

---

---

## Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 4, number 1. February 2008

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

---

---

### Review of Kelly Oliver's "The Colonization of Psychic Space: Toward a Psychoanalytic Social Theory"

**STACY KELTNER**

Department of History and Philosophy

Social Science Building #2206

1000 Chastain Road

Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591

[skeltner@kennesaw.edu](mailto:skeltner@kennesaw.edu)

Kelly Oliver's *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (2004) is one of the key books for understanding the emerging field of psychoanalytic social theory. Oliver situates her formulation of the requirements of 'psychoanalytic social theory' in relation to that particular strand within the tradition of social theory that appropriates psychoanalysis within its critical framework, including Frankfurt School critical theory and postmodern critical race, feminist, and queer theories. Oliver faults each for failing to *transform* psychoanalytic concepts into social concepts. Instead, she argues, they tend to apply psychoanalytic concepts to social phenomena, combine psychoanalytic theory with social theory, or emphasize the limitations of psychoanalytic theory for social theory. Each

approach to the relationship between psychoanalytic and social theory fails to challenge the traditional distinction between the object domain and method of psychoanalysis, on the one hand, and that of social theory, on the other. Oliver proposes to reformulate the very distinction between the psyche and the social that organizes both theoretical frameworks.

Oliver's critique of social theory's uses and abuses of psychoanalytic theory is grounded on a reformulation of the object domain of psychoanalysis itself: the psyche. The conception of the psyche that Oliver begins with is neither the private individual nor a mere reflection of the social. It is, rather, an affective, social dynamic that simultaneously refers to a multiple set of borders constitutive of self-relation, relations to others, and relation to the socio-historical world. 'Psychic space' is not a pre-social territory, but rather one that emerges through a fundamental and affective exposure to otherness and others. Oliver uses the term 'space' in order to demarcate the fragile border between bodies and socio-cultural meanings - a border that marks the process of meaning production under conditions of freedom and social support. The *colonization* of psychic space is defined as "the occupation or invasion of social forces—values, traditions, laws, mores, institutions, ideals, stereotypes, etc.—that restrict or undermine the movement of bodily drives into signification" (Oliver 2004, 43). Psychic space is thus not the individual of traditional psychoanalysis insofar as it is socially constituted. However, neither is it merely the effect of social forces insofar as affectivity can appear not only as the effect of a retreat from or failure to master social forces (as in melancholia, for example), but also as the concrete potential for resistance, revolt, and the social transformation of meaning.

Oliver's development of psychoanalytic social theory primarily draws from the work of two seemingly diverse

figures: Frantz Fanon and Julia Kristeva. Throughout the book, Oliver provocatively engages what has tended to remain under-discussed in Fanon and Kristeva scholarship. On the one hand, Fanon's approach to a social philosophy of racial oppression not only makes critical use of dialectical philosophy and existential phenomenology, but also of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In psychoanalysis, Fanon finds not a pre-social psyche, but the social constitution of interiority dependent upon, though not reducible to, its social context. For example, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon argues that a psychoanalytic account of subjectivity reveals not only the constitution of a sexed subject, but of a sexed *and* raced subject, albeit even if psychoanalytic theorists have been slow to recognize the racialized dimension of its analyses. Fanon's use of psychoanalysis transforms its founding terms into social ones. On the other hand, Kristeva's critical reformulation of Freudian psychoanalysis within the economy of signification grounded on an affective, social subject-in-process provides Oliver with the rudimentary tools to develop the social and political payoff of Kristeva's psychoanalytic - primarily the conditions of the failures and accomplishments of social binding, which Kristeva often fails to directly address. By clarifying the psychoanalytic dimension of Fanon's work and the social dimension of Kristeva's work, Oliver demonstrates how these two figures may be read as providing the groundwork of a psychoanalytic social theory, which she here seeks to develop. The selections from *The Colonization of Psychic Space* provided by *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy* offer exemplary moments of Oliver's successful transformation of psychoanalytic theory into a social theory of oppression. However, in order to understand the significance of those selections, something should be said about their context within the overall plan of the book.

The book is divided into four main parts. In the first part, "Alienation and Its Double," Oliver critically analyzes the

concept of alienation in German Idealism, social theory, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis. Oliver aligns these seemingly disparate discourses according to their analyses of an "originary alienation" as formative of subjectivity and the social bond. According to Oliver, each conceptualizes alienation as the primary moment of the formation of the social subject. As such, what Oliver calls "debilitating alienation," inherent to oppression, is theorized as originally founded on originary alienation. Drawing primarily on the work of Fanon, and what she calls his ironic invocation of 'originary alienation', Oliver deconstructs the distinction between originary and debilitating alienation and provocatively diagnoses modern forms of oppression as constitutive of the philosophical account of originary alienation. Originary alienation thus appears as the "perverse privilege" of a modern philosophical subject in the context of modern oppression.

In the second and third parts of the book, "The Secretion of Race and Fluidity of Resistance" and "Social Melancholy and Psychic Space," Oliver addresses head on how oppressive systems condition the transmission of affects from oppressor to oppressed, creating 'the colonization of psychic space', and simultaneously delineate the opportunities for transforming structures of domination into possibilities of resistance. The maladies diagnosed by psychoanalysis, in this context, can be seen to provide insight into the damaging effects of oppression at the subjective, affective level *and* to signal new possibilities for agency and community. Essential to Oliver's analysis of the social and political import of affect is a social concept of sublimation that is not simply the transmission of sexual drives into symbols, as it was for Freud, but the idealization and identification with another socially supportive agency that opens new models of social binding. Oliver's analyses of the affective dimension of oppression raise the question of the possibility of a new conception of the relationship between the marginalized and social change. The

marginalized emerge not simply as the concrete and exploited conditions of a particular way of life that assures privilege to the oppressor. The marginalized occupy a unique position with respect to the politics of domination. The process of decolonization offers the opportunity to re-imagine new forms of community and social support.

In the fourth part of the book, "Revolt, Singularity, and Forgiveness," Oliver continues to develop her account of the possibilities of the social transformation of the affective dispositions created by oppression. She offers a model of subjectivity grounded not on intersubjective conflict and originary alienation, but rather on a social-symbolic moment of connection, which she calls 'loving support'. 'Loving support' delineates new modes of separation and connection conditioned by, but not reducible to, domination. A social theory requires not only an understanding and account of the conditions of exploitation, which the first three parts of the book carefully formulate, but also a practical and normative guide for transformation, which Oliver hints at throughout the book and develops in the fourth part in terms of forgiveness. Oliver here seeks to complete her psychoanalytic social theory of oppression by delineating the need for social conditions that support a dynamic of forgiveness as a model of revolt, sublimation, idealization, and the experience of one's singularity and agency within a community. Oliver proposes forgiveness as a social dynamic of meaning production in which meaning is fore-given to being.

In her transformation of 'sublimation' and 'forgiveness' into social concepts, Oliver draws on Kristeva's psychoanalytic formulation of 'the third' in subject constitution. In *Tales of Love* (1987), Kristeva develops Freud's reference to an 'imaginary father of individual prehistory' as a social-symbolic moment of transference with a third - traditionally called 'the paternal function' - that conditions and challenges the threatening, prohibitive father of Oedipal theory. In

Freudian Oedipal theory the child's separation from the mother is accomplished via the paternal function. By developing Freud's somewhat fleeting reference to another imaginary father, Kristeva opens an analysis of *pre*-Oedipal dynamics of subject constitution and argues that there is triangulation prior to the Oedipal Complex. Identification with *this* father is described as amatory; that is, the father of individual prehistory appears as a loving father conditioning separation from the maternal body. The imaginary father or 'third' is a loving father that the *infans* idealizes and identifies with, and this idealization makes sublimation as entrance into the world of meaning and community possible. In her books on the concept of revolt - *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000) and *Intimate Revolt* (2002) - Kristeva insists that it is this originary social-symbolic support at the heart of subject constitution that conditions revolt. The concept of revolt is thus not articulated in terms of the social and political tradition, but rather in terms of psychic life. Revolt is a psychic dynamic that contains two essential moments. The first is affectivity, and the second is signification. In revolt the subject is returned to a primary affective disposition that is then given signs or meaning. The possibility of meaning production, however, depends on the presence or absence of social support, or a 'third,' which could be an analyst, a friend, a lover, etc. Kristeva, however, evades the question of 'the third' at the social and political level and remains within the domain of intimate relations. Nevertheless, Oliver finds within Kristeva's analysis the tools to interpret the conditions of social and political forms of oppression. Thus, the notion of the 'third' that Oliver critically appropriates and reformulates within the context of oppression is essential to her vision of a new model of separation and connection at the level of society and politics.

Oliver, thus, insists on the need of a loving "paternal" agent, or loving third as requisite for meaning, agency, and community. She says,

The transformations born out of the shame of oppression can lead to a sense of shared culture and solidarity through the negotiation of shame that creates community and belonging, even if on the margins of the mainstream. These performances of transformation may provide the space for an accepting and forgiving third within the social that allows individuals deemed different, queer, or otherwise inferior by mainstream culture to belong to a community. (Oliver 2004, 120)

The third as a “loving social agency” is what “makes idealization possible” and “authorizes or legitimates each subjectivity in relation to idealization” (Oliver 2004, 12). Again, Oliver finds within the atrocities of the colonization of psychic space the possibility, if not the opportunity, for the formation of new forms of idealization, sublimation, and forgiveness that would be “available to all rather than the privilege of the beneficiaries of oppression” (118).

In Kristeva’s work (1987, 2000, 2002) and in Oliver’s earlier work (1995, 2001), the third as a loving figure of social support is utilized both as a diagnostic tool for examining suffering subjectivity under conditions of its absence, and as delineating the possibility of an ethics. However, the question of the relevance of psychoanalytic theory to social and political theory proper has remained an open question, and it is perhaps here that Oliver and Kristeva part ways. Kristeva’s work diagnoses a social and political reality in which we have lost traditional forms of social-symbolic support conditioning separation and the social bond. Psychoanalysis witnesses this loss at the level of suffering subjectivity. One of her privileged examples is Christian: ‘God is love.’ Christianity conditions social binding through ritualistic processes of forgiveness. In the aftermath of religion, Kristeva suggests that we subsequently find social support only in the domain of intimate, ethical relations: on the couch, in love and

friendship, etc. Kristeva’s historical analyses of the role and function of what Oliver calls ‘a loving social agency’ or ‘the third’ reveals that, at the level of society and politics, the third is integrative and constitutive of community, and it is something that we now lack. However, Kristeva also purposefully limits the prescriptive reach of her analysis within contemporary societies. Her delimitation of the third to intimacy in modern societies may be heard as a warning that problematizes its social institution. Historically, ‘God is love’ has provided the form and content of ‘the third’, and while it conditions the social bond, it also harbors dangerous forms of tyranny and oppression: the Inquisition, colonization, nationalism, as well as modern forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. The dangers of ‘the third’ at the social and political level was warned against by Freud himself in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1975). At the individual, as well as the community level, the third marks the possibility of social formation. It also potentially nurtures an offense against otherness bordering on the criminal. In transforming this psychoanalytic account of the third into a socially prescriptive one, how does Oliver’s work avoid this danger in a concrete social and political context? What ensures that a ‘loving third’ loves all? What happens when the ethical gesture of loving support is extrapolated to the level of concrete social, cultural, and political life? In brief, what would the concrete realization of such a third look like and how would it be related to the formation or deformation of modern institutions and democratic processes?

## References

Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Freud, Sigmund. 1975. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

Kristeva, Julia. 1987. *Tales of Love*. New York: Columbia University Press.

----- . 2000. *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, vol 1. New York: Columbia University Press.

----- . 2002. *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 2. New York: Columbia University Press.

Oliver, Kelly. 1995. *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double Bind*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

----- . 2001. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

----- . 2004. *The Colonization of Psychic Space: Toward a Psychoanalytic Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.