Inner-Cultural Imperialism, Government, and the System of Domination

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Domination occurs through a language which, in its plastic social action, creates a second-order, artificial ontology, an illusion of difference, disparity, and, consequently, hierarchy that becomes social reality. (Butler 1990)

he issue of an individual's agency often remains concealed under current academic/political discourses which critique imperialism and domination, focusing on the creation and objectification of oppressed groups or categories. The systems of language and representation which work to justify domination are most recognized and studied in the realm of history. The colonization of Africa, India, and other regions in the Southeast by the British and the French in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has served as the backdrop for the field of post-colonial studies in academia today. Furthermore, the methodology behind this historic imperialism and how it worked to dominate specific cultures has been adopted as a way of analyzing and seeing our own culturally produced categories of race, class, and gender (the way in which British subjects dominated and colonized "native" subjects has been likened to the way patriarchal society has dominated/appropriated the "female").

But is the progressive race, class, gender triad adequate on its own? Has it successfully challenged the system of domination which operates through the creation of categorical representations? Or has it simply questioned several of the oppressive representational categories, making "equal rights" progress for those who fit within those progressive categories, hence leaving the system which works to negate one's agency (re-
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gardless of, but via the creation of, cultural categories) intact?

I contend that there are imperialist frameworks in cultural shad­
ows—areas untouched by the field of critical discourse—which are systematically overlooked. Our current focus seems to be simply on readjusting and/or toppling a certain framework of domination (whether it be physical or symbolic, objectifying “woman” or “black”) within a larger system of domination which negates one’s agency. The untouched systems of repression and the systematic justification of such will continue with great force, especially if the institutionalized race­
class-gender triad begins to see itself as the last step in denouncing any remaining cultural imperialism (incidentally, such a transition would simply mirror the common representations that are perpetu­
atated about our own democracy). And although I could use “structure” and “framework” when discussing modes of domination, I find it cru­
cial for us to create a language that examines the logical, systematic op­
eration of power which denies the individual his/her agency instead of focusing our attention on one or two “frameworks” through which that power may be manifest.

I hope to adopt a strategy which problematizes the traditional Self/Other binary and explores the possibility and consequential implica­
tions of an Other/Other relationship. To do this I will analyze JanMohamed’s (1985) framework of imperialism as he defines it in “The Economy of Manichean Allegory” and apply that framework to Stephan Elliot’s Australian film Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994). What we find when an Other/Other relationship exists is two-fold. First, the category of Other is allowed some agency. This conclusion assumes that neither party in an Other/Other binary will sit passively waiting for a third agent, or Self, to arrive on the scene and frame the experience with the Self at the center. Secondly, the Self/Other binary is disrupted further (especially visible in Priscilla, Queen of the Desert) in that the Self or dominant arena—in the rubric of the race­
class-gender triad, this is traditionally defined as white, male, middle upper class—is not a homogenous position or category. “Drag queens,” for example, are not generally positioned and treated as equals in relation to our dominant social and political ideologues, although they might be male, white, and middle upper class. The “drag” culture might then exist as an Other within the traditional conceptualizations of the “Self” or dominant culture; according to some criteria they might fall within the dominant category, yet in the context of “normative” dress codes they can often be seen as oppositional. Both possibilities, of course, imply that the system of domination has less to do with illu­sory, malleable cultural categories or frameworks than it does with...

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simply denying an individual his or her will. Consequently, I hope to outline the artificiality of the “category” in order to highlight the way it is used as a smoke-screen, drawing attention away from overt acts of oppression. Perhaps the following diagram will clarify the important transition we must make away from the discourse of “category.”

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Category/Language
"Second-order reality"

(A) Indirect Acts of Oppression

System of Authority (B) Individual/Agency

Direct Acts of Oppression
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While “A” demonstrates the functionality of oppression as it is allowed to exist indirect of the subordinated individual, “B” demon­
strates that overt acts of oppression become more visible when we step outside of the discourse of culturally-produced categories. Lastly, I will apply the functionality of “A”—indirect acts of oppression—to our own framework of government for two reasons: 1) our government’s public existence and the written nature of its laws make it easily examined; and 2) the United States’ democracy supposedly exists as the governing system which claims to maintain its citizens’ agency—literally labelling itself as the antithesis of imperialism.

I cannot fully express the importance of this exploration. For if shadows of imperialism do still exist, then the dominant system has only incorporated those groups who have successfully challenged its framework. In doing so, perhaps we have simply strengthened the system of imperialism, allowed more numbers into its arena, and continued to justify morally, ethically, and legally, someone else’s lack of agency. We might now begin to see an inadequacy in the institution­
alized race­class-gender triad, in that it has traditionally focused its critique of domination on representational categories. My goal there­
fore is to initiate a discourse which, by moving beyond the restrictive nature of the “category,” allows for a critical inquiry into real acts of oppression waged against real people; thus opening the doors for a new discussion on liberation, freedom, and the individual’s control over his or her agency.

disclosure
There is no doubt that imperialism produced the category of the "native" in colonial texts and discourse. JanMohamed explains—taking his cue from Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow—that "Africans were perceived in a more or less neutral and benign manner before the slave trade developed; however, once the . . . trade became established, Africans were newly characterized as the epitome of evil and barbarity" (JanMohamed 1985: 80). At the heart of this exchange is the Manichean order, which posits positive and negative connotations at both ends of its binary opposites (i.e. colonizer/colonized, European/"native," rational/emotional, Self/Other) in order to symbolically justify the imperialist's system of exploitation.

The colonizer/colonized system, as the quotation above insinuates, is based solely on the exchange value of the "native" and their resources. These resources are, of course, given value by the imperialist. The exploited category can exist as both a physical resource or commodity—goods, labor, etc.—as well as a symbolic resource or commodity. Symbolically, the mere existence of the "native," and especially his or her existence as a connotatively bad or evil subject, can be used, as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) would say, to increase the symbolic capital of the oppressor. Either way, "colonialist discourse commodifies the native subject into a stereotyped object and uses him as a resource. . . ." (JanMohamed 1995: 83). In order to justify the physical commodification of the "native" subject (especially in cultural or legal systems which theoretically disallow overt physical oppression of the individual), the "native" is endowed with a certain amount of symbolic exchange value: one framework of imperialism—the Manichean allegory—presupposes, in the case of Africa, presupposes the "putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native" (JanMohamed 1985: 82).

Abdul JanMohamed's analysis of the symbolic commodification of the "native" subject explores the two ways in which the Manichean allegory can manifest itself in justifying the "native's" exchange value, which "remains the central motivating force of both colonialist material practice and colonialist literary representation." First, there is the imaginary manifestation, which carries an "adamant refusal to admit the possibility of syncretism, or a rapprochement between Self and Other." These imperialist texts, aggressively creating distance between the colonizer and the Other, justify the exchange-value-system by pitying "civilized societies against the barbaric aberrations of an Other." Secondly, there is the symbolic manifestation, which attempts to "overcome the barriers of racial difference" (JanMohamed 1985: 87, 92, 91, 93). These texts examine the specifics of both colonizer and colonized and work to resolve the innate contradictions between colonizer and colonized by providing (Other) characters for the cultural reader that seem less flat, less stereotyped, less commodified. JanMohamed claims that the symbolic texts which try to simply syncretize the Self and Other, however, merely falter, positioning themselves in the realm of imaginary, This is, of course, because any attempt to change one position or incorporate it into another position is nothing but an emulation that one position is, for one reason or another, not presently what it should be. And finally, JanMohamed explains that only those texts that assume that syncretism is an impossibility free themselves from the Manichean allegory through a strict re-evaluation of that imaginary.

The rationalization of these Self/Other dynamics, as JanMohamed explains, is a system of control and values which is easily discernable through culture-texts: "Colonialist literature," for example, "is an exploration and a representation of a world at the boundaries of 'civilization,' a world that has not (yet) been domesticated" (1985: 83). Hence, we can initially examine Stephan Elliot's Australian film, Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, as an imperialist text in that its main characters—three white, cabaret "drag queens"—go on tour in the Australian outback. The outback is clearly a world that has not (yet) been domesticated.

The film can be analyzed in terms of its representation of the "native" subjects, whom the main characters encounter when their bus breaks down on a un-traveled, dirt, short-cut through the outback. Although this encounter is brief (and only ten minutes of screen-time is allotted for the experience), it provides us with a text from which to judge the effectiveness of JanMohamed's insistence that colonialist discourse emulates a "Manichean struggle—a definition that is not a fanciful metaphorical caricature but an accurate representation of a profound conflict" (1985: 79).

But, does Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, as an imperialist text, coalesce with JanMohamed's notion of the colonialist text? In terms of the system of exchange value on which the Manichean allegory is based, there can be found several narrative acts or plot directions which support JanMohamed's claim, but that seems to be where the similarities between JanMohamed's analysis of the colonialist texts
JanMohamed explains this collectivity as an effect generated when the "natives" are commodified to the degree that, with a certain amount of exchange value. Their bus has broken down in the middle of the outback and "natives" are utilized to help remedy the situation: the "natives" found the stranded performers and (we are led to assume) provide assistance by towing their bus to the nearest town. Furthermore, those "natives" who are not directly utilized in the rescue—if you will—remain silent, are given no speaking roles, and are portrayed as a collective group, not as individuals. JanMohamed explains this collectivity as an effect generated when the "European writer commodifies the native by negating his individuality... so that he is now perceived as a generic being that can be exchanged for any other native (they all look alike, act alike, and so on)" (1985: 83). Also, while the cabaret performers are at the "native" camp, they perform their various stage productions—an opportunity for them to practice, which was often, because of their on-the-road mishaps, not very probable. Here, the "natives" are utilized as a temporary audience. "If every desire is at base a desire to impose oneself on another and to be recognized by the Other," writes JanMohamed, and that "the colonial situation provides an ideal context for the fulfillment of that fundamental drive," then we can see, too, the "drag queen's" performance as a "fulfillment" of that desire and hence, the creation of a relationship between "drag queens" and "natives" which is imperialistic. And lastly, this commodification of the "native" subject is apparent in the incorporation of one "native" into that evening's performance: the cabaret performers dress the "native" subject up in their own costumes, have him dance their dance, and participate in their politics of sexual identity. This narrative act clearly bespeaks JanMohamed's "hegemonic phase" of imperialist domination, in which "the natives accept a version of the colonizers' entire system of values, attitudes..., institutions, and, more important, mode of production" (1985: 81).

But JanMohamed's traditional Self/Other binary is complicated with the inclusion of the "drag queens" in the dialectic. "Drag" not only challenges the "normative" categorical representations of Self which are often perpetuated within the binary relationship (although the three cabaret performers are white, male, and middle-upper class, their dress practices posit them as not of the dominant or Self), but it also—as Judith Butler explains—"parodies" the dominant notions of gender identity:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender which is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency (1990: 137).

In essence, "drag" subjects not only exist as Other within the traditional category of "Self," but the performative (to use Butler's term) nature of "drag" reveals the illusory and malleable nature of the "gender" category—and any category for that matter. We can now re-evaluate the "drag queen's" intrusion into the "native" camp and see it not as an imperialist's exploration and framing of the "unknown" but as a performative subversion of the imperialist's framework itself.

In light of these problematics within the Self/Other binary we can more easily understand the ways in which the relationship of Self/Other—or "drag"/"native" and Other/Other in this context—do not fully coalesce with JanMohamed's analysis of the Manichean rationale for exploitation (which assigns importance to the Self and invalidity to the "native" subject, disallowing the category of the Other some agency.) For example, in Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, an equal representation of both colonizer and colonized, or "drag"/"native," is provided during the encounter. One cultural group is not subordinated to the other. In fact, the cabaret performers, during the encounter, step out of the narrative focus; they only perform their act after several of the "native" Australians—strumming guitars and singing—have performed their own. Also, when the "drag queens" are first found, there is no acknowledgment of superiority/inferiority between the "native" who finds them and the performers. The "native," Adam—a European, biblical name, inherently representative of past colonizations, but temporally used to signify a hierarchical lack of difference between the two parties—stumbles onto the performers, surprising them. The "drag queens" stand astonished for a moment at the fact that someone has found them. And then, almost surprisingly, Adam speaks to them...
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in perfect English. There is no immediate social hierarchy created; no symbolic justification or commodification of one party or another has taken place; in terms of language and communication, they are equals. At that moment Adam does not need to be socialized as a colonized subject the way in which JanMohamed sees the colonized subjects within the Manichean order as being in need of socialization. Also, we not only see this equal representation in narrative acts, but in the camera’s points-of-view. When the cabaret performers are first brought by Adam into the "native" camp, the camera does not follow the performers into this unknown area. The camera positions itself within the camp, positing the “native” position as familiar, and showing the white, "drag queens" approaching from outside of the community—very unfamiliar. One cabaret performer even responds, “I think we’ve crashed a party,” clearly positioning the performers as Other to the "natives" and the "native" environment. In this sense, JanMohamed’s insistence that the representation of the “native” subject in colonialist literature and texts be inherently sedimented with the workings of the Manichean hierarchies seems inapplicable.

Although JanMohamed’s “The Economy of Manichean Allegory” does example the way in which the colonial “native” subject is seen as possessing some exchange value, his insistence that “determined-cultural-text(s) preserve the structures and functions of imperialist ideology” (1985: 103) through exemplification of the Manichean allegory, and its use in justifying the “native’s” exchange value, fails for one important reason. In Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, the “drag queens” problematize the Self/Other dialectic. JanMohamed’s theory does not allow for the notion that a colonized subject can exist within a colonizer’s system, while still being viewed, superficially—race, class, gender—as part of the colonizer. Taking this into view, the Manichean order is disrupted in that the “native” subject, or Other, is confronted by the white, European self which also exists as Other within the white, European milieu. This represents a relationship not of Self/Other, but of Other/Other—a dynamic which not only allows the category of the Other some agency, but also alludes to the existence of certain cultural shadows which can hide the framework of imperialism within arenas which are mistakenly seen as homogenous.

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culturally produced categories. Hence, any homogenized version of the dominant (or other representational category) fails to fully represent its malleable constructs and actions. Consequently, much imperialism, inner-culturally, has been left unquestioned.

This is by no means ignoring specific, focused movements which have tackled a few instances of inner-cultural frameworks of domination. Here I am implying a) all of the work, beginning with Marx, which has examined the ways in which economic means are often shadowed over by symbolic systems of relations between classes; b) all of the work which has examined the material implications and symbolic re-presentations of race; and c) all of the work which has examined the ways in which the cultural production of gender and “sex” have resulted in the objectification/commodification of the human anatomy—again, an analysis of the relation between a specific physical existence and an illusory category.

But these movements have been narrowly effective in that their analyses of oppression were focused (and many still remain focused) on the illusion, the reified label or category, as if a deconstruction and dissolution of several oppressive frameworks or “categories” would create equal rights for all members of a society. Perhaps we should heed Antonio Gramsci’s (1978) urgency of bringing all subordinated groups together to re-evaluate and enlist change in any system of domination.7 The progressive triad—by ignoring real acts of oppression waged by the dominant stratum against any individual—has simply attempted to alter the center of power; and in doing so they have often, and to varying degrees, been incorporated into it. Amidst continuous imperial repression, only these few groups have been granted some agency.

Gayatri Chakrvorty Spivak (1988), in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” appropriately claims that “certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other.” Could we not also say then, that certain varieties of the repressed elite—race, class, and gender—are at best informants for the power-controlling groups which have an interest in the voice of the Other? bell hooks remarks that “everything changed when white male academics in the United States “discovered” cultural studies” (1994: 3). There is no doubt that the race-class-gender triad has, to some degree, been incorporated into specific Western social institutions, such as education and the government. Raymond Williams (1977) alludes to the possibility of this incorporation in his exploration of the dominant, residual, and emergent areas of culture and its constructs. He explains that any critique of the dominant and its
structure of power, or any "alternative, especially in areas that infringe on significant areas of the dominant, is often seen as oppositional and, by pressure, often converted into it" (Williams 1994: 608).

What else would demonstrate so clearly the artificial and unstatic nature of "category" than the incorporation of a dominated Other into the Self, or larger system of repression. (In fact, some critics—Jean Baudrillard for one—would even claim that this is the goal of America: those "missionary people bearing electroshocks which will shepherd everybody towards democracy" (1995: 84).) In her book Outlaw Culture, bell hooks describes this incorporation of what was once-repressed into the larger system of power as it is exemplified through Madonna. hooks explains that "currently, Madonna is redefining her public persona in a manner that negates and erases her earlier support for feminist issues . . . [by abandoning] her earlier radical questioning of sexist objectifications of female sexuality, announcing via these [October 1992 Vanity Fair "little-girl sex kitten"] photos that she consents to being represented within a field of image production that is over-determined by patriarchy and the needs of a heterosexual pornographic gaze" (1994: 12). The photographs in Vanity Fair however were just the beginning of Madonna’s transgression out of the realm of the Other and into the realm of the imperialist. In Madonna’s most recent book, Sex, her transformation is complete. bell hooks explains that:

Ultimately, images of homosexuality in Sex, though presented as never before to a mainstream audience, are not depicted in a manner that requires viewers to show any allegiance to, or understanding of, the context from which they emerge. Indeed, they are presented as though they come into being through the heterosexual imagination, thereby enabling heterosexual and/or homophobic audiences to share in Madonna’s voyeuristic relations, looking into and at "gayness," without connecting that pleasure to any resistance struggle for gay rights, to any demand that they relinquish heterosexist power. As with the opening pages, the image of Madonna in a gay club surrounded by men evokes a will to violate—to enter a space that is at the very least symbolically, if not actually, closed—off limits. Even in the realm of male homoeroticism/ homosexuality, Madonna’s image usurps, takes over, subordinates. Coded always in Sex as heterosexual, her image is the dominant expression of heterosexism. Mirroring the role of a plantation overseer in a slave-based economy, Madonna surveys the landscape of sexual hedonism, her "gay" freedom, her territory of the other, her jungle. No break with stereotypes here. And more importantly, no critical interrogation of the way in which these images persist and maintain institutionalized homophobic domination. In the context of Sex, gay culture remains irrevocably linked to a system of patriarchal control framed by a heterosexist pornographic gaze. (1994: 16-17, emphasis added)

Clearly, no system of domination has been eliminated. The realm of the dominator has simply widened its periphery to incorporate a category that was previously its antagonist. Unfortunately, what hooks fails to emphasize in her critique of Madonna is that Madonna no longer needs to battle the forces of imperialism because in the face of a large-scale contestation (the "women’s rights movement") it has allocated a space where she too can become the imperialist—the dominator. Furthermore, Madonna can easily slide into the realm of the imperialist because her initial efforts, as bell hooks’ essay shows, were simply targeted at acquiring “woman’s” agency, instead of dismantling the system which works to negate any individual’s agency regardless of the cultural category.

These recent efforts seem to ignore the attempt at abolishing the commodification of the individual—and the negation of his or her agency—which had begun the postcolonials’ debate concerning relations of power. It was over four decades ago that Frantz Fanon (1952), in dealing with the symbolic commodification of the black individual, put forth the call to "rise above this absurd drama that others have staged,... to reach out for the universal": a way of seeing in which the body is not “in the middle of a spatial and temporal world,” where there is no “dialectic between [the body and the world]” (1995: 325, 323). Edward Said (1978) also critiqued the system of relations of domination between Europe and “the Orient” in which the creation of that category—forcing millions of individuals into the illusion—took place. Said explains that:

Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character (1995: 90).

Although Fanon and Said had originally questioned the issue of an individual’s agency in relation to the dominant ideology, later critiques of domination have merely questioned several representational frameworks existing within the larger system of domination. It seems
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imperative, therefore, that a way of seeing which would acknowledge
the operative constructs of the system of domination be adopted: I
mean here an analysis which primarily focuses on the individual and
his or her agency as it is granted or repressed within our own late capi-
talist democracy; and only then should we move towards a secondary
analysis which examines the creation of a representational category
separate from an individual's anatomy which exists within a
Manichean order designed and defined by the oppressor/imperialist. I
must acknowledge here that the theorist Nancy Fraser has explored
the limits of "actually existing democracy in late capitalist societies," and
she has outlined a model which "would allow us to theorize the
range of possible relations among . . . publics, thereby expanding our
capacity to envision democratic possibilities beyond the limits of ac-
tually existing democracy." However, the basis of her model requires
"that an adequate conception of the public sphere require not merely
bracketing, but rather the elimination, of social inequality," and she
provides very little in the way of a model which would take us to the
actual "elimination of social inequality" on which her framework is
based (1994: 93). My goal has been to outline the fabricated con-
structs behind the system of domination, moving us closer toward a
discourse which encourages actual social equality. Focusing our criti-
cal inquiry on oppression against the individual might provide us
with a way of seeing which insists on the dismantling of all frame-
works of domination, many of which we may not know exist.

Agency and the Individual

Law does no more that symbolically consecrate—by rendering it
in a form both eternal and universal—the structure of the power
relation between groups and classes which is produced and
 guaranteed practically by the functioning of these mechanisms.
—Pierre Bourdieu

In discussing systems of relations of domination it is important
to point out that besides the physical or symbolic commodification
of the individual, as it is performed by the dominant group for physical
or symbolic gain, there is also the crucial fact that the objectified indi-
vidual can be either voluntarily or involuntarily commodified. This
again brings up what should be the central focus of our efforts. Those
types of commodification which JanMohamed, Said and Fanon de-
lore are of course involuntarily assigned to the objectified subject.
Fanon, in his blackness, did not choose to be "the symbol of sin"
(1995: 325). Said points out that the Orient did not choose the sys-

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tem of relations which commodified it, saying "The relationship be-
tween the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power," which
"has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (1995:
89, 91). Furthermore, the notion of symbolic commodities, which I
have used extensively, is examined in detail by Pierre Bourdieu in
"Structures, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power." However, Bourdieu's exploration is unfortunately limited to seeing
this symbolic power as connotatively good, in that symbolic "capital"
is the accumulation of status, brought about by the exchange of fa-
vors, gifts, homage, and indebtedness. In other words, "collectively
concerted make-believe" (1994: 168). Bourdieu's notion of a sym-

colic commodity, therefore, exists consensually in a system of rela-
tions: what he calls legitimation authority. But unlike Bourdieu's anal-

ysis, much symbolic power exists, not consensually, but at the expense
of another's agency. Hence, the vital distinction needs to be made be-
tween not only the symbolic and physical forms of commodification
of the individual, but between the voluntary and involuntary frame-
works in which it is manifest.9

The Role of Government

In the United States, the system of relations of power between
the government and the people is voluntarily symbolic. "The active
principle," in this system of willing subordination by the
commodified subjects, Bourdieu explains, "is the labor, time, care, at-
tention, and savoir-faire which must be squandered to produce a per-
sonal gift" (1994: 168) by the mis-recognized oppressor. For the citi-
zenry of the United States, this "personal gift" comes in the form of
agency, granted and upheld by the government. In turn, the citizens
consent to their subordination by the government and its regulations.
The implication of granting each individual his or her agency reflects
our disallowance for the involuntary commodification or objectifica-
tion of an individual (one cannot be "free" if they have been involun-
tarily endowed with a specific amount of exchange value which suits
the needs of another—i.e. slavery). Hence, the legal doctrines within
the United States have eternalized its citizens' protection from invol-
untary commodification: you will be sentenced to a prison term for
murdering someone, raping someone, stealing from someone; deny-
ing someone's agency. This disallowance for the negation of an
individual's agency—and the creation of laws to support the ideol-
gy—has even ventured into the discourse on symbolic
commodification (I can only mention the numerous lobbyists and ac-

rectifying Justice
tivists who are fighting for restrictions on the coercive nature of advertisements, which attempt to have the consumer believe that "You need to buy our product because you are not yet what you should be"). Furthermore, as I previously alluded to, when the symbolic order—consensually allowing the government authority—is broken, then physical intrusion will take place by the imperialist to ensure and maintain the symbolic order. Bourdieu makes clear that the symbolic capital is easily converted into physical capital, and vice versa (1994: 181), and JanMohamed reminded his readers that consensual subordination of the colonies’ “native” population, by adopting the dominant group’s form of government, was kept in place by the background threat of physical coercion (i.e. government troops) by the dominant group (1995: 81).

**Problematics within the System**

Unfortunately, certain inconsistencies exist within the system of consensual subordination/protection within the United States that have been largely un-challenged due to the fact that studies of domination have only focused on specific frameworks of representations instead of the system of domination. Here I must mention the government’s increasing concern in enforcing victimless crimes (i.e. prostitution, gambling, drug use), even though the citizenry consented to its subordination on the condition that the individual would not be denied his or her agency. Even our terminology—self-crimes, victimless crimes—concerning the issues lay bare the crimes’ moral implications, and nothing else. In order to effectively prosecute issues of morality, especially within a society which has forbidden the involuntary commodification of the individual, you need to simply create a category, reify it, laden the label with an unusual amount of symbolic weight, and enter it into an illusory system of exchange (framed by the oppressor, of course) where the individual/practice/category can be seen as less right—the method of justification within the neo-colonial mindset. This objectification of an individual/practice/category—and the direct act of oppression when the authority figure intervenes—is no more different than the objectification of a subject by a murderer, or a rapist, or a thief (in fact, the phrase “It could have happened to anyone” shows the way in which the murdered or raped subject is easily replaced by any other individual; they are merely a commodity which contains a certain amount of exchange value which can be utilized by the criminal). A difference arises between the government and a murderer, however, when you acknowledge that the United States’ government was consensually granted power to help eliminate the negation of an individual’s agency—by arresting a murderer suspect—and yet takes part in the same system of domination, somehow shadowed from any critique of its imperialist framework.11

There is, of course, a material and/or symbolic gain by the government when they operate in either system: consensual protector, mis-recognized oppressor. Bourdieu explains that:

Objectification guarantees the permanence and cumulativity of material and symbolic acquisitions, which can then subist without the agents’ having to recreate them continuously and in their entirety by deliberate action; but, because the profits of these institutions are the object of differential appropriation, objectification also and in separably ensures the reproduction of the structure of the distribution of the capital which, in its various forms, is the precondition for such appropriation, and in so doing, reproduces the structure of the relations of domination and dependence. (1994: 178)

By protecting its citizens’ agency (i.e. their assurance of maintaining a self, as opposed to becoming an object), the government guarantees its position of authority in that the original, consensual agreement consisted of such an arrangement. By creating and enforcing crimes of morality—which do not infringe on any other subject’s notion or existence of self—they undoubtedly keep empowered and employed the hundreds of thousands of the dominant group’s representatives in those positions which enforce the victimless crimes and structurally exist as part of that dominant group’s power (these agencies include the Drug Enforcement Agency, Bureau of Narcotics, the department of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the numerous other Vice and Narcotics groups that exist within localized institutions of law enforcement).

This symbolic gain which is obtained by the dominant group through the creation and commodification of the category “criminal” is outlined in Michael Wallis’ (1992) book Pretty Boy. It is the biography of Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd, who was executed by F.B.I. agents after he was accused of taking part in the Union Station massacre in Kansas City in 1933. Referring to the massacre, Wallis points out that “No other act of violence, except the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby, so stunned the nation and galvanized authorities in their persistent warfare against the outlaws spawned by the Great Depression...” Based on slim evidence and marginal eyewitness accounts, [J. Edgar] Hoover and the authorities in Kansas City eventually placed a large...
share of the blame for the mass murder at Union Station squarely on the shoulders of Pretty Boy Floyd” (1992: 288). The author examines the way in which “the propaganda war... waged in the newspapers by [U.S. Attorney General Homer] Cummings and Hoover” (1992: 324) created the need for a stronger federal police force, resulting in:

...a host of legislative measures... by Congress to increase the bureau’s [the early 1930’s Bureau of Investigations] jurisdiction and broaden its authority. At last, agents would be permitted to carry firearms. They were granted the power of arrest anywhere in the country. They were also allowed to investigate certain cases. . . This momentous legislation... gave rise to the modern Federal Bureau of Investigation, as the agency became known in 1935. (1992: 323)

It is interesting to note that many people suspected that “Hoover was on the verge of losing his job as bureau director,” but the propulsion of Pretty Boy Floyd to the status of public enemy resulted in the creation of the F.B.I., headed by Hoover, which became “the most potent police force in the world” (Wallis 1992: 322-323).

Although Pretty Boy Floyd was a known bank robber and murderer, the dominant stratrum still commodified him into an image which would both hide and justify their own framework of power. In 1930 the general population believed in the public enemy illusion, and today we have the FBI.

As Bourdieu explains, however, the “relations of domination have the opacity and permanence of things” (1994: 178). Althusser, in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” explores the numerous ways in which the dominant ideology is disseminated through various cultural texts: such as religious and educational practices, which he calls ideological state apparatuses; “All ideological state apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation” (1971: 154). Taking this dissemination of the dominant ideologue into account, we should begin to see several of the ways in which the United States government conveys an image which supports or solidifies its actions, whether contradictory to its agreement with the citizenry or not, as unquestionable and eternal.12

**Conclusion**

My interest is only in distinguishing the way in which the system of domination operates by denying an individual’s agency. Either physical or symbolic systems of relations of domination which exist consensually cannot, by myself, nor anyone else, be denied if both parties voluntarily enter the system of relations. However, when the involuntary commodification of an individual takes place then we must strive to extinguish the system of authority, not merely join in its ranks. This may be specifically difficult when, as Bourdieu explains, “Gentle, hidden exploitation is the form taken by man’s exploitation of man whenever overt, brutal exploitation is impossible” (1994: 186). We saw this exchange functioning in JanMohamed’s application of the Manichean allegory to colonialist texts, in which hidden exploitation, such as socializing the “native,” replaces the overt slavery of early colonialism.13 We also see, if we look hard enough, this system which justifies overt oppression by masking it within an illusory category closer to home.

For example, Clearfield, Utah (not far from where I grew up) recently created a city ordinance which was put into effect during this year’s fourth of July celebration. The ordinance was instituted to keep all members of the community safe during the city’s third and fourth of July activities by not allowing “gang” members to be present or to participate in the festivities. We might also rephrase this as some members of the community wanted to keep other members of the community from equal participation. Of course the previous phraseology masks the oppression within the category of “gangs,” which—because the term carries so much symbolic weight—allows oppression against certain members of the community. The oppression is self-justified with the creation of a new “law” which explained that any individuals in groups of three or more who “were wearing their baseball caps backwards or sideways,” “making obscene gestures,” “standing in insolent poses,” or “wearing baggy clothes,” would be ticketed by the police and removed from the public function. You might be wondering what constitutes and who decides what is “obscene,” “insolent,” “baggy,” and “gang.” But this shouldn’t be our focus. As one radio talk-show host, Rick Taylor, said in response to a caller who favored the new law, “So, if you and your wife and your child were all wearing your caps backwards, you would be ticketed and not allowed to participate in a city function which was paid for by your tax dollars?” The caller responded with “No, the cops know who the real problem is.” Taylor finished by saying “So, the cops will selectively apply the law?”

This example not only demonstrates the artificiality and fluidity of the “category” and its definitive criteria (anyone can wear their baseball hat backwards), but it also shows that the “category” is simply implicated in order to justify oppression against certain individuals (the male caller and his nuclear family would not have been ticketed.

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and asked to leave, only the "real problem": those who fit the categories of "youth," "hispanic," and "black" for example). The category "gang" and the indirect oppression of the "gang" subject is no more different than what Bourdieu explains as being the "objectification which the law guarantees by defining permanent positions which are distinct from the biological individuals holding them, and may be occupied by agents who are biologically different but interchangeable in terms of the qualifications [good or bad] required" (1994: 182). But the exploitation of these individuals still takes place. Nonetheless, the governing body of a system of relations of domination, especially within the United States—which sees its democracy at its own end: perfect— is empowered with such an extreme amount of symbolic weight that it can exist, owing "nothing to the logic of exploitation" (1994: 191), mis-recognizably separate from any physical commodification (until, of course, the symbolic order is broken), and able to continue in practices against the consensual arrangements which were originally agreed upon between the governing body and its citizenry.

Perhaps we should listen to what Raymond Williams has said concerning the frameworks of domination:

Its practical inclusions and exclusions are selectively encouraged or discouraged, often so effectively that the deliberate selection is made to verify itself in practice. Yet, its selective privileges and interests, material in substance but often ideal in form, including complex elements of style and tone and of basic method, can still be recognized, demonstrated, and broken. (1994: 601-602, emphasis added)

This way of seeing—which forbids the structure of domination to reach a state of perfection—insists that it is a malleable and permeable framework that is continually re-inventing itself and its participants. If we argue that the "categories" are illusory, then so too is the power manifest through them. The structure of domination is, therefore, by no means static and is continually changing to suit the material needs of those individuals in positions of power. Hence, the more important it is that the system of domination, regardless of its framework, which denies an individual his or her agency, be identified and broken down. The popular domination studies which deal with race, class, and gender are, of course, a step toward this direction. But these analyses have merely examined some representational categories. Unfortunately, the shadowed system of domination and imperialism still exists.

References


Filmography


Notes

1. I must say here that the United States has, militaristically, engaged in both the imaginary trait of the Manichean allegory, as well as the symbolic trait. In "Desert Storm" Saddam Hussein was represented as the evil dictator in order to justify our military presence; and in Bosnia, today, our military presence is justified within a framework that assumes that the present nature of that region is not what we think it should be: our involvement will make them better.

2. I might point out that seeing the colonial and postcolonial eras as an unbounded textual field is not a new idea. bell hooks explains in the introduction to her book *Outlaw Culture* that, "Politically, we do not live in a postcolonial world, because the mind-set of neo-colonialism shapes the underlying metaphysics of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (6).

3. I use the words imperialist and colonialist almost interchangeably here. Although colonialism has historic denotations, my usage simply conveys the systematic function of domination as it works interchangeably between the two frameworks.

4. This issue of "agency" on the part of the "native," subaltern subject is currently being explored by not only JanMohamed and Spivak (both of which see the subaltern as being void of agency), but also conversely by Bhabha who does allow "agency" for the Other. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The Post-colonial Studies Reader, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995). Also see Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question - the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," Screen 24 (Nov-Dec 1983): 18-36.

5. JanMohamed even asserts the notion that the writer of cultural texts, aware of the Manichean opposites and even writing against them, still cannot escape its influence: he claims "even a writer who is reluctant to acknowledge it [the Manichean order] and who may indeed be highly critical of imperialist exploitation is drawn into its vortex. The writer is easily seduced by colonial privileges and profits ... ." (82).
This notion of permanence is even more compounded in the United States, in which both the people and the government see the United States' democracy as being at its own end; perfect. According to Henry Giroux, in his book *Border Crossings* (London: Routledge, 1992), this act of seeing our government as perfect is a type of "political smugness," in which "Western democracy believes itself to be at its own endpoint; it has given up the ambition of social change, of which it was once a central, but never and exclusive part" (41). Instead, Giroux would support the notion of democracy as it is explained by Vaclav Havel, the Czechoslovakian poet/president: "You [the United States] have been approaching democracy uninterrupted for more than 200 years" (qtd. in Giroux 71).

I must add that I have been brought, several times, before a judge who represented the interests of the United States. My crimes were victimless (as the government might term them), yet I was asked at the conclusion of each incident (and here I mean the incident as it exists beginning when a law enforcement official intervened with my life and ending when I was let go, forced to pay a fine, etc.) if I had learned of my mistake, become a better person, and most importantly, had I been rehabilitated from what I once was; not much unlike the native subject who must become socialized, civilized, and educated.