Good-bye, Columbus? 
Notes on the Culture of Criticism

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

"We must remember that until very recently Nigeria was British," said Miss Spurgeon. "It was pink on the map. In some old atlases it still is." Letty felt that with the way things were going, nothing was pink on the map any more.

Barbara Pym, Quartet in Autumn

1

I recently asked the dean of a prestigious liberal arts college if he thought that his school would ever have, as Berkeley has, a majority nonwhite enrollment. "Never," he replied candidly. "That would completely alter our identity as a center of the liberal arts."

The assumption that there is a deep connection between the shape of a college curriculum and the ethnic composition of its students reflects a disquieting trend in American education. Political representation has been confused with the "representation" of various ethnic identities in the curriculum, while debates about the nature of the humanities and core curricula have become marionette theaters for larger political concerns.

The cultural right, threatened both by these demographic shifts and by the demand for curricular change, has retreated to a stance of intellectual protectionism, arguing for a great and inviolable "Western tradition" which contains the seeds, fruit, and flowers of the very best that has been thought or uttered in human history. The cultural left demands changes to accord with population shifts in gender and ethnicity (along the way often providing searching indictments of the sexism and racism that have plagued Western culture and to which the cultural right sometimes turns a blind eye). Both, it seems to me, are wrongheaded.

As a humanist, I am just as concerned that so many of my colleagues, on the one hand, feel that the prime motivation for
a diverse curriculum is these population shifts as I am that those opposing diversity see it as foreclosing the possibility of a shared “American” identity. Both sides quickly resort to a grandly communitarian rhetoric. Both think they’re struggling for the very soul of America. But if academic politics quickly becomes a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, perhaps it’s time to wish a *pax* on both their houses.

What *is* multiculturalism, and why are they saying such terrible things about it? We’ve been told it threatens to fragment American culture into a warren of ethnic enclaves, each separate and inviolate. We’ve been told that it menaces the Western tradition of literature and the arts. We’ve been told it aims to politicize the school curriculum, replacing honest historical scholarship with a “feel good” syllabus designed solely to bolster the self-esteem of minorities. As I say, the alarm has been sounded, and many scholars and educators—liberals as well as conservatives—have responded to it. After all, if multiculturalism is just a pretty name for ethnic chauvinism, who needs it?

Well, there is, of course, a liberal rejoinder to these concerns, which says that this isn’t what multiculturalism is—or at least, not what it ought to be. The liberal pluralist insists that the debate has been miscast from the beginning and that it’s worth setting the main issues straight.

There’s no denying that the multicultural initiative arose, in part, because of the fragmentation of American society by ethnicity, class, and gender. To make it the culprit for this fragmentation is to mistake effect for cause. Mayor Dinkins’s metaphor about New York as a “gorgeous mosaic” is catchy but unhelpful, if it means that each culture is fixed in place and separated by grout. Perhaps we should try to think of American culture as a conversation among different voices—even if it’s a conversation that some of us weren’t able to join until recently. Perhaps we should think about education, as the conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott proposed, as “an invitation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices,” each conditioned, as he says, by a different perception of the world. Common sense says that you don’t bracket 90% of the world’s cultural heritage if you really want to learn about the world.

To insist that we “master our own culture” before learning others only defers the vexed question: what gets to count as “our” culture? What makes knowledge worth knowing? There’s a wonderful bit of nineteenth-century student doggerel about
the great Victorian classicist Benjamin Jowett which nicely sums up the monoculturalist's claims on this point.

Here I stand, my name is Jowett
If there's knowledge, then I know it.
I am the master of this college:
What I know not, is not knowledge.

Unfortunately, as history has taught us, an Anglo-American regional culture has too often masked itself as universal, passing itself off as our "common culture" and depicting different cultural traditions as "tribal" or "parochial." So it's only when we're free to explore the complexities of our hyphenated American culture that we can discover what a genuinely common American culture might actually look like. Is multiculturalism un-American? Herman Melville—canonical author and great white male—didn't think so. As he wrote in Redburn, "We are not a narrow tribe, no. . . We are not a nation, so much as a world." Common sense (Gramscian or otherwise) reminds us that we're all ethnics, and the challenge of transcending ethnic chauvinism is one we all face.

Granted, multiculturalism is no magic panacea for our social ills. We're worried when Johnny can't read. We're worried when Johnny can't add. But shouldn't we be worried, too, when Johnny tramples gravestones in a Jewish cemetery or scrawls racial epithets on a dormitory wall? It's a fact about this country that we've entrusted our schools with the fashioning and re-fashioning of a democratic polity: that's why the schooling of America has always been a matter of political judgment. But in America, a nation that has theorized itself as plural from its inception, our schools have an especially difficult task.

The society we have made simply won't survive without the values of tolerance, and cultural tolerance comes to nothing without cultural understanding. In short, the challenge facing America in the next century will be the shaping, at long last, of a truly common public culture, one responsive to the long-silenced cultures of color. If we relinquish the ideal of America as a plural nation, we abandon the very experiment that America represents.

2

Or so argues the liberal pluralist. But it's a position that infuriates the hard left as much as the conservative rhetoric of
exclusion distresses the liberal pluralist. The conservative (these are caricatures, and I apologize), extolling the achievement of something narrativized under the rubric "Western civilization," says: "Nobody does it better." We liberal reformists say: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you . . . and hope for the best." The hard left says: "Let's do unto you what you did unto Others and then see how you like that."

For the hard left, what's distasteful about the ideology of pluralism is that it disguises real power relations while leaving the concept of hegemony unnamed—that it presents an idyllic picture of coexistence that masks the harsh realities. Pluralism, for them, fails to be adequately emancipatory; it leaves oppressive structures intact.

There are at least two things to notice here. First, if the hard left is correct, then the hard right has nothing to worry about from the multicultural initiative. Second, the hard left distinguishes itself from the liberal pluralist position in its frank partisanship; it subsists on a sharp division between hegemons and hegemonized, center and margin, oppressor and oppressed, and makes no bones about which side it's on.

Finally, there is something more puzzling than it first appears about the more general objective: the redistribution of cultural capital, to use the term made familiar by Pierre Bourdieu (see Bourdieu and Passeron). I think it's clarifying to cast the debate in his terms, and faithful to what's at the core of these recent arguments; I also think there's a reason that participants in the debate have been reluctant to do so. Again, let me enumerate.

First, the concept of "cultural capital" makes an otherwise high-minded and high-toned debate sound a little . . . sordid. The very model of cultural capital—by which the possession of cultural knowledge is systematically related to social stratification—is usually "unmasked" as an insidious mechanism; it's held to be the bad faith that hovers over the "liberal arts." You don't want to dive into this cesspool and say, "I want a place in it, too."

Second, a redistributionist agenda may not even be intelligible with respect to cultural capital. Cultural capital refers us to a system of differentiation; in this model, once cultural knowledge is redistributed so that it fails to mark a distinction, it loses its value. To borrow someone else's revision of Benjamin, this may be the work of reproduction in an age of mechanical art (Appadurai 17). We've heard, in this context, the phrase "cultural equity," a concept that may well have strategic value, but that is hard to make sense of otherwise, save as an
illicit personification (the transferral of equal standing from people to their products). What could confer "equity" on "culture"? The phrase assumes that works of culture can be measured on some scalar metric—and decreed, from some Archimedean vantage point, to be equal. The question is why anybody should care about "culture" of this sort, let alone fight for a claim upon its title.

Third, the question of value divides the left in two. On the one hand, the usual unself-conscious position is to speak in terms of immanently valuable texts that have been "undervalued" for extrinsic reasons. On the other hand, the more "theorized" position views the concept of "value" as essentially mystified. That position has shrewdly demonstrated that our usual theories of value are incoherent, unintelligible, or otherwise ill-founded; the only error it made was to assume that our practices of evaluation should, or could, fall by the wayside as well, which is surely a non sequitur. Indeed, the minute the word "judgmental" became pejorative, we should have known we had made a misstep. This is not for a moment to concede that anybody actually stopped judging. Literary evaluation merely ceased to be a professionally accredited act.

In the end, neither left nor right escapes the dean's dilemma. In short, we remain mired in the representation quandary.

3

The interplay between the two senses of the word "representation" has, indeed, been foundational to the now rather depleted argument over the "canon." On the one hand, it has dawned on most of us that the grand canon—this fixed repository of valuable texts—never existed, which is why it was such a pushover. On the other hand, more scholars have come to see that the conflation of textual with political representation fueled a windily apocalyptic rhetoric that had nowhere to go when its putative demands were granted. (It tended to sponsor a naively reductionist mode of reading as well: Alice Walker as the black Eternal Feminine on two legs.) As John Guillory, perhaps our most sophisticated scholar of canon formation, has remarked,

this sense of representation, the representation of groups by texts, lies at a curious tangent to the concept of political representation, with which it seems perhaps to have been confused, a confusion which is the occasion of both the
impasse of cooptation and the very cachet of the non-canonical, contingent as it is upon the delegitimation of the canon. . . . The work of recovery has for the most part been undertaken as though the field of writing were a *plenum*, a textual repetition of social diversity. In fact, as is quite well known, strategies of exclusion are employed historically most effectively at the level of access to literacy. ("Canonical" 484–85)

But the tension between the two senses of "representation" isn’t restricted to arguments about the canon; in the minority context, the same issues resurface as an issue about the "burdens of representation" of the black artist. If black authors are primarily entrusted with producing the proverbial "text of blackness," they become vulnerable to the charge of betrayal if they shirk their duty. (The reason that nobody reads Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwannee* isn’t unrelated to the reason that everybody reads *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*) Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, the black British filmmaker and media theorist, have focused on the tension "between representation as a practice of depicting and representation as a practice of delegation. Representational democracy, like the classic realist text, is premised on an implicitly mimetic theory of representation as correspondence with the ‘real’" (4). (As one of a small number of black filmmakers, Julien has felt the pressure to be in some sense "representative," so that his theoretical objections have an additional polemical edge.)

And while most of us will accept the point, I think many of us haven’t appreciated the significance of this breach when it comes to the highly mediated relation between critical debates and their supposed referents.

Indeed, with the celebrated turn to politics in literary studies in the past decade, there’s been a significant change in the register of reproach. Pick up any issue of *Modern Philology* in the 1950s, and turn to the review section. You’ll find that in those days, one would typically chastise a study for unpardonable lapses in its citations or for failing to take full account of the insight yielded by other scholarship, and judge the author to be a slipshod ignoramus. Today, for equivalently venial offenses, the errant scholar can be reproached as a collaborationist—accused of unwitting complicity with the ideologies and structures of oppression, of silencing the voice of the Other, of colluding with perpetrators of injustice: "Thus Heywood’s study only reinstates and re-valorizes the very specular ideologies it appears to resist. . . ." The culprit, some fresh-faced young ac-
ademic from the Midwest, stands exposed for what she is, a collaborator and purveyor of repression, a woman who silences entire populations with a single paragraph, who, in view of fatal analytic conflations, has denied agency to all the wretched of the earth.

Politics never felt so good.

It's heady stuff. Critics can feel like the sorcerer's apprentice, unleashing elemental forces beyond their control. But we know, on some level, that it's mostly make-believe—that the brilliant Althusserian unmasking of the ideological apparatus of film editing you published in *October* won't even change the way Mike Ovitz treats his secretary, let alone bring down the house of patriarchy.

I suppose that's why these levels of criticism often get mixed up. I've seen readers' reports on journal manuscripts that say things like: “Not only does so-and-so's paper perpetuate a logic internal to the existing racist, patriarchal order, but footnote 17 gives page numbers to a different edition than is listed in the bibliography.” Well, we can't have that, now can we?

The dilemmas of oppositional criticism haunt the fractured American academic community. The 1980s witnessed not only a resurgence of what I'll call the New Moralism, but the beginnings of its subsidence. And this, too, is very much bound up with the problematic of representation, such that the relation between the politics of theory and the politics of politics became a question to be indefinitely deferred or finessed.

Seventies-style hermeneutics killed the author; eighties-style politics brought the author back. The seventies sponsored a hedonic vocabulary of “free-play,” *jouissance*, the joys of indeterminacy. The eighties brought back a grim-faced insistence on the hidden moral stakes: New Historicist essays on the English Renaissance, for instance, regularly turned out to be about Indians and empire.

Oppositional criticism in the early seventies offered us a sort of “wacky packs” version of literary history as a procession no longer of laureled heads but of clay feet. Later critiques of the canon went on to dispute its patterns of inclusion and exclusion. And, as Guillory has also pointed out, the reason the debate over the canon entailed the resurrection of the author was simply that it required representatives of a social constituency: The debate over canon formation was concerned, in the first instance, with *authors*, not texts (“Canon” 40).

And we “minority” critics came to play a similar role in the marionette theater of the political that I referred to earlier. We shouldn't wonder at the accompanying acrimony. Edward
Said has indicted what he describes as the “badgering, hectoring, authoritative tone” that persists in contemporary cultural studies, adding, “The great horror I think we should all feel is toward systematic or dogmatic orthodoxies of one sort or another that are paraded as the last word of high Theory still hot from the press” (182). Is it merely the uncanny workings of the old “imitative fallacy” that account for the authoritarian tonalities of scholarship and professional intercourse where issues of domination are foregrounded?

Again, I want to stress the way in which minority criticism can become a site for larger contestations. Robert Young, an editor of the Oxford Literary Review, ventured an intriguing proposition in a recent paper entitled “The Politics of ‘The Politics of Literary Theory.’” He notes that literary Marxism in contemporary America (as opposed to that in Britain) has “few links with the social sciences or with a political base in the public sphere. You can make almost any political claim you like: you know that there is no danger that it will ever have any political effect.” “At the same time,” he continues, “the pressure of feminism, and more recently Black Studies, has meant that today the political cannot be ignored by anyone, and may be responsible for the white male retreat into Marxism. Marxism can compete with feminism and Black Studies insofar as it offers to return literary criticism to its traditional moral function, but can, more covertly, also act as a defence against them . . .” (137). The elided social referent of struggle returns, but now it is merely a struggle for the moral high ground. And I think you could argue that this return to a gestural sort of politics reflects a moralizing strain in contemporary criticism that has lost faith in its epistemological claims. If we can’t tell you what’s true and what’s false—the thought goes—we’ll at least tell you what’s right and what’s wrong. What’s wrong? Racism, colonialism, oppression, cultural imperialism, patriarchy, epistemic violence . . . So we lost facts, and we got back ethics—a trade-in, but not necessarily an upgrade.

One problem is, as I’ve suggested, that the immediate concern of the “politics of interpretation” is generally the politics of interpreters. Another is that we tend to equivocate between, on the one hand, what a text could mean—the possibilities of its signification, the “modalities of the production of meaning,” as de Man has it—and on the other hand, what a text does
mean—the issue of its actual political effectivity. Political criticism usually works by demonstrating the former and insinuating the latter. Now, the pleasurable political frisson comes from the latter, the question of reception and effects (as an old newsroom slogan has it, if it bleeds, it leads). But critics are reluctant to engage in actual sociology: it isn’t what they were trained to do; it’s not what they were raised to value. Still, as political critics, we usually trade on that ambiguity.

Let me give you an example of a now familiar version of such political reading. In the course of elaborating a theory of the “corporate populist,” a recent critical essay accused the filmmaker Spike Lee of being responsible, though perhaps indirectly, for the death of black youths. The chain of causality begins with Spike Lee, who makes television commercials promoting Air Jordans; it ends with the inner city—devastated by crack and consumerism—and a black youth with a bullet through the brain, murdered for his sneakers. All because Spike said that he’s gotta have it. You think Mars Blackmon is funny? Those commercials have a body count.

I want to insist that this was not an aberration, but a state-of-the-art critical essay, one that represents the impasse we’ve reached in the American academy. This is how we’ve been taught to do cultural politics: you find the body; then you find a culprit. It’s also where the critique of the commodity will lead you. This is an old phenomenon on both the right and the left—and certain kinds of Marxism can be very theological on this point: commodification is a kind of original sin, and any cultural form it touches is tainted. These critiques, to be sure, are usually anchored to semi-organicist notions of authenticity.

The old leftist critique of the commodity has a usefully confining tendency: it sets up a cunning trap that practically guarantees that the marginalized cultures it glorifies will remain marginalized. They knew just how to keep us in our place. And the logic was breathtakingly simple: If you win, you lose.

And that’s because it’s just a fact about what we quaintly label the “current conjuncture” that if a cultural form reaches a substantial audience, it has entered the circuits of commodification. What Paul Gilroy calls “populist modernism” stays in good ideological standing so long as it doesn’t get too popular. And one of the most important contributions of a younger breed of cultural theorists has been a critique of the old critique of the commodity form. Mercer, for example, explores ways in which commodity forms have been expressively manipulated by the marginalized to explore and explode the artificiality of the identities to which they’ve been confined.
I want to propose that it's worth distinguishing between morality and moralism, but I do so with trepidation. As Logan Pearsall Smith has observed: "That we should practise what we preach is generally admitted; but anyone who preaches what he and his hearers practise must incur the gravest moral disapprobation." At the same time, I worry that the critical hair shirt has become more of a fashion statement than a political one.

A friend of mine suggested that we institutionalize something we already do implicitly at conferences on "minority discourse": award a prize at the end for the panelist, respondent, or contestant most oppressed; at the end of the year, we could have the "Oppression Emmy" Awards. For what became clear, by the end of the past decade, was that this establishment of what J. G. Melquior calls an "official marginality" meant that minority critics are accepted by the academy, but in return, they must accept a role already scripted for them: once scorned, now exalted. You think of Sally Field's address to the Motion Picture Academy when she received her Oscar. "You like me! You really, really like me!" we authorized Others shriek into the microphone, exultation momentarily breaking our dour countenances. (We can, of course, be a little more self-conscious about it and acknowledge our problematic positionality: "You like me, you really, really like me—you racist patriarchal Eurotrash elitists!") But let's face it. It takes all the fun out of being oppositional when someone hands you a script and says, "Be oppositional, please—you look so cute when you're angry."

What feel-good moralism had to confront was the nature of commodified postmodern ethnicity—which we could describe as the Benetton's model. "All the colors of the world": none of the oppression. It was a seductive vision: cashmere instead of power relations.

And it was a change. Usually, the Third World presented itself to us as the page people turn when the Time magazine ad says, "You can help little Maria or you can turn the page." It was a tropological locale of suffering and destitution. Now little Maria's wearing a purple Angora scarf and a black V-neck sweater, and the message is: "You can have style like Maria and shop at Benetton's—or don't you even care about ethnic harmony?"

To be sure, the Benettonization of culture was not without its ironies: in New York, as Patricia J. Williams has pointed out, the shops may not buzz you in if you actually look like one of those "ethnic" models. But as the eighties came to a close, a nagging doubt began to surface: was academic politics
finally a highbrow version of what *Women's Wear Daily* would call the "style wars"? I think that too easily lets us off the hook of history; I want to talk about the ways we've been betrayed by our two-decade-long love affair with theory. Oscar Wilde once quipped that when good Americans die, they go to Paris. I think in Paris, when good theories die, they go to America.

In retrospect, it was easy to point to blunders, some of which I've mentioned. Righteous indignation became routinized, professionalized, and in so doing, underwent an odd transformation. Back in the 1930s, a magazine editor wondered aloud if there was a typewriter at the *Partisan Review* with the word "alienation" on a single key. At the moment, I'm on the lookout for a typewriter that has "counter-hegemonic cultural production" on a single key.

5

And one of the most interesting developments in the past decade took place when theoretically sophisticated minority scholarship parted company with its left-theoretic mentors. I want to take my example here not from literature, but law, and the field of critical legal studies in particular. The participants include the legal scholars Maria Matsudo, Richard Delgado, and Patricia J. Williams, and the philosopher Cornel West. What was revealed was a principled distrust of a "radically utopian strain" in CLS. West took to task American leftism for its undialectical, purely antagonistic relation to liberalism: If you don't build on liberalism, he argues, you build on air. In this vein the minority legal scholars pointed out that those rudiments of legal liberalism—the doctrine of rights, for example, formality of rules and procedures, zones of privacy—that CLS purists wanted to demolish as so much legalistic subterfuge was pretty much all they had going for them. So the irony was, when all the dust had cleared (I'm oversimplifying of course, but not hugely), that the left minority scholars had retrieved and reconstituted liberalism. Some may well dismiss this as just another example of "uneven theoretical development," the minoritarian resistance to universalizing theory. It is, in fact, one of the most telling intellectual twists of recent memory.

And one that also points to the way in which critical theory has failed to keep pace with the larger world. The very notion of an ethical universal—for years dismissed as hopelessly naive—is beginning to make a comeback in the works of a number
of feminist theorists. We had so much fun deconstructing the liberal ideology of “rights,” for example, that we lost sight of how strategically—humanly—valuable the notion proved in, for example, much Third World politics (as Francis Mading Deng, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na‘im, and others have shown).

Turning a baleful eye to its fellow disciplines, literary criticism has spent the last two decades singing, “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better” rather like a scratched Ethel Merman recording, which makes the difficulty literary critics have had in grasping some elementary ideas rather poignant. What was once a resistance to theory has turned into a resistance to anything not packaged as theory.

The oppositional style of criticism has failed us, failed us in our attempt to come to grips with an America that can no longer be construed as an integral whole. What Richard Hofstadter famously called the “paranoid style” of American politics has become the paranoid style of American studies.

None of this is of recent vintage, of course. In 1930, Lionel Trilling could write, “There is only one way to accept America, and that is in hate; one must be close to one’s land, passionately close in some way or other, and the only way to be close to America is to hate it. . . . There is no person in the United States, save he be a member of the plutocratic class . . . who is not tainted, a little or much, with the madness of the bottom dog, not one who is not in sympathy of disgust and hate with his fellows.” For these are “the universally relevant emotions of America” (29, 32; see also Krupnick 40–46).

Today, success has spoiled us, the right has robbed us of our dyspepsia, and the routinized production of righteous indignation is allowed to substitute for critical rigor.

And nothing more clearly marks our failure to address the complexities of the larger world than the continuing ascendancy, in contemporary criticism, of what could be called the colonial paradigm. Colonialism, more as metaphor than as a particularized historical phenomenon, has proven astonishingly capacious; Fanon is blithely invoked to describe the allegedly “colonizing” relation between English departments and history departments. The irony is that, in the meantime, the tendency in subaltern studies has been to pluralize the notion of “colonization,” to insist on the particularity of its instances and question the explanatory value of the general rubric. So too with the concept of “neocolonialism,” which is increasingly regarded as both exculpatory of despotic Third World regimes and, 30 years after independence, too vague to be helpful in
characterizing the peculiarities of these states in the world econ-
omy.⁴

But the sovereign-colony relation is simply another in-
stance of the spatial topography of center and margin on which
oppositional criticism subsists. And it is just this model that, I
want to suggest, has started to exhaust its usefulness in describ-
ing our own modernity.

6

Let me say at once that I do not have in mind what some
people have trumpeted as the new Pax Americana. In his recent
“reflections on American equality and foreign liberations,” Da-
vid Brion Davis remarks, apropos of the recent decline of East-
ern bloc communism, that “[n]othing could be more fatuous
than to interpret these developments . . . as a prelude to the
Americanization of the world.” He reminds us of Marx’s view
that capitalism itself is “permanently revolutionary, tearing down
all obstacles that impede the development of productive forces,
the expansion of needs, the diversity of production and the
exploitation and exchange of natural and intellectual forces”
(Davis 6). But to view recent events as a triumph of American
corporate capitalism, which has failed to abate the immiseration
of the so-called underclass in its own backyard, is simply to
misread history. (The Chinese students at Tiananmen Square
quoted Locke and Jefferson, not Ayn Rand or Lee Iacocca.)
At the same time, I think Davis establishes that the historio-
 graphical tradition that depicts America univocally as a force
of reaction in a world of daisy-fresh revolutionary ferment re-
duces a history of complex ambivalence to a crude morality
tale.

A great deal of weight has been assigned to the term “cul-
tural imperialism”: I do not know that much time has been
spent thinking about what the phrase should mean. Should the
global circulation of American culture always be identified as
imperialism, even if imperialism by other means? In an era of
transnational capital, transnational labor, and transnational
culture, how well is the center-periphery model holding up?

The distinguished anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has
drawn our attention to that “uncanny Philippine affinity for
American popular music”: “An entire nation,” he writes, “seems
to have learned to mimic Kenny Rogers and the Lennon sisters,
like a vast Asian Motown chorus” (3). All this, in a former US
The colony racked by enormous contrasts of wealth and poverty, amounting to what he felicitously describes as “nostalgia without memory.” And yet the usual remarks about “cultural imperialism” fail to acknowledge the specificity of cultural interactions. An American-centered view of the world blinds us to the fact that America isn’t always on center stage, whether as hero or as villain. As Appadurai writes,

[I]t is worth noticing that for the people of Irian Jaya, Indonesianization may be more worrisome than Americanization, as Japanization may be for Koreans, Indianization for Sri Lankans, Vietnamization for the Cambodians, Russianization for the people of Soviet Armenia and the Baltic Republics. Such a list of alternative fears to Americanization could be greatly expanded, but it is not a shapeless inventory: for polities of smaller scale, there is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of larger scale, especially those that are nearby. One man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison. (5–6)

What we are beginning to see, in work that proceeds under the rubric of “public culture,” is that, as Appadurai concludes, “the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those which might account for multiple centers and peripheries)” (6). Again, I want to suggest that the spatial dichotomies through which our oppositional criticism has defined itself prove increasingly inadequate to a cultural complex of traveling culture. Once more, the world itself has outpaced our academic discourse.

Melville’s America retained a strong sense of its marginality vis-à-vis its former sovereign and colonizer, and yet his assertion that we are “not a nation, so much as a world” has become true, as a geopolitical fact. As a result, the disciplinary enclave of American studies is surely the proper site to begin a study of both the globalization of America and the Americanization of the globe; but, equally, the resistance bred by both of these trends. I think this is a project worth pursuing even if it does not come without a price. Surely it is clear to us all that the ritualized invocation of Otherness is losing its capacity to engender new forms of knowledge, that the “margin” may have exhausted its strategic value as a position from which to theorize the very antinomies that produced it as an object of study.
Or as Audre Lorde writes in her poem “Good Mirrors are Not Cheap,”

It is a waste of time hating a mirror
or its reflection
instead of stopping the hand
that makes glass with distortions

But I’ve been misunderstood in the past, so I want to be very clear on one point. While I may be taken to have argued for the retrieval of liberalism, however refashioned, as a viable, reformable agenda, I distrust those—on the left, right, or center—who would erect an opposition between leftism and liberalism. West has rightly argued that a left politics that can imagine only an agonistic relation to real-world liberalism is a bankrupt politics, but the converse is true as well; a rights-based liberalism unresponsive to radical (and conservative) critiques is an impoverished one indeed. So let me make it clear that my remarks are primarily aimed at those massively totalizing theories that marginalize practical political action as a jejune indulgence. It’s a critique I made a few years back about Luce Irigaray—that her conception of the amazing fixity of patriarchy, the complete unavailability of any external purchase, is more likely to send us to the margins of Plato, Freud, and Lacan than to encourage anything so vulgar as overt political action. The embrace of systematicity—and this is something common to a certain structural/functional tradition of social thought, a tradition whose grand paranoias have made it particularly seductive to literary criticism—rules out humble amelioration (see Gates, “Significant Others”). And while some of the masters of grand totalizing theory will concede the need to struggle for such unglamorous things as “equal wages and social rights,” the fact that they feel obliged to make the (rather left-handed) concession indicates the difficulty; their Olympian, all-or-nothing perspective cannot but enervate and diminish the arena of real politics. In short, my brief—and that of many minority intellectuals today—is against the temptations of what I call Messianic pessimism.

Nor, however, can we be content with the multiplication of authorized subjectivities, symbolically rewarded in virtue of being materially deprived. Perhaps we can begin to forgo the pleasures of ethnicist affirmation and routinized ressentiment in favor of rethinking the larger structures that constrain and enable our agency. In an increasingly polycentric world, our
task may be to prepare for a world in which nothing is pink on the map.

Notes

1. "For Lee to deny the potential connection between the indiscriminate hawking of shoes and a climate of indiscriminate crime is incredibly to render his advertising as the commercial version of the Air Force's vaunted surgical strike," Jerome Christensen maintains (593).

2. I don't think this is much of an extrapolation. In an issue of Screen, for instance, Yvonne Rainer, a distinguished avant-garde filmmaker, helpfully listed her conferential Others: "Starting with the most victimised (alas, even the most noble fantasy of solidarity has its pecking order), they were: blacks, Lesbians, Latina women, Asians, and gay men." (She apologized that Latino men "got lost in the shuffle" [Reynaud and Rainer 91–92].)

3. "There simply is no intellectually acceptable, morally preferable, and practically realizable left social vision and program that does not take liberalism as a starting point," West argues. "I find it ironic that as a black American, a descendant of those who were victimized by American liberalism, I must call attention to liberalism's accomplishments. Yet I must do so... Liberalism is not the possession of white male elites in high places, but rather a dynamic and malleable tradition... In this regard, liberalism signifies neither a status quo to defend... nor an ideology to trash... but rather a diverse and complex tradition that can be mined in order to enlarge the scope of human freedom" ("Colloquy" 757); see also Williams 146–65; Delgado 301; and the selection presented in Minority Critiques. Cf. my "Contract Killer."

4. For a more extended discussion of the colonial paradigm, see my "Critical Fanonism."

5. Further, as Appadurai argues, "the simplification of these many forces (and fears) of homogenization can also be exploited by nation-states in relation to their own minorities, by posing global commoditization (or capitalism, or some other such external enemy) as more real than the threat of its own hegemonic strategies" (6).

Works Cited


