

Preface

Consider three recent episodes, all of which took place in February 2004.

Returning to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport to fly back to Birmingham, Alabama, after visiting the University of Chicago for the weekend, I was picked up by a cab driver who was originally from Tanzania. Although the traffic was not that bad, it was still a forty-minute ride, so our conversation moved from talk of the weather, our shared nostalgia for our separate homelands, and the Democratic presidential primaries which were then taking place, eventually getting around to Janet Jackson's breast-baring at the 2004 Superbowl's half-time show. Upon learning that I studied comparative religions, she told me that she was Muslim and commented on the unfortunate impact of Christian missionaries at home. Sooner or later, the conversation worked around to what it was like living as a Muslim in the U.S. after September 11, 2001. Lamenting the current state of affairs, she sighed and shook her head, saying, "radicals have hijacked Islam."

Later that same day, while awaiting my flight, an announcement came over the airport loudspeaker. "Roman Catholic Mass will be celebrated in the airport chapel at 4:00 p.m. Everyone is welcome to attend."

A few days later, a reporter for my university's online student newspaper, *Dateline Alabama* (<http://www.datelinealabama.com>) came to my office to discuss Mel Gibson's much publicized film, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Why, she wanted to ask a Religious Studies professor, had so much attention been given to historical detail in the film—such as having actors speak Aramaic and Latin—but the character Jesus was still Caucasian, presumably looking nothing like an average male inhabitant of the Mediterranean region some two thousand years ago. "Doesn't this insult other people, such as African-Americans?" she asked. "Isn't Mel Gibson's Jesus too white?"

What these three episodes all have in common is not simply that I was there for each, or that they all took place in the same month. What strikes me as rather more significant is that each is an example of how historically embedded social actors steer the course through their semantically ambiguous worlds, building identities and coalitions of identities, by resorting to what I'll simply refer to as the rhetoric of authenticity. But, despite what those who employ these rhetorics might think—everyone from an expatriate cab driver in Chicago making claims about what constitutes authentic Islam, to a Hollywood director selling the meaning of the Gospel to viewing audiences worldwide—their claims to authenticity all take place in ever-changing historical circumstances, ensuring that these discourses must operate on a sliding scale where some things are a little more authentic than others, and some are authentic but only some of the time.

Because a white Jesus who speaks Aramaic is both familiar and strange, it is evident that authenticity is a slippery boundary marker, always in motion relative to a community's changing interests and contexts. But since members of the group take their own identity to be enduring and uniform—despite significant gaps within the group—their assertions of authenticity efficiently gloss over an unresolvable dilemma, i.e., how to have permanence, identity, and meaning in the midst of historical happenstance. Such rhetorics do this by creating the *impression* of two interrelated states of affairs: limitless inclusion and sharp distinction: apparently, “all are welcome” to a ritual that just happens to function to set one group apart from another (whether that be those outside the Church or those within it who have yet to partake of their First Communion). Although everyone is welcome, I imagine that not everyone can have a wafer. Or, despite reports of Pope John Paul II lending his imprimatur to Gibson's film—“It is as it was,” Vatican insiders were reported to have said the Pope concluded after a private screening of the film before its release, though Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, the Pope's private secretary, subsequently denied that the Pope had said any such thing—evangelical Protestants, many of whom would vehemently argue that Catholics are not even Christians (much less saved), have been flocking to theaters and buying up blocks of seats to this traditionalist Catholic depiction of Jesus' last twelve hours. Apparently, a brief, ecumenical unity is possible when otherwise competing groups huddle in the dark around what they each take to be a representation of their ahistorical, originary source. Much like the movie screen itself, this speculative origin is a blank slate onto which they can each project their individual (and, perhaps, mutually exclusive) self-images. Yet things are not quite so simple, or civil, when they all leave the cool of the theater and their interests clash in the light of day.

These rhetorics of uniform origins and timeless principles, of pure intentions versus degraded expressions, and of pristine insides versus ambiguous outsides—all of which we find everywhere from Chicago cabs to darkened theaters and scholarly monographs—are eminently useful to virtually any group engaging in the necessary sleight of hand we call social formation. But their utility is limited, of course, because conflicting groups are often more alike than their members can afford to recognize; and because coalitions have internal contests that must go unseen if their cooperative work is to continue, sooner or later the cracks show through. It is in this way that rhetorics undermine themselves and make evident difference where similarity was once cherished, and similarity where difference once caught our attention. Just as with the three little girls' infectious nursery rhyme that I heard just today at lunch—“Girls go to college to get more knowledge; boys go to Jupiter to get more stupider”—upon closer examination, the relationships that we hold dear, those that assist us to understand ourselves in relation and opposition to others, provide the undoing of our cherished

similarities and differences. For, despite their whimsical efforts to distinguish themselves from “stupider” little boys, thereby simultaneously marking their commonly shared (and, I presume they thought, superior) status, these little girls’ ungrammatical chant put them in the same boat as their untutored male counterparts.

And it is just this sort of rhetorical hocus-pocus that is the focus of the following short volume.

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