

The People in the *Gayborhood*:
Language Crossing and Code Ownership

Rampton (1995) has used “language crossing” to describe uses of language that index groups to which the speaker does not claim membership. Recent studies of European Americans’ use of stereotyped African American English (Smitherman 1994, Bucholtz 1999, Cutler 1999) and American Anglos’ use of “mock Spanish” (Hill 1998) evaluate crossing as a form of appropriation. Rampton has observed that crossing is fundamentally a strategy speakers use to navigate between the twin injustices of over-emphasizing differences and ignoring them (1995: 502). However, no speaker “owns” any code *a priori*; like all rights, the right to cross must be negotiated in interaction. This paper shows how two speakers use language crossing to negotiate similarities and differences while simultaneously positioning themselves within a social landscape.

My data consist of a half-hour conversation that Marshall, a gay white man, and his friend Mamawana, a heterosexual African American woman, recorded and posted to the Internet as a podcast in the *Gayborhood Radio* series. Marshall’s use of stereotypical African-American /r/-lessness and Mamawana’s use of stereotypical white women’s language (Barrett 1995, Lakoff 1972) in (2) both win ratification:

(1)

- 381 Marshall: ... Maybe the *Jigga* (.) put one too many big pimpins in her puss-
382 oir, and now she’s all cock-eyed, cock-eyed whore
383 Mamawana: ((laughter))

(2)

- 361 Mamawana: Jigger got that like conceited, dick syndrome, so maybe
362 like she feels like, ((stereotypical white woman)) I’m going to be
363 *Sasha* ((end white woman)) which is a fucking fucked-up name
364 anyway ...
...
371 Marshall: Right, that’s what I’m saying ...

However, in (3) Marshall questions Mamawana’s use of a stereotypical lower-class pronunciation of the word *Chanel*, and in (4) Mamawana rejects Marshall’s attempt to use a phrase in Caribbean Patois:

(3)

- 446 Mamawana: H&M is some bullshit anyway but Burberry and ʔfæ.nəl,
447 that’s some [real shit]
448 Marshall: [ʔfæ.nəl, ʔfæ.nəl!] Are you that black that you
449 call it ʔfæ.nəl?
450 Mamawana: No, I say ʃə.ʔnəl

(4)

- 598 Marshall: He wasn't all like 'bæt.swa like 'bəm.bə.klæt on me
...
601 Mamawana: It's not 'bat.swa, it's Patois [it's a difference, Patois]
602 Marshall: ['bat.wa, bat-, what is a]
603 'bat.a.wa?
...
611 Marshall: Okay, 'bəm.bə.klæt Patois
612 Mamawana: ((Speaks Patois))

In (3) Marshall's challenge *are you that black?* requires Mamawana to prioritize similarities in class and education over differences in race. However, in (4) Mamawana reinforces ethnic and racial differences by contesting Marshall's right to cross into Patois. These exchanges suggest that crossing involves more than simple appropriation. Successful crossing builds solidarity by invoking and undermining stereotypes. Yet the right to cross is not inherent, and speakers bring different kinds of social power to each negotiation. In (3) Marshall foregrounds his membership in a dominant group to invoke the prestige of standard English, while in (4) Mamawana accesses greater perceived authenticity and the moral authority conferred by a history of oppression. These examples of language crossing illustrate how the micro-politics of interaction are both informed by and help constitute macro-level identity.

References

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