Wendy Doniger explores the concept of passing with her habitual wit, flair, originality, and learning. “Passing” has many meanings. The entries in my *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (9th edition) are one closely-printed column long. Doniger focuses on a variety of passing that has cross-genre relevance: people who belong to a particular race, gender, or profession and enact an intricate masquerade. They pretend to belong to another race, gender, or profession, but they offer glimpses of, hints about, their original condition. One might think of these identities as palimpsests, and Doniger’s intelligence as a palimpscopic, an instrument that uses ultraviolet light to read the layers of a palimpsest.

Contemporary culture is so saturated with the belief that all the world’s a stage and that all our identities are basically a constellation of roles that we may be indifferent to the particulars of passing. I have a major difficulty with Doniger’s three examples of passing. They are not commensurate. (I also think Doniger underestimates Reagan’s sheer political skills independent of his thespianism, but that is another conversation.) An actor passing as a politician and then, as a politician, passing as an actor is fundamentally different from someone engaged in gender and/or racial passing. Being an actor and/or a politician entails taking on a profession, a chosen way of working and being in the world. Of course, to a great extent, being a member of a gender or of a race also entails choosing a way of working and being in the world. deBeauvoir was to a great degree right when she wrote that one is not born but becomes a woman. However, my remark about gender and race is true only to an extent, and deBeauvoir is right only to a degree. I no more believe in biological essentialism for race or gender than I believe in the tooth fairy, but I was born with a set of racial and biological characteristics, including the capacity to grow teeth, that are more deeply rooted than any professional roles.

Nevertheless, Doniger helpfully reminds us of the nature of passing. It involves much more than the assumption of an identity fundamentally different from one’s “own”----a man pretending to be a woman, a black to be white, a spy to be a citizen loyal to the prevailing regime, a Jew to be Christian. (I hope that elsewhere Doniger will apply her concept to religious identity, for example to the Marranos, Jews forced to become Catholic and watched for signs of impurity and backsliding in their new and compelled conversions.) People pass because they feel they must, because their survival depends upon it---be the survival psychological, social, economic, or of physical life itself. They are aware that passing means crossing rigidly patrolled and maintained borders. When the passers drop clues to an “original” identity, one on the other side of the border they have crossed, they are taking genuine risks, although out of a variety of motives. For a faltering or failing performance, even one that is barely passable, will have painful and dangerous consequences. Passers may not be easily forgiven.

The seriousness of my interpretation of passing, my sense of what is at stake in doing so, distinguishes passing from play. When we play, our audience is in on the games of masquerade, no matter how complicated and convoluted they may be. The audience may know from the beginning that a game, which may have the power to bring us to tears, is going to be played. Such awareness is part of the amazing pleasure of going to the theater or movies. The audience may catch on to the joke in the middle of the performance, or the audience
may not know about the joke until the end. Gertrude Stein does not explicitly let on until the final paragraph of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that she is the book’s primary author and that its title might more appropriately, if less kiddingly, have been *The Autobiography of the Gertrude Stein*. Only an impossibly obtuse reader, of course, would really believe that Toklas had dashed off the best-seller in the midst of her gardening and cooking. Unlike passers, players may be easily forgiven.

My contrast between passing and playing has its flexibilities and blurrings. Passing may have elements of playing; playing elements of passing. The recent, blissful movie *Being Julia* reminds us that for the great actor or actress, success depends on convincing us of the necessity and reality of a sequence of metamorphic activities, of the performer becoming the role and of the role then becoming a part of us, as if we had undergone a successful transplant operation. Moreover, both passing, if seen through a palimpsest, and playing, if seen from an audience’s perspective, do destabilize fixed categories of identity. To be sure, some performances may take their audiences through a process of destabilization and a subsequent restabilization. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam writes about a variety of drag king performers, including the “femme pretender.” The “femme pretender” acts in a masculine way, but in such a way that her femininity and hence gender binaries are finally and cheerfully confirmed. Despite this ultimate reinforcement, we have gone through a penultimate and unforgettable questioning of gender binaries. A conclusion need not be conclusive.

Despite common ground between passing and playing, the difference between them is significant. A gay man who passes for straight may either slip in his masquerade or come under an unbearable surveillance. Once unmasked as “a fairy,” he may be viciously harmed. How much easier it is to be the tooth fairy who replaces the milk tooth of a sleeping child with a bit of money.
In the book from which this essay is drawn, The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was, Wendy Doniger proffers a dazzling array of mythic narratives that ponder the paradoxes of identity and imitation. This essay, focusing on racial, gendered and political forms of self-imitation that go by the name of "passing," is drawn largely from the book's ninth chapter. While both essay and book demonstrate the structural similarity of narratives of self-imitation from culture to culture, genre to genre, and topic to topic, I will take the opposite approach and discuss some of the differences between the categories taken up here -- acting out in politics, sexual/gender passing, and racial passing.

The first section of this essay, "Acting Out in Politics" is taken from the first (rather than the ninth) chapter of the book, where it is used as an illustration of the overall theme of the mythology of self-impersonation. There, the stories of Reagan and Schwartznegger are deployed in the context of a discussion of self-impersonation on stage and in film-actors playing self-imitating roles, people in real-life who imitate actors, and actors who take on in reality the roles they have played on stage. These two actor/politicians, playing their "role(s) of a lifetime," help demonstrate the reciprocal relations between what we take as every-day reality, and its representations in theatre, film, and television (and we should add: the internet).

These stories, like the stories of sexual disguise later in the essay, are told with wit and brio, playing off our eternal fascination with intrigue in politics as in sex. However, the juxtaposition of tales of actors-become-politicians with tales of racial passing, and of M. Butterfly with Casanova and Rock Hudson, point to some of the differences, rather than the similarities, between political, sexual, and racial passing. These differences raise the question of whether the capacious framework of imitation is able to take sufficient account of the widely differing contexts, particularities and implications of its examples.

Doniger argues that we all masquerade as ourselves: the gendered and racialized roles we play are instances of "passing as what you are." However, while racial passing may be a particular form of the impersonation that seems, from ancient Hindu mythology through Hollywood to Lacan, to be a universal mechanism in the constitution of the self, its conditions, as Doniger points out, are generally not freely chosen but are imposed by "society as a whole." Passing in a racial context (as at times in a sexual context) is often furtive, shameful and secretive. Reagan and Schwartznegger, on the other hand, feel no shame about, and do not attempt to hide, their lives as actors that preceded their "passing" onto the state and national stages. The differences between a socially-mandated passing-as-oneself that may give rise to a furtive passing-as-another, and a voluntary, optional, and open passing between two socially-desirable positions -- between shameful secret and shameless politicking -- strike me as critical.

While Reagan and Schwartznegger "pass" into politics to achieve their ambitions, Doniger demonstrates how Broyard's passing tragically robbed him of what he sought to achieve -- to become a great, non-racialized, novelist. His passing was an attempt to negotiate what Anne Cheng would call "racial melancholia,"(i) the grief
caused by the inability to embody the culturally-sanctioned ideal (white) self. Broyard's creative failure illustrates Cheng's use of Freud's characterization of melancholia as an unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) mourning that makes the ego itself "become poor and empty."(ii)

The story of M. Butterfly, too, points to the differences raised when passing takes place in a racialized (and colonial) context. Doniger judges that the French diplomat's ritualized suicide, which takes place after he has discovered that his lover of twenty years was actually a man passing as a woman, "finally erases the gender (and Orientalist) categories altogether." When, at the end of the play, the French diplomat puts on a kimono and whiteface -- reminiscent both of the "white face" of the European colonizer and of the white makeup used by Japanese Kabuki performers -- to die in the guise of Mme. Butterfly, he takes on the feminine and Oriental role that had previously been his Chinese lover's to play. But rather than erasing gender and racial categories, this reversal of reversed roles accentuates them, demonstrating their perdurance. For the French diplomat, it is only the gendered colonial frame of reference provided by Butterfly -- the Oriental woman sacrificing herself for love of the American man -- that has given his life, and will now give his death, meaning. What matters to him is not who takes the role of Butterfly, but rather the colonial structuring of power, race and gender which requires someone to play the part of the sacrificial Oriental female. The universal theme of imitation is crucially mediated by the colonial structure that lines up racial and gender differences along a specific gradient of power.

Doniger is a chronicler of the human (and divine) comedy and handles her materials with a large-heartedness and a light-heartedness born of affection and delight. As with any work that covers such a large terrain, however, the question remains whether the grievous particularities of racial passing can be adequately accommodated within its broad and universal framework.


On November 27th, 2004, as I sat writing in my office at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study in Cambridge, my telephone rang. My brother in Iowa was on the line, to tell me that our father, Victor Eugene Selby, had just died. A common clash of selves began instantly – a clash familiar to me all my adult life. The little black-clad soldiers that dwell in the scholarly half of my brain began to draw out their mean little swords, congealing on an imaginary midline, to fight off the red-clad soldiers of family and emotion. The red guys won. The elderly nurses of reason, clad in grey and carrying little lanterns, swept in and had a look at the carnage. I phoned the airlines, cancelled a flight to London, where I was to give a set of talks at the Wellcome Institute, and converted the ticket into one that would point me West, in the opposite direction, home to Iowa for a wake and a funeral. And, as always, Art was passing as Life: I was working on a lecture on Sanskrit systems of prognosis, on the art of reading the dying body, and had somehow forgotten to read my own father’s.

As I sat on the plane, I thought of Wendy Doniger’s essay (I had left her book, half-read, on my nightstand, back in Cambridge where I thought it belonged) as I felt my multiple identities shifting around like continental plates; some disappearing, some giving way and yielding, making room for others. Daughter ate Scholar. Daughter then vanished, Orphan replaced Daughter. Matriarch replaced Orphan. As I pulled away from my Cambridge life, I became acutely aware of the polarities of all those selves, and how they seemed to cluster around my own senses of place. The political and intellectual self wanted to stay behind at Radcliffe, and as we flew closer to the barren, poison-soaked fields of central Iowa, my sense of being warped strangely into reverse. No longer 50, I was suddenly 18 again, the smart, mouthy bad girl I was when I left home. Where was the point of integration, at 36,000 feet, somewhere over Columbus?

During the wake and the funeral, I felt as if I were somehow performing my grief; that I was a professional wailer who had been flown in expressly for the purpose of weeping and sobbing over a dead man’s body, which happened to belong to my father. The body itself looked like a cartoon, a doll of my dad. Inside, my feelings were true; the sorrow authentic because it was wordless, but the physical performance of those feelings felt wrong. I was “be-tending,” as my daughter used to say; impersonating the grieving oldest child. But when I sat down, I could see the curve of my father’s nose rising over the gunwales of the casket, and it was as if we were wearing masks of each other. “Hey, that’s my nose,” I thought, and I then thought of that man who made me, and how much Matter matters. And I imagined him speaking to me, in words from a poem by Sharon Olds, and he said: “I have been in a body without breath, I have been in the morgue...where I have been I understand this life, I am matter, your father, I made you, when I say now that I love you I mean look down at your hand, move it, that action is matter’s love.”

Today, as I settle back into my office, the little black soldiers of intellect have miraculously revived, but a truce has been called between the factions. For now, the work of writing has become performance, as I mimic the self I was eleven days ago, but this new kind of self-imitation will give way to a new self of sorts, a self acutely aware of its new dynamics, but loving the father in its fingers.