

Teaching Carol Brooks Gardener's "Passing by: Street Remarks, address rights, and the urban female" (1980)¹

For a number of years now, I've taught this article, and the class meeting during which I teach it offers some of the richest and most memorable discussion of the term. For me, this piece represents research that is simultaneously so very strong and so very problematic in particularly instructive ways. I have taught it to students at all levels—undergrad nonmajors, undergrad majors, and graduate students—in a variety of courses—language and gender; language, gender, and sexuality; and introduction to sociolinguistics (or some more general version of this topic), always with great success.

The success of the discussions speaks to the article's strengths: its willingness to try to tackle such a difficult but everyday situation, yet one that genders each of us because we have seen, heard, or been participants in street remarks, whether willingly or unwillingly. Hence, we "know" immediately what Brooks Gardener is talking about, and we cannot help but reflect on our own experiences as read. Wonderfully, the article likewise genders us as readers, as I'll explain below: briefly, the text interpellates us, beckoning us to a subject position of woman or man that we are quick to occupy.

THE ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Here, I reprint the assignment sheet I give students before the class when we discuss the article.

NOTES ABOUT CAROL BROOKS GARDNER'S "PASSING BY" (1980)

There are two parts to the information presented here. The first is an assignment to complete about the article before coming to class. The second offers additional information on the African American speech event, signifying.

ASSIGNMENT

- 1) Type up responses of several healthy paragraphs to each of the following questions:
 - (a) What kind of affective response do you have to Brooks Gardener's article? (In other words, what's your gut reaction? How does reading it make you feel?)
 - (b) What kind of intellectual response do you have to the article? Does she have a thesis to support? What is it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? In particular, if you are critical of her methods of data collection or analysis, try to suggest alternative methods that might avoid the problems you see.

- 2) Here are some specific questions to be ready to discuss. Before coming to class, consider the following features of Gardner's text and evaluate their advantages and disadvantages. In class, we'll discuss these. You'll be assigned small groups to discuss them in; hence, be ready to talk about them.

¹ In John Baugh & Joel Sherzer (Eds.). 1984. Language in use: Readings in sociolinguistics (pp. 148-164). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. (Reprinted from Language and social interaction (Sociological Inquiry) 50, pp. 328-356, 1980).

(i) her use of the historical present and short, largely decontextualized narratives ('A woman walks down the street' to report a past action is sometimes labeled the *(conversational) historical present*. The narratives are 'decontextualized' in that we, with rare exception, do not know anything about the woman who was the recipient of the street remark.)

(ii) her use of Goffman's notion of civil inattention. (Do you think such a norm exists? Is it as unified a norm as Gardener presents it? Why or why not? What are the advantages and disadvantages of assuming such a robust norm, as Gardener does?)

(iii) her use of the notion of open categories. (Do such groups exist? Has she formulated the notion in a useful way? (Although she does not make the point, I think her notion could be extended to include other sorts of behaviors; e.g., I think those falling into her 'open categories' are more likely to get stared at—a breach of the norm of civil inattention, whether because of curiosity or otherwise—than those who are not.) Would we expect to find such groups in all societies? (For those of you who have lived in other cultures, what are the 'open categories' in your society?) What would be the basis for membership in such groups?)

(iv) the priority she gives to gender (sex, really) as the 'cause' or best account for why street remarks exist, continue, etc. (To consider here: in what way do her data, as problematic as they might be, lead some readers to think that an analysis based on gender/sex alone is too simple, both now and even back in 1980?) Brooks Gardener's article is a great example of second-wave feminist thinking; we'll use it as a way of thinking about the strengths and shortcomings of certain frameworks for analyzing sex/gender.

(v) her sources of data. (Here, consider whether she had alternatives and what sort of alternatives she (or another researcher) might have or have had.)

(vi) the tone of her article. (How would you characterize the tone? objective? scientific? engaged? disengaged? emotional? angry? descriptive? analytic? irrational? etc. (Don't focus just on the use of the historical present (question (i) above) but on the rest of the article.) What accounts for the article's tone? Also consider what role the opening quotation from the Joyce Carol Oates story plays in setting the tone for the story.)

Two other questions to think about:

- 1) Do you agree with Brooks Gardener that the major purpose of street remarks is socializing men in to rejection (a kind of self control) and women into self control? What if she is right? What if she is wrong?
Does whether she is right or wrong in any way reduce the validity of the strengths of her analysis?

- 2) What does Brooks Gardener mean when she says "there are...no dinners for which [a woman] does not have to dress"?

Additional information on the African American practice of *signifying*

Gardner mentions ethnic differences in how street remarks are dealt with, especially with respect to African American culture in contrast to the (unnamed) culture she is describing. Specifically, she contrasts street remarks with 'signifying'. Here, I first give an example of an African American woman's 'talking smart' in response to a man who is trying to pick her up; while talking smart is a kind of signifying, signifying itself it often more clearly critical in nature (though it is still based on indirection). Then, I offer an example of explicit signifying as contrast.

An especially insightful treatment of the issue of 'talking smart' and a woman's need constantly to create and protect her image as reputable in public in African American communities comes up as part of the following article:

Abrahams, Roger. 1975. Negotiating respect: Patterns of presentation among Black Women. Journal of American Folklore. Vol. 88, (N° 347), pp. 58-80.

In this article, Abrahams includes the following exchange between Claudia Kernan Mitchell, whose dissertation Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community, (1971), was among the first extended treatment of language use in African American communities and the first contemporary work by an African American. (Zora Neale Hurston had, of course, done related work of a different sort earlier in the century.) In this exchange, Mitchell manages to 'talk smart' to a young man who is trying to pick her up; in fact, she wishes to interview him, but before she can do so, she has to gain his cooperation without alienating him. (R = researcher; I and II are young, unnamed African American men. The setting is a public park.) Although the young man's remarks are not exactly street remarks, Mitchell's replies represent the sorts of replies that can be used in response to street remarks in the Black community—if the female is adept at coming up with them.

I (= unnamed African American man): Baby, you a real scholar. I can tell you want to learn. Now if you'll just cooperate a li'l bit, I'll show you what a good teacher I am. But first we got to get into my area of expertise.

R (= researcher; Claudia Kernan Mitchell): I may be wrong but seems to me we already in your area of expertise.

I: You ain' so bad yourself, girl. I ain't heard you stutter yet. You a li'l fixated on your subject though. I want to help a sweet thang like you all I can. I figure all that book learning you got must mean you been neglecting other areas of your education.

II: (= second unnamed African American man): Talk that talk!...

R: Why don't you let me point out where I can best use your help.

I: Are you sure you in the best position to know?

(laughter)

I: I'mo [I'm going to] leave you alone, girl. Ask me what you want to know.
Tempus fugit ['Time flies', a Latin expression], baby.

Notice the indirection: Speaker I wishes to seduce R, but he never talks directly about sex; instead, he chooses a way of speaking that can be interpreting as relating to sex, though he could deny that is the case at any point should he be accused of doing so. In the end, R "passes the test" through her own verbal skill, and I agrees to help her—on her terms, not his. In other words, this exchange represents a sort of playful banter in which words and one's facility with them are the currency.

In contrast, SIGNIFYING always involves critique, often bitterly so, by indirection; thus, it, too, is always defeasible (i.e., it can be denied, if necessary). Its artfulness is directly related to the signifier's ability to be indirect (and hence get out of things if necessary) and his or her ability to get the point across in some (nearly) unambiguous way. As the following incident demonstrates, Nig, the protagonist of the novel, paid dearly for her signifying, but her critique was lost on none present. Note in particular that the writer explicitly notes that Nig never looked at her mistress as she ate; to do so would have been to acknowledge openly (i.e., directly) the meaning of her actions. Of course, the signifying here was nonverbal whereas the genre is usually associated with speaking.

Example of signifying from Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall even There. [1859]. The book was written under a pseudonym, 'Our Nig'. Henry Lewis Gates, Jr. has identified the writer as Harriet E. Wilson. The only accessible edition of this novel is the Vintage Books Edition (Random House, 1983) with introduction and notes by Gates. Gates contended at the time that Wilson was "most probably the first Afro-American to publish a novel in the US, the fifth Afro-American to publish fiction in English..., and along with Maria F. dos Reis ...[of] Brazil, one of the first two black women to publish a novel in any language" (xiii). Within the past few years, Gates has discovered an earlier novel written by an African American woman.

"Put that plate down; you shall not have a clean one; eat from mine," continued she [Mrs. Bellmont, the mistress of the house]. Nig hesitated. To eat after James [one of the Bellmont's grown sons, in ill health], his wife, or Jack [the Bellmont's other grown son], would have been pleasant; but to be commanded to do what was disagreeable by her mistress, *because* it was disagreeable, was trying. Quickly looking about, she took the plate, called Fido [a common name for a dog in American culture] to wash it, which he did to the best of his ability; then, wiping her knife and fork on the cloth, she proceeded to eat her dinner.

Nig never looked toward her mistress during the process. She had Jack near; she did not fear her now.

Insulted, full of rage, Mrs. Bellmont rushed to her husband, and commanded him to notice this insult; to whip that child, if he would not do it, James ought.

James came to hear the kitchen version of the affair. Jack was boiling over with laughter. He related all the circumstances to James, and pulling a bright silver half-dollar from his pocket, he threw it at Nig saying, "There, take that; 't was worth paying for."

James sought his mother; told her he "would not excuse or palliate Nig's impudence; but she should not be whipped or be punished at all. You have not treated her, mother, so as to gain her love; she is only exhibiting your remissness in this matter."

She only smothered her resentment until a convenient opportunity offered. The first time she was left alone with Nig, she gave her a thorough beating, to bring up arrearages; and threatened, if she ever exposed her to James, she would "cut her tongue out."

James found her, upon his return, sobbing; but fearful of revenge, she dared not answer his queries. He guessed their cause, and longed for returning health to take her under his protection.

(pp. 71-72, closing scene of chapter 6)

If you're interested in signifying and African American verbal art in general, you can find relevant references in my article "He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind': Zora Neale Hurston's revenge in Mules and men." Journal of American Folklore 112, 445 (1999), 343-371.

CLASS ACTIVITIES

I divide the class into groups to discuss their responses to the questions they've replied to for homework. For the only time during the term, I divide the groups by sex (and I generally teach this article several weeks into a course when students have come to know one another.)

VISCERAL REACTIONS

The dozen or more times I've every taught the piece, the groups of males have responded as men and the groups of females responded as women, as constructed by the article. What do I mean? The women devote most of their time to telling first-person narratives of street remarks they or a woman they know has endured while the men generally criticize males who would make such remarks, apologetically admit that they (or men they know) have made such remarks, and/or criticize Brooks Gardener's analysis in much the way that she claims males seek to deny whatever might, in fact, be behind street remarks.

(Having left UT-Austin after fifteen years, I now teach in Portland, Oregon, where, I understand, there is a large transgender community, and I wonder what it will be like to teach the article to a class containing individuals who identify as transgender. That situation never occurred when I taught the article in Austin.)

ANALYTIC REACTIONS

After we've discussed the responses of the groups and analyzed them (in much the way I did in the preceding paragraphs), I assign groups one or two questions to discuss from the "intellectual" list. (I'll make some brief comments below on some of the issues I see at play.) After the groups have talked for a few minutes, we come back together for a large group discussion.

COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC TOPICS

(i) use of the historical present and decontextualized examples

The discussion of verb tense helps students become aware of the ease with which, in English, we move from the use of the present tense to report something that happened in the past to unwarranted generalizations while the discussion of Brooks Gardener's strategy of decontextualization helps them appreciate the power and potential misuse of examples about everywoman and everyman.

(ii) civil inattention

Students are often surprised to see that, indeed, all cultures seem to have some version of this notion although the particulars and the motivations behind them will vary. They also come to appreciate, as Goffman taught us to, that understanding stigmatized groups in a culture teaches a great deal about social organization. At the same time, they generally come to realize that different communities within a culture will vary in the details of this norm as well.

(iii) open categories

This question leads to very interesting discussion about cultural difference. It has also led two mothers to do course papers on pregnant women as open categories and the sorts of remarks (and verbal and nonverbal reactions) addressed to expectant mothers in public.

(iv) priority of sex

As noted, this question offers a great opportunity for helping students see the weaknesses of second-wave feminism. As comments in the article's footnotes make clear, what was going on in the data was far more complex than matters of sex and the patriarchy (though both are important), but Brooks Gardener's analytic framework did not help her see that. At a more abstract level, this discussion helps students appreciate that all research paradigms lead us to favor certain kinds of accounts and disfavor (or even be unable to entertain) other possibilities.

(v) sources of data

This question helps hard-core empiricists see that not everything can be studied with questionnaires; its also helps those who claim one must use "natural, spontaneous data" to study everything realize that such a requirement means many interesting phenomena will go unstudied.

(vi) tone of the article

Many students, more male than female, I think, contend that Brooks Gardner is angry or emotional or even irrational. When I ask them for their evidence, they have trouble finding any. It seems to me that the decontextualized examples and descriptions, almost antiseptic in some ways, are quite the opposite: a sort of *cinema vérité*. At the same time, the opening quotation from the Oates story positions readers: it certainly seems to put male readers on the defensive (I say this as a male reader); my female students respond strongly to this passage as well but in a very different way. I think this discussion helps some student begin thinking about the power of rhetorical structure (what would the

article have been like—how would we as readers have experienced it—if the quotation from Oates hadn't been there? What if it had occurred later?)

This question also permits us to talk about alternate ways of knowing and creating texts and about the desire of some feminists to broaden the nature of academic writing in terms of textual conventions, subject, and sources of data.

Finally, the discussion of whether or not we agree with Brooks Gardener's claim that street remarks about socializing females and males helps some students realize that even if we reject someone's analysis (e.g., a response that Och's claims in "Indexing Gender" on the status of American mothers elicits from many), we can still learn a great deal from those with may not ultimately agree with—in fact, such people may have given us the best texts to think with and against.

While some male students in particular and an occasional female student complain about this article, no one forgets this discussion. They report that this article helped them understand notions like embodiment, visceral and gendered responses, the ubiquity of gender, and the consequences of gender differences in everyday life in a profound way. It seems to have the ability to help lots of students "get" why gender matters and why studying that issue is often complex and understandably contested.

By the way, one group of undergrads, two women and a man, in a course on language, gender, and sexuality decided to make a video based on this article a few years back. Armed with a video camera, they interviewed students on the UT campus about street remarks and found many of the responses Brooks Gardener discussed—much to their surprise. (Students in the class were sometimes of the mindset that the women's rights movement had gotten rid of the evils of sexism that, for them, *used to* characterize American life just as the civil rights movement had gotten rid of racism.) After showing the video to the class, one of the women who made it commented that only in making the video did she realize what Brooks Gardener meant in her discussion of class issues and street remarks. Repeatedly, she said, she saw men who wanted to distance themselves from such remarks, claiming that only men of lower social classes made such remarks, and women who rationalized the behavior of men of their own social class or a higher one when they made street remarks (cf. Brooks Gardener's claim that women who do so privilege class over gender). Despite the many shortcomings of the article that we had discussed in class, she realized how much Brooks Gardener had gotten right. I can only agree.