

Book Reviews

Engaging Materialist, Poststructuralist and Postcolonial Rhetorics: When Whiteness, Feminisms, and Nations Collide/Collude

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MORE than a year ago we set out to re-navigate our way through poststructuralist and materialist feminisms so as to come to terms with the competing discourses that drive contemporary feminist social practice and political struggles. Having a hard time locating ourselves in either “camp,” we began the journey with one question: are the differences at stake and between materialist and poststructuralist discourses *real*ly insurmountable, or is it more productive to imagine their relationship as conjunctural? This question seems increasingly crucial to the communication discipline as traditional boundaries such as those between communication and culture, humanities and social science, the symbolic and the material dissolve, only to reappear in new guises. The question led us to three contemporary texts that come from or bear on communication studies, two of which come from communication scholars, the other an interdisciplinary postcolonial reader that has a distinct transnational feminist texture.

We begin with Dana Cloud’s (1998) *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: Rhetorics of Therapy*, which was published in the Rhetoric and Society series of Sage. Cloud’s arguments presume a very specific form of materialism, that of class and labor-based social movements and social action, and from this standpoint she targets “therapeutic rhetorics.” These are public discourses that transform social problems into issues of personal ills, low self-esteem, lack of morale, and the inability to cope with the stresses of everyday life; the resultant mystification extends not only into cultural politics but also contemporary social theory. Cloud labels this rhetoric a “containment strategy,” since “therapeutic discourses dislocate political energy, anger and activity into the realm of personal life, where oppositions to systems of oppression and exploitation can do little damage and exert minimal long-term influence on relations of power as they exist” (Cloud, 104). According to Cloud, therapeutic rhetoric operates by abstracting above material struggles and oppressions through a set of codes that make the dominant elites invisible. In this way real class contradictions and struggles are muted and overwritten by an ideology that blames social, political and material problems on individual disease and frailty, on individuals always already in need of help, support, and consolation, rather than on those who own the means of economic production. An ethics of care, or care of the self, displaces open, public, collective debate and organized interventions into state institutions.

Cloud devotes four chapters to tracing how this rhetoric of therapy effectively mutes class, race, and gender struggles. Her first case study is of three films about life in the “hood,” *Menace II Society*, *South Central*, and *Boyz N the Hood*. Cloud cogently shows how in each film the imagined resolution is not resistance to or rebellion against unemployment, inadequate support programs, poor housing, and substandard schools, but rather

strengthening of the family, especially through the recovery of the strong, responsible father. Cloud maintains that this line of reasoning, a line that echoes the contemporaneous "family values" program of political conservatism that has engulfed the United States, simply justifies the tendency to blame black families for their own poverty and deprivation.

In her discussion of the "Support Group Nation," Cloud turns to the reporting for the Gulf War, arguing that it, too, operated as strategic therapeutic discourse. Early coverage of the conflict acknowledged public protest as well as deep concern about the war and real US interests in the Gulf. But this flicker of political debate was quickly overshadowed by a shift to "feel-good" stories about families with members overseas, men and women at war. Cloud contends these messages offered hope, support, and consolation to those who waited and worried at home, thus effecting a turn from the political to the personal, a turn toward talk therapy and group support.

Both these studies are valuable, enlightening pieces of rhetorical criticism that are thoroughly grounded in the material. But her third case study is rather more of a mixed bag. Cloud takes on what she sees as a prevailing "therapeutics of feminism," an interpretation of "the personal is the political" as licensing individuals to turn inward in an idealistic (as opposed to realistic) manner. Her targets here are Gloria Steinem's *Revolution from Within*, which Cloud uses to represent liberal feminism, and the film *Thelma and Louise*, which she designates as a representative for radical feminism. Cloud sees both as dead ends for feminism, the former because it takes consciousness-raising as a sufficient political action rather than only a necessary first step, the latter because of its moral that when feminists do fight back at the material level, they end up in suicide. Cloud's choices of representative rhetorics, particularly her use of the conclusion to *Thelma and Louise* as justification for dismissing radical feminism, may distort the feminist project somewhat. She rules out poststructuralist feminists such as Judith Butler and Linda Alcoff, since they are guilty of lapsing into idealism, with their emphasis on identity and subjectivity, and leaving material struggles unaddressed.

In her handling of poststructuralism here and in her next section, on the "New Age of Post-Marxism," Cloud seems to be working from a rather restricted view of this still-evolving intellectual current. She does not represent the variety of differences now present within poststructuralism, nor does she acknowledge those poststructuralist theorists who grapple seriously with material conditions. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* is mentioned, only to be immediately dismissed in one quick sentence for its supposed "romanticization of schizophrenia" (p. xvii; this should be read against their explicit repudiation of such a position in the closing pages of their book; indeed, it should be read against their entire book). Rather, Cloud dismisses all poststructuralism, as just another manifestation of the much-dreaded idealism.

In a variation of this theme, in her fourth case study she criticizes Laclau and Mouffe as well as other theorists (the "Post-Marxists") who are attempting to hammer out Marxisms that do not conform to her classical Marxist perspective for . . . failing to conform to a classical Marxist perspective. This fourth study is the weakest insofar as its contribution to the theme of the book is concerned; the connection of "post-Marxists" to the therapeutic rhetorics is tenuous, at best, and Cloud relies to a large extent on a guilt by association strategy.

Nevertheless, Cloud's basic line of argument about the ways in which therapeutic rhetorics manifest themselves in contemporary American culture is undeniably important, and through much of her book she is absolutely on the mark, accurately tracing

how this rhetoric appears in film, books, and TV news coverage. Unfortunately, the purity of her Marxism makes it more difficult for her to account for the complexities of class as it is imbricated with other constituents of power such as gender, race, nationality, language, and education.

The concern with these interrelations is one of the many strengths of Thomas Nakayama and Judith Martin's (1999) *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*. This edited volume offers a multitude of perspectives on whiteness; case studies, ethnography, historical analysis, and personal reflection. These essays present historically substantiated examples of why class centered politics is insufficient as a practice or as a social theory, and they also illustrate how discourses are inherently connected to the materiality of social relations (in contradistinction to Cloud's attempt to place them in utterly separate worlds). The first set of essays presents social and institutional histories of whiteness. It is followed by postcolonial and poststructuralist perspectives on whiteness issues, and the succeeding set of essays considers whiteness in the United States. The volume is rounded off with essays on whiteness in international contexts. This inclusion and placement of the postcolonial and international perspectives on whiteness is itself a refreshing change from the usual exclusive focus on or pride of place given to studies of whiteness in the U.S.

Although all these articles very much merit serious attention, we will focus here on three essays which relate most closely to the theme of this review, that is, how material and discursive forces play out and play against each other. In the transnational spirit of the volume, we begin with Raka Shome's "Whiteness and the Politics of Location: Postcolonial Reflections." Shome asserts that "whiteness needs to be studied through the interlocking axes of *power*, *spatial location*, and *history*" (p. 109) and her reflections on how she internalized and experienced whiteness in her own life illustrate these complexities beautifully. A South Asian Indian of a privileged class, Shome was educated in an English-language Catholic school in India, marks of advantage and power that brought her closer to the whiteness of the colonial rulers of India. At the same time, she was made aware that her darker skin was a social drawback in a society where her sister was praised for having a lighter complexion (skin tones being associated in the Indian context with the Aryan/Dravidian ethnic distinctions). Although in India she regarded herself as a member of the privileged elite, when she went to the southern United States for advanced studies she became the subject of the racial gaze, the staring of whites at those who are marked as Other, those who may be looked at but are not expected to look back—the non-white Americans—, and she began to realize the intricate web of power and history associated with these distinctions in the United States. Shome's essay not only deepens our understanding of how whiteness manifests transnationally, as a legacy of imperialism, it also demonstrates how whiteness, as a discursive formation (its range of meanings) and as a material phenomenon (the kinds of social and material power associated with it), depends on and shifts according to historical and cultural contexts.

This dialectical interplay between discursive and material also undergirds the article "Whiteness as Strategic Rhetoric," by Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek. Working with the notion of assemblages from Deleuze and Guattari, they deterritorialize "whiteness," making its articulations visible and showing how they reflect and reproduce power relations. Nakayama and Krizek uncover six strategies according to which white people understand whiteness. Perhaps most importantly, for these American whites their whiteness is associated with being in the majority and having status. Other

strategies are subtraction (defining by what whites are not, in a Burkean sense), appealing to whiteness as a scientific racial category, equating whiteness with being American, equating whiteness with being European (“we’re just Euromutts,” as some of my white students would say), and refusing to label or hyphenate one’s identity. Although whiteness itself is embodied and lived in the material world, from the Deleuzian perspective the underpinnings of the assemblage need to be made visible before it can be undone. It is Nakayama and Krizek’s contribution to have applied these poststructuralist insights to a particular discursive situation in so productive a fashion.

Finally, in their essay “The Dynamic Construction of White Ethnicity in the Context of Transnational Cultural Formations” Jolanta Drzewiecka and Kathleen Wong (Lau) do indeed approach whiteness from a transnational perspective. Specifically, they examine the phenomenon of white people in the United States performing European folk dances as a means of connecting with and communicating their putative European ethnicity, or even to share the experiences of a group other than their own, in enactments of what the anthropologist James Clifford calls “traveling culture.” In a fascinating ethnographic study of folk dance camps, they show how attempts to reconstruct various white ethnic identities and communities in another time and place through folk dance are rendered problematic by transnationalism. For instance, “as more and more dancers and musicians learn that it is lucrative to teach Americans Hungarian dances, these dances, sometimes chosen idiosyncratically by graduate students researching in ethnomusicology, become the reified quintessential Hungarian dances not only in America but in Hungary as well” (p. 211). These “borrowing and flows” are of cultural objects and practices, but they are also appropriations and modifications of cultural meanings, in yet another illustration of the discursive and the material in symbiosis.

This transnational orientation also characterizes most of the works in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat’s *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (1997; University of Minnesota Press). Like so many other recent anthologies in postcolonial studies, it consists entirely of works already published elsewhere (despite the editors’ statement to the contrary, even the Dirlik piece first appeared elsewhere). Since many of these essays are now what might be called postcolonial classics, it is very convenient to have them assembled all together. All the usual suspects are here; Kwame Appiah, Edward Said, Ella Shohat, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Trinh Minh-ha, Gauri Viswanathan, Stuart Hall, Arif Dirlik. Here again, rather than giving each chapter the careful review it deserves, we will concentrate on two essays that bear especially closely on the relationship between materialism and poststructuralism, especially as they play out in feminist theory and social practice.

In her essay “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race, and Nationalism,” Anne McClintock uses the work of Anderson on imagined communities in the development of nation-states and of Hobsbawms and Ranger on invented tradition as the jumping-off point of her analysis of the creation of the South African nation. In true transnational style, she questions Hobsbawms’ position that nationalism emanates from a western center and his consequent dismissal of third world nationalisms. She also argues against the determinist emphasis that Anderson places on print capitalism in the spread of nationalism. Pointing out that often only a small elite in an area could read, she argues that performed spectacles are often as powerful in popularizing and propagandizing the idea of the nation. The Afrikaners recognized that their sought-after community of the *volk* required “the conscious creation of a single print language, a popular press, and a literate populace. At the same time, the invention of tradition

required a class of cultural brokers and image-makers to do the inventing" (p. 100). Hence such highly organized and publicized spectacles of fetish nationalism as the "Tweede Trek," the centenary recreation of the 1838 Afrikaners' epic covered-wagon trip.

For McClintock, "all nationalisms are gendered; all nationalisms are invented; and all nationalisms are dangerous," dangerous because, although (only) discursive formations, they "represent relations of political power to technologies of violence" (p. 89), a connection that hardly needs to be elaborated upon. But McClintock does elaborate upon the gendered nature of Afrikaner nationalism. She looks to the historical record to document the range and significance of Afrikaner female labor, such as their participation in farming and in fighting. At the same time, she shows how the state represented "woman" in the new nation as relegated to the home, family, and private sphere, her labor inside the home naturalized and her work outside the home ignored.

Interestingly, McClintock makes a similar critique of one of the founding fathers of postcolonial studies, Franz Fanon. She acknowledges Fanon's awareness of the sexual politics of colonization; Fanon recognized that the family, as a colonial construct, has particular gender effects that are indeed oppressive. However, McClintock ultimately concludes that Fanon actually reproduces that which he repudiates, through his conception of the Algerian nation-to-be along the lines of a purified, decolonized family metaphor, in which the family is organic and authentic, and naturally stratified along lines of gender and sexuality. Here McClintock nails Fanon for accepting a pre- and postcolonial vision of a family in which "the girl is always a notch behind the boy," but accepts this "natural" order of things "without being humiliated or neglected" (99). This foundational assumption about gender difference has immediate effects on how feminist militancy is diffused across national movements. McClintock contends that when the nation is imagined according to an organic family metaphor, "women's militancy is contained within the prerevolutionary frame of the reformed, heterosexual family, as the natural image of national life" (p. 99). McClintock explores how this inconsistency on gender relations manifests itself both in Fanon's psychologically grounded position in *Black Skin White Masks* and in his political project in the *Wretched of the Earth*.

McClintock makes a similar argument about Fanon's treatment of veiling in Algerian society. Although he describes the historical meaning of veiling in Algerian society "as open to shifts and subversions," he is most concerned with the colonial powers' attempts to induce Algerian women to unveil, which he considers a mere "ruse to get power over the [Algerian] men" (Fanon, 39, quoted in McClintock, p. 97). McClintock sees Fanon as so focussed on denying this "colonial rescue" fantasy that he would not come to terms with the earlier history of veiling as a way to discipline and mark women's bodies. Indeed, she quotes Fanon to the effect that the veil is an "inert element in Algerian culture, an undifferentiated element in an homogenous whole" (Fanon 47, quoted in McClintock, p. 97) as a prelude to making a larger point about women's agency. Fanon, like many other scholars of nationalism, assumed that before the national struggle women had no political agency, since their work was located in the private sphere. The national movement pulled women in, but only insofar as they were passive handmaidens to the national struggle. McClintock calls this a *designated agency*, always on hold; gender oppressions that are constituted in the state's discursive and material engines are deemed divisive and threatening to the larger national struggle to be deferred until after the nation-state is built.

Unsatisfied with Fanon, McClintock articulates these contradictions to the feminist/nationalist movements taking shape in both Afrikaans nationalisms and the feminist agenda that made its way through the African National Congress. Here she reminds us that although Afrikaner women were subordinated to Afrikaner men, they were, nevertheless, active in the creation of Afrikaner identity, and hence complicit in apartheid. It is hardly surprising that black South African women would reject notions of universal sisterhood offered by Afrikaner women. However, McClintock claims that although the ANC was thoroughly patriarchal at its inception, eventually it officially recognized feminism as a necessary and valuable political movement, without subordinating it to the national cause as happened in so many other national and postcolonial contexts. The irony, of course, is that despite the ANC support, feminist agendas have not been realized more generally in the national struggles in postcolonial nations and nationalist movements. Thus McClintock concludes on the same sobering note with which she began; nationalisms are always gendered and always dangerous.

Whereas McClintock provides a historically materialist analysis that articulates feminism(s) and nationalisms, Butler's essay "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion" epitomizes a discourse-centered poststructuralist interrogation of gender categories (work of the kind that Cloud accuses of sliding into therapeutic idealism). Butler begins with Althusser's conception of interpellation; to use the classic example, when a police officer, sanctioned by the state to enact the law, calls out "hey you," a juridical subject is constituted. But while Althusser sees such hailing as an unilateral act, Butler asks "are there other ways of being addressed and constituted by the law, ways of being occupied and occupying the law, that disarticulate the power of punishment for the power of recognition?" (381). She offers a yes/and . . . explanation, insisting that "the law not only might be refused but might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation" (Butler, 381). Butler invokes Gramsci to situate this sense of rearticulation. Yet all the while, Butler's orientation is also entangled with psychoanalytic, Lacanian registers. It is in this spirit that she pushes the naming question to the fore, bringing to life Spivak's sense of "enabling violation," the condition of being thrown into subject positions of the I and you, positions always already interpreted for you, but which you can refuse or disavow. Positing an alternative conception of interpellation, Butler scrutinizes the ways in which drag culture pushes the boundaries of gender categories, its mimicry calling into question the very fabric of heterosexual ideals.

Butler sees the culture depicted in the film *Paris is Burning* as exemplifying this "rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation." The film documents voguing pageants among Black and Latino drag queens and gay men, men who mostly come from the working class. Butler highlights how their playful masquerade makes visible heterosexual normativity, and, just as importantly, she stresses the ambiguities of their gendered enactments of femininity and masculinity. For Butler, it is crucial to recognize and appreciate this ambiguity and variety in how subjects respond to hailing, because frozen categories of subjectivity limit subjects' potential range of action. The drag performers, on the contrary, have appropriated the notion of the nuclear heterosexual family to constitute themselves into "houses" headed by "mothers," surrogate families that provide relations of support, affirmation, and solidarity in a hostile larger society. Along the same lines, Butler takes exception to bell hooks' argument, in her review of the same film, that all drag is inherently misogynist.

Butler asserts that such a position is not only homophobic but also colonizing, given that it assumes that women are the center of all gay men's identifications.

While Butler is far from offering a naïve vision of consciousness-raising here, she does stop short of structural intervention, the limit that concerns Cloud deeply. Butler does not pretend to take on this question. Through her anti-reading of *Paris is Burning*, she articulates the ways in which subjective categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality crosscut one another and are mutually constitutive. She illustrates how it is that gender masquerades destabilize the presumed unilateral axis of heterosexual masculinity. She stresses that recognition of the ambiguities inherent in subjective identifications bear on material bodies that, after all, matter. She points to the case of Venus, a preoperative transsexual Latino prostitute, who is killed by one of her clients who discovers her secret genitalia. Butler contrasts Venus to a Ninja voguer who masquerades as a straight, hyper-masculine man. The ninja enjoys commercial success as a dancing hero and is picked up by Madonna and other interested high profile agents. Through these stories, Butler attends to the material ways in which gender defiance, while it may be a set of performances, also involves a fight for one's life.

Our ruminations on these texts lead us to conclude that when cast as mutually exclusive, materialism and poststructuralism may seem to operate in different worlds. Like many of the authors reviewed here, however, we see their relation as conjunctural and symbiotic. We have concluded with discussions of McClintock and Butler because when read with and against one another they make visible the ways in which materialist and poststructural theorizing is interventionist and interested in similar political contests, whether those contests show up as critiques of western metaphysics, of modes of production in late capitalism, or of the material resources that evoked imperial battles. Materialists and poststructuralists presuppose and play off one another. They both offer space for feminist social practice, the former through social movements and action, the latter through relentless interrogations of subjective forms and linguistic categories, forms and categories whose violence reverberates through material struggles, national movements, queer performances, and battles over whiteness.

Books Reviewed

CONTROL AND CONSOLATION IN AMERICAN CULTURE AND POLITICS: RHETORICS OF THERAPY. By Dana Cloud. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998; pp. 224. Cloth \$67.95; Paper \$31.95.

DANGEROUS LIAISONS: GENDER, NATION, AND POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES. By Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; pp. 560. Cloth \$62.95; Paper \$24.95.

WHITENESS: THE COMMUNICATION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY. Edited by Thomas Nakayama and Judith Martin. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999; pp. xiv + 314. Cloth \$73.95; Paper \$36.95.

Notes

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