Coco Fusco

WHO'S DOIN' THE TWIST? NOTES TOWARD A POLITICS OF APPROPRIATION

...How are we to understand
the social or psychological bases for this postimperial mode of mimicry,
this ghost dance of white ethnicity?
KOBENA MERCER

DURING A TRIP I made to Germany and France in 1993, I could not avoid taking note of resurgent hatred directed at foreigners in general, and at Muslims in particular. Not a week passed without some news report about Arab, Turkish, and African immigrants being burned out of their dwellings or beaten by neofascists. It seemed as if Europeans reserved a special kind of malevolence for the last non-Christian people to have succeeded in conquering parts of their continent. Sadly, it reminded me of the rising xenophobia in my newly adopted home state of California, a sentiment I interpret as a symptom of the fear that the Southwest might become part of Mexico, as it once was.

In Europe's climate of animosity, derisive comments about the (perceived) stubborn insistence on maintaining traditional connections between identity and appearance were common. More than a few Europeans reminded me of the legal battle involving the young Muslim girls and their *chadors* (veils), which the French state had sought to remove while they were in school. In many more conversations, I noted how even progressive Europeans equated "traditional" appearance with "oppressive" culture and minorities resistant to assimilation. They also insisted on the obverse of this view, saying that if immigrant children no longer *sounded* like their parents, then they were no longer really different. "It's only their hair that let's you know," a German woman told me, speaking of the children of Turkish guest workers. I found no room in these discussions for the idea of a third term, of hybrid identities that result from living between cultures.

The European feminists I encountered were no exception. I heard all too many horror stories about Muslim treatment of women that often began with comments about *chadors* and led to assertions that "traditional" men didn't allow their women to be feminists. At the same time, I also learned that the latest craze for middle-class German women trying to "get in touch with their bodies" was belly-dancing classes,

which were even more popular than the salsa workshops that had sprung up like weeds all over northern Europe. No one spoke of the simultaneous embrace of a culture and rejection of the people who originate it as a contradictory behavior with a colonial history. German intellectuals at a film conference I attended on that trip argued that their interest in black culture was not part of a colonial legacy but rather a by-product of their being victims of the American culture industry, thus positing themselves as colonized. Rap performed by white youths, herbal medicine and hair care, nose piercing and world-beat fashion, all gestures of cross-cultural appropriation and identity displacement, were among the latest defining markers of the rebellious northern European. No one wanted to consider how European countercultural groups attempting to redefine, transform, and broaden contemporary societies, depended on reified notions of difference to delimit their transgressiveness.

I didn't have to cross the Atlantic to witness such acts of cultural transvestism, or the resistance of white artists, intellectuals, and global cultural consumers to interrogate the power relations implicit in these exchanges. On the contrary, I was sensitive to this phenomenon because of the emotionally charged debates about cultural appropriation in America. Less than a year after my European visit, during a public lecture I gave at a northeastern university, I made a brief comment about a female veteran of the 1960s New York avant-garde, noting how references she had made to African fertility goddess sculptures as a liberating influence in her search for erotic female imagery were part of a tradition of appropriation I saw as linked to colonialism. I explained that I thought she had conflated the identity imputed to the fetishes by Euro-Americans (i.e., that they were African, therefore erotic, therefore transgressive) with the significance of the objects within their own context.

Afterwards, several of my white colleagues pulled me over quite nervously to ask what was wrong with such borrowing. They assured me that the artist in question wasn't racist, and confessed that they too absorbed visual influences from non-Western cultures. "Are you trying to tell me I have to take all the stuff I brought back from my trip down the Nile out of my studio?" exclaimed one of them. My attempts to distinguish between moral judgments and the politics of cultural exchange were futile, so I opted to drop the issue rather than be ostracized, once again, for appearing to behave like a politically correct hardliner.

No other multiculturalism-related topic I know of has been the source of more defensiveness and explosive reactions from white people than that of cultural appropriation. As I look back on a decade of multicultural debates in the American art world and academia, the memories of that rancor alone are enough to make me persist in asking why whites are so invested in either avoiding the issue of cultural appropriation or refuting racialized approaches. I can no longer keep count of the times I have seen artists and critics of color shunned for raising the issue at public events, or how often colleagues have been blacklisted when they have advocated affirmative action policies as protective measures against excessive appropriation. Could it be that

the backlash has generated an intellectual climate in which such vehemence is acceptable from people who might have bitten their tongues in other times?

Between the liberal cries of reverse racism and censorship, and the post-structuralist accusations of essentialism, one might be coaxed into believing that people of color actually had the same kind of control and access that the dominant society and mainstream cultural institutions wield. These hyperbolic accusations, gay Asian-Canadian cultural activist Richard Fung points out, give the false impression that individuals and communities can engage in censorship, which in reality is the sole prerogative of the state, and also perpetrate age-old notions of nonwhites as barbaric philistines.[1] The invectives against political correctness mask what motivates white attraction to cultures and peoples designated as Other, and diverts our attention from looking at how "difference" acts as an antidote to a perceived absence of spirituality, vitality, or erotic pleasure in the dominant culture.

"While some fusions may be celebrated as exchange, a larger proportion is the result of domination," writes Fung after working for a year on the advisory committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equality in the Arts. In his article, "Working through Cultural Appropriation," Fung goes to great lengths to map out a contextually bound system of interpretation to evaluate acts of exchange.[2] He makes crucial distinctions between the needs and priorities of different groups, stressing that it is particular *genealogies* of racial and ethnic subaltern groups that makes their concern for cultural preservation a logical priority. He notes the need to investigate the pervasiveness of misrepresentation in relation to a group, the degree of commercialization of the culture, and the actual possibilities of self-representation. Also, Fung differentiates between distinct modes of cultural production, suggesting that the specific natures of each might entail individualized regulatory policies. The opinions of his committee never became policy. Of the twelve recommendations made to redress racism within Canada's cultural bureaucracy, the only one dealing with cultural appropriation became the centerpiece of a protracted nationwide media attack on multiculturalism, despite the fact that the Canada Council had rejected it. So violent was the reaction to the very idea of regulating access to subaltern cultural property that the valuable efforts of activists were completely lost in the shuffle.

Black British cultural critic Kobena Mercer characterizes these encounters as moments of "acceleration of interculturation," calling them skirmishes played out around the semiotic economy of the ethnic signifier.[3] Mercer's theorization is particularly relevant to me because of his view that the problem is political (i.e., a struggle for power) and economic (i.e., a question of attribution of value to formally similar but distinct operations and entities). Mercer argues that we need to look at the network of social relations and histories that invest the act of appropriation with different values for different groups to make appropriate theories and aesthetic judgments about them. By doing so, he adroitly moves us past the two rationalizations that underpin multicultural backlashers' more frequent arguments—the liberal notion

of cultural appropriation as an act of "free will," and the post-structuralist approaches that abstract individual acts of appropriation from the social systems that imbue them with specific meanings. With the help of his analyses, and those of Fung, bell hooks and others, I will attempt to walk through some of the current skirmishes to make sense of the dynamic that unfolds around me daily.

Writing and talking about cultural appropriation, I reposition myself in a somewhat precarious way within a society that seeks to deny how segregated it is; I go from being a "minority" critic dutifully explaining Otherness to one who addresses whites as agents in an ongoing dynamic of racialization. This shift in terms disrupts the commonly held assumption that desire for the Other is in itself a way of eliminating racial inequality. Furthermore, to speak of whiteness as a way of being in the world still disturbs many of those for whom a racialized discourse is in itself a minority discourse, a mode of marginalization. Dominant cultural and white avant-garde defenses are cast in terms of aesthetic freedom (*But why can't I use what I want as an artist?*) and transgression of bourgeois banality (*But I cross boundaries and therefore I rebel too*). What is more fundamentally at stake than freedom, I would argue, is power—the power to choose, the power to determine value, and the right of the more powerful to consume without guilt. That sense of entitlement to choose, change, and redefine one's identity is fundamental to understanding the history of how white America has formed ideas about itself, and how those ideas are linked first to a colonial enterprise, and, in the postwar period, to the operations of industrialized mass culture.

American history from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is rife with examples of how black and Native American cultural expression was regulated by a white power structure and removed form its sources to serve as entertainment for whites.[4] Many Native American dances, for example, were outlawed on reservations while they were regularly performed for whites at fairs and circuses. This legacy makes the act of preserving culture and invoking boundaries less a matter of essentialist romanticism than cultural survival. At the same time, absorption and mimicry of Native American, Mexican, and African American cultural forms and philosophies have been absolutely central to the formation and transformation of white Americanness. During the Boston Tea Party, for example, colonials dressed like Native Americans to attack British ships.[5] After the transfer of the northern half of Mexico to the United States, German and Scottish settlers in Texas turned the world of the Mexican *vaquero* into what is now considered quintessentially American—cowboy culture. During the same period, easterners who headed west in search of fortune often changed their last names to Spanish ones to slip in among the *Californios*.[6] Class is woven into this pattern as the transfers of appearance move from the subaltern to the privileged.

There is a long history within American feminism of these sorts of gestures, dating back to the links made by early suffragists between political disenfranchise-

ment of black slaves and white women. During the early stages of the women's movement of the 1960s, it was commonplace for some white feminists to appropriate the terminology of slavery to speak of bourgeois marriage. More recently, many white feminists have chosen to ally themselves, politically and theoretically, with the struggles of women of color in the United States and the Third World. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty eloquently explains in "Under Western Eyes: Third World Women and Feminism," many of these gestures, however well intentioned, too often rely on (with no actual reference), a paradigmatic "Third-World woman" as well as on the universality of the category of women to be politically effective.[7] Resistance from feminists of color has come in response to the awareness that such alliances too often function as a simple means of validating white feminism as morally superior due to its apparent antiracism.

Privileged women in Latin America have also relied throughout history on subaltern cultures for signs they could appropriate as markers of their transgressiveness. One of my favorite examples is that of the *tapadas* of the sixteenth-century viceroyalty of Peru. They were libertine *criollas* who used their shawls as *chador*-like veils, covering all but one eye to hide themselves and thus be freer and less easy to identify in public places. This practice had originated in Spain, where after the expulsion of the Moors in 1492, Islamic veils were banned as *Morisca* slaves turned to shawls to cover their heads and faces. Catholic women quickly perceived in the use of this body covering the advantage of its allowing them more social mobility and privacy. They took on the practice with such gusto and success that the Spanish crown outlawed it thereafter. In South America in the 1580s, the Council on the Indies saw in *tapadas* potential damage to the empire, noting that their sexual behavior could not be controlled and that even men were using shawls to engage in homoerotic "sin and sacrilege." Despite frequent attempts to outlaw it, the practice continued into the eighteenth century, when Enlightenment ideas redirected privileged women's desire for more liberty to cerebral rather than sensual pursuits.[8]

The dynamics of appropriation that evolved with colonialism intensified with the introduction of industrialized mass culture in the postwar period. In *Subculture and the Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige notes that in First-World youth cultures one can discern the phantom history of race relations since the war.[9] To this I would add that mass culture cyclically projects the image of an atomistic racial utopia to (white) middle-class consumers, promising individualized, and often eroticized, modes of cultural appropriation and consumption that substitute for equitable exchange or simply contain interaction among ethnic groups. It has been widely argued that white youth in the 1950s danced to "jungle music" and "mambo" to express their rebellion against the repressed atmosphere of the McCarthy era. Though some might claim that their enthusiasm for the music prefigured integrationist ideals of the 1960s, the music industry quickly made whites into the star figures of what began as black cultural movements, thereby strengthening mass-cultural dominance and

revalorizing its symbolic capital by means of commodification. The modality of this cultural practice has shifted somewhat in recent years due to the emergence of world-beat culture, which presents a more equitable facade, and also to the growth of black-dominated areas of the American entertainment industry, where some people of color exert a degree of control over their representation. Yet, our projection of racial diversity as desirable, and our sophisticated consumer's attraction to commodified otherness have done little to stop increasing the polarization of wealth along racial lines. In fact, they parallel the intensification of xenophobia and nativism in government policy throughout the nations of the First World.

The postmodernist celebration of appropriation dovetails with a certain kind of thinking about art that extends the notion of creativity to include the recontextualizing of objects and signs. The more Eurocentric versions of this school of thought distinguish between dominant cultural acts of appropriation as creative transformation, and subaltern manipulation of imposed forms as "derivative" activity that distance them from a preferably natural state. The white avant-garde's and the dominant culture's appropriations are interpreted as implicit critiques of a modernist glorification of originality, and of ideologies that conflate nature and culture, while the subaltern version is seen as evidence of self-hatred. In "Black Style/Hair Politics" Mercer provides a detailed analysis of the defects in the reasoning that identifies such practices as hair-straightening as assimilationist. At the same time, he acknowledges the significance of cultural nationalist negation of Eurocentrically imposed aesthetics and standards as a necessary and strategic moment in a process of decolonization.[10] The Eurocentric approach to appropriation does not account for the conditions of colonized societies and other contexts where national autonomy, national culture, and/or subaltern identity are fragile, imperiled, or symbolically effaced by external forces. Attempts to establish protectionist measures in order, for example, to allow national cinemas to develop in such contexts are hardly examples of reactionary essentialism—they are prerequisites to survival and are ways of combating the American habit of dumping its entertainment industry waste on poorer neighbors. These regulatory efforts do not oppose, but complement, the strategies of recycling, creolizing, parodying, and otherwise transforming the imposed symbolic systems that are integral to the history of, for example, most Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Contemporary cultural debate in the United States has tended to depoliticize the act of appropriation by abstracting it from its historical context, as well as from its agents. Too often, the focus of analysis is either on the individual acts of appropriation by artists and identity-benders or the large-scale exchanges of goods within the domain of global capitalism, without a questioning of the ways these practices intersect. Formalist analyses can make different operations appear to be similar, but only the most extreme forms of relativism would allow us to equate the operations of institutions, corporations, governments, and affluent consumers with the survival strategies of marginalized communities. Appropriation is a process that

cannot be reduced to what happens once something identifiable is removed from the place it previously occupied. Cultural appropriation is as much a political act as it is a formal operation or linguistic game. It involves *taking* something, often from someone, and it is rarely an isolated gesture. Seen from a semiotic perspective, the act may be interpreted as a dramatic illustration of the arbitrary relationships between identities and bodies, or between signifiers and referents. Seen within the historical context of historical relationships among the different sectors of societies in the Americas, however, that act of taking is marked by a legacy of violence, and of forced adaptation to imposed symbolic orders and the loss of the colonized's right to name things as their own. While it is true that no culture is fixed and that exchange among cultures has taken place throughout history, not to recognize historical imbalances and their influence is *the* strategical evasion that enables the already empowered to naturalize their advantage. As bell hooks points out in her essay "Eating the Other," members of ethnic minority groups that have endured a history of having their cultural production regulated by and capitalized on by whites deploy essentialist arguments as a defense against excessive commodification.[11]

Underlying hooks's, Mercer's, and Fung's arguments is the insistence that not all exchanges of cultural symbols are the same, and that an effective critical vocabulary to address the issue must be able to take the specificities of each situation into account. Methods that proceed from facile generalizations, abstractions, and theoretical paradigms may provide quick results, but abstractions and theoretical paradigms obfuscate the issue. The current moves within gender studies to present passing and drag as psychosymbolically interdependent modes of appropriation might be reviewed in light of the ongoing insistence among white scholars on forging equivalence among different forms of marginality by abstracting examples from their specific contexts. To insist on the equivalence between textual acquisition of information and experiential knowledge, they buttress their arguments not only with diatribes against essentialism, but also an endless artillery of decontextualized citations from subaltern writers. Perhaps the best-known manifestation of this debate involves the writings of bell hooks and white lesbian theorist Judith Butler about Jennie Livingston's film about black and Latino voguers, *Paris is Burning*. I cannot here recapitulate Butler's and hooks's arguments in their entirety, but I will try to gloss the pertinent points, referring to hooks's article "Is Paris Burning?" and Butler's "Gender is Burning."[12]

Reacting to the euphoria in the mainstream media over Livingston's film, hooks took up issues that had been downplayed by white critics; mainly that the drag queens in the film drew their notion of femininity from white suprematist ideals of female beauty, that the film deploys the voyeuristic gaze of the conventional ethnographic documentary, and that its status as a cross-over hit was indicative of its success in exploiting the established colonialist and voyeurist convention of taking the white tourist into the dark underworld. Throughout her piece, hooks stresses that the film

is an industrialized form of mass entertainment, which is extremely significant. Crucial to understanding and determining the value and meaning of cultural appropriation is the nature of the genre worked in and the power relations it sustains among artist, subjects, and audience.[13] Commercial cinema's sheer money-making potential sets it apart from many other art practices and invites an analysis of its economic relations. Ethnographic cinema, in light of its historical connection to colonialist adventurism, and decades of debate about the ethics of representing documentary subjects, is a genre that demands a special degree of scrutiny.

Throughout her rebuttal, Butler blurs these distinctions. She declines to address the position of the film in the mass-cultural marketplace, preferring instead to take on an auteurist, psychoanalytic reading that focuses on the relationship between the director and her subject. Even so, Butler makes no mention of the fact that, in 1991, several of Livingston's subjects filed suit against her and the film's distributor for unlawful use of their images. With ease, Butler glosses over substantial differences between the genres of literature and documentary film, moving from the contemporary *Paris Is Burning* to early-twentieth-century novels by Willa Cather and Nella Larsen to support her theoretical claims. Butler's mode of analysis abstracts the issue appropriation from its context, thereby eliding the ghosts of history that might temper her claims of transgression.

Butler's response relies heavily on diminishing the validity of hooks's terms as essentialist, inaccurate, and heterosexist, but I also detect a deconstructionist distaste for social and historical forces, which, if mentioned at all in her analysis, are compressed to the point of triteness (i.e., "the painful and fatal mime that is passing for white"). Butler claims that hooks assumes that the drag queens are imitating women, and is therefore leaning toward female essentialism.[14] Why, Butler asks, should drag be necessarily seen as negative imitations of women? But why should hooks's views be read as part of a history of white feminist critiques of drag as misogynist when her comments are about the reactionary quality of the version of femininity being appropriated? In her digression on drag and misogyny, Butler allows race to drop out momentarily—not acknowledging that hooks's actually refers to the drag queens' embrace of white suprematist notions of female beauty, ideals that are distinguishable from any historical or essentialist category of women and/or women's experience. In not noting this distinction, Butler reverts to the earlier stages of feminist thought that she initially criticizes for positing the primacy of sexual difference as determinant.

As if to "out-race" the race expert, Butler then suggests that hooks isn't sensitive enough to ethnic diversity among the voguers because she neglects to mention that there were Latinos as well as blacks. She herself, however, does not make a critical distinction between the *racial* category of black, which covers all the voguers, and *ethnic* categories of African American and Latino, which divide them. hooks makes no *racial* distinction because there is none to make. Furthermore, while Butler

makes efforts to undermine hooks's assertions about racial dynamics in film, she never acknowledges that the sexual history of the Caribbean (the origin of *Paris Is Burning*'s Latinos) is rife with evidence of exploitation of gay and heterosexual men *and* women of color by gay and bisexual whites, heterosexual *criollos,* and tourists. To suggest, as Butler does, that the possibility of a white lesbian director's gender-bending desire for a black transvestite in and of itself subverts ethnographic convention because it introduces ambiguity does not engage with a history of racial exploitation that crosses genders and sexualities. It also overlooks another key chapter in the history of sexual relations between whites and blacks, in which, during slavery and segregation, white women "called the shots" in their actual and invented relationships with black men and "cried rape" as a means of exerting control. Livingston's alleged feminization of her black subject may subvert gender identity for Butler, but it also recalls a long history of white women's power to subjugate black men and thus keep the racial order of things in check.

To allow such a possibility of subversion to hinge on the exaggerated camera movement in one scene that was probably executed by a camera operator rather than the director further destabilizes Butler's critique of hooks's argument about the film's colonial gaze. If subversion occurs because of ambiguity, for whom does it occur? Are we to believe that anything about the life conditions of the voguers is subverted by a camera movement or directorial desire? What kind of subversion or ambiguity, then, is it? Did ambiguity prevent the film from playing into the prevailing racial and economic dynamics of a sexual economy in which "cruising the margins" is an international pastime for filmmakers, tourists, and consumers? hooks's stress on the economic and power relations in the film, and her suggestion that Livingston gained wealth and professional prominence through her capturing that culture on film, are side-stepped by Butler in favor of a reading that transforms every sign of oppression into a symbol of transgression.

In her attempt to show that Livingston's ethnography was a critical parody of convention because the voguers' "houses" constituted radical appropriations of family structures, Butler makes ambiguous assertions that are reminiscent of early anthropological writings. It is unclear at moments whether she is crediting Livingston-the-author for an adaptation of heterosexual kinship structures, or if she is recognizing that the "families" predated the film. Though Butler asserts that the balls catalyze the creation of alternative families, she uses their existence to support her claims of the film's subversion of ethnographic convention. Do the subjects then subvert the filmmaker's ethnographic look, or does the director undermine notions of family by choosing a nonconventional one as her subject? Finally, Butler's concern for the ethnic specificity of the Latino voguers does not motivate her sufficiently to learn that "nontraditional" extended and otherwise re-invented families are a historical constant in Latin American societies, particularly at the lower end of the social and economic scale. Butler's suggestion that the presentation of nontraditional kinship

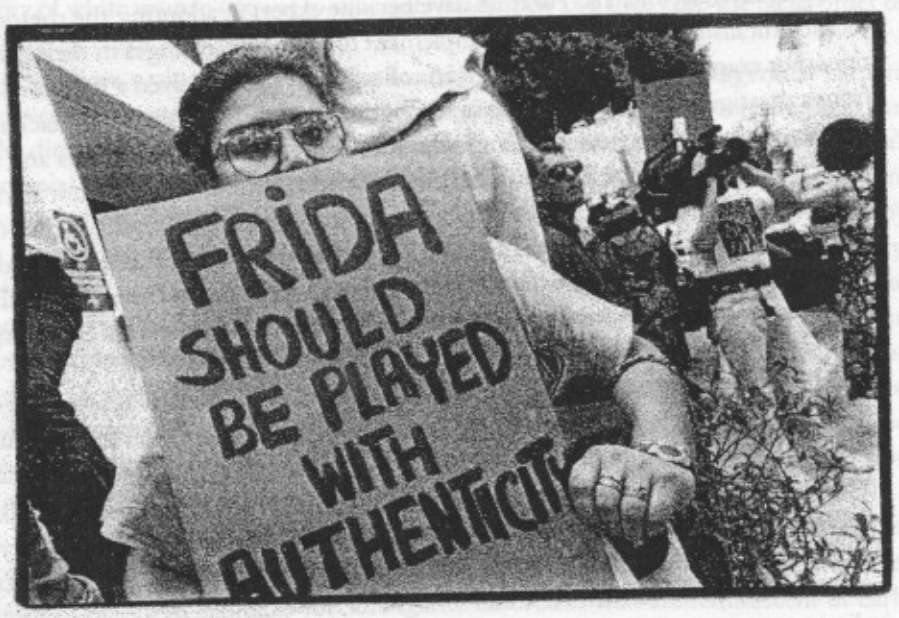
structure as family undermines convention sidesteps ethnography's historical purpose, which was to record and classify "other" kinship systems and thereby distinguish the western family from them. Their difference did not *subvert* the norm, but rather served as proof of it as a superior evolutionary stage. To suppose that voguers reinvented the white American middle-class family also implies that subaltern lives are purposely organized to subvert white heterosexual American norms, which is hardly the case, though whites may read them as such. To assume so, as Butler would seem to do, is surprisingly, if not alarmingly, ethnocentric.

In cultural milieus throughout the country, progressive intellectuals and artists have resorted to sophisticated forms of evasion rather than deal with the anxiety that confronting whiteness can generate. Operations within cultural bureaucracies are somewhat different from the assertions of individuals, but often lead to similar goals. Mainstream museums and curators have become expert at adopting the rhetoric of multiculturalism without having to implement fundamental changes in their institutions. For example, an African American colleague recently received a rejection letter from a prestigious California museum explaining that the exhibit about black masculinity she sought to present there "did not fully take into account artists and attitudes represented in Los Angeles's African American community," a sector that has never been paid attention to by the museum before invoking its name served their purposes. Two years before, another staff member at the same museum had told a Puerto Rican artist from New York that giving him a show might be taken as a slight by the local Latino community, which is largely Mexican, although no Latino show had ever taken place there.

White resistance to reckoning with the politics and economics of appropriation is not the only obstacle to furthering more productive discussion of cultural politics. Subaltern attempts to redress inequities and misrepresentations are still rife with inconsistencies. Protectionist measures are frequently couched in the moralistic language of guilt and blame, or they depend on static notions of authenticity to determine group membership and valorize certain forms of expression. The recent establishment of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, for example, designed to protect indigenous artists, relies on federal laws governing tribal affiliation that are contested by many Native Americans. At times, the subaltern intervention is not systematic but suspiciously arbitrary, aimed at targets that are too weak to be of significant consequence. The action launched in 1992 by a prison warden's association against New York's Department of Cultural Affairs and a single white artist for having allegedly reinforced negative stereotypes about Latinos in a public mural on a jailhouse wall is a clear example of this. That same association had never considered addressing the systematically racist depiction of Latinos on television, for example, while the National Council on La Raza makes it the focus of one of their annual reports. Another problem is that defensive subaltern reactions often posit all relationships between cultures as binary and hierarchical, implicitly eliminating the critical tools

necessary to understand the current interactions among laterally related subaltern groups in contemporary urban areas.

These deficiencies cannot become rationales for dropping these arguments altogether. To dismiss *any* subaltern defensiveness about appropriation as essentialist propagates the notion that people of color are less able to reason. It is all too easy to throw one's hands up and say that culture penetrates all the borders we might erect, so that we might as well capitulate to the logic of desire and global capital. This response has turned into yet another way of evading the more political dimensions of multiculturalism. Such responses do not distinguish between the historical moment of cultural nationalism in the debates about the aesthetics of ethnic minorities, on the one hand, and activist use of essentialist rhetoric to raise the issues of power and access to cultural institutions, on the other. Hence, the protests launched by Chicana



New Line Cinema protest, 1992.
PHOTO BY CYNTHIA WIGGINS.

actresses in 1992 against a film production about the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, who was to be portrayed by an Italian American actress, was played in the Los Angeles press as an attack on the first amendment rights of the director, Luis Valdez, rather than as an outcry against the reinforcement of Latino invisibility in Hollywood.

These skirmishes over cultural appropriation have sensitized me to the ways that "passing" operates in the post–Civil Rights era, and how the liberal integrationist atmosphere in which I was educated sustained white privilege by enforcing silence

about its hegemony. The socialization I and many other affirmative action babies received to identify racism as the property only of ignorant, reactionary people, preferably from the past, functioned to deflect our attention from how whiteness operated in the present. What bell hooks calls the liberal ideology of universal subjectivity (i.e., that we are all just people) made us partners in a silent pact that permitted "good" people of color to circulate among whites as long as racism was not mentioned as part of the immediate present. Whereas "passing" in the pre–Civil Rights era has been mythologized as having resulted from blacks teaching their offspring to dissimulate, we must also take into account how whites continue to reward token people of color with social acceptance as "honorary whites" for not crossing the conversational marker on race. To raise the specter of racism in the here and now, to suggest that despite their political beliefs and sexual preferences, white people operate within, and benefit from, white supremacist social structures is still tantamount to a declaration of war.

Given the current climate, cultural activists of color will continue to be lambasted for attempting to control access to images and ideas through notions of cultural property. This is seen as interfering with freedom of expression and curatorial prerogative. Liberals and postmodernists alike also resent being told that interracial or intercultural desire, whether it goes by the name of "slumming," border crossing, or appropriation, in and of itself does not disrupt historically entrenched inequities. Nonetheless, it is precisely because mass-cultural and avant-garde assimilation of ethnic signifiers has not brought about significant improvement in the conditions of life in subaltern communities that people of color continue to advocate political measures to redress inequities.

I have raised the issue of subaltern cultural protectionism, fully conscious of the fact that in the past decade, scores of artists and critics of color (myself among them) have implicitly and explicitly chipped away at the essentialist aesthetics of cultural nationalism, openly appropriating influences and ideas that could be considered "white," and self-consciously infiltrating traditionally white cultural institutions and academic disciplines. In light of the virulent backlash against multiculturalism in recent years, I find it absolutely crucial to distinguish between philosophically supporting essentialist arguments to the letter, and understanding their spirit and objective politically. Too often, however, the postcolonial celebration of hybridity has been interpreted as the sign that no further concern about the politics of representation and cultural exchange is needed. With ease, we lapse back into the integrationist rhetoric of the 1960s, and conflate hybridity with parity. Still, the critiques of appropriation cannot be reduced to an attempt to ignore the existence of hybridity or to prevent cultural exchange. What is at stake in the defensive reactions to appropriation is the call to cease fetishizing the gesture of crossing as inherently transgressive, so that we can develop a language that accounts for who is crossing, and that can analyze the significance of each act. Unless we have an

interpretive vocabulary that can distinguish among the expropriative gestures of the subaltern, the coercive strategies that colonizers levy against the colonized, and dominant cultural appropriative acts of commodification of marginalized cultures, we run the perpetual risk of treating appropriation as if the act itself had some existence prior to its manifestations in a world that remains, despite globalism, the information highway, and civil rights movements, pitifully undemocratic in the distribution of cultural goods and wealth.