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Forgiving Lost Pasts?

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

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With her usual lucidity and breadth of knowledge, Kelly Oliver has once more given us a valuable and insightful reading of the obfuscating dynamics of social oppression. Focusing particularly on their apparent intransigency, Oliver approaches the social scene of oppression through the psychoanalytic theories of sublimation and idealization to argue that oppression never occurs solely at the material, overtly political level, but also, and arguably much more deeply, in the register of the social psyche through which we are all then individuated. As she writes, "the material dominance of colonial values is bound to adversely affect the psychic life of the colonized" (Oliver 2004, 31). Arguing explicitly against the masculinized heroism of existentialist

theories of alienation that carried the day for most of the twentieth century, Oliver develops a theory of sublimation and idealization that allows for what she calls "a psychoanalytic forgiveness" (187), which in turn resists the social structures of oppression to allow for a resignification and creation of meaning that includes, rather than excludes, the oppressed.

Oliver's grasp of the problems at stake here is unwavering and she often pins the slippery logic at play in concrete instances of oppression with such concise and elegant insight that the reading comes almost as a relief—"Ah, yes, that is exactly how that works!" For example, in her discussion of the pernicious logic of color-blindness and Patricia J. Williams' story of 'the clunky social box of race,' Oliver captures the excessive signification that attaches to race and therefore threatens the social system of meaning. As she shows, because race "is that clunky social box that is always a stumbling block within contemporary race relations governed by the rhetoric of color-blindness . . . [it] must always remain the elephant in the room that everyone tries to go around" (Oliver 2004, 33). Analyzing this in its socio-psychic register, Oliver then explains how this paralyzes the ability to respond to race at all: "Obviously, racial experiences and experiences of racism do exist, but within racist culture the meaning of those experiences is foreclosed, and the social resources for sublimating their concomitant affects are withheld" (35). As she shows much later in the book, responses to racism that do not follow the social codes of color-blindness are then usually read as trapped in this excessive signification: "Rather than lead to sublimation, creativity, and belonging, the revolt of those excluded from the dominant values and social institutions—if they pull it off—is seen as uppityness, perversion, or terrorism" (196).

This foreclosure from the possibility of identification, a condition necessary for idealization and sublimation, lies at

the heart of Oliver's diagnosis. Her primary concern is about the possibility of the colonized, the racialized other, and the sexed other entering into healthy subjectivity, given this paralyzing foreclosure. Therefore, she argues compellingly for a psychoanalytic theory of social oppression that begins to address these dynamics, moving us beyond the stale frameworks of alienation or politico-economic representation. I agree with her wholeheartedly and both praise and thank her for her work here. In an effort to extend, refine, and elaborate it further, I follow Oliver's own trajectory of the central dynamic of revolt and resistance: I have a few questions.¹

First of all, I wonder about the totalizing logic of colonialism that may undergird Oliver's analysis. While I agree that the deepest damages wrought by colonialism occur through the social identification of the colonized with the colonizer, I also want to follow post-colonial theorists' work on challenging the totality of this reduction of the social field to the colonizer's terms. A long section from Oliver will help to refine my question. She writes,

Sexism, racism, and homophobia are covered over and denied within dominant culture through the double movement of the colonization of psychic space, which operates first as a form of social abjection and exclusion and second as a form of silencing. Both operations undermine the ability of those othered to create their own meaning, especially that of their own bodies and experiences. As Fanon says, they arrive *too late* into a world that already has constructed their meaning as abject and debased. They are doubly alienated and doubly excluded through the absences of supportive social space within mainstream culture to express painful and angry affects. (Oliver 2004, 88, my emphasis)

For Oliver, this "belatedness" of the colonized—a subject that she problematically aligns with the dynamics of sexism, racism, and homophobia here—is the primary obstacle to full inclusion within the social codes of meaning. As she writes in a Heideggerian vein elsewhere, while all humans may experience the problematic dynamic of being thrown into a world of meaning not of their making, the colonized "are thrown there as those incapable of making meaning, as those whose meaning has already been defined as abject and less than fully human" (26). The temporality of "belatedness" connotes, for Oliver, the condition of foreclosure into the social field of meaning and it is from this condition that the colonized must struggle to resignify the social field—a field of meaning that has been saturated by the colonial systems.

To make this argument, Oliver must assume that the processes of colonization are always complete—that is, that any social field of meaning preceding the advent of colonization is utterly wiped-out by the oppressive dynamics of colonialism. Colonialism becomes a kind of *ex nihilo* origin here, erasing any temporality of "before" colonialism. Moreover, as such pure origins often do, colonialism also becomes a totalizing logic, disallowing any fractures or slippages within its mechanisms. While Oliver must account for some kind of slippage in the semiotic field that allows for the re-idealization that leads to her Kristevan "intimate revolt,"² that slippage only occurs "after" colonialism as a kind of working out of the paradoxical and often contradictory logic endemic to it.

I wonder, then, how our understandings of resistance might change if we do not succumb to this totalizing view of colonialism. Following Homi Bhabha's rather different reading of Fanon, for example, we might read Fanon and "his sense of the *belatedness of the black man*" (Bhabha 1994, 236) in white civilization as the opening up of holes and gaps in the signifying chains of colonialism that become 'time-lags' in the

naturalized narrative of Progress. Bhabha argues that, with astute attention to his own “temporality of emergence” (236), Fanon resists and undercuts the homogenous empty time of the white colonizing world. This progressivist temporal narrative of colonialism posits the colonized as always belated to its civilization, rendering him merely an opposition to the ontology of that world or a moment of its past in its dialectical sublation into the future—two options that Oliver also recognizes as insufficient for access to full, healthy subjectivity. For Bhabha, by speaking from “the signifying time-lag of cultural difference” (237), Fanon displaces colonialism’s metaphysical ideals of progress, rationality, humanity, and civilization, “in a number of culturally contradictory and discursively estranged locations” (237). Consequently, Fanon exposes the ethnocentric margin *and historicity* of these allegedly universal symbols and opens the possibility of what Partha Chatterjee calls “a deep and heterogeneous time” (Chatterjee 1993, 79) of many temporalities and many heterotopic spaces. In destabilizing the progressivist narrative, these time-lags both avail the colonized of the agency of interruption and render those allegedly dynamic and temporal identities of colonialism frozen in space.

I suggest that this reading of the “belatedness” of the colonized draws on a temporal possibility that Oliver never entertains—namely, a *pre-colonial* social field of meaning that is not fully erased by or sublated into the colonial systems of signification. For Oliver, two assumptions appear to block this possibility: first of all, she seems to assume that the colonial field of signification is the only viable field of social meaning at work in the scene of colonialism; consequently, and secondly, whenever she entertains the question of a state that pre-exists the social field of meaning, she reads it as the state of animality,³ where the body has not yet been alienated through entrance into meaning. Insofar as she collapses the social field of meaning into the totalizing logic of colonialism,

this forecloses the possible—and possibly ongoing—access of the colonized to these *pre-colonial* fields of social meaning.⁴ Rendering the colonial scene both totalizing and ahistorical, this forecloses the possible access to what I would call the “lost pasts”⁵ of the colonized that otherwise invigorate their various modes and styles of resistance.

While this problem has a broad reach, largely about the need for ongoing and vigilant historicizing of the dynamics of colonialism, I wonder here about how this totalizing logic affects Oliver’s concepts of resistance—more specifically, how it may reduce her concepts of resistance to a space of reaction that always hinges on *disidentifying* from the colonized, rather than the possibility of never having fully identified from the beginning. For example, Oliver writes that the colonized internalizes his/her anger and transforms it into “the obsessive need for recognition from the ‘superior’ white colonizer” (Oliver 2004, 53); but this only works if we already assume that the colonized’s subjectivity depends solely on identification with the colonizer. A turn to the many lost pasts of the colonized would suggest multiple other kinds of identifications always already at work in the social psyche of the colonized. I suspect that Oliver’s rich notion of psychoanalytic forgiving, especially as occurring “on the level of the semiotic” (187), gives her ample resources to respond to this line of query, but I think it would enrich our understandings considerably to hear her respond to it explicitly.

As a further extension of this general question about a totalizing logic of colonialism, I am also puzzled by a subtle tendency in this book to collapse several different dynamics of oppression into one, over-arching mechanism. First of all, Oliver appears to assume that the dynamics of racism in colonialism are the same as those that occur within the United States. In her turn to a discussion of DuBois, she quickly states, “Fanon’s analysis of the racism of colonization speaks

to racism in the North American context, where racism began with a type of colonization, the slave trade" (Oliver 2004, 31). While I agree with her, and with Lewis Gordon,⁶ that a kind of neocolonial logic is appropriate to examining racism in the United States, I think there are real dangers in conflating all colonial scenes to the same general logic. The histories attendant to the middle passage, practices of seasoning, and the many different kinds of enslavement—and resistance—practiced across the southern United States for decades shape the social psyche of the United States with all kinds of different historical debris. There are very different histories at work in the voices of Fanon and DuBois and this means, among other things, that we must not conflate the colonial scenes in our examinations of racism in the United States.

Secondly, and more surprisingly, Oliver also appears to assume that the dynamics of racism and sexism are reducible to the same logics. As she takes up the questions of "the depressed sex" and the problem of representation in feminine quests for identification, sublimation, and idealization, Oliver does not explicitly distinguish these dynamics from those she has diagnosed in the colonial scene. But as she turns to Kristeva's discussions of the maternal body and the infant's struggle to have a self-conscious relation with her (e.g., Oliver 2004, 138), she begs the question of race. Assuming a biological relation between the mother and child (also not a necessary assumption), racial identification will affect not only the mother-infant dyad, but the larger symbolic order in which they exist. Again, the question of histories, and of a shared history of oppression/resistance, needs to be addressed more explicitly here. (To compound this problem of conflating different kinds of oppression, Oliver goes on, at various points, to drop references to homophobia and nationalism as well, suggesting that these systems of oppression are also part of her diagnosis. But are not these also quite distinct from both racism and sexism?)

Generally, while I am deeply sympathetic to Oliver's project here, I am concerned about the subtle work of a totalizing logic in her text—always a danger when working with psychoanalysis. I thus suggest we heed her own admonitions. In her closing work on developing a psychoanalytic notion of forgiveness, Oliver argues that bringing the theory of the unconscious into the Hegelian and Derridean notions of forgiveness makes us "suspicious enough of the illusion that we have achieved our ideals or that the universal had been realized" (185). It is precisely about such a quest—a quest for a universal account of oppression and resistance—that I am concerned. I am concerned that, unwittingly, Oliver has been seduced by those sirens of psychoanalysis that ring with an infamously universalizing sound.

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¹ In the closing discussions, Oliver argues that the central ingredient of revolt is ongoing, self-critical questioning. See Oliver 2004, 147, 186, 197.

² We see this, for example, in her discussion of Fanon's discussions of the radio and the veil (Oliver 2004, 73-77).

³ See, for example, Oliver 2004, 13, 133-34, 197 for passages where timelessness or the state of the pre-social is associated with the animal. See page 53ff for the connections to Kristeva's reading of animality.

⁴ While this chain of reasoning leads us to read the pre-colonial space as the space of animality and this may well be the fantasy of colonialism, this is surely also a place for resistant interruption in such a pernicious narrative.

⁵ For a fuller development of what I have called a politics of lost pasts, see Winnubst 2006.

⁶ Gordon (1997) is among the first to make this argument explicitly.