

Voice and the Postmodern Condition

“Subjectivity” and “voice” are inextricably tied. Indeed, as many of the contributors to this issue of *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* argue, voice is the expression of the subject. The modern Western conceptualisations of one’s voice, one’s voting rights, one’s right to communicate, one’s right to be heard, scream, laugh, burble, talk in one’s own language, one’s demand for self-determination, one’s right to be silent etc., describe products of the Enlightenment’s humanistic argument for individual freedom and expression. But is one’s right to an individual voice merely an illusion? Certainly Foucault’s “death of man” – where he claims that the humanist conception of “man” (as a self-contained rational agent) was the creation of a unique set of historical contingencies – would suggest accordingly that voice as “self-expression” of subjectivity is a mirage.¹ Likewise, contributor Pat HOFFIE’s thoughts on reality and representation in an “Age of Terror” problematises the notion of individual voice, especially in relation to the recently deceased Jean Baudrillard’s response to the events of 9/11 in *Der Spiegel* where he argued that globalisation has reduced everything into “a negotiable, quantifiable exchange value.”²

The central question here then is how voices emanate in the postmodern and postcolonial contexts? That is, how do voices resonate in conjunction with the purported “death of the subject”? Using a text for probing this question, I focus on Fredric Jameson’s primarily descriptive yet immensely influential and polemic essay *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.³ In his essay, Jameson draws from the cultural fields of architecture, painting, film, literature and music to describe a “decentering of the subject”, which he believes was a result of an economic shift from modernism’s “imperialistic stage” to the postmodern conditions of “consumer” or “late” capitalism. Like other analysts of postmodernism, Jameson acknowledges that the decentering of the subject is fundamental to postmodernity but criticises the fragmentation, while seemingly defending the modern monadic subject. Here, Jameson links with the poetry of Neruda as analysed by HOFFIE in that he both rues the loss of modernity’s realism and idealism while acknowledging, as HOFFIE writes: “the compelling impossibility...of responding to the magnitude of *the experience* of its age”, leading to an “utterance of hopelessness.”

To Jameson's credit he does not valorise the subject of modernism, depicting the subject as often alienated and in anguish, as in his analyses of Munch's painting *The Scream*. Yet, for Jameson, modernity's subject at least contained a central core being that enabled him/her to suffer, to feel from the depth of their centre, to feel affect stemming from the distance between a true self and emotion:

The very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that "emotion" is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling.⁴

According to Jameson, late capitalism constitutes the purest form of capital yet to have emerged: "a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas."⁵ Jameson's project compared and contrasted cultural texts from the imperialistic and late capitalist stages. For instance, in probably his most famous comparison, Jameson deconstructs and compares Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes* and Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*. In his analysis of *Peasant Shoes* he suggests the work, "in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth."⁶ In comparison, Warhol's work is considered to turn, "centrally around commodification" signalling "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness."⁷ The flat individual of late capitalism has experienced a "Waning of Affect", where modernism's alienation of the subject, "is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject...the 'death' of the subject itself – the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual...the *decentring* of that formerly centred subject or psyche."⁸ The decentred subject has been more recently epitomised by the figure of Bateman in Brett Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*⁹ where the human and the social "are collapsed into the visual and the material so that sex, bodies and relationships are as indistinguishable, disposable and meaningless, or meaningful as clothes, Cds and interior design."¹⁰ As with Ellis the decentred, fragmented subject for Jameson is inextricably tied to the commodification of culture:

What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation.¹¹

Jameson is critical of the postmodern condition, describing a fragmented image culture that consumes stereotyped and clichéd sets of nostalgic images, rather than engaging with genuine history and projections of culture in the future. For example, in the television programme *The Sopranos*, lead character, Tony Soprano, consumes American heroic white masculinity through his viewing of old movies featuring Gary Cooper, Clarke Gable and the like. The consumption of nostalgia demonstrates the blankness and depthlessness of Tony's masculinity as he imbibes male self-confidence from a bygone era. A subjectivity based on image construction (as opposed to the belief in a stable core identity) is inherently destabilised or, in the case of Tony Soprano, stricken by "panic attacks." Of particular relevance here is the state's collusion with commodity production at the level of discursive discourse. Emma Rich

and John Evans' "Re-reading Voice: Young Women, Anorexia and Performative Education" points to the besiegement of state-mediated messages upon today's young women, which have led to, as they say, "a moral panic" regarding an "obesity epidemic", where "schools have been subjected to a barrage of initiatives and policies, steeped in performance outcomes and targets, in an effort to regulate young people's bodies."

At a multitude of levels, however, there is a simplicity to Jameson's ideas that is complicit with his romanticisation of the *deep* modern subject. Certainly, Jameson fails to consider the possibilities that the conditions of late capitalism enable. Of note here is contributor Jane Venis' research into the technology of voice producing amplifying systems for those who have lost the physical capacities to be heard. Likewise, in "Echoes of Voices Long Gone", Mary Modeen recognises the importance of recorded voices of the Manx people of the Isle of Man to her soundsculpture. She writes: "the tiny fragments used here came from recordings of the last of the islanders who spoke Manx as a mother tongue." Undoubtedly, a sound reading of the conditions of late capitalism must recognise that the dispersion of technology amongst groups of previously marginalised voices has enabled an audibility to those voices, even in turn those voices have been subsequently commodified.

It is this lack of recognition of Others within Jameson's work that makes his theorisation problematic. One of the criticisms of modernism and, to an extent, postmodernism has been its white hetero-patriarchal centrism. Indeed, white men have been at the vanguard of both the modernist and postmodernist movements. When theorising first "the humanist subject" and then "the death of the subject", there is often an implicit and silent understanding that the subject has been/is a white male. While Jameson, for instance, seemingly discusses arbitrary figures, such as Van Gogh, Munch, and Andy Warhol, the privileging of white men in his essay speaks to the invisibility of white patriarchy. Reference to people of colour and women, for example, seldom enter into his text, while discussions of race, gender, sexuality and colonisation simply do not feature. Yet, as contributor Audra Simpson points out in "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship", the colonising subject, for example, was inextricably tied to "the imperatives of Empire and in this regard to specific technologies of rule that sought to obtain space and resources, to define and know the difference that it constructed in those spaces and to then govern those within."

As already alluded to, other analysts of the postmodern condition are (unlike Jameson) underpinned by anti-foundationalism and skepticism; particularly, skepticism of authoritarian forms of traditional knowledge and identity. Here I align with Angela McRobbie's understanding of postmodernism as the deliverance of those voices quashed by the metanarratives of modernism.¹² Indeed, Richard O'Keefe's "Hearing Different Voices" in this issue of *Junctures* demonstrates the multiplicity with which the ultimate metanarrative (i.e., the Bible) can be interpreted. Given Foucault's focus on modernity's medical practices and discourses, it is unsurprising that other ways of understanding knowledge in terms of the valid and the "in-valid" are, under the conditions of postmodernity, being re-interpreted. Grant Gillett's "Subjectivity, Voice and Narratives in Clinical Medicine" challenges the way that medicine's metanarratives "see the subject as a biological organism and illness as a malfunction in a working (biological) system." Kirsti Malterud and Arnhild Taksdal's "Shared Spaces For Reflection: Approaching

Medically Unexplained Disorders” attempts to create common ground between doctors and patients suffering from medically unexplained disorders, suggesting that obstructions may be related to time, gender, and shame.

Under the conditions of late colonialism, Simpson points out that to provide an academic voice which is representative of indigenous communities is highly complex; a complexity that belies most anthropological constructions of indigenous people to date:

The work of understanding these issues of membership, political recognition, sovereignty and autonomy within communities requires an historical sensibility (and reckoning) that is deeply horizontal as well as vertical. Outside of Western structures, there exists a hearty oral archive of the structuring logics of exclusion – of how people got to get “here” – how they married each other when they did – and there is co-terminously the logic of the present that I saw and lived and suffered through and enjoyed (and still do), of tolerances and exceptions and affections – what I call in other places “feeling citizenships” that are structured in the present space of intra-community recognition, affection and care, outside of the logics of colonial and imperial rule (as enacted through, for example, the *Indian Act* or blood quantum).

The alignment of decolonial thinkers with the skepticism of postmodernism is not surprising given the Enlightenment view that European reason provides the foundation for deciding between truth and falsehood and, consequently, that through European reason the world is intrinsically knowable. Poststructuralism in the era of postmodernism, for instance, suggests that such a premise is inherently “cultural” and instead dwells on dissimilarity, difference and unpredictability. While described as politically impotent (and this critique must be taken seriously by decolonial theorists who endeavour, for political purposes, to “decolonise”), the allure of poststructuralism to indigenous theorists is its inherent acceptance of alternative epistemologies and difference, and its ridicule of Enlightenment universalism. Speaking from a vantage point of *difference*, indigenous theorists form part of what McRobbie refers to as “the new generation of intellectuals.” Lina Sunseri’s *Indigenous Voice Matters: Claiming our Space Through Decolonizing Research* picks up on McRobbie’s conceptualisation by asserting indigenous voices in social research and by, specifically, examining issues of indigenous subjectivity, reflexivity and representation, arguing that decolonial research must include a collaborative research methodology.

To come back to Jameson then, if we contextualise his essay as a piece of work that silently excludes race, colonialism, gender and sexuality, then we can see the potential that the decentring of the (white, colonial, male, heterosexual) subject has in the breaking down of imagined binaries. The decentring of the subject and white male subjectivity’s lack of self-assurance, in particular, suggests an opening up of a space where previous stratifications can be resisted or repositioned. For instance, if the notion of “postmodern hyperspace” is reconceived in racial terms to theorise a “postmodern hyperrace”, then it is possible that the confusion and disorientation caused by late capitalist structures, which Jameson describes, is also taking place in terms of conventional racial stratification. Postmodern hyperrace suggests late capitalism will effect racial categorisations to move beyond modernity’s racial

binaries. That is, the decentralisation of white subjectivity due to the influence of late capitalist structures produces racial diffusion and the reconfiguration of racial signifiers. Robyn Weigman argues that the rupture between the material body as signifier and the signified, challenges the logic of race in the postmodern condition:

In the increasing production of simulated visual fields, in the deeply wrenching knowledge of an eye that continually misperceives, in the loss of epistemological assurance in the referent – in all of these, the logic of race attached to a corporeal essence is challenged at its most fundamental level of bodily belief.¹³

Hyperrace and the movement *beyond* conventional racial structures via the decentring of subjectivity is reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's notion of "hybridity." Hybridity refers to "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization."¹⁴ Like Jameson, Bhabha conceives of the postmodern (or postcolonial) condition spatially, arguing that hybridity enables a "Third Space." Bhabha suggests that imperial power attempts to essentialise and define indigenous cultures in relation to the West but, inadvertently, what is produced are hybrid cultures that inherently escape essentialist binaries. For Bhabha, the postcolonial condition produces undefined spaces between conventional subjectivities.¹⁵ In the New Zealand context, for instance, the intermixture of indigenous and coloniser cultures does not produce discrete "Māori" and "Pākehā" cultures, as "pure" and "original", rather a space *beyond* such parameters is created where "we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this "Third Space", we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves."¹⁶ Peter Stupples' in "Visual Voices: Heeding the Microcultural Contexts of Art" questions the Māori artist Robert Jahnke who suggests that:

...one cannot see oppression if one is not oppressed nor can one think oppression if one is not oppressed...When we view a *kahuhuruhuru* (feather cloak) in the confines of the museum showcase our perception of this taonga [treasure] is impaired by the institutionalised boundaries of display that include enclosure and articulation conditioned by contingencies of space and light.¹⁷

In rebuttal, Stupples questions whether "simply being the member of a particular culture entitle[s] the speaker to claim to speak on behalf of the culture as a whole?". In reference to Bhabha and "difference" then, what is important is the location of spaces or voices that move beyond the colonial archive (the museum) and beyond discrete Māori and Pākehā cultures, where indigenous culture is not enclosed nor Pākehā silenced.

Simpson urges indigenous scholars "[not]to genuflect to recent formulations of alternative methodology such as 'radical indigenism', one that is neither radical nor indigenous but rather, in the name of 'tradition', structuring yet another expectation for a culturally-pure indigenous subject." Simpson's attack on "tradition" is an important one in the indigenous context because many of the "new generation" of indigenous intellectuals who find themselves within the highly conventionally coded walls of anthropologically infused indigenous academia, are at loggerheads with some of their more esteemed counterparts regarding the very concept of tradition. The upstarts suggest that tradition, as a fixating trope, is the very thing that displaces indigenous people into the world of the pre-enlightened Self. As Gillett points out in reference

to Levinas: “the subject is in-definable because there is an ongoing and developing interaction that ontologically constitutes the human subject as a being-in-the-process-of-becoming.” In his reading of E L Doctorow’s novel *Ragtime*, Jameson laments that, “the way in which the kind of reading this novel imposes makes it virtually impossible for us to reach and thematise those official ‘subjects’ which float above the text but cannot be integrated into our reading of the sentences.”¹⁸ Conversely, I argue that the conditions of late capitalism problematises white patriarchal privilege, and opens up a space for voices undefined by the binaries of modernity. It would be extremely naïve/idealistic of me, though, to suggest that the conditions of late capitalism are unequivocally emancipatory for the Other. As Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry argue in Stupples’ discussion: “much of what is named as ‘progress’ is the assimilation of signs of difference into a homogenising system, the [Western] art market.”¹⁹

I think more important than the simplistic attack on white patriarchal systems, however, is the recognition that transforming voices and subjectivities will move *beyond* their traditional binaries and, thus, to question where that leaves the Other politically? What do these new spaces mean for Others, given that their identities have, in part, been formed through allegorical construction in conjunction with the white patriarchal Self? The paradox of the postmodern condition is that while Others assert their “Self”-determination, radical political forms of Otherness have been constructed in reaction to binaries cemented through modernity. Thus, the transformation of voices under the conditions of late capitalism also impact on “traditional” conceptions of Othered identities. The most disturbing feature of the postmodern condition is undoubtedly the flatness and blankness of the commodified cultural text so aptly described by Jameson. In the extremely insightful quote below, Jameson suggests that in the imperialistic stage a hegemonic “face” existed that could be a focus of political activism:

If the ideas of a ruling class were once the dominant (or hegemonic) ideology of bourgeois society, the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm. Faceless masters continue to inflect the economic strategies which constrain our existences, but they no longer need to impose their speech (or are henceforth unable to).²⁰

The logic of late capitalism in effecting the postmodern condition has decentred white patriarchal subjectivity and, in so doing, it has configured a spatialisation where hybrid voices function to challenge white privilege. However, the Other is not immune to the “prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” and, thus, also faces a future where voices based on false senses of “tradition” will become untenable.

- 1 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970).
- 2 Gary Genosko, “Introduction: Have You Seen the War?”, in *This is the Fourth World War: The Der Spiegel Interview With Jean Baudrillard*, *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1, January 2004, <http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/spiegel.htm> as last accessed on 20 October 2007.
- 3 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *New Left Review*, 146 (July-August), 1984: 59-92.

- 4 Ibid., 61.
- 5 Ibid., 78.
- 6 Ibid., 59.
- 7 Ibid., 60.
- 8 Ibid., 63.
- 9 Brett Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991).
- 10 Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 131.
- 11 Jameson, 56.
- 12 Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 13 Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 41.
- 14 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2003), 118.
- 15 Paul Meredith, "Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand", paper presented to "Te Oru Rangahau Māori Research and Development Conference", 7-9 July 1998, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- 16 Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 118.
- 17 Robert Jahnke, "Between Weft and Warp", Review of Roger Neich's *Painted Histories: Early Maori Figurative Paintings*, *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History* (1995), 19-20.
- 18 Jameson, 69.
- 19 Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry, "Art as Ethnocide: The Case of Australia", *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory* (Continuum: London and New York, 2002), 124.
- 20 Jameson, 65.

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