

Linda López McAlister (1999) describes a pivotal moment in her life when she nonchalantly explained to family and friends that her grandmother “was Mexican” (22), in her presence. This phrase led her grandmother to carry deep-seated feelings of anger towards her, and McAlister’s article is an attempt to understand this resentment. McAlister explains that her grandmother had a lifelong “determination to be seen as an Anglo lady” (15). Growing up in an environment that led her to “internaliz[e] negative attitudes about Mexicans” (20), and develop a self-hatred towards her Mexican culture prompted her grandmother to “marr[y] outside [her] ethnic group ... [and move] away from [her] original culture, language, and traditions toward those of the Anglo community” (20). However, even though her grandmother had “spent thirty years of her life thinking of herself as Mary Douglas, an Anglo lady (...) [who] believed, mistakenly, that she was passing” (23) everyone she encountered “could tell she was of some kind of Latino – if not specifically Mexican – ancestry” (22) because of her skin color and accent. By pointing out her grandmother’s Mexican background, McAlister betrayed her by “reveal[ing] what she believed was a secret (...) thereby outing her, even though she wasn’t really passing, except in her own mind” (23).

McAlister uses her grandmother’s false belief that she had successfully taken up an Anglo identity as evidence that “you can try to assume a new identity by means of language, culture, dress, [and] behavior (...) [but] thinking you’re passing does not make it so” (24). There is a distinction between a passing performance and actually ‘being’ a new ethnic identity; transforming in to a new ethnic identity is a process that requires “wholesale change in language, culture, and tradition” (25). It is difficult to erase the hauntings and visible markers of one’s ethnic past.

In McAlister's argument, a transformation in ethnic identity (unlike sexuality) is more rigidly bound to biology, requiring a "biological and cultural history to back it up" (25) alongside "an emotional and/or a political impulse" (26). However, I am left wondering if McAlister's piece would have benefitted from a critical engagement with the notion of ethnic 'passing'; who gets to decide if someone passes or not? And, how is the social construct of 'race' (and the social beliefs and stereotypes involved in racialization) implicated in ethnic 'passing'. Further, I wonder if McAlister misses an important examination of white privilege, and whiteness as a social hierarchy which impacts one's capacity for ethnic identity mobility (affording privilege to white-read bodies, while denying mobility to those read as ethnic 'others', such as McAlister's grandmother). For instance, McAlister, as an easily 'white'-read woman, has the privilege to identify as Chicana, and be taken as legitimate (while sometimes being assumed to be Anglo). However, in the Anglo-centered context of the United States, had McAlister been a Mexican-read woman, with a Mexican accent, with one Anglo grandmother, would she be able to pass as 'Anglo', and afforded the same ethnic identity mobility?

[Word Count: 496]

Work Cited

McAlister, Linda Lopez. "My Grandmother's Passing" *Whiteness: Feminist Philosophical Reflections*. Ed. Chris Cuomo and Kim Hall. Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield 1999. 15-27.