



CHAPTER SEVEN

Boomerang Perception and the Colonizing Gaze: Ginger Reflections on Horizontal Hostility

This chapter is written for people of color; for women firstly and mainly, but also for men: green-eyed Blacks,¹ never-been-taught-my-culture Asian Americans and U.S. Latinos, émigrés, immigrants and migrants, mixed-bloods and mixed-cultures, solid core, community bred, folk of color. It is difficult to write without being moved from this intention and it is difficult to hear the writing as so addressed. That is because public spaces are dominated by white/Anglos and because it is part of our oppression that our public spaces are not sufficiently occupied by this kind of conversation. I would like to be heard as if public spaces were thick with us both speaking and hearing and as if our public spaces were fluent in the conversation. This is a chapter about perception, how we perceive each other and what the connections are between those perceptions and the racist/colonialist gaze.

One's body, its color, features, its movement, and the culture expressed in its movements and clothes, all up for mistrust and inspection. One's voice, the accent in one's voice, the culture in one's speech, deeds, ways inspected, over and over by those one would like to call one's own, or—alternatively conceived—those one has reason to think might be one's own people (as when an adopted child has reason to think she has found her real, blood mother). The door to an untroubled identity always closed. Having learned in their eyes that one's claim is not solid. Taken from group to group by the need for solidarity, belonging, for understanding the damages of racialization, for understanding the puzzle of one's identity. From cultural specificity to larger and larger rings of solidarity always inspected, mistrusted, found wanting or not, but always in need of legitimation. Whether from Chicanas and Puertorriqueñas to Latinas to Women of Color; or from African American, Jamaican, Haitian to Women of Color; or from Chinese or Korean American to Asian American to Women of Color. Missing the marks of solid identity.

Solid, barrio raised, core, easygoing in one's identity of color, the sense of faking it or of being perceived as a fake not in one's experience. Not with respect to one's ethnicity or race, anyway, and not by one's own, though one's humanity, one's abilities are constantly taken to be counterfeit by white/Anglos. Solidly tied to a group of one's ethnicity and race by blood and culture and shared history and traditions. One's values clear, one's word and judgment authoritative, weighty. A sense of place or nation accompanied by a deep sense of the tie between place or nation and survival. One's movements, ways, use of speech, very much of the place. The eyes that allow one to position and identify oneself clearly in the world,

comfortably taken for granted as they surround one in a trusting glance.

Under siege, solidity is a matter of degrees and circumstance. At least for some, the degree of solidity changes from place to place, it changes with the company and the territory as it is tied both to company and territory. When outside one's territory, one feels out of one's element, outside the influence of the sources of one's self-assurance and self-esteem. The way of traversing space less steady, uneasy in one's skin, as if one were wearing someone else's clothes. For others the sense of solidity is a sense of nationhood not tied to territory but to a deep sense of shared traditions, traditions forged in "a transgenerational detestation of our subordination" (Langston Gwaltney 1980:xxvii). Moving with others who do not share or are not fluent in resistant core culture feels like a loss of solidity, particularly if one is open to be moved by the values and beliefs of the company. In both cases, going from less to more encompassing circles born from the need to form a politics of resistance means the loss of some degrees of assurance in one's solidity, unless one can succeed in asserting one's values over the larger circle. Sometimes, some people appear to have become context-free-solid; they appear to me that way, anyway. It is hard to imagine anyone subject to the hazards of perception in a racist society feeling that way, feeling impermeable to the multiplicity of mistrustful glances. I wonder about their openness to other resistant ways and about the harshness of their glance. I wonder whether context-free solidity doesn't come together with a willingness to lord one's culture over others.

Mixed, in blood or culture: Anglo-Mexicana, Mexicana-Korean, Black-Mescalero, Chicano-Riqueña, and so on to bounteous hybridation. Mixed, *agringada*, looking the wrong way for the culture, the values and beliefs mixed up in obvious and jarring ways. Or adopted by whites and reared as "their own" into white eyes looking at one's color as if it were not one's own, but fully conscious of one's self-alienation, a sense of lacking a soul. Reared in white neighborhoods to see the culture of one's ancestors as a private affair not fit for public identity and at the same time not quite fluent in the home culture. Feeling as if one does and does not belong in the public; feeling chameleon-like if one blurs the colors and the cultures out of one's own self-perception. Fidgety in the presence of community folk, as if one could cover one's lacks with self-consciousness. Immigrant or migrant to a community of color and thus with no blood ties; immigrant or migrant to a community of color whose shared culture bears distant or no clear ties to one's own; immigrant or migrant to a community of color without sharing its history. Immigrant, one's speech accented not with the mark of regions but with the mark of foreignness, of lack of cool, of lack of savvy in the ways of U.S. insubordinate traditions.

Jon is a young brother and he is a little withdrawn, but he is intelligent and loyal.... He is at that dangerous age where confusion sets in and sends brothers either to the undertaker or to prison. He is a little better off than I was and than most brothers his age.... Tell the brothers never to mention his green eyes and skin tone. He is very sensitive about it and he will either fight or withdraw. Do you understand? You know that some of us don't bother to be righteous with each

other. He has had a great deal of trouble these last few years behind that issue. It isn't right. He is a loyal and beautiful black man-child. I love him. [George Jackson 1970:220]

I have forgotten what I used to be. I lost my youth consciousness in the process of growing up. I did not like my childhood, so I find it strange that I am struck by sentimentality in seeing an Asian child with a white elder. I do not know whether the child's situation is at all the same as mine, but I longed to stop the child, to talk to him, to protect him. I think, though I'm not exactly sure, that in my childhood, my "Asianness" was much more distinct to me. I have assimilated into a world that really isn't mine and though I can speak academically of such an assimilation and though it pains me to do so, I still see out of white eyes. [Bill Elsing 1993]

Just how ethnic are you? We shun the white-looking Indian, the "high yellow" Black women, the Asian with the white lover, the Native woman who brings her white girl friend to the Pow Wow, the Chicana who doesn't speak Spanish, the academic, the uneducated. Her difference makes her a person we can't trust. *Para que sea* "legal" she must pass the ethnic legitimacy test we have devised.... and woe to any sister who doesn't measure up to our assigned places, woe to anyone who doesn't measure up to our standards of ethnicity. [Gloria Anzaldúa 1990]

Where do you go to be seen? To be seen as something other than a more-or-less monstrous imitation, an imaginary being. Where do you go to be seen apart from tests of legitimacy that turn you into an imaginary being? Monstrous to different degrees. Imitation white/imitation color. Ready to be accused of failing to pass the ethnic legitimacy test of passing; of "git'n over" on Blacks, Latinos, Asians, folk of color; of not being someone others can count on; of not resisting subordination because one does not need to and because one is foolish enough to think one can pass; of being a "wanna be" woman or man of color; of being just a foreigner. Everyone can see or hear or understand that one is not white/Anglo, that having green eyes does not qualify one for that, nor having a thick accent, nor a white mother, nor having being denied any culture except white/Anglo culture. Everyone understands that none of these characteristics qualify one as white/Anglo. So how does one get to be seen and why is one left out? Left out of territory, nation, home? Or included as a favor and to be reminded over and over of the favor through rituals of mistrust and exclusion.

The notion that black culture is some kind of backwater or tributary of an American "mainstream" is well established in much popular as well as standard social science literature. To the prudent black American masses, however, core black culture is the mainstream. The minority of black Americans who

significantly depart from core black customs and values may pass, may become bourgeois in spirit as well as income, or swell the ranks of marginal drug and welfare cultures. But far more often than not, the primary status of a black person is that accorded by the people he or she lives among. It is based upon assessments of that person's fidelity to core black standards.... Most black people agree, on all levels of consciousness and in their overt actions, on what these specific standards are. [Langston Gwaltney 1980:xxiii]

“People can tell the difference between ‘real right’ and ‘jackleg’” (Langston Gwaltney 1980:xxiiv).

I am interested here in those caught in between two perceptions that relegate them to a particular lack of independence and lack of sociality. It is a situation similar to exile as it is constituted by a denial of identity, and a ghostly subjectivity. But unlike exile, this is not a discontinuous state from home to homelessness. It is a state of estrangement from self in between two perceptions, neither one of which allows one to position and identify oneself in the world except as an image. Neither perception provides a home or a sense of belonging. One is divested of historicity, living in an uncreative limbo, used, arrogated, doomed to carry out other people's agendas.

Edward Said compares nationalism and exile. He sees nationalism and exile as opposites “informing and constituting each other (Said 1990:359).

Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs. [Said 1990:359]

Exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place. [Said 1990:357]

A sense of home, place, and heritage has been crucial for those who are targets of racism. It has meant the creation and maintenance of an alternative to racist/colonialist perception. It has kept one able to practice a double vision: seeing oneself and one's company at once in the racist and the resistant construction. It has kept one able to hold two incompatible and parallel perceptions at once. And it has also kept one cautious of the racist construction, less touched by it, in touch with it so as to handle one's situation with knowledge of the oppressor's delusions of superiority. I have appreciated the survival and resistant quality of home-made perception, of having one's attention riveted on one's own. Thus, I have tended to think it unhealthy for oppressed peoples to obsess over the oppressors' perception of their subjectivity. One becomes both fascinated by it and overwhelmed by its power. Understanding the extent to which we have internalized it paralyzes one. Unraveling the logic of the oppressor's gaze requires that we pay great attention to it, that we become fascinated by it, but

even when we discover its irrationality, we are not on our way towards a resistant subjectivity. That requires a different logic.

So I have thought that one needs a justification to study the oppressor's logic. As I dwell on the construction of the racist/ colonialist perception, I am guided by three questions: Why do core persons of color, bred in communities of shared traditions, subject the less solid to inspections that constitute them as fakes? Can one maintain the double vision that combines an understanding of the oppressor's powerful imagery with the active exercise of one's home-grown prophetic sense of self without constituting them as fakes? Can those without homeplace, those not bred in the nation, those *sin barrio*, *sin comunidad*, provide a critique of closed boundaries nationhood that doesn't endanger the exercise of double vision?

So, I enter this exploration gingerly without an intrinsic interest in the racist/colonialist gaze. My attention riveted on women and men of color and on the hostility among us as we attempt to neutralize its effects on us. Racist/colonialist perception is narcissistic; it denies independence to the seen, it constructs its object imaginatively as a reflection of the seer. It robs the seen of a separate identity. "I look at you and come right back to myself" says Elizabeth Spelman. "In the United States white children like me got early training in boomerang perception when we were told by well-meaning white adults that Black people were just like us—never, however, that we were just like Blacks" (Spelman 1988:12).

As I think about the object of boomerang perception, I see the consequences of the lack of reciprocity in its logic. The white person is the original, the Black person just an image, not independent from the seer. Given Spelman's account, the white gaze imagines its object to be like and different from itself. The white seer does not really believe that "Black people are just like us," since the white seer does not believe himself to be an image or does not experience herself as an image dependent on Black people.

When talking about the West's creation of the Orient, Edward Said describes a mental operation similar to boomerang perception through which the mind domesticates the exotic, after having created it. The exotic is created through what Said calls "imaginative geography," the setting of imaginary boundaries in our minds between a familiar space—"our land"—and an unfamiliar space—"the land of barbarians." The exotic becomes an exciting threat controlled through a mental operation that domesticates it. "Something patently foreign and distant acquires a status more rather than less familiar." The distinction between things that are completely novel or completely well known is broken down by coming to see "new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing." This is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things. "The threat is muted, familiar values impose themselves, and in the end the mind reduces the pressure upon it by accommodating things to itself as either original or repetitious." The Orient is a repetition of the West. The West acquires a sense of itself negatively through the setting of the "us"/"them" dichotomy; but it acquires a sense of its own value by constituting itself as the original which the Orient repeats, mimics monstrously, grotesquely. Said thinks of this construction as imaginative geography because it does not require that the "barbarians" acknowledge the "us"/"them" distinction. The barbarians are imaginative constructions; they become stereotype,

monstrous repetitions of the familiar.

As I consider both Said and Spelman, and locate my attention on the object of the oppressor's gaze, I come to see the complications and dangers of boomerang perception more deeply. The Western/white seer is the original, the object of his gaze a mere but distorted image: image both in the sense of imagined and in the sense of a reflection, an imitation. The imagination wavering between fear and delight construes us in its image, but as terrific, dangerous, monstrous distortions of its own familiar visage and as fulfilling its unspoken desires. In both cases it construes us as dependent on the seer for its existence, and lacking an independent history because lacking an independent subjectivity. The "same" and monstrously different.

Just in case you may think that my complication of Spelman's analysis with Said's does not quite understand middle-white American perception, consider the following all too familiar example. I was sitting in a very full plane on the window seat. A white woman was sitting next to me, in the middle seat, her husband on the aisle seat. She asked me what I did and after a few minutes I began telling her of my work in Latino/Latina communities and about the situation of Latinos and Latinas in this society. As she insisted that there was no racism involved in the situation of Latinos and Blacks, that we are all the same and that any Latino or Black person could achieve the same things as white people, I began to feel a bit claustrophobic. But then, I thought, this is a political education opportunity. She espoused with conviction the position that we are all the same and that our situations are all the same, a question of a shared human condition. There are differences among individuals, she said, but not between groups. Soon she began telling me about reading about rappers in the paper. She felt horror toward Black and Latino rap, at its violence in its relation to women. She reduced all rap to hatred of women. As I argued that the whole society was violent against women and brought the spectacle of U.S. senators reflecting on the sexual harassment of Anita Hill, the statistics on rape and the small number of rape convictions, she brought the stereotype right to my face: she insisted that Latino and Black male rappers were, after all, different, brutal, animalistic, sexually violent in a way very much different from white manhood and from the violence of the system. Sameness called for by narcissism, difference called forth by a sense of danger, of aggression. The "same" and monstrously different. As I was arguing with her, her husband forbid her from talking to me any more. She complied.

The alternative perception allowed by homeplace and the company that homeplace affords, *carnales y carnalas*, is crucial for survival. It layers itself over this ghost-making gaze and gives one substance. In giving one substance it affords resistance. It makes both vision and history possible. But it should be clear to anyone who respects the many resistant enclaves that folk of color have built in this society, that we have fashioned a variety of styles, values, beliefs, ways, which afford us perceptions within different seeing circles all of which are alternatives to the racist/colonialist gaze. Most of us are aware of and fiercely tied only to our own, to the one of our seeing circle.

So, why is it that those steeped in home-grown perception make others pass ethnic legitimacy tests and constitute them as fakes through the inspection? There is a felt connection

between survival, resistance, the maintenance of double vision and who one sees as one's own, who is part of the resistant seeing circle, the nation. There is a felt sense that one can only keep double vision seeing and being seen through the eyes of one's particular circle. There is an understanding of only two logics that are markedly distinct, in fierce opposition: racist logic and resistant logic, both active in the home-grown seer as realistic resistance requires. This lack of fluency in resistant logics accounts in part for the drawing of very tight, inflexible boundaries around one's circle. There is also a presupposition that the formation of nations, homeplaces, is the only way to develop logics of resistance.

Thus, there is a deep fear of losing this anchor, this seeing circle that gives one substance, as it stands as the sole conceivable source of a resistant subjectivity. This fear is analogous in my experience to the terror that seizes acute chronic pain sufferers: the fear that the pain may take over your whole consciousness and leave nothing in you except consciousness of pain, all other subjectivity erased. One fears that one may become what one is in the racist perceiver's eyes, and nothing else, all other subjectivity erased. And as I have argued, that is to become something insubstantial, dependent, a distorted image of white humanity. So one guards the seeing circle zealously.

One can understand, then, the mistrust of people of color who, given these presuppositions, must have been taken, zombified, given white/Anglo eyes or who must have few or no defenses against racist perception. There is a sense of unspoken horror, of metaphysical revulsion, at such people. They are lost, consumed by the only other available logic, the logic of ghostly subjectivity. The two fears, the fear of losing one's own solidity and the fear of seeing someone who has none as one of one's own, closes the outside of the circle in its own terrifying intersubjectivity. Thus, enlarging the circle to include those who do not have, or one does not have clear reason yet to believe they have, an alternative sense of self, is understood as endangering the circle itself.

I think these presuppositions are mistaken: fluency in more than one resistant logic breaks one out of the two exclusive logics paradigm, a paradigm that necessitates fragmentation and mistrust among people of color. It also enables one to be open to the possibility that others are not consumed by racist perception, that they are not ghosts. The fragmentation of perception disempowers our resistance by making deep coalitions logically impossible as it undermines the very possibility of fashioning larger and complex resistant collective subjectivities, more complex seeing circles.

But it is not just that the presuppositions are mistaken. It is crucial to my argument here, that those who are not insiders to homeplaces are seen by those within, with the eyes of the oppressor. The choice between only two exclusive logics dictates this adoption. But it is paradoxical that those who cultivate resistant perception with respect to each other would thoroughly internalize oppressive perception of those outside their circle. It is only when perceived with the oppressors' eyes, as consumed by them, as mere monstrous images, that those outside homeplaces lack a resistant subjectivity and have nothing to teach those within the nation.

Once the first presupposition is abandoned, when one comes to see that there is more than

one resistant logic, one has very good reason to abandon mistrustful ways of perceiving people of color who are not part of one's own community of validation and resistance. This allows the perceiver to face those outside shared values and shared community with a willingness to ask the question of identity anew, with the curiosity of someone who is looking for companions in the formation of a larger resistant subjectivity. Who are you? Who are we? become different questions when asked anew, without presupposing the real/fake dichotomy. Then one may see that the no-home, in exile position may have provided some perceptual advantages: the one without home may have learned to see orthodoxies and ossification in the homeplaces; learned them as interpretations of their own flesh; learned them in the rejection of themselves as innovations. Orthodoxies and rigidities may well respond to a desire for safety, and to a sense that conserving tradition is a way of safety. The racially/culturally homeless may stir critique and new life that appears to endanger that safety. But she looks for community because she looks for the formation of a large resistant subjectivity and this cannot be constructed without the company of those seasoned in resistant traditions.

There is a fear of critiques of orthodoxy. When tradition seems a haven from cultural and psychological devastation, it is hard to honor critical stances as it is hard to see the dangers of orthodoxy and conservatism from within and under siege. Yet those of color who are culturally homeless understand that orthodoxy is itself dangerous, a form of self destruction, an ossification of culture that aids the ethnocentric racist push towards culture as ornament. So, the fear of critique also inclines toward the exclusion of the culturally homeless through the adoption of the racist perception of them. Again, this is self-destructive, and it is further indication of the infiltration of whiteness in the logic of home-grown resistant circles. It indicates a further understandable inconsistency in the resistant stance.

We can agree with Gloria Anzaldúa's claim that "it is exactly our internalized whiteness that desperately wants boundary lines marked out" (1990:143). Once we understand the presupposition of only two logics of perception, one racist, the other resistant to racism, and once we understand the presupposition of resistance arising only from within culturally traditional circles, the internalization of whiteness in the rejection of the culturally homeless becomes clear. The culturally homeless are seen with white/Anglo eyes; cultural critique is resisted toward a reduction of culture to ornament; fragmentation follows, as does lack of understanding of other resistant logics. We can also mention that the very logics of ethnic legitimacy and of racist/colonialist perception are consonant, working on the original/real-imitation/fake dichotomy. Thus, we administer legitimacy tests with white eyes on, and what moves us to administer the test is the same logic that invokes the distinction between the original/real and the image/fake.

So, we have answered the question: "Why do core persons of color, bred in communities of shared traditions and history subject the less solid to inspections that constitute them as fakes?" We have also answered the question: "Can those without homeplace provide a critique of closed-boundaries-nationhood that doesn't endanger the exercise of double vision?" Indeed, the critique of closed boundaries challenges the internalization of whiteness and buttresses the exercise of double vision. It makes one self-aware of the very construction of resistance, its sources, the process, the company. It enables one to be choosier about the company by

uncovering a different way of asking the question of identity, one that doesn't presuppose a simplicity of two opposed logics, one racist, the other oppositional, resistant. It opens the door to a plethora of resistant possibilities, alliances, understandings, playful and militant connections. There is risk, but the safety of tradition, of conservatism is a myth for people under siege. Only the powerful derive power from quieting critiques of tradition.

We have also answered the question: "Can we maintain the double vision that combines an understanding of the oppressor's powerful imagery with the active exercise of one's homegrown prophetic sense of self without constituting the culturally homeless as fakes?" The answer is simply that double vision becomes more complex and open-ended. One's resistant vision will become more open to and knowledgeable in other resistant logics, and benefit from the complex exchanges. Or it may become "visions," complex fluencies, critical and creative understandings of possibilities. The cautious vision, the "realistic" vision of the hegemonical construction becomes more honed. One understands its reach further and guards against its intrusion into the inner sancta of resistance. Fragmentation becomes meaningful only when its phantasmic logic is allowed to infiltrate the logic, core, spring of our connections.

So, this has been a call to reflect on the destructive and self-destructive logic of the demand for cultural and racial authenticity. The analysis has led us full circle to a reappraisal of bodies, accents, ways, combinations of bloods and cultures. We all can be traitors, but that does not depend on green eyes, Anglo mothers, or thick accents.

I want to end denouncing, rejecting, and abhorring a reading of reality between the barrio solid or homeplace dwellers and the culturally homeless that sometimes suggests itself to me when swallowing rejection of myself or of others who don't quite make it to authentic by the use of an allegory.

In a Nahuatl erotic tale (León Portilla and Shorris 2001), the hero, disliked by the powerful father of his beloved, is sent to the front lines in war together with the insane and physically deformed. They are sent to take the brunt of the violence. As their dead bodies block the enemy, the society is purified of the infirm. The logic that promotes the formation of this gruesome strategy should fill solid, together folk of color with horror. Yet, how have we—those outside home-grown identities—not been sent to the front lines unaccompanied, unshielded, unprepared by the logic of the real and the fake?

Note

1 In this chapter, I use capitals for "Black" and lower case for "white." With this usage I want to indicate that Black is a superimposed organic term of resistant identity, though sometimes it is used as a "bare" racial "descriptor." The latter is a racist usage, since the black/white racial distinction is racist. I will not write "black" in even those cases to disallow the racism to stand without resistance. In those cases there are two moments within the linguistic act. The term "white" is never used in my text as an organic identity term.

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