If we accept the post-structuralist argument that it is language that endows the social with meaning, we must also insist that language, itself, acquires meaning and authority only within specific social and historical settings. While linguistic differences structure society, social differences structure language.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg

Since the emergence of post-structuralism and the social movements of the late-1960s and 1970s, scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities has taken some steps in bridging the study of, what Stuart Hall terms, "the insides of people, subjective activity and sexuality" with the study of "social relations, production and the 'hard edge' of productive systems" (Hall, 102-3). This has marked a shift from assuming the context of identity categories to examining the assumptions/truths which historically constitute subjects as bound to specific socio-historically grounded identities, from exploring the intersecting topics of historical reality and identity formation to mapping the genealogy of institutional identities. This article is primarily aimed at raising some questions about - as well as partially exploring - the tensions that exist between post-structuralist and post-colonial perspectives on "race," on the one hand, and the historical social sciences and the humanities, on the other. Ultimately, does "race" necessarily inform the ways in which these academic disciplines are imagined and practiced? Is the bridge mentioned and encouraged by Stuart Hall actually possible and is it necessarily racial? Is the very notion of such a "bridge" necessarily heteronormative (suggesting a "marriage" between the disciplines)? Would it be more interesting to perceive such efforts in terms of erasing frontiers or cross-dressing? What is at stake when all of these attempts and practices are only partially successful or even when they fail?

Patricia Williams

I, like so many blacks, have been trying to pin myself down in history, place myself in the stream of time as significant, evolved, present in the past, continuing into the future. To be without documentation is too unsettling, too spontaneously historical, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but my future as well.

Subaltern Writing and the Claims of History

One of the principal limits of prevailing post-structuralist perspectives in general is that they tend to elide the subjects, recipients, etc. of racial oppression, namely, the subaltern subjects of Western colonialism. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has pointed out in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" her critique of Michel Foucault, et al., the seemingly decolonized Western author/subject of poststructuralist discourse inevitably becomes recuperated precisely because 'he' is abstractly theorized within a Euro-like universe that originally only contains the West (and no "natives" and/or no "women"). On the contrary, most post-colonial literature and social inquiry arise - within the context of anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles - precisely to address this Euro- or Euro-American-centric. This went from the turn-of-the-century works of W.E.B. DuBois, José Martí, and Arturo Schomburg to the 20th-century precursors involved in the Harlem Renaissance, the socio-historical work of José Carlos Mariátegui, the literary production of the Caribbean and African exponents of negritude, and the post-war anti-colonial writings of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Amilcar Cabral, and Roberto Fernández Retamar.

However, and as Cherrie Moraga, Barbara Smith, Essex Hemphill, Maria Lepage, et al. have argued, just as much of this writing and broader social practices of the subaltern subjects of Western colonialism/racism unfortunately continues to define these norms/istylized social spaces as perpetually in need of centering straight men within these communities. In other words, subaltern national-cultural/social communities are necessarily imagined and re-membered within heterosexist and masculinist horizons. This is how they are historically represented in lived experience - this is how they are socialized and represented in memory. The political effects of such perspectives have been disastrous: from the misogynist backlash that followed the Algerian and Viet-Namese wars of independence to the imposition of the Civil Rights and National Liberation movements within the United States, these last tragedies also partially resulting from the authoritarian substructures of their patriarchal leaderships.

Nevertheless, one of the tensions within most of these critiques from feminist women of color and/or lesbian and gay "Third World" writers seems to be the question of history/city. For example, Audre Lorde, in an essay that has become a touchstone for so many of us ("Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference"), says...
Because of the continuous battle against racial erosion that Black women and Black men share, some Black women still refuse to recognize that we are also oppressed as women, and that sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well. It is a disease striking at the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear.

She then adds:

Differences between ourselves as Black women are also being misused and separated to suport us from one another. As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and as a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to black out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful white, elitizing or denying the other parts of self. (Lorde, 118-119)

Here Audre Lorde broadly gestures to racially gendered wage inequalities in the United States and instances of homophobia within the Black community, as well monitoring the brutality and exploitation that limit women-of-colour's reproductive health and choices. Yet there does not appear to be any broader sense of the unevenly changing and contradictory institutional materiality that contextualizes these atrocities making them not only possible, but usually reasonable — even to most of their victims. I could have picked any other example from Audre Lorde’s work or from any of the other examples of this genre of criticism. This is usually the terrain of autobiograpy, where one clearly gets a sense of how personal experience (i.e. an individual's history) authorizes a particular viewpoint, thus empowering specific members of oppressed groups to tell their story and change their lives.

Important as the reinscription of memory to within these testimonial and empirical points of departure are, some dialectic perspectives give me the impression of assuming that experience is a transparent event through which the individual is...literally—speaks for itself. These viewpoints appear to conflate the individual's experiences with the political, economic, and cultural apparatus that have structured such experiences in different ways, making them meaningful to those individual subjects. In this sense — and only in this sense — they would seem to assume that experience is not social and historical product.

Do notions of "Black nationhood" or "Black women" ultimately make any sense, even within narratives of memory, without the not always named referents of "origins," "lineage," "descendants," etc.? Are these referents always already evocative of the "natural" and of its principal signifiers (i.e. race and sex) — which, by the way, was one of the important points Patricia Williams made in the first epigraph above? How can subaltern social subjects "pin [ourselves] down in history, place [ourselves] in the stream of time as significant," when our processes and structures of this history?...Or, rather, am I making the mistake of positing a far too constraining view of history, am I overlooking the pluralism "allotted" to these within "subaltern" histories? Are these testimonial narratives offering another, different, yet just as pertinent, perspective on what history and the writing of history means?

What about the other, presumably more macro-structural ways in which those personal experiences have been affected and even determined by the transformations and conflicts within those institutions and technologies of power —changes to a large extent due to the resistances of expressed groups?...Which brings us back, not only to the second epigraph by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg that opened this paper, but also to the questions raised in the work of the new historical forms of inquiry had on the work of "Third World" women authors? Are or should subaltern poets and other "Third World" women literatures really be compelled to address such questions? Perhaps the answer lies in writings such as Audre Lorde’s and Patricia Williams’ Borderlands.

Moreover, where the work of feminist...Some of this has been very much the development of thinking and doing historiographical (and even on white scholarship), which can be interesting or disturbing. This can be a specific point of the historical present tense, which is the present tense of the writing of history, for what is it that makes...Recalling the Patricia Williams epigraph, again, wouldn’t this be "too” unambiguously, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but also our future as well? If this is not an abstruse posture, what does abstractness mean then? It, on the contrary, this is an abstruse posture, doesn’t run the risk of reinforcing the meaningful conceptual territory, not only of machista and homophobic subaltern practices, but also of the still hegemonic Euro- and Euro-American-centric subject?

**The Colonial Question**

Hence, we are back to the problem of colonialism. To my mind, this is one of the political, economic, and cultural apparatuses that has, not only socially structured, but historically defined and produced subaltern experiences (both individual and collective). A post-colonialism is the United States today is immediately complicated by the fact that, particularly within the academic discipline of History with a capital "H", colonialism is understood to be a question that was resolved in 1776 —just as any discussion of white supremacy tends to evoke the bad old days of Jim Crow and legal segregation. I think these perspectives — which are commonplace even among post-strucuralists, feminists, and queer theorists — need to be seriously re-examined. As bell hooks has argued, speaking of white supremacy and, particularly, of colonialism in the present tense helps to de-individualize and re-historicize racial-national/cultural conflicts and hierarchies within the United States. What would a post-colonial perspective mean, then, within this context? What follows are some suggestions regarding conceptual points of departure.

The history and current reality of colonialism is not only the result of the formation of cultural-national/racial groups but also the social, economic, and historical processes and structures of that and that of the humanities is insuperable.

If, in the end, we are all just telling stories, then, stories must be told in new ways and events) with extremely varied socio-political effects, is it even fair to raise the following questions? How does the connection between past history, current historical practice, and subaltern memory/identity become masculinized and heterossexualized in each of these different subaltern communities? How do race and sex give meanin to the organization of historical knowledge and subaltern/colonized memory and how do these meanings vary across time? Doesn’t this point to the need of reinscribing metaphorical paradigms and timelessness? Recalling the Patricia Williams epigraph, again, wouldn’t this be "too" unambiguously, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but also our future as well? If this is not an abstruse posture, what does abstractness mean then? It, on the contrary, this is an abstruse posture, doesn’t run the risk of reinforcing the meaningful conceptual territory, not only of machista and homophobic subaltern practices, but also of the still hegemonic Euro- and Euro-American-centric subject?

Audre Lorde
universalism into Eurocentric universalism. It is no accident that the rise of the colonialist culture of capitalism also brought into "common"—that is, Western—usage the term "ethnic." This signals the shift from the Greek "ethnos," meaning "nation" and "people," to the Catholic-Latin "ethnus," referring to "heathen," "pagan," and "savage;" hence, the interwoven genocides of modern racism, colonialism, and nationalism. As Trinh Minh-ha has pointed out, the perception of the outsider as the one who needs help has taken on the successive forms of the barbarian, the pagan, the infidel, the wild man, the "native," and the underdeveloped. Needless to say, these forms whose meanings helplessly keep on decomposing can only exist in relation to their opposite... Thus the invention of "needs" and of the mission to "help" the needy always blossom together. The

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With the metaphysics of Euro- and Euro-American-centric subjects, male, properly and sexually "correct." The questions thus remain: How does race (as well as sex, nationality, and class) give meaning to the organization of historical knowledge, existing colonial memory, and the lived colonial present? And what are the implications of all of this?

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