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Shape Shifting: Toward a Theory of Racial Change

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Abstract: We are accustomed to thinking of identities—racial, ethnic, often religious—as if they were permanent, unalterable features of individuals and groups. The theory enunciated here is directed to illumine individuals and groups whose lives are more complicated than that. Such people are shape shifters. At different times in their lives, or over generations in their families and communities, their identities have changed from one group to another. This article sets out an agenda for understanding the phenomenon of racial or other primary identity change. It seeks to understand what kinds of circumstances produce racial change, what sorts of people and groups are likely to change identities, what processes facilitate identity change, and what kinds of work that change is doing. It describes three major intertwined processes at work. Sometimes it is mainly a matter of changes in context and the menu of identities that are available. Sometimes changes in identity are imposed by governments, by institutions, or by society at large. And sometimes it is an individual's, a family's, or an entire ethnic group's choice to make a change. The complexity and contingency of these processes may tend to diminish our commitment to the very idea of social inquiry as science.

Keywords: race; identity; racial formation; racial change; shape shifters; mixed race; passing

Ask an audience of a hundred people to tell you what their racial or ethnic identity is and just about everyone in the house usually can do so. A is Black, B is Muslim, C is Japanese, and so are all of the members of their respective families and kin groups. Our racial identity is something we all know about ourselves. Ask the same audience how many have changed their racial identities over the course of their lifetimes, and it is unlikely that a hand will go up. We assume that race is a stable and essential part of our makeup, a ground to our identity. This article, however, is about people who *could* raise their hands if they were asked a similar question. It turns out that there *are* people who have changed their race or another primary identity, sometimes more than once.[1] As is appropriate for a special issue on the theme of mixed race, many such people do indeed have complicated ancestries, and mixed people tend to have more identity options than those who see themselves as monoracial. I am writing to explore the circumstances under which individuals or groups may be prone to changing their identities, and to try to assess what is the work that such racial change is doing. I am not doing this because it is the main issue in racial studies—far from it. Racial change is rare, but it does happen, and I want to try to understand it. Thus, I am writing in the direction of a theory of racial change.

1. Some Preliminary Considerations

First, let me describe what I mean when I talk about race in this paper.[2] I will use the term "race" to refer to any primary identity of an individual or group that is inherited from kinfolk (biological or cultural) and that is commonly deemed to be permanent. I am not surrendering to the pseudoscience of eugenics or any of its contemporary successors— race as subspecies, a biological category, discernible by physiognomy or genetics, and determinative of character and abilities (Gould 1996; Marks 1995; Stern 2016; Kevles 1985; Tucker 2007; Sussman 2014; Roberts 2012).[3] Nor am I making a distinction between such kinds of identity as race, ethnicity, ethnoracial group, or indeed religion. Such categories

are all related and they tend to leak into one another. For example, Jews and Muslims are religious groups, yes, but have both been racialized and treated as fundamentally Other by European and American White Christians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Joshi 2020; Blumenfeld et al. 2008; Delatolla and Yao 2018; Meer 2012). To imagine that their groupness is fundamentally different from other kinds of ancestry-based identities is making a distinction that may lack a difference insofar as social processes go.

Rather, for the purposes of this article, race is a shorthand referent for any ancestral identity that is deemed indelible and widely believed to shape one's character and life chances. Racial belonging is assumed to be more permanent than other sorts of identity, which are widely recognized as partly voluntary. In common thinking, a Methodist may become a Presbyterian; it is a voluntary choice, related to theology, education, and class mobility. However, one cannot be formerly Chinese and now Black. A Jew is likely to be regarded by others (and to regard herself) as somehow Jewish even if she converts to Catholicism. In this sense, Jewishness, Chineseness, and Blackness are all racial identities, while Methodism and Presbyterianism are not.[4]

Second, let me address one thing that racial change is not, or at least that it seldom is. For generations, we have heard much about the passing trope. It is an artifact of the American racial system, born in the days of legal slavery and the one drop rule, which decreed that any person with any African ancestry at all is actually Black. The passing trope is one of the great, hoary, and utterly misbegotten themes of twentieth-century American literature and film. The story goes that a *really* Black person *pretends* to be White and is miserable because of it. From Charles W. Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars* (Chesnutt 1900) to Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (Hurst 1933) to *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett (2020), it's the same story, over and over. A light-skinned, mixed-race child grows up in a Black family and community but yearns to experience the wider (that is, White) world. She (it is usually a woman) moves away, cuts ties to her Black kin, and lives as White. She is miserable there, deeply regretting having cut herself off from the warm company of Black people who meant the most to her. Usually, she dies unhappy. The history of this fiction is complex. It is worth noting that the most recent historian to assert the passing narrative, Allyson Hobbs (2014), is forced to resort to scenes from literature when she gets to the crucial conclusion that all passers were miserable; she does not have data to draw from life.[5] As we shall learn, there have been some people whose lives fit the passing description. But they are a tiny minority among race changers. Something bigger (though perhaps less salacious) is going on in cases of racial change. I am calling it shape shifting: simply moving from one racial identity to another, for reasons we can perhaps discover.

Third, allow me to address the question of authenticity (Lindholm 2007). Take the example of several people who once were White (or at least had that option) and then chose to regard themselves as Black. In this instance, many observers have an urge to police who is really Black and who they believe is just pretending. They are likely to make a negative judgment about someone like blond Australian rapper Iggy Azalea or NAACP activist Rachel Dolezal. Possibly they will consider challenging the essential Blackness of Reconstruction-era Louisiana Governor P. B. S. Pinchback or Black movie star Herb Jeffries. But they will probably not think to question the Blackness of W. E. B. Du Bois. Yet a case can be made—for each of these individuals—that they were really Black, having to do with their own self-proclaimed identity, their behavior, and how a lot of people perceived them. And a case can also be made for each of these that they were not Black at their origins and that they later *chose* to be Black. Particularly when one thinks about individuals, it is easy to become obsessed with the authenticity question. Is Dolezal truly Black? Did Du Bois have racial options? Yet, insofar as we may presume to judge another person or group's identity, authenticity is not the question. Commitment is the question. I am not writing this paper in order to police the authenticity of anyone's identity. What I am trying to make sense of is *what is going on when a person or group starts out with one identity and then, by their own volition, or by the acts of others, or simply on account of changing circumstances, ends up with another identity?*

My own work on Pacific Islander American ethnic multiplicity (Spickard 1995) suggests that four factors are in play in judging the strength of an individual's claim to belonging in a particular group identity:

- **Ancestry**. A single ancestor will be enough to make one eligible for membership.
- **Family**. Is there a group of people who are indisputably members of the group to which you say you belong that recognizes you as a member of the group?
- **Cultural practice**. Does one behave as one is expected to behave in this group?
- **Place**. Is there a place from which you spring that is deeply associated with the group in which you are claiming identity?

Of these, the most important is family: Is there a group of people who are indisputably members of the group whose identity you are claiming who recognize you as one of them? Let that be our master criterion for judging whether an individual or group is a member of a particular ethnic community.

I must add that shape shifting is not a universally available phenomenon. It is not something that is possible for all individuals or groups. It is more likely to be available to groups and individuals that are customarily seen as mixed than to those in whom mixedness is not widely perceived. Shape shifting does not always carry the same moral freight. Shape shifting is not a thing without consequences. There are stakes. However, as we shall see, the stakes, the consequences, and therefore the moral freight to shape shifting can vary enormously.

2. Conditions That Abet Shape Shifting

From my five-decade-long study of many centuries of race and human behavior on six continents and in the Pacific, it appears that racial change happens most frequently in contexts that are characterized by rapid and powerful social change, to wit:

- **War** (the violent clashing of two or more peoples, in very uncertain circumstances for individuals, sometimes leading to individuals making unexpected identity choices);
- **Slavery** (in the modern world, often the enslavement of one kind of people by another);
- **Migration** (people from one part of the world going to another place and trying to find a way to become part of that other society);
- **Empire** (the bringing together of disparate peoples into a single social field);
- **Nation building** (when governments often try to impose a single identity on a variety of peoples); and
- **Borderlands** (at the fringes where two or more societies touch, intersect, and overlap, providing room for individuals, even whole groups, to move back and forth).

To take a single borderlands example, racial change in the last third of the nineteenth century was more likely to occur along the US–Mexico border than it was in New York City or Mexico City. Thus, it was there, in south Texas, that a young African-descended man, William Ellis, born enslaved and newly freed in the latter 1860s, began to engage in trade across the border into Mexico. In a few years' time, he transitioned and became Guillermo Eliseo, a Mexican millionaire. Yet even though racial change was born in the borderlands, one must point out that Eliseo then entered the metropole. The former slave, now millionaire, had offices and magnificent homes in both Mexico City (where he was viewed as an American) and New York City (where he was a Mexican). What started in the borderlands ended up becoming a feature of the centers (Jacoby 2016).

Shape shifting can occur at the level of both group processes and individual lives. I see three kinds of processes at work in such changes: (1) Sometimes a changing context—either a move from one racial system to another or a rapid transformation of the racial rules within a particular society—dictates or makes possible a change of identity (Deaux 2018; Rodríguez-García et al. 2021). (2) In many instances the change is compelled; usually, it is by large institutions, such as national or imperial governments, but compulsion may also be social, local, even familial, in its driving force. (3) When the circumstances allow it, an individual or a group may choose to make a change of their identity, with varying results.

Of course, this division is heuristic. In any given instance of racial change, combinations of more than one motivation and process are likely to be at work.

3. Changing Context, Changing Identity

Turpan. I am a White guy from California. When I am in Central Europe or Scandinavia, people come up to me and speak the local language because they assume I am from there. But it has not always and everywhere been thus.

In the spring of 1989, I was traveling in Chinese Central Asia. A dust storm in the Taklamakan Desert kept me and my friend Bob pinned down in Turpan, an ancient oasis town, for several days. We hiked the local hills, explored caves with ancient Buddhist carvings, and just sat around waiting. One hot day I was in the bazaar, sitting up against a whitewashed wall, trying to squeeze into the little bit of shade that was to be had, alongside an old Uyghur man. Ninety-five percent of the people in Turpan were Uyghurs, Turkic-speaking people with hawk noses, slanted eyes, and tawny skin. There was little Chinese presence except Radio Beijing blaring from a loudspeaker, ignored by everyone present. Uyghurs used words like "colonialism", "hate", and "kill" if they talked about the Chinese at all.

I spoke street Chinese in those days and the old man knew a little, so we tried to make conversation.

Ni shi Nippon-ren—"So you're Japanese", he declared.

Bu shi. Wo shi Mei-guo-ren—"No, I'm American", I answered.

Na shi shenme?—"What's that?" he asked. And then it occurred to me: aside from the loudspeaker playing Radio Beijing overhead (in Chinese), there was no local means of learning about the outside world. No Uyghur language radio, no television, no newspaper. Few outside visitors except for Chinese bureaucrats. No way of knowing about the United States, or much else outside Turpan.

I tried to describe my country to the gentleman. He wasnt buying it. No place like that existed as far as he was concerned.

He knew about three kinds of people. There were *people*—that is, Uyghurs, of many tribes and lineages. There were Chinese, the hated colonizers. And, as it turned out, there were also Japanese. Every two weeks a minibus brought about a dozen Japanese tourists to Turpan. Outsiders, in this man's world view, people who were neither Uyghur nor Chinese, were *ipso facto* Japanese. A White American like me was Japanese.

Things have changed a lot in Turpan since that hot spring day in 1989. The world has come in. People have cell phones and watch Al Jazeera. Today I would not be labeled Japanese. But that day I was not *mistaken for* Japanese; I *was* Japanese, in the language of the Turpan racial system of that time. This may be a trivial case, but it is an example of racial change as a matter of context. In California or Budapest, I am a White American; in Turpan in 1989, I was Japanese.

Karina. More significant, perhaps, is the experience of my friend Karina (pseud.). Over the course of her life, she has gone through several fundamental changes of racial identity. Born in the 1980s in the Kyrgyz Republic of the Soviet Union, she was simply a Soviet citizen at a time when the USSR encouraged interethnic marriage. Her mother's ancestry was Polish and German, her father's Armenian and Tatar. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Karina, her mother, and her grandmother were "repatriated" to Germany on the basis of the grandmother's German maiden name (though she too was mixed, and the actual German ancestry was several generations remote). "In Germany, we, as the Russian-Germans, have been received like a wild horde of 'fucking Russians' (sorry), who threatened in every way the German way of life. The people couldn't consider us as ethnic Germans, especially because we looked, behaved, and talked like Russians. ...I never felt so Russian before". So remote German ancestry got her German citizenship, but her behavior and friendships in Germany led to other Germans concluding she was Russian. Then she lived for a year in France, where she began to feel like a German for the first time.

When I interviewed Karina a few years ago, she said that she increasingly felt, not like a Russian or German or Kyrgyz, but like a European. In Karina's case, European is an easy identity to take on, since she has lived in several countries, and besides, her boyfriend is not German. What is Karina *really*? The authenticity question does not apply. She did not choose to shape shift. It is simply the fact of her history that, over the course of her life, Karina has felt herself to be, and has been treated by others, depending on the context of the moment, by turns as Soviet, Kyrgyz, perhaps a bit Armenian or Tatar, German, Russian, German again, and finally as European.

Becoming Italian. Not just individuals but groups, too, can change their identity as they move from one context to another. Between 1870 and 1930, more than 4.6 million Napoletanos, Torinos, Sicilianos, Umbros, and other peoples from the Italian peninsula and islands migrated to the United States. Those who came in the early decades of that period were not Italians until they arrived in America. Italy did not become a unified state until the Risorgimento in 1871, and it took many years after that before the many peoples of Italy began to regard themselves as a single people. Some would say they do not see themselves as one people even now (Gabaccia 2000; Portelli 2004; Guglielmo and Salerno 2003; di Leonardo 1984). It was only a few years ago in a Milan restaurant that I encountered a possibly drunk local bellowing that "Africa begins in Napoli".

Black Racial Formation. To take another example, consider this old historian's joke: How many Africans were ripped from their homes between 1450 and 1850, enslaved, transported to the Americas, and made to work? Answer: None. In Africa they were not Africans; that was a European idea. They were Ibo, Hausa, Fon, Fulani, Bambara, Mandinka, Dahomey, Asante, and several dozen other disparate peoples, with different identities, languages, religious practices, and foodways. In a book called *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, Michael Gomez (1998) shows vividly how they gradually became Africans in the course of capture, enslavement, the Middle Passage, resale, and then ultimately became Negroes after a couple of generations in the Americas. This is the historical process that Michael Omi and Howard Winant (Omi and Winant 2014) describe as Racial Formation.

Thus, one variety of shape shifting is driven simply by change of context—changes in the menu of racial identity possibilities.

4. Compelled Identity Change

Orphans of Colonialism. Sometimes, individuals or groups are forced to make a change. This is seldom a happy experience. Frequently it is a matter of a state or an empire working its will on a population. In British India and Belgian Congo, for example, governments and religious authorities acting on their behalf seized mixed-race children from their settler colonialist fathers and their colonized mothers, housed them in so-called "orphanages", and tried their best to erase their Indian and Congolese identities. In the case of British India, after ten or fifteen years of training in Whiteness, a subset of the "orphans" was shipped off to Aotearoa (which White people call "New Zealand"), where they became White settler colonialists themselves (McCabe 2017; Peltier 2021; Schreuer 2019; Pilkington and Gagimara 1996; Read 1999; Smithers 2017).

Sometimes, the leaders of a marginally stable nation impose a common identity on the people they govern in order to strengthen the national bond. Political scientists tend to assume a fairly simple formula for understanding the grounds of national identity:

One Nation =
One Ethnic Group =
One Religion =
One Language =
One Stable Territory =
One Government =
One Imagined History.

That is, each of these features, when held in common by the bulk of the people in a country, tends to reinforce the glue that holds the nation together (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; A. D. Smith 1986, 1995; Eley and Suny 1996; Hobsbawm 1990; Armstrong 1982; Geary 2002).

National Imperative: Khazars Become Jews. A slightly controversial example is the medieval Khaganate (roughly, kingdom) of Khazaria, a country north of the Caucasus Mountains and the Black and Caspian Seas that arose in the seventh century. The population included several Turkic-speaking tribes, as well as Bulgars, Iranians, Ugrians, Finns, Slavs, and other peoples—many nomads or semi-nomads, but also townsfolk, farmers, and hunter-gatherers. Among them were some Jewish refugees from persecution by Christians in the Byzantine Empire and by Muslims among the Arabic peoples. The story goes that sometime between the middle of the eighth century and the first decades of the tenth, first the Khagan converted to Judaism and then the nobility joined him *en masse*. Scholars are divided as to how far Jewishness advanced into the common population. Some say that substantially everybody became Jews; others that it stopped with the nobility. At this historical remove there does not seem to be much definitive evidence either way. The everybody-was-Jewish crowd posit further that, when the Khazar kingdom fell apart before a Russian onslaught late in the tenth century and early in the eleventh, this large Jewish population migrated west and formed the basis of the Ashkenazi Jewish people, in places such as modern Ukraine, Hungary, and Poland. That is the slightly controversial part, as many scholars of Judaism hold fast to the conviction that the Ashkenazi population were all diasporic descendants of Abraham and Sarah, not converts. For our purposes, what happened later is beside the point. What matters to this discussion is that a Khagan converted to Judaism and his people followed, almost certainly at royal order: that is compelled identity change (Golden 2003, 2010; Vachkova 2008; Brook 2006; Koestler 1976; Dunlop 1954; Gold 1982; Sand 2009; Behar et al. 2003).[6]

Ethnic Erasure: Making Uyghurs Chinese. What China is doing to its Uyghur population these days is the flip side of the nationalist race-changing project: trying to destroy dissent by destroying ethnic difference. Uyghurs are a Turkic-speaking Central Asian people, the dominant racial group in massive Xinjiang (nominally a "Uyghur Autonomous Region") in China's far northwest. Xinjiang was colonized by China during the Qing Dynasty and has never been fully integrated into Chinese society. There has been a low-level resistance movement in the region since at least the 1950s. The majority of Uyghurs are Muslims. In the 1980s and 1990s the Chinese government began encouraging Han Chinese (the dominant ethnic group, more than 90 percent of the national population) to move into Xinjiang in order to dilute the Uyghur presence (Spickard and Fong 1994). After 9/11, the national government began a campaign to label Uyghurs as terrorists (men especially), arrested a lot of them, and drove thousands into exile in countries ranging from Kazakhstan to Turkey and beyond. Then, in the 2010s, they began to incarcerate Uyghurs (up to 1.5 million people) in re-education camps. There they work for low wages behind high walls and wire fences. They are forbidden to worship, to wear Uyghur clothing, to speak the Uyghur language. It is a conscious attempt to erase their Uyghur identity and replace it with Chineseness (Roberts 2020; Bovingdon 2010; Amnesty International 2021).

Kill the Indian, Save the Man. Sometimes, peoples are compelled to change their fundamental identity just out of bigotry, a misguided sense of racial superiority, and perhaps a conviction of inevitability. Take the case of boarding schools for American Indians in the United States. The history of White people educating Native people in the ways of White people began in the seventeenth century and was practiced sporadically, but it became systematic national policy after the Civil War. In 1879, Lieutenant Richard H. Pratt, who had just spent eight years fighting and killing Indians, founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School with federal government support. He commanded there and lectured widely until 1904, when he retired as a brigadier general. Pratt and other educators who ran Indian boarding schools at government behest pursued a policy of assimilation, with the motto in Carlisle's case: "Kill the Indian in him, Save the man". They saw themselves

as "friends of the Indian", but regarded Native peoples as destined for inevitable extinction and in need of saving, which to them meant Whitening. They took children away from their families, sometimes thousands of miles away, cut their hair, dressed them in White people's clothing, forbade them to speak their native languages, and tried their best to turn them into White people.

This pair of before-and-after photos of Tom Torlino (see Figure 1), a Navajo boy who spent three years at Carlisle in the 1880s, is typical of many attempts to convince the public that a positive transformation had been created. In fact, tens of thousands of American Indian children went through such schools. There are many stories of Native children who resisted, who ran away, who fought to maintain an Indian identity and cultural ways. However, as time went on, and especially with the second generation of boarding students, engagement with the schools increased. The indoctrination was so strong, stressing White superiority and the inevitability of Indian decline, that not a few of them came out and lived the rest of their lives as White people, just as Pratt and the other educators had hoped. They may not have been viewed initially as White by some non-Indians, but they adhered to White cultural norms and over generations many blended into the White population (Adams 2020; Trafzer et al. 2006; Churchill 2004; Fear-Segal and Rose 2016; Pratt 1908; Lomawaima 2018; Fear-Segal 2007; Child 2000).[7]

Figure 1. The image of Tom Torlino.

Benevolent Colonialism? Transnational Adoption. Shape shifting can be compelled by individuals as well as by institutions. Consider the good intentions, but painful racialized consequences, that frequently attend transnational adoption. I am not here to criticize anyone who opens their home to a child who does not have a family. That is an act of generosity and an act of love. However, as a growing number of adoptee writers have attested, it can also sometimes be an act of colonial condescension and self-congratulation for the parent's own racial colorblindness. Many transnational adoptions involve parents from wealthy, industrialized countries (usually White) and children from less wealthy countries (often Asian, Brown, or Black). Many adoptive parents try to create an environment that supports their child's engagement with their ancestral culture; others just raise them as if they were little White people. But even with the best of efforts, there is an element of racial identity change and displacement that affects the adoptees (Choy 2013; Kim 2010; McKee 2019; Oh 2015; Nelson 2016; Pate 2014; Trenka et al. 2005; Tuan and Shiao 2013; Woo 2019; Jacobs 2011; Fanshel 1972; Jacobs 2014; Högbacka 2016; Palmer 2010).

5. Racial Change by Choice

Sometimes, then, shape shifting occurs simply because the racial context changes—either a person or a group moves from one racial system to another, or the rules change within the system they inhabit. And sometimes it is a matter of a state or other institutional entity, or a powerful person, such as an adoptive parent, compelling a person or group to change their identity. Now we turn to those times when a change of race takes place as a matter of personal choice from a stable array of categories in a given social system. These

are often the most interesting cases. The people whose stories follow all made racial identity moves within stable social systems over the course of their lives. All of them succeeded in that transition, though history remembers some as more authentic than others.

Let Me Mesmerize You: Korla Padit. Some willful shape shifters may appear to be simply racial frauds. However, there is nothing simple about them. Korla Pandit was born John Roland Redd to a Black Baptist family in Missouri in 1921. His hometown, Columbia, saw several lynchings of Black men during his childhood. Educated in segregated schools, John was a piano prodigy. Handsome, with olive skin, dark eyes, and wavy hair, he left the South for California in the early 1940s and found gigs playing on Los Angeles radio shows as a Mexican named Juan Rolondo. He married Beryl June DeBeeson, a White woman, and together they refashioned his persona into Korla Pandit. He was now an Indian from New Delhi, son of a Brahmin government official and a French opera singer, who had studied music in Europe and at the University of Chicago. Graduating from radio to the new medium of television in 1949, Korla soon had a daily fifteen-minute afternoon show, wearing a jeweled turban, playing exotic music on the Hammond organ, and staring soulfully into the camera, saying nothing. Housewives would pause their afternoon chores, bewitched by his mesmerizing countenance. He later had a daily show in San Francisco where, in addition to playing spacey music on the organ, he dispensed bits of faux-Hindu and -Zen wisdom. He and Beryl kept up the shtick in public and in private for decades, even after Pandit's death in 1998 at age 77 (R. J. Smith 2001; *Korla* 2015).

A Gal's Gotta Make a Living: Ólöf Krarer was an Icelandic dwarf born in 1858. With no employment opportunities in Iceland, she migrated to the US at age nineteen. There, the only job she could find was playing the wife half of a dwarf couple in the circus. Ólöf had a better idea. She marketed her services as an Eskimo from Greenland who was prepared to give lectures to popular audiences about life in Eskimo land. Over the next several decades she gave more than 2500 lectures based on stuff she made up. She encountered public figures, including William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic politician, and Robert Peary, the Arctic explorer, and they did not detect her artifice. She died in 1935 at age 77, a renowned expert on the life and culture of the Eskimo people, whom she had never encountered (Bjornsdottir 2010; see also Hudson 2015; Browder 2000).

Some observers are likely to dismiss Korla Pandit and Ólöf Krarer as simple frauds—con artists. Each was born into one identity. Each then chose to manufacture another, radically different identity for themselves, one to which they had no ancestral or cultural connection (no knowledge, really) in order to make a living. I prefer to see them as one end of a spectrum of shape shifters. These are people who had no connection whatsoever to their new identity; they really just made it up. Yet they lived it thenceforward and paid whatever psychic cost that entailed. As R. J. Smith (2001) said of Pandit:

> To consider the life of Korla Pandit—and that's what I will call him because that is who he became—is to consider the weight of wearing a mask for 50 years. It is to grasp the fear of exposure, of a revelation that would have killed his career. One slip and he would have gone from being a mirror of white America's mania for things "exotic" to somebody white American didn't want to face. ...It is to recognize how he had to cut himself off from a black community that he'd grown up in, from a culture that had shaped the musical skills, and the survival skills, that he drew on for the rest of his life.

Smith wants to respect Korla Pandit for the brave, ingenious thing he achieved in becoming, and remaining, Korla Pandit. I am not unsympathetic to his emotion.

To Be a Writer, Not a Black Writer: Anatole Broyard. As a next step on our spectrum, what are we to make of such a figure as Anatole Broyard? Broyard was born in New Orleans to light-skinned Creole parents who were of the upper part but not the very top—that is, White—stratum of that city's complicated racial hierarchy. When they moved to Brooklyn, they lived in Black Bedford Stuyvesant. Anatole's father, Paul Broyard, a construction worker, took the streetcar across Brooklyn each day, and each day made the transition from Black to White, because the carpenters' union did not take Blacks, and then made the

transition back to Black again on his return trip. His son Anatole, after serving in World War II as a White officer, came back to New York and quickly left his Black roots behind. He became a Greenwich Village bookseller, then a contributor to literary magazines, and finally the *New York Times*' daily book reviewer—one of the core arbiters of American intellectual affairs. He married a White woman who knew his racially complicated past and didn't much care. Most of his colleagues knew of his racially complicated past and didn't much care; others had heard rumors about his raciality and didn't much care. His children, apparently, he kept in the dark. But he was striving to become, not a Black writer like Richard Wright or James Baldwin, with a political agenda trailing behind his writing, but simply an author. This ambition he shared with Ralph Ellison, though the two adopted different strategies toward their common goal. Broyard was for the next fifteen years one of the main shapers of American literary taste, with scarcely a hint of racial inflection. He successfully made the transit from Black to White (A. Broyard 1997; Gates 1997; B. Broyard 2007; Steele 2010).[8]

To Lead: P. B. S. Pinchback. Next, let us consider Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback. Pinchback was one of the better-known political figures of the era of Reconstruction after the US Civil War. He was born in 1837 in Macon, Georgia, the son of Eliza Stewart, a free woman of mixed Black, White, and Cherokee ancestry, and William Pinchback, her former master, who kept a White family as well as a mixed-race household. When Pinckney was a child, his father bought a larger plantation in Mississippi and moved there with both his families. Pinckney Stewart (he did not take his father's name until after the Civil War) was sent to school in Cincinnati at age nine along with his older brother Napoleon. When his father died two years later, Eliza took the remaining children and fled to Ohio, in fear that her common-law husband's legal wife and relatives might try to enslave them. There they lived as White. Pinckney soon left school to help support the family. In 1860 he married Nina Hawthorne, a light-skinned free woman of color.

Pinckney entered the Civil War as a White private in the Union Army. Then, changing his racial identity, he rose to become a Black captain who commanded a company of troops. After the war, as a Black politician, he became a Reconstruction-era Republican State Senator, then Lieutenant Governor, and finally, briefly, Governor of Louisiana. He was also elected to both the US House of Representatives and the Senate (though both houses failed to seat him). He published a biweekly newspaper throughout the 1870s and invested in real estate and other ventures. Pinchback remained a powerful figure in African American politics throughout his life. He was highly successful in business, maintaining grand residences first in New Orleans and later in Washington, D.C.

Pinchback, in later conversations with his grandson Jean Toomer, did not fault his brothers for having chosen to pass for White, nor apologize for his own choice to pass for Black: "They had every right to be white. I have every right to be colored. They saw it to their advantage to do what they did. I saw it to my advantage to do what I did. . . . I realized I could make more headway if I were known as black. . . . Besides . . . I was more attached to our mother". Pinchback saw an opportunity and he took it. Still, he did have considerable Black ancestry, his mother and siblings were born enslaved, and he remained Black, and a leader of Black Americans, throughout his lifetime (Dineen-Wimberly 2019; Toomer n.d.; Haskins 1973, 1996; Languth 2014).

W. E. B. Du Bois. How shall we think of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois? Du Bois grew up among White, small-town New Englanders in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and performed New England White culture perfectly. He spoke Boston English throughout his life. As a child he grew up in a poor, single-parent household, but his childhood was not particularly circumscribed by race. He knew he had African-descended ancestors and he could talk about them in detail, but there was no family memory of enslavement. Nor was he socially connected with Great Barrington's tiny Black community. He and his mother attended First Congregational, not the AME Zion church, and all his known friends were well-to-do Whites. It was only when Du Bois applied to White Harvard and was turned down that he chose to go to Fisk and made a decisive choice to see himself

as unambiguously Black. Even then, all the rest of his long life, alongside a rock-solid commitment to being a member of and an advocate for African Americans, Du Bois acknowledged and maintained an acute interest in his White forbears. He often quarreled with his close friend and collaborator, Rayford Logan, about his racial identity. Logan asserted that Black identity was not an option and that Du Bois was Black by necessity. Du Bois, to the contrary, insisted that it was at Fisk that he had learned to cherish his connection to Black people. He referred to Fisk as "where I learned to be Black" and to that time in his life as "when I chose to be Black". Du Bois's commitment to Blackness was complete, but it was a learned identity, not a necessity of birth. He knew he was a man who had racial options—not wholly unfettered ones, to be sure, but options nonetheless—and he opted to be Black. He did not start out especially Black, but there was no Blacker man in twentieth-century America (Du Bois 1940, 1968; Lewis 1993).

Love and Commitment: Harriet Gold Boudinot. Matters of the heart guided the racial identity choices of both Harriett Gold Boudinot and Eunice Kanenstenhawi Williams. Harriett Gold was a member of a prominent Connecticut White family who fell in love in 1825 with Elias Boudinot (formerly Gallegina Uwatie), an editor and a member of the Cherokee Nation. The wedding was opposed by Harriett's family and the White population of Connecticut. By the law of coverture, Harriett immediately lost her US citizenship upon marrying Elias, because he was not a US citizen. Rejected by her family and friends, Harriett moved to New Echota, the Cherokee capital, where she was welcomed into the Nation. She said, "I am now at home. Here I expect to pass the remainder of my days", and so she did (McGrath 2015, 2016; Gaul 2005).

Eunice Williams was seven years old in 1704 when she, her family, and many of her Puritan neighbors in Deerfield, Massachusetts, were seized by a raiding party of French, Abenaki, and Mohawk warriors. Many of their town were killed, and more died on the 300-mile walk through winter snow to Montreal. Eunice's mother died along the way, but her father and older siblings survived. In due course Eunice was given to a Mohawk family who had lost their daughter in a smallpox epidemic. They fed her and raised her, teaching her the Mohawk language and customs. After three years the father and the older children were repatriated to Massachusetts, but the Mohawk family kept Eunice. In time she took the adult name Kanenstenhawi, was baptized a Catholic as Marguerite, and married a Mohawk man, François-Xavier Arosen. They had several children and, though she communicated with her Massachusetts family sporadically, she remained a Mohawk (much to her natal family's dismay) until she died in 1785 at age 89 (Demos 1994). There was an element of compulsion at the start of Eunice's racial change, but by far the majority of her life was shaped by her choice to be Mohawk. Neither Harriett nor Eunice had any ancestry or cultural connection to their new Indigenous identities, but they ended up in situations where they chose to be Indians—Mohawk and Cherokee—and they made it stick.

For the Ancestors? Or For a Better Life? Bene Ephraim. Groups, too, on occasion make strategic identity choices. The Bene Ephraim are a group of Magida Dalit (that is, Untouchables) living in the village of Chebrole and surroundings in Andhra Pradesh. Once converts to Christianity, in the 1980s a group of them became convinced that their ancient ways descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel. They studied Jewish practices and did their best to embrace Judaism. In 2005, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Amar, announced he planned to recognize the Bene Ephraim as a Lost Tribe and to assist in their formal conversion to Orthodox Judaism. He did, and about 1700 Bene Ephraim were admitted to Israel as Jews as part of that nation's policy of ingathering lost Jews (Egorova 2011, 2015, 2018; Egorova and Perwez 2010, 2013; Tepper 2021).

6. A Complex Case

Li Xianglan/Yamaguchi Yoshiko. Sometimes it is just really complicated—motives and compulsions are muddled and it is difficult to parse out what exactly is going on in a shape shifting situation. Let me leave you with the story of Yamaguchi Yoshiko,

and Pan Shuhua, and Li Xianglan, and Shirley Yamaguchi—she was all these people in turn. Yamaguchi Yoshiko lived in the world where Japan and China intersected, and she inhabited both Chinese and Japanese identities—even a Japanese American one for a decade or so.[9] She was born in 1920 in Manchuria to ethnic Japanese parents, as part of the wave of Japanese sent out to populate Japan's new colonial domain (Peattie 1988; Mason and Lee 2012; Duus et al. 1983, 1988, 2010). They were hoping to make a new, unified Asia, independent of Europe and America and led by Japan. Her father, a Sinophile and linguist who worked for the South Manchuria Railway, put his young daughter on a train to Beijing and told her, "From now on, you must start being a Chinese person" (Stephenson 2002). She went to a Chinese school, took the name Pan Shuhua, learned to speak unaccented Chinese, and did her best to blend in at a time when anti-Japanese feeling was running high in China. At fourteen she was recruited to sing Chinese songs on the radio under the name Li Xianglan, which had been given her by Li Jichun, a friend of her father. That led to a series of radio and movie roles, all as a Chinese woman. In her private life she maintained the mannerisms of a young Chinese women, including wearing the *qipao* (Cantonese: *cheongsam*), a close-fitting, high-necked dress with side slits so the legs can move.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s Li made a series of increasingly popular films that were ambiguous in their sentiments about the relationship between China and Japan. They were all made by Japanese film companies and mainly employed Japanese actors. Li was often the only actor presented as Chinese. A frequent theme had her, as a beautiful young Chinese woman, initially resisting the aggression of a colonizing Japanese soldier, but ultimately coming to love and appreciate him. Thus, China was cast as feminine and passive and Japan as masculine and commanding. In the 1930s this came to be part of the Japanese government's policy of proclaiming the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, in which the peoples of Asia would unite under Japanese leadership and throw off the chains of European colonialism. But Chinese audiences actually liked these movies, despite the colonial overtones, and they loved Li Xianglan. As World War II progressed, the word went around that perhaps, then probably, then surely, she was not born ethnic Chinese, but still her popularity soared with Chinese audiences. So Chinese audiences colluded in her Chinese identity.[10]

Li Xianglan[11]/Yamaguchi Yoshiko here was enacting a kind of proto-panethnic Asianness, and Chinese audiences were going along with it. She used "we" when talking about the Chinese people, although many years later, looking back, she felt some guilt and simplified her recollection to one of masquerade. Those who have studied her life most closely think she saw herself in the 1940s as truly Chinese, and that Chinese audiences saw her that way, too, despite her ancestry.

When World War II ended, Li was arrested and charged with treason for having betrayed China in her quisling performances in Japanese films. She might have been imprisoned or executed, but at the last minute a friend produced her Yamaguchi family register, which established that she was formally a Japanese, and not a Chinese citizen. She was summarily "repatriated" to Japan, a place that had never been her home. She tried to work as a singer and actor in Tokyo but had little luck. In the 1950s she went to Hollywood and made a couple of movies under the name Shirley Yamaguchi, dated Yul Brenner, hung out with Charlie Chaplin and James Dean, and married the famous Japanese American sculptor, Isamu Noguchi, who was himself a complex individual, the son of the bisexual Japanese poet Yone Noguchi and the White American writer Léonie Gilmour, although they never were a family (Sueyoshi 2012).

During the McCarthy years, Li/Yamaguchi was denied re-entry to the United States on the ground that she had been friends with suspected Communists in Hollywood. Later she made Chinese-language movies in Hong Kong as Li Xianglan again. In the fullness of time, she made her way to Japan and reinvented herself as Otaka Yoshiko (taking the family name of a new husband). In 1969 she became host of the popular *Sanji no anata* (Three O'Clock You) TV show in Japan. Five years later she was elected to the House of

Councillors, the upper body of the Japanese parliament, where she served for eighteen years. She died in 2014.

Li Xianglan was born Japanese in the middle of that country's experiment in imperial pan-Asianism. She grew up a thoroughly Chinese woman and had a successful acting career that brought her fame and adulation as an emblem of a particular strain of Chinese womanhood. Life circumstances and the collapse of the Japanese empire forced her to become Japanese, really for the first time, after the war. She floundered a bit before she was able to make the transition to a stable Japanese identity in middle age and go on to become a revered figure in Japan throughout the last several decades of her life. From the 1930s through the 1960s, she really was (she did not pretend to be) by turns Japanese, then Chinese (and the biggest female movie star in China), then briefly and unsuccessfully Japanese, then successfully Japanese American (while also becoming Chinese again), and then finally Japanese.

7. Reflection

For the vast majority of shape shifters, their racial change is not pretense. It is not someone who is *really* X *pretending* to be Y. It is people or groups changing their racial identities. Often, they are mixed and choosing from among their various ancestries. Sometimes they are making up a new identity. Racial change is nothing nearly so puny as the passing trope would imply. We have discerned some patterns in this shape shifting:

- Sometimes individuals or groups change their racial positioning because their context changes; either they move from one racial system to another, or their own racial system revises its rules. Almost no one ever questions the authenticity of such a change. It's just what happens.
- Often people or groups are compelled by forces beyond their control, whether institutional or personal. Here again, authenticity is not the issue.
- Sometimes people and groups make choices that lead them to choose to change their racial or other primary identity within a stable social situation—to pursue an opportunity, for love, out of political commitment, or for other reasons. It is only in these few instances that we onlookers are tempted to judge their authenticity.

In each case, we can more or less figure out what is going on—what factors, opportunities, pressures, or interests led (or forced) a person or a group to change their identity.

Notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of shape shifting is never questioned, in certain contemporary individual cases some people feel compelled to police the authenticity of the shape shifter. If we must entertain the authenticity issue, here is the central question we face: Is there a set of people who are unquestionably members of the group who accept the race changer as a member of their group?

By this criterion, Korla Pandit and Ólöf Krarer are clearly pretenders, though one may be quite sympathetic to the changes they made—fleeing segregation and lynching, trying to make a living where there was none ready to hand. There was no group of South Asians or Inuit who saw them as one of their number. However, in my judgement, Anatole Broyard was a White man with a complex ancestry, not a Black man pretending to be White. He lived it, he performed it, everyone accepted it. P. B. S. Pinchback was mixed-race as a boy, then a White soldier, then a Black politician. W. E. B. Du Bois was a not-specifically raced New England boy and then a Black man, the most important Black intellectual of the twentieth century. Harriet Gold Boudinot and Eunice Kananstenhawi Williams were born White and became Cherokee and Mohawk, respectively. The Bene Ephraim were Dalit for many generations and then became Jews. Yamaguchi Yoshiko/Li Xianglan really was by turns Japanese, then Chinese, then briefly Japanese, then Japanese American, and finally Japanese. For none of these individuals or groups was their identity a pretense; it was racial change.

What of the larger social scientific project? Since the Enlightenment, scientists (and that includes social scientists for the last 150 years or so) have been searching for the universal laws that undergird the natural world (Winch 2008; Ross 1991). This quest has brought us

Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, the double helix, and a host of other wonderful understandings. In the case of social scientists, we have been searching for the universal laws that shape human behavior since Durkheim, Weber, and Freud. What, then, are the natural laws, the universal rules, that determine racial change? From time to time, a social scientist will attempt to come up with something resembling a universal field theory to explain the dynamics of racial and ethnic identities in all situations. Among the more notable of this genre are Franz Boas, *Race, Language, and Culture* (Boas 1940), Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969), Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Banton 1987), Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (Omi and Winant 2014); Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race* (Cornell and Hartmann 2006); and Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making* (Wimmer 2013), although there are many others, reaching back to Blumenbach (1969) and Gobineau (1915). Does any of them explain fundamental changes made in human racial identity? All of these attempts at a grand theory of race and ethnicity are useful, but none of them is sufficient to explain all the types of racial change I have uncovered. In the matter of racial change, there are patterns we can discern and motivations we can surmise. However, there is no evidence that there is an underlying, universal set of rules that governs changes in primary identities. Insofar as racial change is concerned there is only one universal, ironclad rule: It Depends.

Notes

[1] I do not plan on entering the discussion of what seem to be for some scholars meaningful distinctions between "identity" and "subjectivity" (see, e.g., Bell 2002; Zima 2015).

[2] For fuller theoretical discussions of race, see Spickard (2015) and Cornell and Hartmann (2006).

[3] For relatively recent incantations of pseudoscientific racism, see: Herrnstein and Murray (1996) and Wade (2014).

[4] I will also not be talking about changes of gender identity. That is an important and not entirely unrelated topic, but this is just one short article and I am already taking on a lot of territory.

[5] For a deeper look at the problems with the passing narrative and references to the huge literature of passing, see Spickard (2020).

[6] It should be noted that the Rus' of Novgorod had a similar conversion experience near the end of the tenth century at the direction of Vladimir the Great. According to tradition, in order to strengthen the solidarity of his growing kingdom the Prince sought a modern (for those times) religion to replace various pagan traditions. He auditioned Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish (from Khazaria) divines and ended up choosing Orthodoxy. Of course it surely was a much longer transition than that stereotypical summary, and it involved a lot of other actors, but nonetheless it was conversion from above (Spinka 1926; Ericsson 1966). At various times there were other Jewish kingdoms in the modern territories of Yemen, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, of which some remnants remain (Maroney 2010; Goitein 1973; Quirin 2010; Kessler 1996).

[7] K. Tsianina Lomawaima and others make the point that not everything that happened at these schools was bad, and that many former students have good memories of their time there (Lomawaima et al. 2000; Lomawaima and McCarty 2006). For analogous attempts at forcing racial change on Indigenous youth in Canada, see, e.g.,: Milloy and McCallum (2017); Grimes (2022); Regan (2011).

[8] Gates's (1997) assertion that the reason Broyard never wrote the novel he hoped to write was because he was crippled by racial imposture is scurrilous.

9   Sources for this section include: Yamaguchi and Fujiwara (2015), Stephenson (1999, 2002), Duus (2004), Wang (2011), Kleeman (2014) and Baskett (2008).

10   Some even claimed other identities for her: Korean, half-Russian, Taiwanese. She was indeed a shape shifter. Stephenson (2002) is particularly acute on this matter: "Li Xianglan was, it seems, many things to many people, and more often than not she was somehow 'theirs'".

11   Japanese audiences learned her name as Ri Koran.

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