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English 6321 Critical Theory

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Drawing on at least three of the authors we have read, explicate one of these concepts:

 --construction of mimicry

The concept of mimicry, as discussed by Bhabha, is a way in which the colonizers dominate the colonized. The colonized mimic, and imitate, the culture of the colonizers. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry focuses on the relationships between the colonizers and the colonized Other, but his work in mimicry can be used to analyze the relationships between a dominant group and a group that exists outside of the dominant. The purpose of this paper is to first define and analyze Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, and then to demonstrate that his notion of mimicry can be found in the work of Gross, and her concept of the Caucasion Cloak, and in Imaginative Geography by Said, as it pertains to the relationships between a dominant group, and any group that exist outside of the dominant group.

The domination of the colonized Other by the colonizers occurs through the process of mimicry. Mimicry is “the desire for the reformed Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha114). The reformed Other, or colonized people, are thought to be normalized by the colonizers. The dominant group of colonizers reforms the colonized in their likeness, and culture, but the image is not an exact copy. The colonized must be almost the same as the colonizers to validate their culture and practices, but they must not be identical because if they were they would be able to infiltrate the dominant group. The colonized must be identifiable, so that they can remain an Other. In this example the colonized assume the culture of the dominant group, and therefore attempt to achieve the power and capital associated with the dominant group. The colonized may be similar to their colonizers, but they are never the same. Imitating their colonizers may not result in them achieving any of the same power and/or capital associated with the dominant group, as they are unable to be seen as the same as the colonizers, but the very process of mimicry inherently allows slippage, and as a result the colonized have the chance to be a menace to the overall power structure.

The discourse of mimicry, its very essence, “is constructed around an ambivalence; its excess; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha 114). It is that ambivalence, and excess, that allows the colonized the opportunity to usurp the colonizers. The slippage gives the colonized the possibility to use the tools of the master. Bhabha through Lacan reminds us “mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form or resemblance” (Bhabha 119). Therefore the ambivalent attitude of the colonizers towards the colonized gives the colonized the space for slippage to occur. Slippage can be thought of as a gap available to the colonized enter the discourse of the colonized, and use that gap to resist the hegemonic practices of the colonizers. The result of this slippage is “profound and disturbing,” because the attempt to normalize the colonizers “alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms” (Bhabha 114).

Bhabha uses the example of the word slave to explain this occurrence. To the colonizers slave refers to property, and ownership, but to the colonized it would represent something very different. To them it would be an example of injustice, power, etc. Therefore what the colonizers and colonized share “is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite)* does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (Bhabha 115). The process of mimicry does not allow for the colonized to represent the colonizers. Their ways are not viewed as valuable to the colonizers, and as a result mimicry is more than creating a repeated version of them. It can account for resistance, because the colonized are aware of mimicry. They can use their reformed image to gain access to the dominant group, and then subvert their power. While it is unlikely that the colonized can ever overthrow the dominant group of colonizers they may act, and look like their colonizers, which at least gives them the opportunity to infiltrate, and weaken the power of the colonizers.
 Mimicry can be found in other relationships between two distinct groups of people throughout history. One such example is the relationship between Mexicans, Mexicans-Americans and Caucasians in the U.S. In “The Caucasian Cloak,” Ariela J. Gross demonstrates the ways in which the Treaty Guadalupe Hidalgo awarded citizenship to the Mexican people living in Texas and California. However, their citizenship did nothing to protect them from Jim Crow laws and practices in the Southwest. The colonized in this example are the newly made U.S. citizens that were racially classified as white, but still subjected to Jim Crow laws. As Gross explains, “whiteness operated as a Caucasian Cloak to obscure the practices of Jim Crow and make them appear benign” (Gross 154). This cloak seemingly protected Mexicans from Jim Crow practices, because they were white by racial classification, but the label of “white,” did not give them the protection afforded to that racial identity.

They were the almost the same, but not quite. They were white, unlike the colonized Bhabha wrote about, but the dominant group found a way to make them different. The Mexicans, and Mexican Americans were othered by the dominant group based on their different cultural and language practices. They made them “white” by law (the same), but to make them not quite the same they separated based on their cultural and language practices. If they were culturally different, and spoke a different language, then Mexicans and Mexican Americans were not white. This way of using language and culture to other a group of people classified as “white” proved to be beneficial to both groups. It allowed the dominant group to openly practice prejudice against them, because “if Mexican Americans were white, then they were represented as long as Whites were” (Gross 155). For example, this allowed for a jury to be made up of whites, and still be considered a group of their peers.

The slippage in this relationship occurs in the varied ways Mexicans identified themselves. They possessed a great deal of fluidity in establishing an identity for themselves. The way in which they were othered by the dominant group set up a battle between the construction of their race as white, and their cultural and language practices. In this sense culture and language were viewed in opposition to their racial classification. This allowed for the idea of mestizaje to form, and as a result of this mixed view Mexicans often identified themselves differently even amongst themselves. In short, no universal identity existed, and so they often times embraced the mixed aspect of their culture, and identity. The fluidity allowed for them to reinforce their own cultural practices as defining their identity, and not the classification supplied to them by their colonizers. This resistance to the labels placed on them by the dominant group allowed for them to view their mestizaje as a positive. They viewed themselves as stronger because of the mixed aspect of their identity, and as a result, Mexican Americans were able to oppose the dominant group by using “a spectrum of languages to identify their racial and national identity, so that it is difficult to know which statements they really meant and which ones were attempts to score points with white lawmakers, judges, or juries” (Gross 157). This is the menace of mimicry, where the opportunity exists for the colonized to use their reformed image for their benefit. The ambivalence towards making them white allowed for them to enter a specific discourse with their colonizers, which resulted in their ability to undermine the hegemony of their colonizers.

Similar uses of mimicry to protect, and validate the existence of a dominant group can also be found in Edward Said’s “Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Orient.” Said discusses the ways in which scholars approached studying the Orient through a Western lens. Orientalism is an example of mimicry, because it defines, imagines, and reimagines the region known as the Orient with Western values. Europeans, as a dominant group, force mimicry upon the Orient as means to neutralize its power, and their fear of the unknown. Said uses Levi-Strauss to explain that the “mind requires order, and order is achieved by discriminating and taking note of everything, placing everything of which the mind is aware in a secure, refindable place” (Said 19). The purpose of doing this, according to Levi-Strauss is to give things “some role to play in the economy of objects and identities that make up environment,” because if they have a role to play, then they can not only be understood, but controlled by the dominant group.

The made up environment of the Orient sets up boundaries that not only keep the Orient outside of their world, but also others the region by making it a barbarian land that needed to be categorized, and understood. The result of this mimicry mutes the fear of the unknown because “familiar values impose themselves, and in the end reduces the pressure upon it by accommodating things to itself as either ‘original’ or ‘repetitious,’” and in this case the Europeans are the original, while the people of the Orient are the repeaters. The purpose of the mimicry of the Orient is to neutralize the power of the Orient, and their own fear of the region. This mimicry occurs in the way that “Europe articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries” (Said 21). The Europeans colonize the Orient, because they create an image of the Orient that mimics European culture, and in doing so they can also set the Orient as the lesser, reinforcing the idea that they are the supreme group. From this point on “Asia speaks through and by virtue of the European imagination, which is depicted as victorious over Asia” (Said 23). In this sense mimicry benefits the Europeans not just by neutralizing the fear, and power of the Orient, but also in continuing to promote their image as powerful. It reaffirms their existence, and cultural practices, by creating a reformed Other that repeats, but does not represent. However, because slippage exists, the people that make up the Orient are still afforded the opportunity to resist by way of the menace of mimicry. They may reinforce the idea of Europeans as victorious over Asia, but their perceived weakness can be used against the Europeans. If they are dismissed in this way, and seen as a less powerful Other, then Orient when mimicking has the opportunity to undermine the Europeans.

The concept of mimicry holds value in RWS, because it is important for instructors to address the ideas that certain identities have been created out of mimicry. Understanding the role of mimicry in society, and in writing, allows for students to use the tools of the master to disrupt, and resist dominant ideologies. However, it is also of value to writing instructors that they teach students not to mimic for the sake of entering discourse. If we are to mimic, then it must be for a purpose. There is nothing learned when a student mimics with no real purpose, because the work they are presenting is only a repetition and not used for the benefit of disrupting hegemonic practices of a dominant group.

Works Cited

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