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slippery characters

Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities

Laura Browder

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Introduction

In October 1991 *The Education of Little Tree*, Forrest Carter's memoir of his Cherokee boyhood, was number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list. *Little Tree* was a true word-of-mouth success.[1] The director of marketing for the University of New Mexico Press recalls purchasers buying a dozen copies at a time to distribute to friends.[2] Sales had reached a half-million copies by 1991. Groups of schoolchildren had formed Little Tree fan clubs. Hollywood planned to bring Carter's gentle, New Age-tinged message of multiculturalism and environmentalism to the big screen.

For thousands of *New York Times* readers, then, October 4, 1991, must have brought an unpleasant surprise. An op-ed piece written by Dan T. Carter, a history professor at Emory University, denounced the critically acclaimed Cherokee memoir as a fake. Its author, Forrest Carter, also known as Asa Carter, was not the Native American he claimed to be. According to Dan T. Carter, "Between 1946 and 1973, the Alabama native carved out a violent career in Southern politics as a Ku Klux Klan terrorist, right-wing radio announcer, home-grown American fascist and anti-Semite, rabble-rousing demagogue and secret au-

thor of the famous 1963 speech by Gov. George Wallace of Alabama: 'Segregation now . . . Segregation tomorrow . . . Segregation forever.' "[3] Even Forrest Carter's new first name, Dan Carter revealed, had been taken from Nathan Bedford Forrest, who founded the original Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Articles on Little Tree's identity appeared in *Newsweek*, in *Time*, and in *Publishers Weekly*. Heartbroken readers swamped Dan Carter's office with calls. Equally taken aback were friends of Forrest's in his later Texas years, for whom he would, after a couple of drinks, perform Indian war dances and chant in what he said was the Cherokee language. For editorialists across the country, the exposure of Forrest Carter was an occasion for soul searching. "What does it tell us that we are so easily deceived?" Dan Carter had asked, a question echoed not only by pundits but by the studio heads who had been, until that point, involved in a bidding war over movie rights.

Although Dan Carter's question may have been the one on which the media focused, there are others that may be more to the point. After all, Forrest Carter's story was only one of dozens of what I call ethnic impersonator autobiographies that have been published in the United States—that is, fictions purporting to be autobiographies, authored by writers whose ethnicity is not what they represent it to be.[4] Why was there such a sense of public outrage and betrayal at Asa Carter's ethnic impersonation? And why have so many ethnic impersonator autobiographies been written, and eagerly read, in the United States over the past 160 years? In the chapters to follow, I explore how, in America, ethnic passage from one identity to another is not an anomaly. Autobiography, with its valorization of individualism and its emphasis on self-fashioning, is a form peculiarly suited to American national mythologies. And the ethnic impersonator autobiography, which creatively reconstructs identity using essential racial and ethnic categories, has proved to be particularly enduring in the United States.[5] This study examines the complex interplay between the authors of ethnic impersonator autobiographies, the texts they produce, and the readers of these texts.

Over the past 160 years, while rewriting themselves into new ethnicities, the individual authors of ethnic impersonator autobiographies have escaped the trap of unwanted identities. Paradoxically, by playing into cultural stereotypes of their newly chosen ethnicities, they have mired their readers further in essentialist thinking. Through close readings of both famous and obscure impersonator autobiographies and by drawing on a context of social, cultural, and economic history, I trace

the development of the ethnic impersonator autobiography from the antebellum South through the expansion of the frontier, and from the dislocations of immigration through the anomie of the postwar period.

American ethnic autobiographies—works that describe the experience of belonging to a minority group in the United States—have traditionally been written and read as a means of helping frame the complex cultural relationships of a multiethnic society. The American tradition of self-fashioning, with its commitment to Emersonian self-reliance, would appear to be distinct from ethnic autobiography, with its tradition of cultural ambassadorship. However, there is a point at which the traditions converge, and that is in what I call the genre of the ethnic impersonator autobiography. These narratives stand as monuments to the tradition of American self-invention as well as testaments to the porousness of ethnic identity.

The dominant strain in American autobiography emphasizes self-construction, as exemplified by Benjamin Franklin, who set out to outline for readers the thirteen steps he considered essential for self-improvement. More than anyone else Franklin introduced Americans to the notion that the self was not a historically determined structure, and that this was what would be distinctive about American life. The self in this model is mutable. The thrill of reading the autobiography is to see how one individual took the raw material of his or her life and formed it into something shapely, unique, and successful.

It may be a commonplace that Franklin's autobiography is paradigmatic of the American tendency toward self-invention. In fact much of the autobiography is a how-to manual for successful performance. In one of the most famous sections of the autobiography, Franklin describes the way that he, as a young printer in Philadelphia, advertised his diligence to the town, not by distributing printed advertisements but by making of himself a walking advertisement: "In order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman, I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious & frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the Contrary. I dressed plainly; I was seen at no Places of idle Diversion; I never went out a-fishing or Shooting; a Book, indeed, sometimes debauch'd me from my Work; but that was seldome, snug, & gave me no Scandal: and to show that I was not above my Business, I sometimes brought home the Paper I purchas'd at the Stores, thro' the Streets on a Wheelbarrow."[6]

While the reality of frugality and industry was important to Franklin, the appearance of them was no less crucial. Thus, in his Thirteen Names

of Virtues with their corresponding precepts, Franklin placed as much stress on the outward performance of virtue as on the inward reality of it. In Philip Abbott's terms, Franklin is the archetypal American hustler.[7] Yet the plain American costume Franklin wore in his autobiography seems an unassuming disguise for his canniness. While informing his readers that he never remembered what he had eaten two hours after a meal, he in fact loved his food and kept a file of favorite recipes.[8] In telling Americans that it was possible for one to reinvent oneself, Franklin laid the groundwork for not only endless variations on the mythology of success—from Horatio Alger on down through Dale Carnegie—but for the more charged possibility: that even ethnicity need not be a limitation on the re-creation of the self. Franklin, in presenting his life as a performance and in assuming a number of different voices in his prose, foreshadowed the development of the ethnic impersonator autobiography.

Although the voice of the self-created individual may be the loudest in American autobiography, it is certainly not the only one. Autobiography has also been an important vehicle for persons trying to free themselves from the strictures of a subordinate racial or ethnic identity. Even as Benjamin Franklin was publishing his autobiography (1771–90), another form of memoir was emerging: the slave narrative. Through hundreds of eloquent testimonials, slaves could and did persuade white Americans that they, too, were human and that they deserved the rights of American citizens. Nor were slave narratives the only form of nineteenth-century ethnic autobiography. By 1854, when Henry David Thoreau published *Walden*, the American public had been reading Native American autobiographies for twenty years.[9]

Ethnic autobiographies have fulfilled and continue to perform a number of cultural functions, but one purpose has remained the same: to offer the authentic voice of a minority group to a reading audience composed primarily of white, middle-class Americans. Autobiography is a political tool in that it contains an implicit argument for the importance of the self described and for the validity of his or her perspective. In a culture in which minority citizens have often had to struggle for their rights, ethnic autobiography states a case for citizenship and for the value of the ethnic self. As Benedict Anderson has written, a nation "can be imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[10] Ethnic autobiographies have often been constituted as arguments for inclusion by

their authors—and by extension the group to whom their authors belong—in the imagined community of the United States. Slave narratives, by providing eloquent testimonials from those enslaved, made a case for emancipation. Immigrant autobiographies, written during the 1910s and 1920s, a period when nativist sentiments were on the rise, offered testimonials for why immigrants should be considered Americans. Sometimes ethnic autobiographies have revised this argument. Following the rise of ethnic awareness and ethnic pride in the 1960s and 1970s, autobiographies appeared that spoke to the need for minorities to maintain distinct identities rather than to be assimilated into the melting pot. The arguments embedded in these autobiographies have often proved politically effective. Through reading ethnic autobiographies, from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) to *Black Boy* (1937) to *Woman Warrior* (1976), Americans have been outraged, stirred, and sometimes moved to action.

Both the reader and the writer of an ethnic autobiography understand the implied contract: the memoirist is not telling his or her own story as much as the story of a people. In order to be heard, the ethnic autobiographer must often conform to his or her audience's stereotypes about that ethnicity. Frederick Douglass, when touring as a speaker for the Anti-Slavery Society in 1841, was told by abolitionist leader Parker Pillsbury to put a "little more of the plantation" in his speech, and by William Garrison not to sound too "learned," in case his audience not "believe you were ever a slave." Douglass refused both requests.[11]

Ethnic autobiographers, called upon to be representatives, to be the voice of their people, have sometimes even borrowed memories. Although literary critics are accustomed to thinking of fictional texts as being in conversation with one another across time and space, readers generally think of autobiography as the record of an individual's unique past. Yet in his autobiography, *Black Boy*, Richard Wright incorporated stories told to him by friends, including Ralph Ellison, as well as incidents he had observed happening to others.[12] Wright downplayed the middle-class status of his parents; he turned himself into a symbol of the oppressed southern African American. Even the title of his autobiography emphasized the representative nature of Wright's life story.

Not only white readers and ethnic autobiographers have demanded that ethnic autobiographers represent their people. Readers within the ethnic community of the writer have also stated the case for representative authenticity. This is evidenced, for example, by the reception given Maxine Hong Kingston's 1976 *Woman Warrior*, which was attacked by

many Chinese American critics for being, as Katheryn M. Fong wrote, "a *very personal* description of growing up in Chinese America." Jeffrey Paul Chan worried that Kingston "may mislead naive white readers."[13] The notion that Kingston was presenting an example of Chinese American life that was misleading or inaccurate implied that the author did not have the right to present her personal experience as such. In the eyes of her critics, she was not telling her own story but (mis)telling the story of her people.

The writers of ethnic autobiographies have historically had to work within what one might call the trope of their given identities—to speak for their people, as a representative of their people. However, not every "people" is what it appears to be, nor is every ethnic autobiography what it purports to be. In a multiethnic society, Americans have always shifted identities. Even before the founding of the United States, colonists moved into new ethnic roles.[14] Yet it was not until the 1830s, with the rise of the abolitionist movement, that the first ethnic impersonator autobiographies, or fictions disguised as memoirs of ethnicity, made their appearance.

The anxiety over racial and ethnic identity and its slipperiness is an issue of autobiography as well as a wider cultural phenomenon. Ethnic impersonator autobiography offers us a range of voices that challenge received ideas about ethnicity, about the autobiographical "I," and about the very notion of self. Through studying these impersonations—as works of literature, as historical documents, and as cultural artifacts—we are forced to confront difficult questions: How much of ethnicity is a construction? Is there such a thing as an authentic ethnic or racial identity? And as Dan Carter asked, What is it about American discourse that makes us accept these impersonators so readily? Ethnic impersonators force us to rethink our easy assumptions about identity; they disrupt the notion of the melting pot and make us question how all identities are constructed. They revise the basis for a national sense of self.

Significantly, ethnic impersonators appear in clusters during critical periods in American history, such as the decades leading up to the Civil War, when slavery was being debated and it was unclear which ethnic groups were to be afforded full human status, and during the 1920s, when laws affecting immigrants and Native Americans were changing and the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise. Later still, during the civil rights era, a new rash of self-conscious ethnic impersonator autobiographies

appeared, the work of writers who detailed their passage from whiteness into blackness.

Some impersonators adopt the voice of another group in order to gain political effectiveness, such as the white abolitionists who spoke as slaves in order to present a compelling case for emancipation. Other impersonators seem to have escaped the psychological prison of their own identity by speaking with the voice of an ethnic other. The WASP writer Daniel James broke his thirty-year writer's block, which first manifested itself after his appearance as an unfriendly witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), by "becoming" the young Chicano activist Danny Santiago, author of *Famous All Over Town* (1983). Elizabeth Stern, a survivor of sexual abuse and the author (Leah Morton) of *I Am a Woman—and a Jew* (1926), took on the ethnic identity and national origins of the foster father who had abused her. However, most ethnic impersonators employ autobiography as only one tool in the larger project of redefining their identity. Typical is the "colored" janitor Sylvester Long, who in the 1920s transformed himself into Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance. He not only authored a best-selling autobiography but became a movie star and had his own line of running shoes. He embraced his "Indian" identity in every aspect of his life.

When ethnic identity is up for grabs in America, ethnic impersonator autobiographies make their claims, and they often find a receptive audience. The reception of these works stands as a reminder of how willing we are to believe. *I Am a Woman—and a Jew* was a success when it was first published and is still taught in college courses on women and Judaism. Danny Santiago's *Famous All Over Town* was the 1982 recipient of the prestigious Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award. Thus, rather than being simply curiosities, these ethnic impersonator autobiographies have been influential in shaping American notions of identity.

Ethnic impersonator autobiographies operate at the margins to illuminate a central paradox of American identity. This paradox has changed over the past 150 years and will continue to change, but it has two central features that remain constant: American belief in the fluidity of class identity and the fixity of racial and, to a lesser extent, ethnic identity. This book is about what happens when people apply the logic of class to a construct of race and ethnicity. To borrow Werner Sollors's terms, ethnic impersonators are illustrations of ethnicity by consent

rather than descent. According to Sollors, "Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of 'substance' (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of 'law' or 'marriage.' Descent language stresses our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and 'architects of our fates' to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems."[15]

Perhaps the clearest example of substituting the structures of class for those of race can be found in impersonator slave narratives. After all, slavery in the United States was a condition in which race and class status were inextricably linked: to be a slave was to be black, and blackness was and is considered a state from which it is impossible to assimilate into another racial or ethnic category. In that sense, impersonator slave narratives are among the most obvious and dramatic examples of the genre of ethnic impersonator autobiography.

Race more than ethnicity can be considered the most essentially recognized category of identity, given that race is commonly understood as having to do with biology, and ethnicity with culture. Of course the terms "race" and "ethnicity" themselves are slippery and change in meaning over time. Jews were once considered a separate race, biologically different from Anglo-Americans, but are now considered ethnics. Scientists and anthropologists have rightly taught us to distrust biological definitions of race.[16] Nowadays "race" usually, though not always, means black or white. Since these are the most clearly drawn racial distinctions that Americans make, it is perhaps unsurprising that most recent books on passing and the construction of identity have focused on the movement between black and white and on the construction of whiteness.[17] Several important recent studies have shown how immigrants have achieved "whiteness" by positing their identities against African Americans' and assimilating into the dominant culture.[18] As Roger Sanjek puts it, they pay "the price of linguistic extinction and cultural loss for the privilege of white racial status," gaining "the prize of race awarded upon the surrender of ethnicity."[19]

However, this is only part of the story. While I agree with Sanjek that "the post-1400s global racial order has always extended beyond black and white in its ranked racial ordering, but these two terms have always defined its poles,"[20] Americans have also escaped the polarities of race by moving along the ethnic spectrum—from white to Chicano, for instance, or from black to Indian.

Ethnicity can provide an escape from whiteness and blackness but

cannot be seen as equivalent to race. Werner Sollors, surveying the terrain of American ethnicity in *Beyond Ethnicity*, chose to see race "while sometimes facilitating external identification, [as] merely one aspect of ethnicity."[21] However, ethnicity can be an option in a way that race never can.[22] While blackness and whiteness remain opposite poles in the popular imagination, there are times when these polarities are foregrounded and times when they recede—and when it is more useful to focus on the complex middle ground of ethnicity to avoid getting trapped by binary thinking.[23] As Ishmael Reed writes, "You know, we have these two basketball teams in the United States right now—'White America' and 'Black America.'" These terms, Reed maintains, function as "lazy metonymy," swallowing up ethnicities and providing a monolithic view of America that erases the subtleties of ethnicity.[24]

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have attacked and in fact discarded the notion of race and ethnicity as essential qualities.[25] While I am arguing against an essential view of racial and ethnic identity, I am also aware that much as we may like to think that race and ethnicity are not essential qualities, they are certainly treated as such in the United States. Race may be a construction, but color remains a visual cue; and most Americans use visual, physiological cues to make their judgments about a person's racial identity. The constructions of racial and ethnic identities have the psychological weight of reality.

As Elin Diamond writes in a passage that might apply as easily to race, "Gender, then, is both a doing—a performance that puts conventional gender attributes into possibly disruptive play—and a thing done—a pre-existing oppressive category." That is, gender (or race), while not an essential category, *behaves* as one through its reiteration. Diamond is right to point out that race and gender are not bravura performances but are reified through this repetition. This form of performance is not a one-night stand but might better be compared to, say, a Broadway show that runs for decade after decade. "When being is de-essentialized," writes Diamond, "when gender and even race are understood as fictional ontologies, modes of expression without true substance, the idea of performance comes to the fore. But performance *both affirms and denies this evacuation of identity*." In other words, the performance of gender or race insists on its own reality. It draws its audience into an agreement that what is occurring onstage is in some sense real. "In the sense that the 'I' has no interior secure ego or core identity, 'I' must always enunciate itself: there is only performance of a self, not an external representation of an interior truth."[26] However, the illusion of an

exterior truth is created through the repetition of the performance, as well as through the reality that there is no moment that performers let down their guard and become other than what they represent themselves to be.

What better place to study that performance than in the self-conscious, rather than naturalized, performances of race and ethnicity—that is, with those who have consciously shifted their performance of racial or ethnic identity? Autobiography is a space where it is particularly easy to see this performance taking place. Autobiography foregrounds the process of self-fashioning. The memoirist is informing his or her readers how he or she came to be the person he or she is. In contrast to the ephemeral nature of other forms of performance, autobiography is fixed. The autobiographer presents a permanent self-definition to his or her readers. However, these autobiographical performers succeed, paradoxically, by presenting identity as an essential quality. In order to succeed, these performers need to know all of the stereotypes of the racial categories they have entered. So rather than expanding their readers' notions of identity, they restrict them.

In the introduction to her edited collection *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Elaine K. Ginsberg points to "the positive potential of passing as a way of challenging those categories and boundaries. In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to create multiple identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress."[27] What would she make, one wonders, of Asa Carter, the former Klansman who experimented with multiple subject positions by reinventing himself as a Cherokee orphan?

While ethnic impersonators may free themselves from the historical trap of an unwanted identity by passing into a new one, their success rests on their ability to manipulate stereotypes, thus further miring their audience in essentialist racial and ethnic categories. Asa Carter, as a professional racist, was expert in manipulating stereotypes. He chanted in "Cherokee" to fit his audience's expectations. Re-creating himself as a Native American seems to have come easily to him. He understood the racial and ethnic categories in which his audience thought and apparently had had little trouble in working with a new set of symbols. The success of ethnic impersonators depends in large part on their manipulation of others' essentialist beliefs about race and eth-

nicity. It is possible to celebrate creativity, as does Ginsberg, but we should do so without ignoring its costs.

For a Klansman to speak as a Cherokee orphan or for an American-born gentile to speak as a Jew is certainly not seen in late twentieth-century America as a natural state of affairs. In a context where such categories exist, we need to take ethnic impersonators' transgression of these categories as a serious issue, one worthy of examination for what it tells us not only about the individuals whose stories are related but also about American identities in general. While it is serious, it is also humorous. There is a playfulness inherent in the ethnic impersonator, a creativity that comes from having a deep knowledge of the valences of ethnicity and race and a willingness to manipulate those for the sake of his or her own liberation. Some of these impersonators are reprehensible. In the mid-1950s Asa Carter was among the men who incorporated a shadowy paramilitary group called the Original Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy, six alleged members of which kidnapped and tortured a black handyman. Carter only switched identities after the statewide paramilitary force he set up in 1971 failed, as had his attempt the previous year to establish a string of all-white private schools. While we may not want to hold up these impersonators as exemplars, there is an audacity inherent in their choices, a refusal to accept essentialist rules of race for themselves that has the transgressive quality of an outrageous joke.

Ethnic impersonator autobiographers use a Franklinian model of self-fashioning, but they turn the meaning of self-fashioning on its head. They write themselves out of the margins, to which they have been banished because of their ethnic or racial definition or their political beliefs, and into Americanness. In doing so, they change the definition of what "American" means. When they are successful, impersonators may trap their readers further in essentialist thinking about race and ethnicity. It is their exposure as impersonators that offers readers the possibility of being liberated from their fixed ideas about the meaning of racial and ethnic identity. Reading these texts with the full knowledge that they are impersonator autobiographies and analyzing them as ethnic performances can help us to rethink the construction of American identities by making us reconsider both why the writer wanted so much to escape his or her assigned ethnic identity and why the reader feels so unsettled at the idea of ethnicity as performance.