CRITIQUING POSTMODERNISM IN CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES OF RACE

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For Key Young & June Kim
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Introduction

In *Critiquing Postmodernism in Contemporary Discourses of Race*, I critique the epistemology and politics of what I refer to as “otherness postmodernism,” or the group of critical tendencies based on the privileging of difference and alterity—particularly in regards to race and gender—in contemporary literary criticism and theory. This tendency is manifested variously in poststructuralist, postmodernist, and even antitheoretical positions; although it takes different guises, otherness postmodernism, I argue, is ubiquitous in academic and public conversations about race in particular and alterity and marginality in general. I contend that otherness postmodernism constitutes what Slavoj Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), terms an ideological fantasy, or the notion that ideology functions primarily through belief rather than practice. The ideological fantasy of otherness postmodernism includes the belief, for example, that the postmodernist believes that he/she resists racism and other kinds of exploitation by “seeing through” the ideologies that the credulous essentialist presumably believes. On the contrary, I argue that despite the insights of postmodernism, literary criticism and theory continue to perpetuate essentialisms, obscuring the institutional, political, and economic structures that shape issues of race and marginality.

I focus on otherness postmodernism as manifested in critical conversations around three notable “postmodern” literary texts: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*. The reception of each text has been key in establishing the hegemony of philosophical postmodernism across the literary studies landscape. Critical readings of *Dictee* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* served to promote, institutionalize and, normalize the assumptions of postmodernism, while readings of *A Question of Power* have been informed by and ultimately hampered by those assumptions. And while contemporary methods of reading almost uniformly privilege heterogeneity and difference in a variety of ways, I argue that analyses of these novels remain limited by essentialist determinations based on the author’s
identity and narrow notions of the ideological valences of narrative form. A wider consideration of political, aesthetic, critical, and other historical contexts and genealogies complicates those essentialist assumptions. Moreover, the texts themselves—dealing with the same political, ethical, and epistemological issues as the theories applied to them—in many ways offer subtler and more complex understandings of ideology, culture, and identity than the narrow terms of otherness postmodernism allow.

Otherness postmodernism encompasses a number of critical tendencies. It repeatedly pits sameness against difference, unity against heterogeneity, and singularity against multiplicity in a variety of ways—in terms of signification, determination, identity, social formations, literary form, and so on. The critical proclivity for the sameness/difference dichotomy produces a number of interlinked problems. First, otherness postmodernism fails to account for the structures and processes that produce the situation in which certain terms are articulated as “Same” or central, while others are “Other” or marginal. This failure to render structures and processes of power explicable runs the risk of naturalizing and thereby reinforcing them. Second, the overly simplified sameness/difference binary ends up consistently privileging difference, particularly because a perfectly unified, totalized, or homogenous social phenomenon never really exists. But without ways to account for mediations between, say, total unity on one hand and heterogeneity on the other, the default choice becomes that of difference. Third, when formalized, the sameness-versus-difference dichotomy fails to provide the grounds for evaluation between social articulations by appeal to, for example, ethics, reference, or metanarratives. Because otherness postmodernism offers no guides for evaluating cultural practices and productions other than that sameness/difference dichotomy, postmodernism itself becomes the only means for progressive politics and theoretical sophistication. Therefore, the hermeneutics of difference ironically ends up flattening differences into sameness, or rendering the diversity of significations and possibilities only in terms of sameness or difference. In other words, otherness postmodernism fails to live up to the truth of its own tenets.

For example, this privileging of difference ironically lumps all marginal writers into a flat, static category. In literary criticism, otherness postmodernism often correlates narrative form to politics, assuming that difference from literary realism constitutes political resistance because of the presumed correlation between realism and bourgeois ideology and subject formation. Narrative interruption, therefore, constitutes political resistance and the formation of new subjectivities. These narrow critical parameters, however, often lead to the underconsideration of the various,
actual historical contexts that impact a writer and his/her texts; the complex aesthetic form of the texts that can themselves provide commentaries on and theorizations of those historical moments; and the ideological valences of those texts. In contrast to the tendencies of otherness postmodernism, I argue that the central concerns, aesthetic style, and implications of an author’s texts should not be determined primarily by his or her identity, but rather by a constellation of considerations that can be applicable to all writers. The predominant critical methodologies available to us today have not sufficiently accounted for some major narrative tendencies in “postmodern” fiction. The narrow sameness/difference paradigm has prevented us from reading, for example, across political, ethnic, and historical identities; through such foreclosure, otherness postmodernism ends up undermining its advocacy of difference.

My aim is to connect discourses that are usually separate in order to examine common underlying assumptions and structures, so this book is comparative in several senses. I bring together issues from cultural studies fields such as U.S. ethnic studies, “mainstream” or Euro-American poststructuralist theory, and postcolonial studies, which are related but often quite separate. My approach is syncretic in that while I am a Marxist, I agree with Sartre’s argument in Search for a Method that historical materialism must take seriously the multileveled complexities of a situation (person, event, thing) before locating it in a larger system. I believe that many of the approaches and epistemologies commonly associated with postmodernism have produced insights that are not only useful but also true. It is in subscribing to notions of truth and ethics, however, that I depart from postmodernism in general. My goal is to check some of excesses of postmodernism in order not to lose its insights to irrelevancy.

In the first chapter, “The Ideological Fantasy of Otherness Postmodernism,” I outline the basic characteristics of otherness postmodernism, drawing on the recent critique of poststructuralism’s rejection of referentiality by Rey Chow. I also examine the historical and theoretical bases for otherness postmodernism, or why it arose when it did and why it may be limited now. I look at influential retheorizations of the social in the mid-1980s, primarily Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985) and Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s Racial Formation in the United States (1986), which posed not only new articulations of the social, but also attendant prescriptions for “radical democracy” through the politics of difference. Despite the insights provided by these texts, they also laid the groundwork for many of the problematic assumptions of otherness postmodernism, including binaries between utter sameness and difference and
an emphasis on insuperable alterity. The failure to account for the mediations between sameness and difference—the messy in-betweens that constitute most actual social processes—results in the constant privileging of difference. Furthermore, otherness postmodernism’s unwillingness to identify a common ground to evaluate between social elements and interpretations leads to postmodernism itself becoming the de facto political litmus test; the only way to be a political radical is to be a postmodernist. In these ways, otherness postmodernism promotes a sense of superior knowledge as the key to puncturing ideology, while failing to account for gaps between belief and action enforced by social, political, and economic structures. Revisiting the work of Laclau and Mouffe and Omi and Winant—their contents, contexts, and institutionalization—offers insight into the reasons for our current critical tendencies, as well as some ways to move beyond it. To remedy this situation, I concur with those such as Chow, Masao Miyoshi, Madhu Dubey, Frederick Luis Aldama, and others that we must allow referentiality, ethics, metanarratives, and even traditional Marxist critique to interrupt our current ways of thinking.

Chapter two, “Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and the Politics of Form,” questions one of the central tenets of otherness postmodernism: that experimental texts by minority and/or female writers constitute political resistance by contravening realist narrative forms. As several critics have noted, such readings of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s experimental text *Dictee* marked a turning point in Asian American Studies’ embrace of postmodernism. I point out, however, that the interpretive methodologies of the criticism and the narrative elements that such criticism highlights in the text do not differ greatly from mainstream postmodernist reading modes. Implicitly, then, her work appears to be more oppositional than that of other modernist and avant-garde artists because she is a Korean American woman. In order to think beyond this dead-end, I situate Cha’s work in its complex context of aesthetic and political ideas. Through an examination of Cha’s earlier anthology on film theory, *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus*, I argue that Cha’s work, including *Dictee*, responds as much to modernism and postmodernism as it does to realism. Locating her work within the politically ambivalent avant-garde aesthetic context—including New Wave film and psychoanalytic film theory—demonstrates that it is oppositional not only because its form is unconventional, but also because it calls into question an increasingly depoliticized formalism and a problematic notion of a passive subject-viewer in modern/postmodern art and art theory. To do so, Cha’s work reasserts the importance of history and human agency, coupling
experimental formal strategies with pointed emphases on reclaimed histories and contexts. At the same time, such historical and aesthetic contextualization recasts the politics of Cha’s work in more complicated lights.

The third chapter, “Not Three Worlds but One: Thomas Pynchon and the Invisibility of Race,” critiques the postmodern fascination with the “sublime”—technological, historical, ethical, epistemological, et cetera. I argue that the concept is used, in Pynchon’s terms, to “approach and avoid” difficult issues of ethics, history, technology, race, and the structures that shape them. I examine the curious absence of issues of race and imperialism in Pynchon criticism, although these are central issues in Pynchon’s work. Whereas the work of Cha and Bessie Head are always tied to the ethnic and gendered identity of the author, Pynchon’s work rarely is, beyond his status as a cult figure. My contention is that, in fact, Pynchon’s whiteness and maleness license a literary universality that underlies the critical reception of his work, demonstrating the essentialism that underlies even the most theoretically sophisticated postmodernist approaches. If, as with Cha’s text, we examine the context of Pynchon’s writing, we can see the genealogy of the issues of race and imperialism in Gravity’s Rainbow extend to the literary and political movements that shaped Pynchon. I read Pynchon’s early work as a reaction to American modernist, Beat, and counterculture appropriations of difference, particularly blackness and colonial views of the other. Pynchon’s early stories, articles, and his first novel V. struggle with identification and alterity in ways that cannot be understood through a blanket notion of the sublime. I contend that Gravity’s Rainbow, in exploring differences and similarities in the situations of three central characters—Slothrop, Enzian, and Tchitcherine—suggests that race and colonialism must be understood within global economic and political structures. In other words, Pynchon invokes and challenges the Three Worlds theory in ways that harmonize with Aijaz Ahmad’s argument that we live not in three worlds but one. The lacuna regarding race in Pynchon criticism brings us back to the idea that even as “incredulous” poststructuralists, we still think in terms of essentialism, whether discussing “difference” race or “sameness” whiteness.

The fourth chapter, “Analyzing the Real: Bessie Head’s Literary Psychosis,” calls into question the methods of readings that reduce Bessie Head’s novel A Question of Power to a manifestation of psychosis, an example of the impossibility of articulation, or a cultural specimen. Older readings of Head’s novel, some of which tend toward the patriarchal, racist, and condescending, have interpreted it as straight autobiography or simply a portrait of a mental breakdown. With the postmodern
turn, scholars read the novel as an example of the impossibility of signification, of universals, and of coherent subjectivity—in other words, the usual terms of otherness postmodernism. Even praise for Head’s novel usually treats it as an expression of culture, in David Treuer’s sense of a cultural artifact, rather than as a complex literary product from a complex individual drawing on various aesthetic traditions. In contrast, my reading demonstrates that, through subtle, masterful manipulation of aesthetic form, the novel constitutes a challenging examination of the various ideologies at work in the historical moment Head was writing. Whereas Cha and Pynchon’s work demand that we mine their political and aesthetic histories to understand them, I argue that Head’s *A Question of Power* narrative itself offers a challenging, compelling historical framework. I read the three hallucinatory characters—Sello the Monk, Sello of the brown suit, and Dan—as figures of the competing ideological metanarratives at work in the 1960s and 1970s, interlinked by descendence yet simultaneous and conflicting. Critics have not treated Head’s novel as a serious philosophical-artistic endeavor because otherness postmodernism constantly reproduces the essentialism and paternalistic racism it claims to have overcome. As with the work of Cha and Pynchon, Head’s text is far more complex than the usual heuristic contours of otherness postmodernism acknowledge.

In the concluding notes, I examine how some of the tenets of otherness postmodernism have migrated beyond literary studies and theory; its assumptions have been mobilized by both liberals and conservatives to justify ideologically problematic positions. The Right’s appropriation of postmodernism particularly demonstrates the danger of its ethically blind, formalistic approach to knowledge and being. The ideological fantasy of otherness postmodernism can be counteracted partially by attention to history and by reference to the world, even as we treat this information critically and understand that it is always already interpreted. I argue for a reconsideration of referentiality, or what we might think of as an ethics of reading—literature and the world—that includes at least the attempt to account for more than what is given within the hegemonically articulated field of the existing social. Nonfoundationalist notions of “truth” with a small “t,” or, as Sandra Harding puts it, a “strong objectivity” can seriously consider processes of signification and interpretation while attempting to produce increasingly accurate accounts of the world (“Rethinking Standpoint” 69–74).

Before continuing, I want to make a note about terminology. “Otherness postmodernism” is an ugly, clunky term, but that is as it should be. The repetitive theoretical approach it refers to is not only
tired, it has limited how we read literature, people, and social formations. I add the tag “otherness” to emphasize this particular strand of postmodernism; the proliferation of the meanings and uses of the term “postmodern” makes it almost useless. It has been used to refer to an epistemology (or rather, anti-epistemology), ontology, aesthetics, social conditions (such as the organization of late capitalism), models of subject and identity, and notions of power and resistance. It has been called a form of Western imperialism as well as inherently subversive, particularly in relation to marginal groups. The various definitions of postmodernism sometimes conflict; the philosophical claims of postmodernism are sometimes identified with poststructuralism, while sometimes they have been clearly differentiated. Moreover, postmodern aesthetics do not always correspond to philosophical postmodernisms; this disjunction is one of the claims I make in this book. But I choose to use “postmodernism” because it is more widely known than the term “poststructuralism.” While many of the claims I explicitly deal with are poststructuralist, and while there are many differences between specific poststructuralist theorists and the general notion of postmodernism, I would argue that there are still identifiable critical tendencies that draw on both poststructuralism and postmodernism and have produced a common set of theoretical assumptions and methodological moves. This set of critical tendencies, clustered around the issues of otherness and marginality, are what I interrogate in this book.

There Is No Such Thing as the Vulcan Mind Meld

My favorite metaphor when I’m teaching literary theory—although I somehow manage to incorporate it into almost every class—is that there is no such thing as the Vulcan Mind Meld. I ask students if they know what that is, and usually one or two students do. (A disconcerting number of students are too young to even have watched Star Trek: The Next Generation!) In the original Star Trek, Mr. Spock had the amazing ability to become one with a member of any alien species simply by putting his hands on his/her/its head or equivalent. They share their memories, thoughts, emotions, experiences—their total subjectivities. I like to illustrate the Mind Meld by approaching some hapless student and pretending to put my hands on his/her head and become seized by shared consciousness.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) we mere human beings do not have this ability; we can only communicate with one another through discourses, primarily language but also nonverbal cues. We can’t even do
the Vulcan Mind Meld on ourselves! In order to think and, often, even to feel, we have to be able to articulate and interpret ourselves, but no word or sign can ever capture the full, complex subjects that we are, or can ever be truly equivalent to what we want to mean. As Lacan writes, “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (142); even as we postulate ourselves in language, we are banished from self-presence. In fact, driven by the desire for presence and meaning, we strive for better and more words and signs to capture ourselves and the world, even as these things are constantly changing and thereby making our quest even more impossible.

Put in these terms—there is no Vulcan Mind Meld with others, ourselves, or any sign—students find the likes of Derrida and Lacan not just explicable but kind of banal. Descriptively, the notions of fundamental nonidentity, absence, overdetermination, indeterminacy, et cetera, make sense. But why, then, does simply registering this description itself become a political good? In other words, why, in one essay and book after another, does just the fact of recognizing this basic nonfoundationalism become a means toward liberation? And why does the reverse—whether accurately identified as essentialism (both philosophically and in terms of identity) or not—immediately become politically reactionary?

Many critical tendencies of otherness postmodernism have already been examined and critiqued. The tide of theory-with-a-capital-T has turned and the heyday of postmodernism has passed (although part of my thesis is that, even in theory’s “heyday,” many arguments that are not self-identified as postmodern or poststructuralist and that are even directed against those “Western” schools of thought, nevertheless implicitly reproduce the theoretical assumptions of postmodernism). This book participates in the project of articulating the strengths and weaknesses of past and current practices and trying to figure out a path for the future. A change in direction is palpable in recent scholarship and conferences, particularly a turn to greater attention to aesthetics and form, which is to the good. But even as we turn to more closely and complexly treating literary form beyond the realist/experimentalist divide, we have to balance this turn to form with even more weight to context and identity, not in essentialist ways, but in understanding that these still profoundly shape how we think and exist, despite claims of a “post-race” world.
CHAPTER ONE

The Ideological Fantasy of Otherness
Postmodernism

It is important not simply to practice antiessentialist differencing ad infinitum but also to reconsider such a practice in conjunction with the rejection of referentiality that lies at the origins of poststructuralism. Exactly what is being thrown out when referentiality is theoretically rejected?

—Rey Chow

To right the situation, to null the transaction and be just to all on earth, we may have to relearn the sense of the world, the totality, that includes all peoples in every race, class, and gender.

—Masao Miyoshi

In his foundational work *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek argues that ideology is not simply the fantasy that people believe about themselves and their society. The classical notion of ideology assumes it to be “false consciousness,” so if people were simply informed about how the world works, they would change it. Against this notion, drawing on Lacan, Althusser contended that ideology constitutes the subject’s “imaginary relations” to the real conditions of existence (109–112). In turn, Žižek argues that “ideology” is not only this Imaginary relationship to reality; rather, ideology itself is the notion that social reality relies on a fantasy: “the fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself” (*Sublime* 33). The ideological fantasy is that ideology can be separated from reality, whereas ideology is not only what people “think” or “know” but also—even primarily—what they *do*. Belief, Žižek continues, is not merely an individual or purely mental state; rather, it is “always materialized in our effective social reality: belief supports the