**Review**

**Carol J. Moeller**

*Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia, Eds., University of California Press, 2000.

*Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*, Satya P. Mohanty, Cornell, 1997.

**Realism and Identity: Rethinking the Categories of Our Lives**



"Triplets in the bedroom, N.J." by Diane Arbus

     Each essay in *Reclaiming Identity* (referred to as *R.I*.) uses theoretical frameworks developed by postpositivist thinkers, particularly Satya Mohanty, in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (henceforth referred to as *L.T.C.H.*). The anthology is a collaborative work building upon ongoing collective inquiry, extending in part from the 1993 essay by Satya Mohanty reprinted here.

     This new volume may have a difficult road ahead of it. It has the audacity to question and to disagree with much of what has come to pass for common sense among many left-leaning academics. Elaborating and developing the frameworks of Satya P. Mohanty, Paula M.L. Moya, and others, *Reclaiming Identity* explicates and critiques the various components of this near-consensus, developing alternatives to epistemological assumptions and implications which are often implicit within postmodernist views. Being implicit, these assumptions and implications often go unrecognized. Other times they are celebrated as advancements of postmodernism, that it has the courage to go beyond Enlightenment ideas and totalizing presumptions. Yet, as postpositivist philosopher Hilary Putnam writes, "Metaphysics often disguises itself as rejection of metaphysics."[1](#note1) The same may be said here for epistemology. Contemporary skepticism is often trapped within the very assumptions it is said to reject.

     Understanding this claim requires investigating a whole range of views that are, in various ways, skeptical about objective knowledge of the world. Certain implicit aspects of postmodernist thinking, as well as of related views such as Richard Rorty's pragmatism, must be made explicit. Many of the ideas under critical review are shared across a wide spectrum of contemporary theorists who may or may not be considered poststructuralist or postmodernist. The claims in question include a related set of ideas:

a) that objectivity is impossible,
b) that we cannot know the external world,
c) that identities are untenable,
d) that experience cannot yield genuine knowledge, and
e) that universal moral ideas are baseless.

In addressing the socially constructed nature of reality and knowledge claims, these theorists deem the very notions of objectivity and realism to be without merit. Subtle analysis of these claims suggests that they are under demonstrated, extending conclusions about the impossibility of Positivist certainty to the impossibility of any knowledge.

     I suggest that these skeptics, like many theorists, are trapped in the grip of a philosophical picture that they claim to reject. In doing so, I follow Hilary Putnam, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Cora Diamond, as well as the *Reclaiming Identity* writers. As Wittgenstein says, "The picture held us captive." In contrast to these varied forms of skepticism, *Reclaiming Identity* and *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* practice what Cora Diamond calls "a realistic spirit." In Diamond's terms, they reject the metaphysical spirit (in which one is trapped in certain metaphysical pictures) in favor of the realistic one. They regard poststructuralist skepticism and relativism as unwarranted, not by denying the messiness and situatedness of our knowledge processes but by embracing those features. Error, for example, becomes useful for purposes of correction, not to be feared or denied but to be learned from.

**The Predicament of Postmodernism?**

     As Paula Moya points out in the introduction to *Reclaiming Identity*, identity has long been a major topic. Feminist, anti-colonialist, ethnic and race studies, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, queer theory, and/or cultural materialist thinking have all discussed identity for decades. These treatments of identity have often been less than flattering. Rather, "much of what has been written about identity during this period seeks to delegitimate, and in some cases eliminate, the concept itself by revealing its ontological, epistemological, and political limitations." (*R.I.*, 2)

     In what sense is postmodernism a predicament? Paula Moya usefully connects the various limitations of problematic essentialist tendencies as they have played out in activist and academic settings. In so doing, she explores how the debates around identity and multiculturalism have developed in very particular contexts of history, as viable notions of group and cultural identities have been sought amidst contentious fields of social change.

     As Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty write:

Postmodernist theory, in its haste to dissociate itself from all forms of essentialism, has generated a series of epistemological confusions regarding the interconnections between location, identity, and the construction of knowledge. Thus, for instance, localized questions of experience, identity, culture, and history, which enable us to understand specific processes of domination and subordination, are often dismissed by postmodern theories as reiterations of cultural 'essence' of unified, stable identity.[2](#note2)

Such dismissals interfere with the real work required to analyze oppression and resistance in the many forms they take.

     Postmodernist challenges to such categories as "race," "gender," and "sexuality" may be at odds with the use and development of analytic tools to critique how these categories are tied to the workings of oppression. They reconsider the rejection of race and other categories used by oppressed groups, as well as the related notion that knowledge from experience can be vital to a liberatory praxis.

     Liberationist theorists have often explicitly engaged with differences in social location and identities to critique oppression, in order to make better sense of how the world is and how it ought to be changed. In postmodernist approaches to literary and cultural studies, "difference" has often been treated in a contrary fashion, ironically erasing the distinctiveness and relationality of such differences as race, sex, nation, and sexuality. To quotePaula Moya:

Typically, postmodernist thinkers either internalize difference so that the individual is herself seen as 'fragmented' and 'contradictory' (thus disregarding the distinctions that exist between different kinds of people), or they attempt to 'subvert' difference by showing that 'difference' is merely a discursive illusion (thus leaving no way to contend with the fact that people experience themselves as different from each other). In either case, postmodernists reinscribe, albeit unintentionally, a kind of universal sameness (we are all marginal now!) that their celebration of difference had tried so hard to avoid. (*R.I*., 68)

     Postmodernist theory is often taken to have refuted, displaced, or deconstructed such categories as "race" and "gender," concepts such as "experience," "identity," "objectivity," and "knowledge." Argues Moya:

If, as Judith Butler and Joan Scott claim in their introduction to *Feminists Theorize the Political*, concepts like 'experience' and 'identity' enact 'a silent violence...as they have operated not merely to marginalize certain groups, but to erase and exclude them from the notion of 'community' altogether,' then any invocation of these 'foundational' concepts will be seen as always already tainted with exclusionary and totalizing forms of power. (*R.I.*, 68)

Linda Martin Alcoff notes a similar effect. In "The Elimination of Experience in Feminist Theory," she writes, "the rising influence of postmodernism has had a noticeable debilitating effect on [the project of empowering women as knowledge producers], producing a flurry of critical attacks on unproblematized accounts of experience and on identity politics."[3](#note3) As Moya notes, "Such critical attacks have served, in conventional theoretical wisdom, to delegitimize *all* accounts of experience and to undermine *all* forms of identity politics -- unproblematized or not."[4](#note4)

     In Moya's "Postmodernism, "Realism," and the Politics of Identity: Cherrie Moraga and Chicano Feminism," Moya argues that postmodernist and other celebrations of difference are problematic. Postmodernists have often cited Moraga and other women of color, yet misreading and misappropriating them from realist contexts to support postmodernist views. Moya notes that Moraga's "theory in the flesh" involves a realist sort of epistemology, grounding struggles for knowledge in the experiences of Latinas. In her notion of social location, critical understandings of the world are made possible by the positionality of Latinas. Such understandings do not come automatically. One does not necessarily have a critical consciousness of oppression by virtue of being Latina. Rather, such a consciousness is facilitated by cultural identity as a point of access into the world, as part of a theoretical and practical process of making sense of the world in light of liberatory goals. Moya conceives of knowledge as produced from particular location. Thus, political alliances may also be epistemic alliances, making connections across diverse experiences and perspectives in order to better understand the world. Crucial to that understanding is how it might be transformed.

     Despite these theoretical complexities, identity remains important to lived experiences in a hierarchically organized world, where patterns such as white supremacy continue. As Moya puts it:

The significance of identity depends partly on the fact that goods and resources are still distributed according to identity categories. Who we are -- that is, who we perceive ourselves or are perceived by others to be -- will significantly affect our life chances: where we can live, whom we will marry (or whether we can marry), and what kinds of educational and employment opportunities are available to us. (*R.I.*, 8)

This statement, like many in the *Reclaiming Identity* volume, seems fairly straightforward. It's difficult to deny, unless one challenges the very notion that inequalities persist today and correlate (to some degree) along such lines as race, and sex.

     Yet Moya states a sort of theme that has become unfashionable in certain theoretical circles. It's not so much that poststructuralist thinkers deny such claims. Rather, they often operate at a different level of critique. They claim to show the very notion of identity to be pernicious. Some see identity as implicated in a naive positivistic metaphysics and epistemology that purports that we can know the real world, unmediated by language, or that fails to recognize the speciousness and instability of such categories as race.

     Moya, Hames-Garcia, and their co-contributors confront these critiques head-on, showing them not to be devastating. Is skepticism about all knowledge warranted, or is it just a positivist conception of certainty that we should surrender? Has objectivity been exposed as a myth, or only positivist conceptions of objectivity? Is any conception of rationality suspect, or is it only certain narrow and culturally imperialistic conceptions of rationality?

     Many people are nervous about the political implications of poststructuralism, but cannot quite see how to avoid them. Some set these supposedly devastating critiques aside temporarily, while making identity-based claims on political grounds. They popularize "strategic essentialism," using Gayatri Spivak's term.

     Such "strategic essentialism" is dangerous. One worry is arrogance and disrespect. Supposedly theoreticians understand the emptiness of such categories of race and sex, but the oppressed people who use those categories and find them important are in the grip of some sort of error.

     Further, those working in Black studies and women's studies and other fields built in part on political struggles have wondered how the cutting edge became textual criticism and why so many of the key texts are written by European white males.

     Other thinkers ignore poststructuralist methods and views, or disparage them from the outside, without understanding any theoretical potential there. Many still are overwhelmed by the difficulties in understanding the poststructuralist views and methods, being intellectually disempowered in the meantime by the highly technical language and the degree to which it has been accepted.

**Post-Positivism?**

     The first section "The Realist Theory of Identity and the Predicament of Postmodernism" elaborates the challenges of postmodernist critiques of identity and how a postpositivist realist notion of identity avoids those difficulties. Showing the limitations of frozen, static, essentialist notions of identity and of postmodernist skepticism about it, they develop a realist notion of identity that avoids both sets of problems. The second section "Postpositivist Objectivity: Uses of Error, Values, and Identity" develops this notion of objectivity as a goal for finite creatures in a theory-laden, social inquiry. Such a notion is not of a "God's eye" view, transcending all. Rather, it builds upon how actual human beings and communities do well or badly in understanding or being mystified about facets of the world. The third section, "Realist Conceptions of Agency, Experience, and Identity," explores how to think of such topics as experience while doing justice to the multiple interpretations available of them, without ending up radical skeptics.

     Certain criticisms to *Reclaiming Identity* are bound to arise. Some might object that *Reclaiming Identity* authors paint poststructuralism as a "straw man," a caricature of poststructuralism that is not true of any of its elements much less of poststructuralism taken as a whole. After all, what single view is common to all considered poststructuralist? Or to what poststructuralism is? Or to who counts as a poststructuralist? Further, aren't poststructuralists refusing to play the very game that Mohanty et. al. claim to find them in? How can they critique postmodernist epistemologies when postmodernists reject epistemology as yet another charade of Western logocentrism?

     Some might say that the very tools used by the *Reclaiming Identity* writers are outmoded, being technical analytic methods that have been superseded by deconstructionist and other postmodernist methods. Thus, some critics might accuse *Reclaiming Identity* of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. They might even appropriate the words of Audre Lorde, another arguably realist thinker whose views often get put to others' ends. Lorde writes, "The master's tools can never dismantle the master's house." The very tools of clarity, precise reasoning, and careful argumentation might be seen as the "master's tools," indelibly marked with oppressive qualities.

     Many might reject the project in total. Is it a last gasp of positivist thinkers who cannot face up to the theoretical maturity of postmodernism? Are they just unable to relinquish Enlightenment notions? Many critics would be quick to draw such conclusions, without even opening the cover of this text, without first considering it and responding. I would urge readers to consider the possibilities above, that postmodernism (broadly construed) has had deep effects upon what ideas are taken seriously. *Reclaiming Identity* demands careful attention. I begin to address such concerns here. Yet they cannot be resolved thoroughly here, or in the *Reclaiming Identity* volume alone. It is in Mohanty's book that the argument for postpositivist realism is fully developed and defended. Taken together, the two books forge a powerful critique of postmodernism and a strong argument for a politically sophisticated postpositivist realist alternative.

     Moral and political ideals of liberation frame this postpositivist view. Mohanty' s context of analysis includes a presumption that capitalistic exploitation operates in ways that produce and reproduce not only objects of labor but also labor itself and the background conditions of labor. As part of these relations of ruling (to use Dorothy Smith's term), people are constituted as racialized, gendered, sexualized, beings.

     Mohanty's work is much influenced by that of Audre Lorde. To Audre Lorde, a profit economy, which runs in the interests of profit for the few rather than genuine needs for all, must posit dichotomies of black/white, female/male, heterosexual/gay, inferior/superior to justify the inequities of power and wealth. "Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people."[5](#note5) As Lorde argues:

Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.[6](#note6)

Lorde's vision, like Moraga's "theory in the flesh," is a realist vision of social justice. She encourages us to "transform silence into language and action," making our way to liberationist possibilities by living honestly in our present world, testifying to its practices of injustice and mystification by intervening in the everyday practices which reproduce oppression. As Paula Moya writes:

The simple fact of having been born a person of color [in the US] or of having suffered the effects of heterosexism or of economic deprivation does not, in and of itself, give someone a better understanding or knowledge of [our] society. The key to claiming epistemic authority for people who have been oppressed in a particular way stems from an acknowledgment that they have experiences -- experiences that people who are not oppressed in the same way usually lack -- that *can* provide them with information we all need to understand how hierarchies of race, class, gender and sexuality operate to uphold existing regimes of power in our society. (*R.I.*, 81)

Realism (of this postpositivist sort) supports the claim that feminist accounts of history are not only politically better, but also epistemically better, than sexist accounts of history. The same is true of Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*, compared to accounts of U.S. history that are more congratulatory to the ruling class while managing to deny its existence altogether. We favor them not simply as idiosyncratic preferences but as offering more explanatory power as accounts of the world. Mohanty writes, "It is from a realist perspective, I suggest, that we can best understand the social distortions of knowledge and justify the social and political goals for which we struggle." (*L.T.C.H.*, 24)

     Oppression is not one monolithic thing. Iris Young defines five faces of oppression affecting people as members of groups: cultural imperialism, marginalization, violence, exploitation, and powerlessness. Cultural imperialism is a process by which one group presents its values as universal or superior to others'. Marginalization is how certain groups are excluded from paid labor. Exploitation is how the interests of the many are sacrificed for the profits of the few. Powerlessness is how those with more status and privilege have authority over others. Violence uses physical or psychic violence, or the threat of them, to keep member of a given group subordinate. To Young, rather than positing a single, ever-arching, and originary oppression, such as class oppression, sexism, or racism, her criteria allow us to see how the faces of oppression impact different groups differently.[7](#note7)

I believe that these criteria are objective. They provide a means of refuting some people's belief that their group is oppressed when it is not, as well as a means of persuading others that a group is oppressed when they doubt it. Each criterion can be operationalized; each can be applied through the assessment of observable behavior, status relationships, distributions, texts, and other cultural artifacts.[8](#note8)

Note that Young claims her criteria are objective, yet she does not claim that they are aperspectival or value-free. To Young, "I have no illusions that such assessments can be value-neutral. But these criteria can nonetheless serve as a means of evaluating claims that a group is oppressed, or adjudicating disputes about whether a group is oppressed."[9](#note9)

     Take the claim that many young white men make, that women or affirmative action programs or any race- or gender-specific policies oppress them. One can use Young's criteria to refute that claim, showing the refutation to be objective and empirical, not "merely political."

     Like poststructuralists and postmodernists, proponents of this postpositivist realist view reject traditional positivist epistemologies with their dichotomies (such as fact/value). Unlike poststructuralists, *Reclaiming Identity* authors develop a postpositivist framework that transforms, rather than rejects entirely, such notions as objectivity, error, justification, and identity. They reject the implicit epistemological underpinnings of poststructuralism.

     *Reclaiming Identity* writers recognize the inevitably social nature of inquiry and thus knowledge. However, they deny that inquiry's social and theory-mediated nature entails skepticism about knowledge, objectivity, and related notions. Rather, each reconceives objectivity and knowledge without foundationalist underpinnings. Satya Mohanty shows how insights fueling feminist standpoint theory and other social epistemologies can be preserved without the dangers of problematic essentialism, relativism, or an epistemic separatism which holds that certain knowledge is entirely inaccessible to those outside a given social location.

     Mohanty shows how postmodernist rejections of social location accounts stem from a confusion about antifoundationalist critiques. Skepticism about foundationalist conceptions of knowledge is over generalized and extended to skepticism about knowledge in general. Though such views are not often explicit in postmodernist writings, they underlie them implicitly. Combined, they yield vociferous attacks upon any views that tie notions of identity, experience, or diverse social positions to knowledge. Mohanty summarizes his project in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*:

The key postmodernist claims I identify derive from well-motivated political desires and agendas but are seriously underdemonstrated. Underlying these claims is a cluster of arguments about the untenability of objective knowledge, but these arguments cannot be adequately examined without a consideration of strong theoretical alternatives such as those realism provides. Seen in this comparative light, postmodernism does not appear very attractive as a philosophical position or as a political perspective. I maintain that a postpositivist realism (of the kind developed in the 1970s and 1980s) would be attentive to the postmodernist's cautions about the social and historical entanglements of knowledge and would enable us to explain the distortions of ideology and political power. At the same time, however, it can provide us with a sophisticated and usable notion of objectivity as an ideal of inquiry, as a reasonable social hope rather than the dream of transcendence." (*L.T.C.H*., xii)

     Theorists and activists have long recognized the politics of naming reality, how oppression can be manifested and reproduced through the worldviews that make oppression appear as natural. As postpositivist philosopher Louise Antony writes:

In a stratified community, where one group of people dominates others, the worldview of the dominant group can become a powerful tool for keeping those in the subordinate groups in their places.

     The real problem with the liberal conceptions of objectivity and neutrality begins with the fact that while they are unrealizable, it's possible for those resting comfortably in the center of a consensus to find that fact invisible. Members of the dominant group are given no reason to question their own assumptions: Their worldview acquires, in their minds, the status of established fact. Their opinions are transformed into what 'everybody' knows. Furthermore, these privileged individuals have the power to promote and elaborate their own worldview in public forums while excluding all others, tacitly setting limits to the range of 'reasonable' opinion.[10](#note10)

Iris Young argues that the norms of impartiality are ideologically constructed so as to further entrench this sort of silencing effect. Young argues that such ideas often make dominant views self-perpetuating, since they readily portray challenges to them as "biased," "crazy," or otherwise not credible. Groups are often subject to oppression in the form of cultural imperialism, a process by which a dominant, partial standard or conception of the world has been disguised as the only legitimate standard. In such cases, oppressed groups must come to develop alternative accounts through such means as consciousness raising among group members, since forums outside of the imperialistic pressures are crucial to developing such views.[11](#note11)

     Many are by now accustomed to such critiques of ruling practices, how their alleged neutrality and normalcy render them so powerful as to make alternatives invisible. Logical positivist notions of objectivity are faulty in denying the social constitution of the world. To the post-postitivists bias is inevitable, and it is impossible to assess the world from a value-neutral standpoint. Biases are not anathema as they were to the positivists, but inevitable. Critical inquiry examines biases, since not all biases are equally obscuring or revealing. Postpositivists practice how to critically engage biases in order to produce better accounts of the world.

**Some Background**
     Who were the positivists, and why are postpositivists and poststructuralists alike so keen to distance themselves from them?

     Sharp binary oppositions have come under critical examination, such as male vs. female, culture vs. nature, mind vs. body, fact vs. value, reason vs. emotion, objectivity vs. subjectivity, and knowledge (without politics) vs. politics (apart from knowledge). Such binary oppositions have turned out to be ways of thinking about the world rather than part of the world. They are constituted by our conceptual frameworks rather than discovered as naturally existing categories. Positivist epistemology, or theory of knowledge, considered terms, including these sharp binary oppositions, to be referring or corresponding to the nature of the world. Logical Positivists, such as Rudolf Carnap and Karl Hempel of the Vienna Circle, modeled philosophy on empirical science and mathematics. Focusing upon data that is demonstrable, observable, measurable, and quantifiable, they urged philosophy to turn away from metaphysics, which, they thought, could not satisfy their strict criteria. Their motives were in part political. They sought to avoid the dangers of grand speculative metaphysical systems, which they thought could be used to dangerous ends. Many of the Logical Positivists were fleeing the Nazis in the 1930's and '40's. They were concerned that philosophy stick to truths that could be demonstrated. They emphasized such values as clarity, precision, rigor, and logical analysis. They sought to find solid foundations for knowledge and to build upon those foundations.

     Contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, as well as British, is largely heir to these traditions. They have developed into Analytic philosophy, which is often contrasted to Continental philosophy, realms heir to German and French turns of twentieth century philosophy. Though Analytic and Continental philosophies are often portrayed as utterly different, they developed from a single tradition, parting ways only after Immanuel Kant.

     Each of these general streams responds to Kant. Kant showed the extent to which human cognition is an inevitable part of human knowledge, leaving its imprint upon thought. Kant claimed that we cannot know the external world as it is in itself, but only as it is apprehended through human cognition.

     Since Kant, Western philosophy has taken two main directions, Anglo-American or analytic philosophy, which has prioritized rigor, clarity, and careful argumentation, and Continental philosophy, which has prioritized vision, continuing to do metaphysics and develop grand philosophical systems.[12](#note12) (Both traditions tend to claim Ludwig Wittgenstein, depending upon their interpretations of his work. Wittgenstein turns out to be a helpful figure in bridging these various traditions.)

     Deconstruction, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, and other views and methods reveal the shakiness of the Positivist's sharp binary oppositions, as well as the questionable epistemologies associated with Positivism.

     Anglo-American philosophy, too, has critiqued Positivism. Post-analytic philosophy rejects Positivism's assumptions, retaining, however, a focus upon clarity, analytic rigor, and argument. See *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Cornel West and John Rajchman, for some key essays in the turn from analytic to post-analytic philosophy.[13](#note13)

     39. Consider a classic positivist tenet, the analytic/synthetic distinction. On this notion, analytic knowledge was considered to be true *a priori*, such that a rejection of an analytic truth contradicted itself, such as "A triangle has three sides." Such a proposition is true without empirical inquiry, unlike statements like "Frederick Douglass was active in the women's suffrage movement in the United States," which does depend for its truth upon empirical realities. Post-analytic philosophers have raised radical questions about the analytic/synthetic distinction, even in asking whether any a priori knowledge is possible at all. The fact/value distinction likewise is in dispute; "the facts" are not entirely separable from background theories and evaluations.

     W. O. Quine, Louise Antony, Wilfred Sellars and other post-analytic philosophers have "naturalized epistemology," contending that inquiry's inevitably social nature makes it a human process, prone to human error and fallibility and historical effects. Naturalizing epistemology does not mean returning to empiricism or to some veneration of the non-human world as "real." Rather, humans and language and thought are all considered to be part of the natural world. Examining social constructions of ideas, their social histories and contexts, is part of naturalizing epistemology.

     Quine advocates a sort of holism, that statements cannot make sense outside of a web of beliefs and presuppositions. His holism does not entail skepticism, however. Naturalized epistemology presumes that it is only from within a holistic web that we can know anything. Instead of concluding that no knowledge is possible, a naturalized epistemologist seeks to confront the social processes of how we come to know anything. In societies shaped deeply by oppression, adequate inquiry must resist that oppression.

**Skepticisms**

     In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,[14](#note14) Richard Rorty critiques analytic philosophy as it has developed, marking a shift between analytic philosophy and post-analytic philosophy. He disputes the "mirror of nature" conception of philosophy, the notion of philosophy as mirroring and thus representing reality, with reality conceived as external and extra-linguistic. Derrida's critique of the "Metaphysics of Presence" and other poststructuralist critiques likewise critique representational pictures. There are similarities among the various critiques of representation.

     Hilary Putnam, though, charges that Rorty is trapped within the very metaphysical picture he claims to reject. Much of Putnam's critique applies equally to various schools of poststructuralist thought. Putnam, amenable to postpositivist notions of realism, nonetheless disparages what he calls "the metaphysical realist," a figure who demands unreachable standards for human knowledge. "Rorty's inclination to give up on the whole idea of representation [can be traced back] to the hold that the metaphysical realist's picture continues to exert on him even as he tries to escape from it."[15](#note15) Putnam writes, "Why is Rorty so bothered by the lack of a *guarantee* that our words represent things outside themselves? Evidently, Rorty's craving for such a guarantee is so strong that, finding the guarantee to be 'impossible,' he feels forced to admit that our words don't represent anything. It is at this point in Rorty's position that one detects the trace of a disappointed metaphysical realist impulse."[16](#note16) This metaphysical impulse stems from "a craving for an unintelligible kind of certainty (a senseless craving, one might say, but for all that a deeply human craving.")[17](#note17)

     Rorty concludes that since we cannot guarantee that words represent reality, we must acknowledge that they do not represent anything. Thus, we must give up on any realist view that truth can be accessed, that we can know the world objectively. At most, we can know our own society's norms. On Rorty's view, the conditions for objective knowledge are so strong that they cannot be satisfied. Accessing a theory-neutral de-situated disinterested position in order to know the world is impossible; that is what Rorty calls "The God Trick." Given the impossibility of "The God Trick" and its accompanying guarantee, we have only the conventions of our society's belief structures. Thus, all we can "know" is what our society believes, what William James calls "what is good for us to believe."[18](#note18) Thus, the ideal of objectivity must be replaced with the ideal of solidarity. This notion of truth is pragmatist, that a society's agreement constitutes the truth. By the pragmatist definition, then, values cannot be deemed true or false in any transcultural sense. Rather, truth is strictly internal to a society.

     To Rorty, from amidst any society the "we" of that society says what counts as truth. Rorty considers the "we" of society's agreement to consist of Western liberal capitalist democracies, which he regards as the best form of government and society. He does not deny his view's ethnocentrism. Further, Rorty's "we" of Western liberal capitalist democracies is a fairly monolithic "we," not reflecting the actual constituencies of the United States, for example, with very different senses of what is true. His is the community of the elite, not of the full spectrum of people of various classes, races, sexes, citizenship and visa statuses, etc.

     The authors of *Reclaiming Identity*, however, draw no such limit to their conversation. They are confronting divergent views, cultures, political forms, and worldviews. Like in Antony's quote above, it is easy for those at the center of a society to take the dominant views for granted and to think of others' views as distorted. In close engagement across lines of difference, *R.I.* authors take up the harder challenge of making sense of the world collectively.

     Poststructuralists' skepticism and relativism operate similarly. Rejecting the Positivist notion of objectivity (as aperspectival, static certainty), they assume that no notion of objectivity is possible. Showing that an ideal of certainty is unrealizable, they claim that no objective knowledge is possible. Like Rorty, they are alarmed that human beings cannot fulfill the conditions of the positivists for knowledge. As Mohanty argues:

The move from the rejection of an empiricist or positivist (or even idealist) model of objective knowledge to the opposite extreme, the adoption of a full-blown skepticism about knowledge, is fairly typical. Postmodernist skeptics implicitly assume that the only kind of objective knowledge that can be conceived at all is positivist (or idealist). When they find this conception (the aperspectival knower or the subject of Hegelian absolute knowledge) defective for one reason or another, they assume that a thoroughgoing skepticism is warranted. (*L.T.C.H.*, 42)

AsPutnam writes, "In sum, both the 'skeptic' and his 'opponents' deny the primacy and reality (or better, the primacy of the reality) of the life world. The ordinary human world is what they are one and all skeptics about; skepticism is a perpetual dissatisfaction with the human position."[19](#note19) To Putnam, these various skepticisms are trapped in illusory Catch-22s: that knowledge requires the God Trick; we cannot do the God Trick; therefore, we cannot have knowledge.

     What are the alternatives to Positivism and the skeptical rejection of Positivism? Instead of taking these positions, Putnam recognizes knowledge as a product of this world. He states, "we cannot know the world as it is 'in itself' not because the 'in itself' is an unreachable limit, but because the 'in itself' doesn't make sense."[20](#note20)

     Cora Diamond, in a similar vein, refers to the "metaphysical spirit" as that embodying the metaphysical impulse, a craving for a non-human kind of certainty. In contrast, she recommends the realistic spirit. With the realistic spirit, one proceeds with the views that understanding the world is difficult but not, in principle, impossible.

     To Diamond, "The important thing is not what answer you give, but your willingness to look, i.e. your not laying down general philosophical conditions."[21](#note21) To Diamond, "The sense in which philosophy leaves everything as it is this: philosophy does not put us in a position to justify or criticize what we do by showing that it meets or fails to meet requirements we lay down in our philosophizing."[22](#note22)

     Of course we must justify and criticize what we do; we must criticize injustices, justify political claims. By "leaving everything as it is," Diamond not endorse political quietism. Rather, we want to reveal the relations of ruling and their effects, the abuses of power, the undemocratic tendencies of our world, as part of social change. Our justifications and criticisms are not based upon the requirements laid down in philosophizing, or in doing literary theory, or in cultural criticism, or in doing feminist theory, or any other thinking we do apart from, or prior to, investigating the world. Postpositivist realism and the realistic spirit admit that we must investigate the world from amidst the world.

     Such a realistic spirit is crucial to theorists of social justice, who are all too familiar with the ways in which everyday injustices are so written into the fabric of culture and ideology that they become invisible. Oppressed people must contend with what DuBois spoke about long ago, the double-consciousness of seeing a world of injustice as it goes hidden in dominant pictures, as well as the dominant pictures which erase or obscure the realities of oppression. The "willingness to look" with a realistic spirit means not deciding in advance what criterion a view has to fit in order to show up as real.

     How do postpositivistic realism and a realistic spirit improve the search for knowledge? They stipulate that inquiry, as a social process in an imperfect world, is prone to error, especially along the lines that a society most tends to distort matters, such as racist views and class exploitation. Those patterns can be identified, examined, and confronted, such that inquiry is improved. Knowledge is unavoidably collective. It is done best by diverse groups of inquirers; social justice best informs it. Why? Such methods are most effective at revealing errors and distortions in quests for knowledge.

     Why are "welfare reform" policies doomed without great input from welfare rights activists, by people most affected by proposed changes? Certain important knowledge is often clearest to those most engaged in the concrete social issues. It is not merely sentimental or "politically correct" to have grassroots input into decisions; it is what produces the most effective results. It will include direct challenges to much of what has passed for "sociological facts," such as the various theories that blame the poor people for their poverty.

     Knowledge is thus conceived not as arising from a theory-free God's eye view. Nor is certainty conceived along those lines. As Satya Mohanty argues, "Precision and depth in understanding the sources and causes of error or mystification help us define the nature of objectivity, and central to this definition would be the possibility of its revision and improvement on the basis of new information." (*R.I.*, 42)

     Social change work is central to this treatment of error, since it is often in the process of transformation that new knowledge is produced. "This conception of fallibility is thus based on a dialectical opposition between objectivity and error. Since error in this view is opposed not to certainty but rather to objectivity as a theory-dependent, socially realizable goal, the possibility of error does not sanction skepticism about the possibility of knowledge. Skepticism (postmodernist or otherwise) is usually the flip side of the quest for certainty." (*R.I*., 42)

     Through activism error is often used to facilitate greater understanding. In intervening in the dynamics of oppression, we may build communities of resistance. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has argued that such communities of resistance may be "imagined communities." They are sometimes imaginary not because they are not real but because it can be difficult to negotiate relationships across differences which are ­ among other things -- conflicts of interest.[23](#note23) The postpositivist realist account of *Reclaiming Identity* offers a theoretical framework from which we might specify such conflicts of interest. Satya Mohanty suggests that we have to create our own communities through our writings, our activism, and through exchanges of people building upon our ideas. This volume is one such bit of community, created and yet in the making. It could not have been written 15-20 years ago. *Reclaiming Identity*, like Satya Mohanty's text which it builds upon, came about through the efforts of people thinking together through the issues, living through the 1980s and 1990s, including debates on multiculturalism, the eroding of affirmative action policies, and the ever-widening split between the "haves" and the "have nots."

     Consider the politics of knowledge described above by Antony, where assumptions and ideas of a given group can come to be accepted as fact, seemingly immune to question. If that effect can be shown to operate in hegemonic worldviews, is it possible that there could be a similar normalizing effect among postmodernists? What if postmodernist thinking carries similar dangers, where certain assumptions and claims come to seem almost obligatory? Might the dangers described above by Antony and Young be similarly constraining upon critical projects?

     Linda Martin Alcoff claims such effects have already occurred. She regards *Reclaiming Identity* as an "act of talking heresy," it is "swimming upstream of strong academic currents," it is "to risk, even to invite, a dismissal as naïve, uninformed, theoretically unsophisticated." (*R.I.*, 312). She notes that the contributors to *Reclaiming Identity* are "already at risk in the academy, already assumed to be uniformed and undereducated precisely because of their real identities." (*R.I.*, 312)

     Though the notions of voice and empowerment (and disempowerment) here may seem nostalgic or naïve, effects like it are real enough. The destabilizing effects of such criticisms are likely to disempower those who enter the academy with a relative lack of privilege, having endured for much of their lives the message from others that their thoughts and words do not matter.

     As Nietzsche and Foucault point out, under a certain amount of policing, one may come to be one's own jailer, needing no external power to keep one in line. These silencing effects can linger. The academic world can continue to be hostile to oppressed people, activists, and especially those who are both.

     These contestations are not merely theoretical. They play out in very direct ways, in and out of classrooms. Consider my experience as a graduate student in philosophy and cultural studies. Keep in mind that this story is not unique to me, nor is it without effects in who makes it through the gate keeping functions of college and university training. When I mentioned having been a student of bell hooks, I was often told that she was guilty of essentialism and other crimes. When pressed for reasons, they often could not go beyond such catch phrases as, "oh, you know, the whole humanistic subject thing," as if that explained everything.

     As a woman from multiple marginalized groups, I was already struggling to find a voice in a philosophy Ph.D. Program. Cultural studies seminars, far from being rejuvenating sites of intellectual inquiry, were often more disempowering than philosophy courses. In philosophy classes my peers often did not understand my ideas. However, in cultural studies and English classes, my peers *claimed* to understand my views, critiquing them, and rejecting them completely, often before I had finished articulating my thought. Without giving reasons, these peers would often roll their eyes and exclaim a fragment like "You cannot say that ­ not after the critique of Humanism."

     In a cultural studies and English seminar called "Theory and Emergent Subjects," we read Edward Said's *After the Last Sky*.[24](#note24) Said was castigated by postmodernist students as buying into the bourgeois humanist subject. They transferred critiques of Enlightenment to those of Palestinian resistance as if there were no salient differences between them. Cultural studies students, supposedly trained to always contextualize, belittled even the most oppositional efforts to claim a space in the world, to seize a position from which to speak. Testimonial and theoretical accounts are not equally privileged and stable when coming from subaltern nations and peoples as from dominant ones. The Palestinian context makes this point quite clear, as does the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, especially *Decolonising the Mind*[25](#note25)(which we'd read in that very course). Yet, this postmodernist knee-jerk reaction to any notion of identity observed no such distinctions.

     Clarity is a profound value, crucial to any attempt at democratic inquiry. If I explain what I think and why, and others can understand it, they can then decide whether they agree with me or not. They can respond, explaining what they think and why. Of course this is no easy matter, particularly across cultures and power differentials. Yet, it is what we must do in sharing a world and sorting out what to make of it. This task includes thinking that there are better and worse accounts of a given event, and that we can be right or wrong on our stands on particular issues. As Mohanty argues, relativism and skepticism disable this critical engagement. Postpositivist accounts of knowledge, objectivity, error, experience, identities, and other related concepts enable them. They recognize people, across cultures and worldviews, as participating in the task of making sense of the world. Unlike Rorty and his Eurocentric pragmatism, postpositivist realism demands broad-based epistemic inquiry. This fundamentally emphasizes our shared humanity and our shared capacities for understanding. It is not just that "they" can learn from "us," but also that "we" can learn from "them."

     In today's ongoing debates about the politics of education and culture and the reproduction of inequalities occurring therein, we must develop transformative accounts. However complex normative inquiry shows itself to be, and however much it may be complicated by the inevitably social nature of the inquiry, postpositivist conceptions of values must be developed as alternatives toward which we want to develop. While identity is critiqued on postmodernist grounds, many hegemonic forces and institutions would be all too happy to drop all talk of the oppression and resistance of particular groups. There are those who champion the old guard, the supposed neutrality of the classroom, and the myth of great literature as impervious to politics. They may pretend that it "just so happens" that the demographics of the canon often reflect those with the greatest institutional power in the world.

     Paula M.L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia, as well as their co-contributors, urge no such retreat. However, it would possible for those in the sway of certain postmodernist assumptions to misread them that way. That would be a misreading. *That* it would be a misreading is precisely the sort of issue they seek to reclaim the license to say. One can anticipate Lacanian interpretations of their desire to possess the virility of phallogocentrism, deconstructionist plays on their apparently naive metaphysical views, and so on. Such responses might well seek to sidestep the challenges posed by Moya and Hames-Garcia's volume and its postpositivist realist framework, but they would not answer them.

     Instead of simply critiquing postmodernism and its effects, or the Enlightenment and its effects, *Reclaiming Identity* writers develop a viable alternative, a way of rejecting Catch-22s as illusory. They show that we need not choose between static essentialist notions of identity and extreme constructivist views with relativistic implications. They reject positivist models of objectivity and knowledge not for debilitating relativism, but for transformed conceptions of objectivity as an achievement of socially situated selves.

     Consider Mohanty's and Moya's essays in *Reclaiming Identity*. Each invokes a sort of "theory in the flesh" that relies not on essentialist notions of Blackness, womanhood, or Chicana identity, but on analyses of concrete social relations.

     In "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition" Satya P. Mohanty proposes that cultures are fields of moral inquiry, that genuine multiculturalism involves epistemic cooperation. His reading of *Beloved* demonstrates how cultural identities can provide epistemic resources, ways of making sense of the world through struggle to understand one's past and present and to shape new possibilities for the future. Mohanty painstakingly articulates the philosophical terms and contexts at stake, drawing upon the dense philosophical literature on theories of reference, notions of causality, conceptions of realism. Mohanty carefully lays out the issues, clarifying the terms and disagreements. He offers his argument and positions only upon familiarizing readers with the variety of positions available and reasons for each. This tone invites readers to follow and assess the arguments at every stage.

     Mohanty's reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is quite beautiful. Especially in his reading of Paul D's moral and epistemic growth, he brings out how vital it is to preserve a realist notion of such movement *as genuine moral growth*. Such growth is possible, achieved through honest interrogations of the complexities of living, through living in opposition to mystificatory practices of oppression. These struggles are not easy, nor do isolated individuals accomplish them. Rather, it takes collective resources of communities to make sense of the world in ways that reveal its complexities and depth.

     If anyone worries that Mohanty advocates a glib universalism about morals, his reading of Paul D will put that to rest. Paul D's growth is precisely going from a superficial universalist condemnation of Sethe's actions to a deep appreciation of the context and particular elements of Sethe's situation. He comes to understand the challenges of mothers under slavery in ways he had not previously. Though he and Sethe's social locations had been similar as slaves on the same plantation, he is not in a moral-epistemic position to appreciate Sethe's actions until he is able to hear Sethe's story on its own terms.

     In "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?" Alcoff acknowledges the diagnoses likely to befall the authors of *Reclaiming Identity*, as nostalgically yearning for the simpler days and stable meanings of identity politics. She offers an alternative diagnosis in response, that the rejection of identity is fueled by fear of the other's gaze, the colonized and oppressed looking back.

     Alcoff's analysis echoes the critique of postmodernism by Patricia Hill Collins, in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. Revisiting the sort of standpoint epistemology she had developed previously, Hill Collins presents a realist account, critiquing both the extreme constructivist stance in much postmodernist thinking, especially deconstruction, as well as the essentialist tendencies of some forms of Afrocentrism.[26](#note26)

     Hill Collins adopts anti-colonialist Albert Memmi's critique of "colonizers who refuse." To Memmi, critics of imperialism in colonizing and ruling classes pose their standing as decolonization actually takes place. Confronted with the formerly colonized, speaking for themselves, the dissenting colonizers lose the status and standing of "colonizers who refuse." No longer required or wanted to speak as intermediaries between the colonized and the colonizers, they experience vertigo and displacement. Stopping short of radical support of the formerly colonized and an anti-imperialism that contends with their own implications in colonization, they often despair of genuine change, talking themselves into positions which excuse them from such work and insulate them from the gaze of the formerly colonized.[27](#note27)

**Conclusion**

Moya, Mohanty, Hames-Garcia and other thinkers develop transformative visions, building upon insights and methods of postmodernist views without falling into extreme skepticism about all knowledge. Their postpositivist realist views shows that we need not choose between a God's eye view, theory-neutral ideals of objectivity and knowledge, versus a hope of there being any reliable knowledge at all. To do so is inadvertently to play into the Positivist conception of truth as an all or nothing affair. This approach often invalidates oppressed people as capable of knowing the world at all.

     In so doing, they preserve the distinction between understanding and mystification, say, in whether a given account of history is mystifying or revealing, not of the "in itself," but of the life world. The life world is one in which oppression is often tied to mystificatory practices, such that oppression becomes invisible, deserved, or freely chosen. In fact, abuse and oppression are often constituted by distortions of truth and lies, or denial of their being different. Oppressed people are taught to believe in their inferiority and to accept their lot in life as deserved.

     In taking a realistic spirit, these authors can show that some explanations of the world are better than others. For example, differences in wealth between different racial groups are better explained by systemic discrimination and inequalities than by ideas of white superiority. Unlike the skeptics, whether poststructuralist, pragmatist, or any other kind, this postpositivist realist account preserves realism and identity without any problematic metaphysical views. Such a realism provides the epistemological framework to characterize unjust conditions in the world, advocate for justice, and to describe and evaluate conditions as they change. Further, it suggests that no one group will have a monopoly upon knowledge. Rather, diversity of knowers is vital to epistemic success, to genuine understanding.

**Notes**

[1](#ref1) Putnam, Hilary, *Words and Life*, Harvard University Press, p. xxxii.

[2](#ref2) Alexander, M. Jaqui and Chandra Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, New York: Routledge Press, 1997, p. xvii.

[3](#ref3) Alcoff, Linda Martin, "The Elimination of Experience in Feminist Theory," Paper presented at the Women's Studies Symposium, Cornell University, Feb. 3, as cited in Moya, p. 127 (in Alexander and Mohanty), p. 69 this volume.

[4](#ref4) Moya, 127 (Alexander and Mohanty), p. 69 this volume.

[5](#ref5) Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*, Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press: 1984, p. 115.

[6](#ref6) Ibid., p. 114.

[7](#ref7) Young, Iris, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 48-65.

[8](#ref8) Ibid., 64.

[9](#ref9) Ibid., p. 64.

[10](#ref10) Antony, Louise, "Quine as Feminist," in Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt, ed., *A Mind of One's Own*, San Francisco, CA: Westview Press, 1993, p. 213.

[11](#ref11) Young, Iris, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 58-61, 115.

[12](#ref12) This account is indebted to James Conant's interpretation of these trends, especially from his introduction to *Realism with a Human Face*, Hilary Putnam, edited and introduced by James Conant, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, xv-lxxiv.

[13](#ref13) Rajchman, John and Cornel West, *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985.

[14](#ref14) Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,

[15](#ref15) Putnam, Hilary, *Words and Life*, James Conant, ed., Cambridge, MA: 1994, p. xxxii

[16](#ref16) xxxii, Putnam, *Words and Life*.

[17](#ref17) xxxii

[18](#ref18) James, William, as cited by Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 22.

[19](#ref19) xxxix-xl

[20](#ref20) xl

[21](#ref21) Diamond, Cora, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991, p. 22.

[22](#ref22) Ibid., p. 22.

[23](#ref23) Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, "Cartographies of Struggle," *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 4.

[24](#ref24) Said, Edward, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1986.

[25](#ref25) Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986.

[26](#ref26) Hill Collins, Patricia, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 124-183.

[27](#ref27) Ibid., p. 120-121.