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Reviewed by Greg Howard

Start with this question: Which of the following most clearly communicates meaning?

a) a law
b) a map
c) a musical composition

Of course, the correct answer is to attack the question. The authors under discussion in this review want to do so by showing that laws, maps, and musical compositions do have meaning, but the techniques by which such meaning is created and enforced implicate social structures much broader than the discreet quarters from which such expression is usually thought to issue. Indeed it is language itself and the considerable force it yields which must be confronted if one is to come to understand how these methods of meaning both reveal and obscure their subject matter, and in so doing, set the terms by which social life is constructed at any given moment. All three modes of expression, by what they include as well as what they exclude, initiate the possibilities for social action and hence the ability to assign meaning to the various subject positions and activities which make up that realm. It is to what extent there exists enough contingency within this realm so that individuals may create new meanings within this realm and the range of this contingency which to varying degrees occupies each of the authors under discussion. To that end the attack upon the original question would have to begin with asking how laws, maps, and compositions can offer anything that could be called meaning, and how it is that they offer to mediate the relationship between the structures they claim to represent and the action they seem to invite.

A law, whether it be a statute or the Law of the Father, serves to delimit conduct and set up boundaries; maps tell us where we can go, and hence where we may not; and traditional Western musical scores give us twelve basic options by which we can make sounds. In thinking through these three books, the way in which meaning is expressed can be highlighted as a common theme and can be used to allow discussion for what is in other respects three very different books. These three modes of expression allow an examination of who is in charge of laying down the laws, drawing up the maps, and keeping the scores, and the status of the subject who is in the position of accepting or rejecting the rules laid down for performing these acts. Each author, to different degrees, explicates the obstructions which keep these modes in place so that the act of making laws, maps, or music remains “meaningful.” In providing such an account each author also offers her or his opinion for the possibility of transgressing these obstructions in order to create real changes in the way each mode reflects and is reflected by a particular vision of social life, as well as the importance and difficulty of such a task.

The change that Drucilla Cornell envisions in Beyond Accommodation is that of a “new choreography of sexual difference.” Working through psychoanalytic thinkers, deconstruction, as well as Lyotard’s “differend,” Cornell defends the role of the feminine imaginary in political and ethical thinking, and comments critically on the views of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray with respect to the position and possibilities of women within the symbolic order. Focusing on the problem of trying to express feminine difference within the masculine symbolic, Cornell challenges this “derelection” (as it is labeled by Irigaray) not, as Kristeva has suggested, by identifying women with the maternal function, but rather by suggesting that “the status of the maternal must be understood and then distinguished from the reduction of the feminine sexual difference to the maternal function or role” (p. 8). In working against this reduction Cornell enlists Jacques Derrida and offers a persuasive argument for the proposition that the opportunity of deconstruction provides the “unerasable trace of utopianism in political and ethical thinking” (p. 107).

This affirmation of the trace provides the argument against the legal
theorist Catherine MacKinnon who holds that patriarchy is totalizing, and as such counsels for a feminist politics of consciousness-raising. Cornell writes: 'The subject' is never just the hostage of its surroundings, because these surroundings cannot be consolidated into an unshakeable reality that defines us and by so doing necessarily limits the possibility of the evolution of what already is’’ (p. 197). Cornell’s most explicit formulation of her project comes in her critique of MacKinnon. Cornell argues that, although the reality of patriarchy as described by MacKinnon is accurate, it must be recognized that this trace of utopianism is structural and affords strategies through feminine writing which offer new possibilities for expression in our language, and hence in the legal system. By precluding such expression as even possible before women have complete control of their lives Cornell believes that MacKinnon has committed a major error by “reduc[ing] feminine ‘reality’ to the sexualized object we are for them by identifying the feminine totally with the ‘real world’ as it is seen and constructed through the male gaze” (p. 130). Fighting Lacan’s view that women do not have a genuine voice in language, Cornell points to Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous as examples of women who have written on the margins in such a way as to provide a distinctive voice that might frustrate the rules of diction and grammar that govern the language of patriarchy and the legal system by which it gains expression.

It is this act of frustration that Gunnar Olsson both argues for theoretically and attempts to perform in his Lines of Power/Limits of Language. A geographer whose career has transversed both the empirical and the theoretical, Olsson continues a line of thinking that he began in his book Birds In Egg/Egg In Birds. Like Cornell, Olsson recognizes the importance of new forms of writing and expression for breaking up the encrustations of language where power resides. Also like Cornell, Olsson is concerned with changing the steps to what he calls the “choreography of meaning,” believing that in so doing, the music of the performance will also change. As their shared metaphor suggests, both writers are committed to the idea that language holds great sway over the body through which it speaks and as such its analysis is central to social theory. Furthermore, it is the possibilities of action and the position of the body within social life entitled by such action which either affirm or challenge the accepted movements by which we may “dance” through the structures of society.

By focusing on the different spatial effects of the equal sign, the slash, and the Saussurean Bar, Olsson invites reflection as to how these spaces are created in the act of translating empirical observations into the spatial language of a map. In describing the problems analytic geography was beginning to encounter in the late 1960’s he writes:

In a sense we came to realize that we were hitting our heads against the ceiling of language, that we were caught in a set reasoning rules that killed both us and our subject matter. The meshes of the reasoning net are so strong, because they are twined by threads of consistency. The challenge is to acknowledge, to show, and to communicate that there are other, perhaps more attractive conceptions of consistency (p.59).

It is with this project of finding alternative ways to communicate that Olsson and Cornell look to the metaphor of choreography for help, although one would want to be cautious about describing the nexus between the body and language in terms of choreography as being any more of a metaphor than other attempts to describe the social. I make this remark to allow the music by which such a dance is performed to serve both as a “metaphor” in the service of Cornell and Olsson, and perhaps more traditionally in terms of the third book under review.

In Developing Variations, Rose Rosengard Subotnik develops an account of the music that accompanies and dictates the choreographic possibilities as envisioned by Cornell and Olsson. Working within the critical tradition of Theodor Adorno as well as Kant’s Critique of Judgement, Subotnik provides a dialectic description of how the dancers of Cornell and Olsson were attempting to change the possibilities of movement and meaning, but also how the music to which they were performing resists this transformation. Listening to the Western art music of the past two centuries, Subotnik follows Adorno’s lead in mapping out the struggle of composers (specifically Chopin, Beethoven, and Schoenberg) to represent the dialectic of individual and society, and how these composers attempted to come to a meaningful resolution of the problem. As such, Subotnik maintains that “the fundamental elements of artistic form are ultimately derived not from the artist’s own imagination but, unconsciously, from the formal categories and models of the historical world outside of the art work” (p. 19). This concretization of the historical should be contrasted with Cornell who sees the utopian possibility she describes.
as a "structural moment... It is not a chronological moment to be surpassed" (p. 107). This difference looms large in Subotnik's idea of the possibility of music to construct compositions suitable for accompanying the choreographies of Cornell and Olsson.

The consequence of such a position is that Subotnik is unable to take the more "optimistic" position adopted by Cornell and Olsson, and in her introduction she notes her awareness of this by commenting on her unawareness, at the time these essays were written, of the theories of deconstruction and poststructuralism. This is not to say that Cornell and Olsson posit any simple solutions that flow from their position that the world is made out of words. By injecting the imaginary into their work, Cornell and Olsson are able to give a description of social life which allows a more open stance towards the possibility of new modes of expression which the imagination is capable of providing even if radical change does not immediately follow. Subotnik's concern with the choreographing of new identities and composing new musics, however, is instructive for both Cornell and Olsson in that she gives an account of the problems faced by twentieth-century composers who, to some extent, refuse to accommodate a tradition. In critiquing contemporary music (by which she means, roughly, art music from Schoenberg forward), Subotnik is troubled by the inability of newer music which has removed itself from the traditional logic of classical music to have any sort of impact on its audience. She writes: "Contemporary music is precluded by its own aesthetic from challenging society directly not only in terms of its intent but also in terms of the specific kind of musical response it can afford to permit itself" (p. 277). Such a concern is equally valid for the choreography of Cornell and Olsson. The dissidence called for by the performance of Cornell and Olsson faces a considerable challenge to its normative force by relying heavily on the imagination.

Subotnik also offers nineteenth-century romantic music as an example of expression in which the imagination played a major role.

The need was for a medium solid enough to embody physically the fragile particularity of images of truth that were clearly envisioned in individual fantasy, especially the fantasy of the artist... Unwilling to characterize the contents of fantasy, however problematic their rationality, as simply and intrinsically irrational, the romantics instead looked at the concrete sensuous images of individual fantasy as a source of truth to which they could imbue a universal status, if only in the sense of some mystically transcendent significance (p. 174-5).

One can see similarities in Cornell's call to give voice to the imaginary through feminine writing; however, the truth that can be generated by such expression differs from that identified in the romantics by Subotnik. In describing the rewards of such a project Cornell writes that "the future of our 'freedom' is incalculable within our current 'reality,' rooted as it is within gender hierarchy" (p. 110). Olsson also addresses this pitfall of meaning and states that "one meaning of meaning is obviously to make you and me obedient and predictable. Like the language in which it is expressed, meaning enters as an ethical glue that fastens individual to society and society to individual. Perhaps it takes a madman or a solipsist to illustrate what a meaningful geography actually could be" (p. 153). Although Olsson spends a lot of time giving the theory of why this is the case, and, more interestingly, why empirical geography is unable to provide meaning and hence is fatally undermined in its ability to speak to the relationship between space and society, his book's much less focused than Cornell's in treating the possibility of solipsism as a serious problem which must and can be overcome. The reason for this is that, at least partially, Olsson's book is more self-consciously a performance than a scholarly account of its possibility, although, to be sure, this plays a role. Olsson's project is more when he keeps theory on stage than when his mise en scène is that of wordplay and (at times) retrograde sexuality.

Nevertheless, the last quotes by Olsson and Cornell indicate that they have an understanding of what their position entails, and the doubts registered by Subotnik seem at times to be more those of the academy than a broader group of listeners. Indeed, in her chapter entitled "Challenges to Contemporary Music" she describes one of her freshman music classes as being extremely attentive to contemporary music although the terms of their reception were quite different than those of a professional musicologist. It is because of this awareness and explicit treatment of the vicissitudes of meaning in their particular areas that all three books offer rich rewards for those engaged in a social theory which takes the entanglement of action and structure as a major problem, and are looking for theoretical as well as empirical examples of what that problem involves.