



A Reply to Harold Fromm

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Critical Response

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A Reply to Harold Fromm

Mary Louise Pratt

Harold Fromm argues that my essay exemplifies a kind of academic colonization, a form of exploitation in which raw material (in this case travel books) is processed into prestige, money, and influence. Other writers, including Foucault, have used this metaphor of colonization to describe intellectual expansionism in the academy, the apparent momentum toward bringing more and more of the world into the academy's purview. I imagine there are few humanists who have not questioned their work along these lines, who have not felt a twinge at the thought that they are building their fame and fortune (or at least their livelihood) on the work of others or acquiring professional capital by opening up previously unscrutinized territories.

Though I doubt it has put a Rolls Royce in anybody's garage, the criticism industry is a reality not to be overlooked. Academics have a responsibility to stay self-aware and self-critical about their own and their profession's interests. All academic activity has a careerist dimension, but it obviously cannot be explained by that dimension alone, and in this sense Fromm's point is simply reductive. But of course it is not *all* academic activity that Fromm is objecting to, only some and notably mine.

The image of academic colonization suggests one has stepped beyond some legitimate borders and laid claim to territory rightfully inhabited by others. Whose world was invaded by my essay, or by the "*Race, Writing, and Difference*" issue in general? Mr. Fromm's, evidently. Fromm wants a world where words stand still and refer, and don't get changed. In particular, to use his own examples, he wants a world where blacks

are blacks, whites are whites, Americans are Americans, knives are knives, brothers are brothers, and Indians are Indians (Is it the wild west? or maybe just Chicago).

This is precisely the world the *Critical Inquiry* issue set out to intervene in, and in that sense Fromm's reaction is to be welcomed. Part of the project of the issue was to destabilize fixed, naturalized meaning systems around race and other lines of hierarchical differentiation. Many of the essays, including mine, sought this end by historicizing such systems, pointing up their constructedness, their means of legitimation, and so on.

It was an interventionist project, to be sure; however, the name for such interventions is not colonialism, it is critique—or, if you like, critical inquiry. They are attempts to change the culture one lives in. Fromm feels the issue left him with “the impossible choice of keeping permanently quiet or perpetuating ruthless violence . . . simply by referring at all” (p. 197). But these are not his only choices—for one thing, he has chosen to respond, and his response is not ruthlessly violent. For another, his ideas might change, maybe despite himself—the words certainly will.

Much of Fromm's response consists of his simply quoting my text in disgust, as if he had no (critical) language of his own. When that language does surface at the end of the piece, I could not help hearing in its evocation of the “horde of academic Marxists” in bad-smelling robes the echoes of all those European travelers looking at the Bushmen. I wondered whether, face to face, Fromm would be likely to load his rifle or start handing out tobacco. Perhaps he would pull out a Bible. Alternatively, I wondered whether we couldn't all think of something completely different.

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