


Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Passing as Persuasion

Marcia Alesan Dawkins · Thursday, November 8th, 2012

This article is excerpted from [Clearly Invisible](#), a new book about passing and cultural identity in America today.

 It was one o'clock in the morning when I made a startling discovery. Insomnia led me to my iPad in search of new applications to pass the time. While scrolling through the iTunes App Store I came across a game called Guess My Race.

Guess My Race consists of a ten-question "quiz" that presents striking portraits of real people's faces.* The user is asked to guess how these otherwise anonymous people answered the question, "What race are you?"** After selecting from among six options, the user discovers how the person actually identifies him- or herself, or how he or she is identified by family and friends. Each answer is accompanied by a quote from the person in the photograph regarding his or her identity or experiences with race. For reasons you will soon see, Guess My Race piqued my interest immediately, so I downloaded it and began to play.

My first score was "1 out of 10 questions correct." Disappointed, I played again: "1 out of 10 questions correct." I wondered if there was something wrong with me or with the game. My next attempt yielded "3 of 10 questions correct." Frustrated with myself and with the game, I put it down and endeavored to get a few hours' sleep. It was a useless attempt. I had been too intrigued by the game, and my mind was flooded with explanations for my poor scores.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that each picture and set of answers in the game creates a momentary crisis of meaning. I did not consider categories like "Haitian," "Catholic," "Hick," and "Undocumented" as racial, so I did not know what answer to select. But by forcing me to consider the possibility that others may think of these categories as racial, the game made me aware of just how inarticulate all racial signifiers can be. My every guess forced me to question what I really know about race. I saw no right way to guess what answers were correct.

I wondered if this was what it was like for others during the countless real-life guess-my-race encounters for which I served as subject. Most people did not ask. They just stared in a way that expressed that they were interested by difference. When close friends asked me this question directly, I told them about my ancestry and family history, although I must admit that I used to guard this information from people at large, sometimes disclosed it selectively, and on occasion said nothing or followed Jean Toomer's example and said "the first nonsense that entered my mind."*** For me the difficulty was not so much in looking like one race or another, whatever that means, but in the unpredictability concerning how the next person I encountered would view or communicate with me.

Guess My Race turned the tables. Not only was I now the bearer of the awkward "what are you" question, but the answers I received confounded me completely. Most of the people I guessed as "white" did not refer to themselves as such. Instead, they referred to themselves as "multiracial" or

in ethnic terms such as Jewish, Italian, Arab, Armenian, Hispanic, and so on. Conversely, the majority of people I guessed were “multiracial” referred to themselves as either “white” or “black,” even when they acknowledged their multiracial and multiethnic ancestries.

Eventually it dawned on me that my problem was not one of knowing the right answer across all ten questions. My problem was of knowing what answer was right in each distinct question. The more I thought of it, the more valid my hypothesis appeared. Guess My Race was not just a lesson in racial identification practices and diversity. It was a lesson in rhetoric and passing.

Notes

* The Race Awareness Project, Cambridge Diversity Consulting, accessed September 7, 2010, <http://www.cambridgediversity.com/rap.html>.

** Race Awareness Project. After each guess is made, the user is presented with a historical or cultural factoid related to identity. According to its developers (the Cambridge Diversity Project), “Guess My Race” is meant to support a constructivist view of race and introduce users “to a critical thinking perspective on culture and hegemony more broadly.”

*** Charles Scruggs, “Jean Toomer and Kenneth Burke and the Persistence of the Past,” *American Literary History* 13, no. 1 (2001): 41–66.

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