Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression
KELLY OLIVER
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004; 245 pages.

In 1952 in Peau Noire, Masques Blancs, Frantz Fanon wrote: "Freud, par la psychanalyse, demanda qu'on tint compte du facteur individuel. À une thèse phylogénétique, il substituait la perspective ontogénétique. On ver­ra que l'aliénation du Noir n'est pas une question individuelle. À côté de la phylogénie et de l'ontogénie, il y a la sociogénie [...] disons qu'il s'agit ici d'un sociodagnostic" (8). Over fifty years later, in both psychoanalytic theory and practice, we continue to attribute the causes of psychic affects narrowly to the individual and family histories of subjects, rather than examine their sources in the social oppression of specific groups. This is despite telling statistical indications of, for instance, higher rates of depression and feelings of shame among groups such as blacks and women than among whites and men. Kelly Oliver's project in The Colonization of Psychic Space is the important one of developing a psychoanalytic theory that explores experiences of alienation (Chapter 2), depression (Chapter 7), and shame (Chapter 6) as direct consequences of social oppression, as well as to theorize in novel ways the paths toward psychic healing through processes such as sublimation and ideal­ization (Chapter 8), individualization (Chapter 9), and forgiveness (Chap­ter 10). In her study Oliver diagnoses society rather than individuals as pathological.

As Oliver points out in her Introduction, while other theorists have applied psychoanalytic theories to social phenomena, and have often noted the limitations of this approach, they have either ended up simply pointing out the insufficiencies of psychoanalytic theory or have com­bined psychoanalysis with social theories such as Marxism and feminism. In either case psychoanalytic theory is not fundamentally revisioned. Moreover, such approaches still fail to move beyond the most proximate relations of the individual, such as the family. While these theorists may consider influences on children such as the gender of caregivers, they still do not take into account the larger social and economic context in which subjectivity is formed. Oliver's undertaking is hence more radical in that it seeks to transform rather than to apply psychoanalysis so that it is adequate to the task of explaining and healing the affects of social oppression, and also to develop a new model of subjectivity, one grounded in sociality, forgiveness, and ethics rather than in oppression

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and alienation.

Parts I and II of The Colonization of Psychic Space focus on racial oppression, drawing largely on the philosophy of Fanon, while Parts III and IV attend predominantly to sexist oppression, elaborating mainly on the feminist psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva. With this division between the first and second halves of her book, and with some points of exception, Oliver does not always adequately account for the complex overlapping of race and gender, nor for the manners in which racial and sexist oppression differ. Not everything Fanon says of the lived experience of blacks, for instance, can be grafted onto the experience of white women, as seems to be frequently assumed, and so a more complex awareness of the ways that sexual and racial oppression differ as well as overlap would have been advantageous.

In the first and most powerful chapter in the book, Oliver demonstrates that Continental philosophers have concealed the racial- and gender-specific affects of social oppression by developing universalizing and thus neutralizing theories of psychic domination, alienation, anxiety, and shame, and a model of human subjectivity for which these states are necessary. At a time when postcolonial and feminist critiques of oppression were being voiced, these were immediately undermined by European philosophies that theorized oppression, domination, interhuman antagonistic relations and their psychic effects, as integral to the human condition and to the formation not only of the subjectivities of oppressed groups but to all human subjectivity. Oliver problematizes this trend as it arises in the works of Hegel, Marx, Sartre, Heidegger, and Lacan. Each of these prominent Continental thinkers, Oliver argues, has subverted accounts of domination and suffering on the part of postcolonial and feminist movements by universalizing the experiences of estrangement which those groups described, while simultaneously putting forth theories of subjectivity that reflect the white male subject and his privilege. In turn, the tendency of commentators to see Fanon’s theories of racialized alienation and oppression and the psychic effects of domination on blacks as making him a “Hegelian,” a “Sartrean,” a “Marxist,” or a “Lacanian” philosopher repeat this gesture by generalizing the racial experience of oppression Fanon describes into mere instances of the universal theories of these more mainstream thinkers. As Oliver shows, all forms of suffering are thus leveled, and we forget, as Fanon accuses Sartre of doing, that “the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man” (16). In particular, by situating Fanon in the tradition of Hegel, Sartre, Marx, or Lacan, as merely applying their philosophies to racial and colonial experience, philosophic commentators generalize forms of estrangement and anxiety over nothingness and freedom which are in fact white male privileges, masking racially specific alienation and
psychic suffering, while simultaneously failing to distinguish between levels and types of domination, oppression, and alienation.

While Chapter 1 is compelling, Oliver’s suggestion in Chapter 2 that philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre theorized a generalized human experience of anxiety, and in particular anxiety caused by the gaze (in the case of Sartre), because they were made personally anxious by the accusing gazes of women and colonized others, is perhaps less so. One would at least expect Oliver to address Fanon’s claims in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* that the gaze is white, that only whites have the gaze (“les regards blancs, les seuls vrais” [93]), that the black man cannot reverse the gaze on the white other, as Sartre supposes (“c’est faux. Le Noir n’a pas de résistance ontologique aux yeux du Blanc” [89]), as well as feminist claims that the gaze is male (“men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” [Berger 1977, 47]). So far as blacks and women look (at themselves), this look is argued by Fanon, Berger, and feminists such as Laura Mulvey to be an internalization of the white, male gaze by blacks and women, and they do not look at their oppressors and thus make them anxious with their gazes, but look at themselves being looked at through the eyes of racism and sexism. Oliver may validly reject these arguments, but she should at least address them.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5, concluding the first half of the book, continue to offer strong readings of the philosophy of Fanon with respect to topics such as the transmission of affect, humanism, property, and power. The second half of the book, which deals with the oppression of women, is in general less persuasive than the first half, which focuses on race. This is partly because the racial model of oppression already developed is transposed onto the experience of sexism, and because it depends largely on overly categorical claims that women are silenced and that there exist no positive images of women and no social meanings for women within mainstream Western culture which are not dehumanizing.

In Chapters 6 and 7 Oliver considers shame and depression, and the ways they are related to oppression such that they seem to affect women and racial minorities far more than white men. While the analysis of female shame versus male guilt is important and persuasive, the analysis of depression raises several questions. With respect to the higher diagnosed rates of depression among women than men, it would be useful to consider to what degree this reflects not only the social oppression of women, which I do not doubt, but also the social conditioning of men which leads them to seek help for emotional and mental (as well as physical) health problems less frequently than women, as well as the internalization of social expectations on the part of doctors such that they might be more inclined to diagnose one sex with depression
The analysis of depression also depends on assumptions regarding women's abjection and silence in society. Oliver writes of women in Western societies as being "without social support and positive self-images available in culture" (149), and asks "What happens when the only readily available meanings for a particular experience are either nonexistent, prohibited, or abject and inhuman?" (142). The experience of maternity, for instance, and the emotions associated with it can only be articulated in mainstream culture, according to Oliver, "through denigration or not at all," and are thus "so profoundly repressed that they are nearly foreclosed from the social" (142). The consequences for women of their social abjection and negative social meaning are said to be "repression and ultimately depression" (143).

Regarding the supposed absence of any positive images of women or mothers in mainstream culture, the closest Oliver comes to proving these assertions is when she lists titles of American films in which mothers are represented negatively, as cruel or abusive or as the sources of their children's psychological problems (106). Yet one could compile similar lists of films in which strong mothers appear, others in which mothers are represented stereotypically but sympathetically, and others in which mothers are romanticized and idealized. Oliver does not explore the ways that women not only experience sexism as denigration and abjection but also, and perhaps more frequently, as idealization and romanticization or through preconceived notions of women as nurturing and beautiful. Today we are surely more bombarded with (and oppressed by) images of the female body as beautiful and ideal than by images of the female body as abject, and more by representations of mothers as self-sacrificing than by depictions of mothers as cruel. The suggestion that there exist no positive meanings for women in culture (even in mainstream culture) presents a homogenous view of society and denies the accomplishments of decades of feminism. Although I am far from wishing to say that our society is no longer patriarchal or that media and popular-culture representations of women are unproblematic, Oliver's categorical claims simply do not reflect a reality, including a reality of oppression, that is far more complex. Although parenthetically and in passing Oliver mentions Oprah's book club and hip-hop music (151), she does not pause to see that such examples of positive images of women (and, in perhaps more circumscribed ways, of blacks) could be proliferated and should cause her to qualify her repeated categorical claims that no such images and meanings exist.

Finally, the claim that women and mothers and their experiences are silenced in mainstream culture also simply does not reflect the reality even of mainstream American media. These claims regarding women's
silence and repression bring to mind Foucault’s ironic analysis of the “repressive hypothesis” in *La volonté de savoir*. Here, Foucault describes the manners in which the modern subject “speaks verbosely of its own silence, [and] takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say” (8). While, like Foucault, I am not denying that any silencing or repression occurs, and although I have found compelling Oliver’s analysis of the manner in which Continental philosophic theories of a generalized alienation and oppression would have worked to silence the voices expressing racially and sexually specific forms of alienation and oppression within philosophic discourse (as can be seen in the reception and marginalization of the philosophy of Fanon as a mere application of Hegel, Sartre, Marx, and Lacan), Foucault is also convincing that in general silence is not our problem, and we have to consider instead the problems of what we do (prolifically) say. Similarly, when Oliver calls for “continual self-interrogation” (xxii, xxiii), a Foucaultian would point out that the modern subject is already defined by its introspective tendencies, as well as by the permanent verbalization of what it “discovers” about itself. What we need is not more talk, or more introspection, but to talk and to think differently about ourselves as well as of others, to transform rather than augment our speech and thought. Oliver is arguably pursuing a similar point when she declares that psychic revolt is necessary for social revolt (149), and yet she is wrong to think that this revolt is always and only against silence, repression, and abjection.

Despite her extensive use of *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* in the first half of the book, Oliver chooses not to explore in equal depth Fanon’s arguments in *Les damnés de la terre*, in which he arguably reverses the order of the revolts of which she speaks, claiming it is social revolt that is the prerequisite for psychic healing. In particular, Fanon argues that the colonized person will regain self-respect and psychic health not through more talking but only if he avenges himself against and frees himself from the colonizer through his own actions. Although, as mentioned, Oliver has said that psychic revolt is necessary for social revolt (and ultimately that the two should coexist), and though concerned with social forms of oppression, her interest and diagnosis are first and foremost sought through individualized psychological work and not through social change. Oliver is interested in psychic healing through therapy, for instance, rather than transformations of society or more immediate attacks on oppression. Accordingly, while in her Introduction Oliver criticizes psychoanalytic theorists for focusing on the individual and not taking the social into account, she also briefly criticizes critical theory because, although it does deal with the social and the ill effects of social oppression on individuals, it thinks that the only solution to these problems is social change, and does not recognize individual solutions such as
therapy (xvii). Oliver, in contrast, privileges introspection, speech, and therapy as solutions to the harmful effects of oppression rather than taking actions which end that oppression. Following Foucault and Fanon, we might doubt this privileging of introspective talk as well as any claims that our society lacks it, and even argue that this tarrying with the inner self delays our acting for social change as well as change in our individual lives.

The final part of The Colonization of Psychic Space is a consideration of the manners in which the effects of social oppression can be healed. Oliver argues that the effects of oppression are healed through sublimination and forgiveness. Sublimination in turn requires the ability to idealize images with which one can identify (so, in this chapter, of idealized images of women). In this context Oliver argues for the need for images of female genuises. Oliver does not pause to consider feminist critiques of the notion of genius but rather turns to Kristeva's series of studies of Hannah Arendt, Colette, and Melanie Klein. While Kristeva's female genius series reflects a traditional understanding of genuises as exceptionally intelligent and creative persons, Oliver argues that in addition to these figures women need a more everyday notion of genius, or must be able to see genius in their everyday talents and activities. This chapter becomes especially troubling when Oliver argues that women are more attuned than men to sensory experience due to their care of bodies and that we can consider such sensory attunement as a form of genius. Moreover, she argues, women manifest maternal genius and genius in their abilities to create and transform not only children but also food and clothes. Oliver does not pursue examples of women's "everyday" experiences that occur outside the household, such as in the workplace or in studios, despite the fact that many women leave their houses to go to work every day. Although she is aware that women's greater abilities in domestic areas are a result of traditional gender roles and patriarchal oppression, Oliver does not dwell on these facts and instead valorizes these roles as sites of "female" (rather than "feminine") genius.

We might think that women's domestic and maternal skills are already nurtured and presented positively in Good Housekeeping magazines, and women have hardly been abjected for their abilities to cook food for their families. Remaining with Kristeva's examination of intellectual and artistic female genuises might have been more promising, even though we might also question the concept of genius on feminist grounds, as has been done in feminist scholarship in disciplines such as literary studies and art history. Moreover, Oliver's position seems dangerous: idealizing traditional domestic roles as "female," congratulating women for being good at cooking and caring for children in ways that men are supposedly not, has worked in the past as a way of reconciling women to cir-
cumscribed social roles, of pacifying them to accept their restriction to these realms. Oliver simply goes further than nineteenth-century and 1950s’ romanticizations of female domesticity and maternity by saying that these are sites of “female genius,” and her claims seem like a particularly exaggerated and outdated case of reinforcing sexist stereotypes. Moreover, these claims once more do not seem to acknowledge that feminism has had any success thus far since women still seem limited in their genius to the domestic realm, for Oliver, nor do they reflect an awareness that women (such as Oliver herself) already have roles in society other than maternity and domestic work which they (and other women looking at them) might find value in and idealize. Needless to say, it is surprising to be making these points in 2005.

In the final chapter, Oliver returns to her critique of theories (Hegel, Sartre) that see interhuman hostility and alienation as necessary to the formation of subjectivity, and offers instead a theory of the interhuman experience of forgiveness as the basis for subjectivity. Oliver considers accounts of forgiveness in the writings of Hegel, Derrida, and Kristeva, drawing on each in order to develop her own psychological model of forgiveness. Oliver argues that this model of forgiveness is presupposed by subjectivity, but has been refused to those who are abjected by society. Although one could question certain aspects of her readings of Hegel and Derrida, Oliver’s model of forgiveness as a primary and ethical inter-relatedness with the other, offered as an alternative to the masculinist model of subjectivity as grounded in antagonism, is of great interest.

On a final note, to readers of Lévinas (and to some degree of feminist care ethics), the theorization of a subject that is always already engaged in ethical relations with others is nothing new, and Oliver mentions only in passing her indebtedness to Lévinas. In response, Oliver would argue that what her model of subjectivity offers that is new, or not adequately explored in either Lévinas or care ethics, is psychoanalysis, or its account of and extension of ethics to the functionings of the unconscious. Given the nevertheless Lévinasian nature of her project (despite the fact that he is mentioned very rarely), it would have been interesting for Oliver to respond to the ways in which her project also diverges from Lévinas, in that for Lévinas the forgiveness of the other cannot be “presupposed” (“Toward the Other,” Nine Talmudic Readings, 1990), and moreover the ethical relation which precedes the ontology of the subject is frequently described as an antagonistic one, once again. For Lévinas, ethics and our primary interrelatedness must be thought without assuming the other’s acceptance and forgiveness.

The ultimate goals of Oliver’s book—the theorization of a model of subjectivity that is grounded in an ethics of forgiveness rather than in the
need to dominate and oppress others, and the transformation of psychoanalytic theory such that it can account for social oppression—are certainly valuable ones. *The Colonization of Psychic Space* is as a whole to be recommended, despite the unevenness of some of its chapters.

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*Hiddenness and Alterity: Philosophical and Literary Sightings of the Unseen*

JAMES RICHARD MENSCHE Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005; 270 + x pages.

I wanted to like this book because of the importance of the questions Mensch raises about self-knowledge and what “the hidden aspect of ourselves” implies for morality (2). The Introduction (1-17) provides an intriguing discussion of self-knowledge, and the issues Mensch frames are persistent and central: otherness as an element of selfhood, self-knowledge’s fundamentality to morality, the danger reflexivity poses for self-deception, the mental life of others.

Though *Hiddenness and Alterity* is presented as a sustained treatment of the topic of otherness, and its parts are designated “chapters,” as the Acknowledgments suggest and the subtitle hints, the book really is an anthology of papers, some “reworked” (ix), and most only tenuously related to one another. The book begins with a consideration of the role and nature of self-knowledge and, in particular, of the question of how we can know that we do not know things about ourselves. Mensch then supposedly applies his “unified theory of alterity” to a number of issues, showing how “sightings of the unseen” enable better understanding of those issues (back cover). The issues include logic, imagination, political perception, shame and guilt, literature and evil, prayer and metaphysics.

Unfortunately, the alleged “unified theory” fails to hold together the various chapters/papers, some of which are independently of genuine interest. The reason for this failure is that Mensch’s “theory” of otherness or alterity is neither a theory nor convincing. The fundamental problem has two aspects. The first is a basic conceptual difficulty, in that what Mensch proposes about otherness rests squarely on his misconceived attempt to offer a phenomenological account of temporality. Regarding temporality, Mensch attempts to describe the indescribable by indirect means. But the indescribable here is not like, say, the taste of a fresh peach or taking an instant dislike to someone; it is not something that