engage in something they thought they had settled, and settled in their favor.

Besides this general aversion to speak any longer about identity, there is the specifically political move proposed by several social critics to move "beyond identity" and, in particular, into a "postethnic" era. These proposals do not necessarily come from the right; indeed, some of the more eloquent and persuasive advocates for this position identify

themselves within a tradition of leftist (if not radical) thought. For these critics of "identity politics," the real issue of bettering the lives of people can only take place if we set aside the distinctions identity politics seems to fix upon, and work together on a common platform of economic rights. Those associated with this position include Todd Gitlin, Richard Rorty, David Hollinger, Michael Tomasky, and others. Each in his own way has argued that the progressive movement of the New Left was compromised by the emergence of identity politics. These critics argue that, whatever salutary value feminist, queer, or critical race and ethnic studies have had, they have caused the left to veer off-track and into the minutiae of finer and finer distinctions of special interest groups, each claiming priority over the others. This blocks any effective coalition building.

I have elsewhere gone into some detail to outline the historical context for and rebut the basic assumptions of such arguments; here, suffice it to say that this argument has a stake in both downplaying the pervasive significance of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other violent manifestations of prejudice against those who are particularly *identified* (that is, those not just "claiming" identity, but having identities foisted on them), and overplaying the economic as an isolatable space outside the racial, gendered, and otherwise identified social and political spheres.[3] "The economic" is taken as the firm foundation on which all else rests—if economic life is improved for all, is that not all we can hope for? Others, such as myself, while certainly not disavowing the genuine virtue of coalition building around issues of economic justice, are less willing to accept at face value the subordinated position into which issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are relegated.

In this essay I will argue that "postethnic" thinking subordinates group or collective rights to advocate as primary individual rights to economic justice. A corollary to this is the argument that individuals should set aside particular group identifications and see themselves as part of a larger, more encompassing whole, that is, the Nation. Nevertheless, I assert that foundational notions about identity production in sociological literature make a key and useful distinction between "identity" and "type" (that is, between individual and group identities) that alerts us to the way racial typing comes to stand in for individual identity. The real question thus is not how to get beyond identity, but rather how to *get to it* in the first place—how to make the transition from typecasting to a recognizing of, precisely, individual identity? The real difficulty in making this move is that "identity" is predicated upon a set of behaviors that, for racial and other minorities and women, is geared to a set of historical narratives about "them" precisely as groups, rather than as

individuals, and these narratives form the perceptual grid that precedes them in the social discourse of identity.

Wahneema Lubiano provides a concise and astute way of opening this topic of what I will call "assumed identities":

> "Like being mugged by a metaphor" is a way to describe what it means to be at the mercy of racist, sexist, hetereosexist, and global capitalist constructions of meaning of skin color on a daily basis. Like a mugging, this attack involves an exchange of assets: some aspect of the social order is enriched domestically and internationally by virtue of material inequities stabilized and narrativized by race oppression and I lose symbolically and monetarily. Further, I am physically traumatized and psychologically assaulted by an operation that is mystified. It goes on in the dark, so to speak—in the dark of a power that never admits its own existence.[4]

Lubiano's treatment nicely opens up this idea of stepping into a narrative-in-progress, of being cast in a role that has been worked out and placed into the realm of a naturalized assumption. In such cases, identity has been produced well in advance of the interpersonal encounter itself, and indeed this mystified operation counts on such preparation in advance, in the dark, in a set of assumptions which all have deep material origins and consequences.

Now what, exactly, do we mean by "identity"? The OED gives a partial answer. "Identity": "the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else." In this definition, there is an overwhelming sense of determinateness and solidity attached to identity, which is transferable into all times and all circumstances—identity yields the same results no matter where or when it is called upon. But how do we know that this identity is identical to what was before, or elsewhere? Identity posits a certain set of actions and behaviors, a presumed set of characteristics and dispositions that are to be reiterated. Identity is manifest in its constancy, in the fact that the person or thing in itself always expresses the contents of its identity by acting in certain ways. My particular focus here is on the moment of intersubjective encounter, when identity is still virtual, comprised of a set of actions and behaviors assumed to inhere in a particular identity. The result of that encounter will reinforce identity, perhaps *not* because of any action taken by the object of identification, but rather by the sustaining of an assumed, *virtual* act. To put this more plainly, we expect certain types of behavior from certain people, and these expectations may well persist despite any evidence to the contrary. Indeed, evidence to the contrary may be dismissed as aberrational and kept from view by the predominance of those assumptions.

I am concerned here with the assumption that certain people marked by race are predisposed toward certain actions that in turn disclose their racial character. My contention is that in this case we are speaking not of identity, but of social roles, or types, which *pass* for identities (the collective passes for the individual), and that this confusion sometimes brings with it profoundly destructive outcomes. Most specifically, I want to address the situation wherein the interpretive act that assumes that certain behaviors accrue to certain identities moves along a set of put-in-place narratives that proleptically inscribe the outcome of acts which are themselves presupposed to be in the making. In these cases, there is a clear sense that it is the interpreter who has taken upon him or herself the power to assign an identity to another. This assumption of power could not have been made without assuming as well the projectability of identity upon that Other.[5]

The definition of "assume" contains within it a powerful articulation of this complex phenomenon of taking on the mastery of positing identity on something or someone else. I will not run through the entire gamut of the definitions of "assume," but it is useful to trace a particular trajectory that will lead us directly into the issue at hand with my discussion of assumed identity. First, "to assume" is: "To take to be with one, to receive into association, to adopt into partnership, employment, service, use; to adopt, take." That is, to assume is to enter into a particular relationship with the object of assumption. That relationship, I will argue, takes place against and within the backdrop of a history of narratives of similar encounters, real and imagined; the racial encounter—or, more broadly, the encounter with difference—manifests a story that has been told and silenced, repressed, left for dead even, and that story is the history of the production of racism. The encounter, and the assumptive act, at once requires and produces the articulation of both the raced and the racist, as an assumed identity is placed upon the other, an identity that has preceded that object already in a preexisting narration of race.

But even as this act of assuming is appropriative—in the sense that the racist has laid claim to the truth of the person he or she encounters, laid claim to the scene and made it, in short, a *pre-text* for the narrativizing of its own identity ("To take as being one's own, to arrogate, pretend to, claim, take for granted")—it may also be *in*appropriate: "To take to oneself as a right or possession; to lay claim to appropriate, arrogate, usurp." In my use of this definition, I argue that in the scene of identity production—in which the racist assumes the right to name the other as particularly raced, to invent the story which conveys the other—there is an area of indecidability, a gap that must be elided. For to name the

scene, to create the other in the image of a character in one's own story, the racist must assume the consequence of a chain of events that he or she can *only* assume: "To take for granted as the basis of argument or action; to suppose: that a thing is, a thing to be."

The seemingly smooth transfer of narrative power from the extra-situational sphere to the encounter itself, from the historical narration of race to the specific moment of the discrete encounter, assumes that the movement from the universal to the particular is justified. How can we tell that racial identity is the same time and again, everywhere? In logic, the assumption is hidden: "The antecedent is assumed when the words of it are barely repeated in the second proposition, or assumption." It is here that we can draw together all these elements into an imputation not only of being, but of action, and identity. The action, in the case I am outlining, is *assumed* to be *going* to take place, about to reveal the name/identity of the actor in its acting out. The force of the assumption is in its ability to drive the narrative forward to its identificatory conclusion in the absence of any explicit voicing. It does not *need* to be said, its story does not need to be recalled, because it is so ingrained in the minds of the participants and reinforced by the historical persistence of institutionalized racism which repeats the story over and over again in its public policy, juridical decisions, and so on.

The elided term is exactly the composite of the narratives of the racial unconscious, the repertoire of stories about "those people" that are assumed to hold true. Crucially, these elided (yet functional) terms preclude the potential narrative for that person *not* to be *as such*. The thing that fortifies this elision, that erases evidence to the contrary and sets to work against the utopian hope of liberation, is precisely the material-historical reiteration of racism—its structural and institutional function: "The construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. . . . [T]he social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships."[6] Here I will emphasize this issue of power, arguing that, as much as we might believe that assumptions of identity work both ways, to and fro between the dominant and the minority identity, we cannot ignore the way that one set of assumptions is embedded within a firm set of institutional practices that maintain an uneven distribution of power.

My essay follows a line of reasoning developed by sociological discourses on identity, namely the interactive model of identity production, and tries to show how the limitations of this model may produce important insights into not only the nature of social identities, but also

into the way the imputation of identity through an assumed narrative of being and acting has important connections with both public actions and policy making, and the study of literature and society.

Since the 1930s, and especially in the 1970s, we find a vast sociological literature devoted to the study of identity that is focused on interactive encounters between the subject identified and other social agents. These studies build on early philosophical, and, later, psychological notions of the social production of the self. For instance, Locke has been noted for offering an early dialectical theory of socialization.[7] In 1890 we find William James giving a striking account of the production of "social selves" in relation to the interaction of self and other: "Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any of these his images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinion he cares."[8] Here we find a set of interests that will be central to later sociological treatments of identity: the notion of "recognition" as such, the *image* of that identity as something internalized by the viewer and mobilized situationally, and the shift from individual-to-individual encounters to individual-to-group judgments. The conception of identity as founded upon social contingency and conventions that may be ascertained through evidence, measured, and quantified, takes us squarely into the realm of sociology.

It was Erik Erikson who first took the study of social selves into the realm of identity and coined the term "identity crisis," describing identity as a product of interaction between an essential self and society. For him, the process of identity formation was "a process 'located' *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities."[9] However, while Erikson retains some sense of an inner biological identity that withstands, ultimately, the forces of social interaction, sociologists place more emphasis on the latter.[10] It is this attitude that forms the core of sociological theories of identity formation. We find it encapsulated in Peter L. Berger's statement: "Looked at sociologically, the self is no longer a solid, given entity. . . . It is rather a process, continuously created and re-created in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender thread of memory."[11] It is worth pausing here over this "slender thread." This thread, however slender, is seen as the very thing that ties together a history of precedents—each one contributes to the reformulation of identity, as new elements are added in.

Yet the primacy placed on the individual encounter downplays the

considerable extrasituational experiences that also feed into that encounter. The prejudices formed from indirect experience may play just as much, or, indeed, *more* of a role in shaping the encounter itself, and we can include in this group narrative texts. That is to say, the running narrative of identity formation brings together a diverse set of narratives both of past encounters (and the reinterpretation of those encounters), and of other information-bearing stories that may have either a close or quite distant and indirect bearing on actual encounters. And their weight may be so strong as to lead the interpreter to distrust his or her own experience in favor of that evidence. For example, consider an anecdote from Korean-American cultural critic and filmmaker, Elaine Kim: a friend of Kim's was presented with a copy of *The Woman Warrior.* The presenter exclaimed that, having read the novel, she finally understood Kim's friend. Somehow Kingston's novel had the power to explain human beings in a way that direct personal contact could not. In its particular discourse the novel provided a mode of understanding that surpassed and even stood in for human relations.[12] What about that text allowed it to achieve such a potent reality effect? I would argue that it was the existence of a powerful discursive network of threads woven together from divergent sources that then rendered Kim's friend suddenly legible, believable, complete, in that she now was seen to fill in a role carved out of the novel, a legitimizing narrative.

The hermeneutic weight of extrasituational texts goes a long way to account for the interpretation of identity-forming encounters, which, as Thomas Scheff tells us, are predicated on sequences of actions that are expected from the individual, that is, what I have called assumed identities. Scheff sets up this idea of sequences and identity formation: "We have treated social relations and identity as merely different terms for referring to the same phenomena: the establishment of mutually recognized, expected sequences of behavior in a transaction. Identity refers to the individual's sequence of acts; relationship refers to the ensemble of acts made up by the sequences of all the parties involved."[13] That is, the very formation of identity is identical with social interaction, which is interactive to the degree that a sequence of actions emanating within and out of that encounter are assumed in advance. But we must note here the second crucial component of this transaction: the insistence on the ideas of reciprocity and symmetry, in other words, the emphasis placed on a *democratic transaction.* For identity to be formed according to this model, for a social relation to happen, there must be a *mutually* recognized sequence of actions that, implicitly, yields the same hermeneutic outcome for all parties involved. Scheff's theory of communicative action requires a social act that is assumed to be able to take place (indicating the parameters of reasonable behavior), emanating

from social actors whose identities have given us those expectations about them.

The crucial importance of this mutual recognition is that it differentiates "identity" from "social role":

> We have taken social role to be a structural concept which differs in two ways from its complementary processual concept, identity. First, role is at a lesser level of complexity, since it is made up of a component part of the definition of identity; i.e., the expected sequence of acts in a transaction. Role, therefore, does *not* contain the added requirement of mutual recognition by the parties to the transaction. Secondly, role is treated to be part of a generalized pattern of expectations in the community, in contrast to a situational identity, which is the sequence of acts expected of a given participant in a transaction by all the parties to that specific transaction. (206)

The crucial issue here is whether, when discussing race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so forth, we can speak of identity, which hinges upon *mutual* recognition, a *consensual* sense of the identities produced, and the sequence of actions and behaviors to be "expected," or whether we are not indeed speaking of social roles, posited not on individuals but upon "such people" without their consent. Furthermore, the question in Scheff is muted as to the likelihood that the "expectation" is, indeed, well founded (consensual or no). What kind of "assumptions" go into this encounter? It is here that Erving Goffmann productively revises Scheff's model by introducing both a more complicated temporal schematization and a real questioning of the agent of assumption:

> Typically, we do not become aware that we have made these demands or aware of what they are until an active question arises as to whether or not they will be fulfilled. It is then that we are likely to realize that all along we have been making certain assumptions as to what the individual before us ought to be. Thus, the demands we make might better be called demands made "in effect," and the character we impute to the individual might better be seen as an imputation made in potential retrospect—a characterization "in effect," a *virtual social identity*.[14]

In his study of social "stigma," Goffmann speaks of the ways stigmatized groups (cripples, disfigured people, people from the working class, racial and ethnic minorities, and so on) attempt to manage their stigmatization. Yet, importantly, once a stigma theory has been invented to account for both the justness of stigmatization and the behaviors and characteristics inherent in stigmatized groups, it is tremendously difficult for the stigmatized to respond without *confirming* his or her

stigmatized identity: "We may perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect, and then see both defect and response as just retribution for something he or his parents or his tribe did, and hence a justification of the way we treat him" (*S* 6). This produces an unsettling effect: "We normals will find these situations shaky too. We will feel that the stigmatized individual is either too aggressive or too shamefaced, and in either case too ready to read unintended meanings into our actions" (*S* 18). Isn't this precisely a description of what is called "political correctness"? Here we can come back to the notion that identity politics is an identity in itself, that calling attention to the undemocratic transactivity which undergirds the production of minoritarian identities reflects back on the protester to solidify his or her "difference," and that the narratives that serve to set up in advance "expected behaviors" of such individuals and groups are written under certain ideological and historical conditions. Thus, what Goffmann calls "cognitive recognition," "the perceptual act of 'placing' an individual," assumes a particular *mis*recognition because it assumes outcomes, behaviors, and so forth, that are based not on individuals, but on types that are fabricated in extrasituational texts (*S* 18).

The assumption of outcomes, the link between virtual identity and an assumed behavior that both manifests and confirms that identity, is deeply linked to social behavior and political and legal policy. It is precisely here that the slippage between social roles and individual identities is most pernicious: individual identities are subordinated to and confused with social types. One is not left wanting for examples of this issue. One has only to think of the 1986 Howard Beach incident commented upon forcefully by Patricia Williams, in which a group of young black men were beaten (and one died) on a public street because they were thought to be up to no good—what would blacks be doing in a white neighborhood in the middle of the night?[15] Or a 1997 case in Rohnert Park, California, an upscale bedroom community in which a young Asian man, Kuan Chung Kao, was shot to death by police in front of his house after neighbors called about a disturbance early in the morning. They claimed that he had posed a "martial arts threat" to the police officer who shot him. He had been playing with a broomstick over his head. He was very drunk and very doubtfully a real threat to life, yet the police officer felt that this Asian male could likely be a real threat because all Asians naturally know martial arts.[16]

Or the recent and deeply disturbing case of Amadou Diallo, a twenty-two-year-old West African immigrant who was shot forty-one times in February 1999, after being mistaken for a suspected serial rapist. The police officers were acquitted of all charges in March 2000. Reading the news accounts of the event, and the manner in which the body of Diallo

is offered up to representation via an elaborate circuit of bureaucratic formulations and denials, Ebony Chatman brilliantly notes, "The corporeal body is subordinate to the textual circuit, if not locked out entirely. The text is entrusted with the two-dimensional task of representing a body that is *unacceptable* outside of the autobiographical fragments that are solicited. Under these terms and conditions, bureaucratic correspondence enacts its authority through a process of acceptance and denial that refuses to touch the actual body, but acts as if the document were that body—or the only body worth addressing."[17] Here again we find the mechanism whereby identity is recast as a statistical confirmation of a pre-existing type, the narrative which conveys this identity at once presents identity and eclipses all other narratives. It is in this sense that Homi Bhabha's notion of forbearance comes into play.[18] And we can note that in all these examples, the state intervenes to be the ultimate arbiter, the final interpreter of the action and the reaction. I mention each of these cases to make the argument that none of them can be understood in isolation, although each has its own particular set of issues. Rather, I want to outline a pervasive history of institutional action that confirms and reconfirms, time and again, the logic of assumption and its deadly effect—there is no identity, only type.

Janet E. Halley's recent study of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy on gays in the military captures all these issues well and allows us a deeper insight into the production of legal discourses of identity, type, and behavior. She argues that the 1993 revision of the military's anti-gay policy by Department of Justice produced: "a new set of rules that allows homosexual conduct to be inferred from supposed homosexual status": "What actually emerged from the legislative process was a complex new set of regulations that discharge people on grounds that tie status to conduct and conduct to status in surprising, devious, ingenious, perverse, and frightening ways. . . . The most important innovation is a provision that all discharges for homosexuality will be grounded on the servicemember's commission of conduct that would manifest, to a reasonable person, a propensity to engage in homosexual acts. 'Telling' isn't speech in this formulation: it is an act that manifests a propensity."[19] This propensity is conveyed in what we may call the assumptive narrative of identity—it puts into place (as much as it may rehearse and reiterate) extrasituational narratives that are assumed to be the inherent dispositions and likely behaviors of those identified. In so doing, it erases the distinction between individual and group, between identity and social role. Once again, individual "essence" is made indistinguishable from social type; the behavior of the individual is assumed to be commensurate with the behavior of the group. For stigmatized people (to harken back to Goffmann's term), this institutes a "psychometric model of

propensity. It attributes a pathological personal trait to each individual homosexual": "Presumptions are possibly the single easiest way to make sure that one party to a dispute steps up to the starting line with a heavy handicap. They are a classic way to achieve substantive outcomes under the guise of a merely technical change in procedure. . . . Most decisively, proponents of the 1993 revisions claim that giving the servicemember an 'opportunity' to rebut a presumption that he or she has a propensity to engage in homosexual conduct transforms a legal and actuarial prediction about a group into a *fact* about *that servicemember*" (*D* 64, 86). The construct used to measure both the normativeness of behavior and the reasonableness of the attribution of propensity is, precisely, that of a "reasonable person," which "makes the interpretive standpoint of heterosexual personhood an indispensable reference point for enforcement" (*D* 117). We should note that appeals to such a construct again make reference to the act of assumption—in this case, societies posit an ideal mental type to house and ventriloquize their own prejudgments; any fallabilities of a reasonable person will reflect "normal" errors, and are thus excused. And the very credentials of a reasonable person can only be ascertained to the degree that this person confirms or departs from expected behavior. Recourse to constructs like "reasonable person" or "common man" are last-ditch efforts to name an ideal type toward which we must all aspire, without interrogating the assumptions that undergird that construction. Indeed, the validity, or reasonableness of that attribution is often only gained in retrospect, after its judgment is rendered. Nevertheless, like all these cases of assumption, the conclusion to the narrative sequence that expresses and confirms the assumption of identity is often a foregone conclusion.

What better example than the 1922 case of *United States v. Thind*, in which a South Asian man petitioned for naturalization based on the fact that as a South Asian, he satisfied the "scientific" "Caucasian" criterion imposed by the court? When that was disputed, he argued that he also satisfied the "Aryan" criterion argued by the court. Finally, having used up its arsenal of weapons based on geography and biology to label the petitioner as ineligible, the court put forward the argument of the "common man": "We venture to think that the average well informed white American would learn with some degree of astonishment that the race to which he belongs is made up of such heterogeneous elements."[20] We may note how "common man" is itself a construct based on supposed behavior and judgment *that confirms and affirms his own race* at an encounter (need I point out that the "common man" designates maleness and whiteness, that this seemingly modest commonality does not hide the power that is there?). "He" is produced precisely as a narrated subject—what "he would do" were he confronted with the idea

that "white" could include South Asians, who are assumed to be variously "oriental" or "mongoloid," or "Asiatic," and therefore prohibited from being considered "white." But note too that this construct serves to ventriloquize power, that "common man" is a dubious and self-fulfilling identity, that this encounter and judgment is *not* mutually agreed upon, but the narrative construction of the "common man" gives it that illusion. The court chose to *narrate* an imaginary scene of social intercourse that replicates the model of interaction: the common man is presented with a figure that astounds him, it breaches the assumptions he naturally held as to the notion of "white," that is, his notions of *himself*, the "race to which he belongs." In Halley's case, the "common man" is simply updated to be a "reasonable person," for whom the logic of "reason" confirms the heterosexual norms of interpreting its own centeredness by rejecting the other. It is here that we can question Goffmann's claim that: "The stigmatized and the normal are part of each other; if one can prove vulnerable, it must be expected that the other can, too" (*S* 135). For Goffmann seems to suggest the democratic, evenly-balanced model of identity formation in which the subject and object of identifying agree on the appropriateness of the identity created in their encounter. I, on the contrary, have tried to draw attention to the unequal relations that obtain and that cancel out evidence to the contrary in favor of a pre-inscribed narrative of being. Yet Goffmann's democratic rendering offers a utopian moment: when will it be the case that identity is produced democratically?

Let me come back to the argument that we should move beyond identity (which certainly does not mean what it says—it is rather *particular* identities that are to be laid to rest). The urge to move beyond identity is first supported by the hypothesis that ethnic identification is already past us. As early as 1979, Herbert Gans argues that "ethnicity may be turning into symbolic ethnicity, an ethnicity of last resort."[21] Gans contends that, as more and more generations are born in the United States, ethnicity will be gradually loosened from formal organizations and even collective rituals—it will become more a matter of individual performance at discrete moments: "they may retain American forms of the religions their ancestors brought to America, but their secular cultures will be only a dim memory, and their identity will bear only the minutest trace, if that, of their national origins" (449). This sort of wishfulness indeed informs most of the social-science literature on race and ethnicity in the United States since at least the 1920s—sheer exposure to American life will gradually but inevitably wear away ethnic identity, and with that will come acceptance.[22] Yet, even as this view has persisted, there has also emerged a sense that the pace of change is much too gradual, and that Americans must take a more proactive role

in erasing any facet of ethnic identity that might impede the full particulation of the ethnic subject in national life.

The most respected contemporary liberal view on the need to move beyond ethnicity comes in David Hollinger's *Postethnic America.* Hollinger pleads for us to set aside the insistence on ethnicity, and to focus rather on a common ground: "I have taken for granted that the economic, political, and cultural obstacles to a postethnic America are truly formidable, but I also take for granted that revulsion against ethnoracial prejudice is strong enough in the United States today to render the ideal of postethnicity worth developing."[23] It is interesting to note that Hollinger's argument here is nothing if not a pair of assumptions ("taking for granted"). The huge difference between the two assumptions is, of course, that while the "economic, political, and cultural obstacles to a postethnic America" are well documented historically and evinced in everyday life, as my examples above show, the faith Hollinger places in "revulsion against ethno-racial prejudice" is evinced only locally and discretely. While legislation against hate crimes can be pointed to as evidence to support Hollinger's faith, one can also point to an overwhelming body of evidence showing that prejudice is not only well and alive, but thriving (besides the widely documented cases of court-sanctioned violence against minorities and women, we can point to socioeconomic policies such as Clinton's "welfare reform," and so on). As worthy as Hollinger's plea for a "postethnic America" may be, it is important to note whom he is addressing—for he has in mind precisely those who argue in favor of multiculturalism. Hollinger asks us to drop our weapons and shake hands with a historical institutional situation that is armed to the teeth.[24]

Rather than to place the responsibility for moving beyond ethnicity on ethnic and racial minorities, it would be better to respect the dialectical engagement of race and ethnicity across multiple tableaux. Rather than to place faith in an assumption of psychological revulsion against racism and the historical efficacy of that revulsion, it would be better to see the production of inequality as taking place in specific institutional practices that are often as not shielded from sight, bureaucratically rationalized on the basis of assumed identities. Such cases require the *identification* of racism to bring them out from their assumed neutrality to their actual everyday historical life: "We can speak of identity only in terms of what Marx calls the 'ensemble' of social relations, a set of relations whose historicity is a fundamental aspect of identity's existence" (RI 115).

But the real problems with the argument for postethnicity, at least in terms of the sociological tradition that still deeply informs our sense of how identity is formed in the first place, are that, first, it imagines that

the narratives which preceed the social encounter can be erased from memory and made inactive. Rather, it is the case that the historical narratives of prejudice are carried forward in handed-down stories, and realized in present-day violence, as my several examples illustrate. Second, it assumes that the determination of identity is equally decided (that is, that we are dealing with a case of identity and not type). The pervasiveness of racism comes from the refusal to grant identity and the assumption that, for minorities, women, and other groups, behavior is that of the group identity, particularly arrived at. The question, again, is not how to get beyond identity in the classic sociological sense of "identity," but how to get to identity in the first place, that is, how to move beyond type to individuals whose identity formation is arrived at in democratic interaction. This move is necessary before we can go beyond ethnicity and see our way clear to a postethnic coalition (one which I would then heartily endorse). Yet this move will be far from easy, not because minorities and women obstinately cling to identity, but precisely because the narratives that have been put into place to deny them identity are deeply rooted, and the psychic form of racism is thoroughly entangled in institutional forms.

Cornelius Castoriadis's notion of the "imaginary" reveals a more precise and profound view into the murky terrain between institutional forms and psychic ones. For him, the imaginary is:

> the operative condition for every subsequent representation: the fundamental phantasy of the subject, his or her nuclear (and not "primitive") scene, where that which constitutes the subject in his or her singularity exists; the organizing-organized schema that provides its own image and exists not in symbolization but in the imaginary presentification that is already for the subject an embodied and operative signification, the initial grasp and the first, overall constitution of an articulated, relational system positing, separating and uniting the "inside" and the "outside," the sketch of gesture and the sketch of perception, the division into archtypal roles and the originary ascription of a role to the subject as such.[25]

More precisely, his comments on the particular gap between the social and the functional may be taken as approximating the area wherein what I have denoted as "assumption" takes place:

> [S]ocial significations do not exist strictly speaking in the mode of representation. . . . They can be grasped only indirectly and obliquely: as the gap, at once obvious and impossible to delimit precisely, between a first term—the life and actual organization of a society—and a second term, likewise impossible to define—this same life and organization conceived of in a strictly "functional-rational" manner; as a "coherent deformation" of the system of subjects, objects

and their relations; as the curvature specific to every social space; as the invisible cement holding together this endless collection of real, rational and symbolic odds and ends that constitute every society. . . (142–43)

It is in shifting between these spheres that we witness the performance of assumptions, the playing-out of elided terms, the surpassing of evidence to the contrary, the insistence on a particular way of rationalizing racism. It is here, too, that we find the possibility of intervention, but not, I would argue, solely in the private psychological adjustments of antiracism, but more importantly and significantly in the reformulation of institutional structures that underwrite the repetition of racism. For without this structural-functional change, the material histories that perpetuate these assumed identities will continue to populate in their specific phantasmatic manners the narration of identity.

Coda: At Stanford, my university, the Faculty Senate had a heated debate over the renewal of the Ph.D. program in Modern Thought and Literature. A well-established, highly prestigious interdisciplinary program, it was attacked for, among other things, admitting some students with "lower GRE scores." The reviewing committee argued that "perhaps" MTL was "missing" some better students. What was the assumption there? How does one make racism apparent? What assumptions were made as to both MTL's actions and the performance of those with low GRE scores? It is telling that the committee that raised this "concern" never once asked MTL for any data on the success or failure of those with low GREs.[26]

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NOTES

1 Craig Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 9–10.
2 See, among others, George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 1998).
3 See my essay, "Awful Patriotism: Richard Rorty and the Politics of Knowing," *Diacritics*, 29.1 (1999), 37–56.
4 Wahneema Lubiano, "Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor: Multiculturalism and State Narratives," in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis, 1994), p. 64.
5 Here I should also say that I do not have in mind the notion of performance and assumption outlined by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*: *On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), especially pp. 93–120. It is not that I disagree with Butler, but rather that my interest will lie in a different dynamic.
6 Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford, 1997), p. 7.
7 See, for instance, Stanley Aronowitz, "Reflections on Identity," in *The Identity in*

Question, ed. John Rajchman (New York and London, 1995), pp. 111–46; hereafter cited in text as RI.

8 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1 (New York, 1890), p. 294.

9 Eric Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle, Selected Papers* (New York, 1959), p. 22.

10 Philip Gleason, "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History," *The Journal of American History,* 69.4 (1983), 910–31.

11 Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (New York, 1963), p. 106.

12 Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia, 1982), p. xix.

13 Thomas J. Scheff, "On the Concepts of Identity and Social Relationship," in *Human Nature and Collective Behavior: Papers in Honor of Herbert Blumer*, ed. Tamotsu Shibutani (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), p. 206; hereafter cited in text.

14 Erving Goffmann, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York, 1963), p. 2; hereafter cited in text as *S*.

15 Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), p. 58.

16 Michael Chang, "Asian American Public Interest Organizations in the Pursuit of Legal and Social Remedies to Anti-Asian Hate Crimes," *Asian Law Journal*, 7 (forthcoming, 2000). I thank him for providing the details on this case.

17 Ebony Chatman, "Deciding Mistakes: Rethinking the Death of Amadou Diallo" (Department of Modern Thought and Literature, Stanford University, 1999), 3.

18 Homi Bhabha, "The Art of Forbearance." Presidential Lecture in the Humanities presented at Stanford University, 6 March 2000.

19 Janet E. Halley, *Don't: A Reader's Guide to the Military's Anti-Gay Policy* (Durham, N.C., 1999), pp. 1–4; hereafter cited in text as *D*.

20 *United States v. Thind*, 261 US 204, 211 (1922), cited in Ian Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York, 1996), p. 8. See also my *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, 1999), p. 39, and Stanford M. Lyman's excellent study, "Marginalizing the Self: A Study of Citizenship, Color, and Ethnoracial Identity in American Society," *Symbolic Interaction*, 16.4 (1968), 16–22.

21 Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America" in *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*, ed. Herbert J. Gans, Nathan Glazer, Joseph R. Gusfield, Christopher Jenks (Philadelphia, 1979), p. 425.

22 This was of course the hope of the Dillingham Commission, which was established by Congress in 1907 to investigate increased immigration from new and much more foreign shores.

23 David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York, 1995), p. 170.

24 For a sharp critique of the discourse of postethnicity, see Tim Libretti, "Leaping Over the Color Line: Postethnic Ideology and the Evasion of Racial Oppression," *Working Papers Series* (Washington State University, 1999).

25 Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 142–43; hereafter cited in text.

26 For an article on this issue, and the minutes of the Faculty Senate discussion, log on to: *http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/report/march8/senate-38.html*.