



The Hegemonic Form of Othering: Or, the Academic's Burden

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Critical Response

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The Hegemonic Form of Othering; or, The Academic's Burden

Harold Fromm

I knew I was in for trouble, that the going would be rough, when I removed the wrapper from the “Race,” *Writing, and Difference* issue of *Critical Inquiry* and observed the word “race” in quotation marks. Something deep was clearly brewing. And any doubts were quickly removed when I turned to the opening remarks of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Who,” he asked me, “has seen a black or a red person, a white, yellow, or brown?” (“Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” p. 6). *There* was a question that spelled trouble, a glove in the face if I ever saw one. Here I was, crude, unregenerate, lacking the hypersensitivity that prevents someone like Gates from making such infra dig distinctions; here I was, daring to use words *without* quotation marks, actually believing that I referred to something identifiable when I spoke of black people, Americans, musicians, and whatnot, and being told that it was all just my own narcissistic and preemptive fantasy. Here I was, faced with the impossible choice of keeping permanently quiet or of perpetuating ruthless violence—of denying the individuality of all of God’s creation—not only by referring to knives, cats, my brother, or Indians, but simply by referring at all. But why, I wondered, was only the word “race” in quotation marks? Why not every single word in the entire issue of *Critical Inquiry*? For to refer, it seems, is to colonize, to take things over for one’s own brutal use, to turn everything else into a mere Other. There was Gates engaging in the academic’s favorite pastime, *épater les bourgeois*, and here was I, a hopeless bourgeois, just asking for a put-down.

Things were bad enough; guilt feelings were settling in. I had begun to equate thought with sin, naming with killing (we murder to dissect, you know); even the act of *being* made me uneasy: I felt that I was taking up someone else's air, inadvertently stepping on ants, killing bacteria in my own body by taking antibiotics, turning vegetables into Others by eating them. Then I began to read Mary Louise Pratt's essay on European colonizing of Africa (a subject, by the way, that looks to be a veritable capitalism of academic industry these days) and saw little ground for hope. How could I begin to understand what complex moral standards are operating in today's academia?

"Any reader recognizes here," Pratt tells us after quoting a passage describing John Barrow's travels into Africa,

a very familiar, widespread, and stable form of "othering." The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective "they," which is distilled even further into an iconic "he" (the standardized adult male specimen). This abstracted "he"/"they" is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterizes anything "he" is or does not as a particular historical event but as an instance of a pre-given custom or trait. . . . Through this discourse, encounters with an Other can be textualized or processed as enumerations of such traits. ["Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen," p. 120]

After reading this and the ensuing remark to the effect that such description "could serve as a paradigmatic case of the ways in which ideology normalizes, codifies, and reifies" (Pratt, p. 121), I was puzzled. Although Pratt was agreeing with Gates, wasn't she, in the very act of characterizing colonial characterizing, engaged in the same practice as Barrow? And when Pratt remarked that "during the so-called opening up of central and southern Africa to European capitalism . . . such explorer-writers were the principal producers of Africa for European imaginations—producers, that is, of ideology in connection with the European expansionist project there" (Pratt, pp. 121–22), wasn't she failing to see that in the very act of "producing" her essay she was, like Gates, engaged in the opening up of certain texts to academic capitalism and its own—her own—expansionist project? Was she not ruthlessly reducing a complex world to a simple commodity (without even bothering with quotation

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marks) for academic consumption, which, when successfully “produced,” would lead to promotions, professional recognition, salary increases, establishing of dogma, and the general colonizing of the minds of graduate students eager to cut it with their sahibs?

As I read on I became increasingly uneasy and embarrassed by what seemed to be one *double entendre* after another. “Unheroic, unparticularized, without ego, interest, or desire of its own,” Pratt continues, with increasing, but insufficient, irony, “it [colonial discourse] seems able to do nothing but gaze from a periphery of its own creation, like the self-effaced, noninterventionist eye that scans the Other’s body” (Pratt, p. 124). “To the extent that it strives to efface itself,” this Foucauldian melodrama continues, “the invisible eye/I strives to make those informational orders natural, to find them there uncommanded, rather than assert them as the products/producers of European knowledges or disciplines” (Pratt, p. 125). Surely, I kept feeling, Pratt could hardly have failed to imagine for a moment the word “academic” in place of “European” in the above and all similar passages. Such sensitivity to the pure passivity of the Other so brutalized and “hegemonized” over by European exploitation could hardly fail also to sense the applicability of these observations to—their interchangeability, in fact, with—her own academic colonization. But no, irony can only go so far.

Speaking of the “reveries” of nineteenth-century writings about exploration, Pratt comments: “They are determined, in part, by highly generalized literary conventions” (Pratt, p. 126). And when I looked over Pratt’s own essay, I could see again how well her descriptions of descriptions served to describe her own production. For what are such terms as *discourse*, *textualized*, *paradigmatic*, *seen/scene*, *sitel/sight*, *capitalist mode of production*, *Other*, *narration*, *hegemonic*, *Bakhtinian*, *gaze*, if not the “highly generalized literary conventions” of today’s self-aggrandizing, colonizing academic, who tells us we are crude to think there are really such creatures as blacks, whites, or whatnots, but who guiltlessly goes right along telling us about sights/sites (as though some essence really underlay the arbitrary sounds of two words and as though this were not just the latest academic sort of fun and games), about “capitalist production” (where do we find it?), about “textuality” and “carnival” (Pratt neglects to use that one, I must admit).

Although *Critical Inquiry*’s “Race” issue contains a good deal of moral instruction, “Physician, heal thyself” perhaps ought to be the first moral exhortation of the day. Against a more generalized background of Stanley Fish telling us that we are already perfect now (a better account than his of antiprofessionalism can be found in Bruce Robbins’ “Professionalism and Politics” in *Profession* 85) and a horde of academic Marxists who are increasingly difficult to distinguish from yuppies, our professional humanist robes really do need to be sent out to the cleaners. They are beginning

to smell. The pontifications of Gates and Pratt—and others like them—can't do much good for anybody except Gates and Pratt. For are they not just academic members of the Evangelical Guru and Guilt Industry that tells its members "I'm okay, you're okay, the rest of the world's rotten" while their garages fill up with Rolls Royces or their vitas with grants?