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COMPLICITY

The Theory of Negative Difference

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It's astounding the first time you realize a stranger has a body—the realization that he has a body makes him a stranger. It means you have a body too. You will live with this forever, and it will spell out the language of your life.

—James Baldwin

This excerpt from Baldwin's novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (pp. 64–65), succinctly describes the material manifestations and linguistic implications of *the other*, a figure that has become a central concern in contemporary radical criticism. The heroine of the novel is a young woman named Tish, and, in a short section in which Baldwin describes the recognition of the other as stranger, Tish confronts the social and physical realities of negative difference, the complicity it engenders, and its impact on human communicative interaction. Although Tish lives in a fictional world, her insights have important implications for critical discourse. The other illustrates the problem of language in Western culture in its most extreme form, as a figure made flesh that reifies the existence of an essential reality, a reality “out there,” separate and distinct from the

human agents that interact within it. This belief in separateness has, indeed, made us strangers, and has created a language of negative difference that manifests itself in the social and symbolic realities of race, gender, and rhetoric.

The calling into question of this language of negative difference has become a key strategy in many feminist, afrocentric, and rhetorical theories of discourse. Scholars in these areas have explicated various indictments of the phallogocentric, eurocentric, and essentialist linguistic strategies defined and perpetuated by dominant population groups, and some have begun the difficult task of addressing the complicitous nature of critical discourse. This essay explores the problem of complicity as it is manifest in critical discourses that converge at the juncture of gender, race, and rhetoric. By focusing on this juncture, it illustrates how racism and

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sexism are products of a conceptualization of language peculiar to essentialist epistemology, and prefigured by the historical conflict between rhetoric and philosophy. It further suggests that contemporary race, gender, and rhetorical studies provide the foundation for an epistemic stance that situates critical self-reflection within a context that makes possible a more positive approach to linguistic definition.

COMPLICITY AND NEGATIVE DIFFERENCE

Herein, the term *complicity* simply means "an agreement to disagree," and *negative difference* refers to the principle of critical analysis that undergirds essentialist epistemology. This analysis of complicity as a theory of negative difference is rooted in the linguistic theories articulated by the ancient Greek sophists, particularly Thrasymachus of Chalcedon, whose *theory of the opposite party* clearly illustrates the problem of complicity as it functions in argumentative discourse. Thrasymachus observes that individuals "who are at variance are mutually experiencing something that is bound to befall those who engage in senseless rivalry: believing they are expressing opposite views, they fail to perceive that their actions are the same, and that the theory of the opposite party is inherent in their own theory" (Freeman, 1977, p. 141). This theory of the opposite party calls into question the principle of negative difference, and ultimately essentialist epistemology and rational logic. Essentialism, which is the dominant epistemological position articulated in Western culture, posits a reality in which material and symbolic processes exist in and of themselves. This results in linguistic practices which legitimate argumentative and critical discourse, precisely because such discourse is aimed at the discovery of *essential* truths.

It also results in social practices that perpetuate the principle of negative difference in human interaction. For example, racism is "one of the most blatant and potentially evil forms of essentialist thought," notes Crapanzano (1985) in *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*. Crapanzano explicates the connection between complicity and negative difference with which

this study is concerned when he explains that often racism's "critical consideration masks other classifications that have the same epistemological roots and permit the same social and psychological tyranny" (p. 20). The isolation of racism as an object of critical analysis obscures the underlying epistemological foundation, essentialism, which also undergirds problems of gender, class and classification. In his discussion of the *rhetoric of domination and subordination*, Crapanzano connects essentialism with the problem of complicity when he argues that although racist and other essentialist social categories—when they exist—enter the rhetoric of domination and subordination in hierarchical societies, they are not as freely manipulated by the dominant, the possessors of power, status, and wealth, as is popularly thought, (p. 20)

Following Memmi and Mannoni, he argues that the belief that individuals can respond to oppression without recognizing their complicity in its perpetuation fails to consider the political and linguistic complexities that circumscribe the system: "Such a view fails, of course, to recognize the constraints of the dominant. To be dominant in a system is not to dominate the system" (pp. 20, 21). Crapanzano's analysis provides a starting point for a discussion of complicity precisely because it isolates and illustrates the essentialist presuppositions of language that undergird the theory of negative difference.

Plato's Phaedrus

Those presuppositions are deeply rooted in Western conceptualizations of language, and provide a common point of reference for our understanding of the relationship between race, gender, and rhetoric. Gates (1984) illustrates the connection between race and the theory of negative difference in "Criticism in the Jungle": "Ethnocentricism and 'logocentricism' are profoundly interrelated in Western discourse as old as the *Phaedrus* of Plato, in which one finds one of the earliest figures of blackness as an absence, a figure of negation" (p. 6). Blackness as a figure of negation points to an *essential* difference, one intimately connected to the assumptions of knowledge in Western discourse. Whitson (1988) explicates how negative

difference functions in relation to both rhetoric and gender in "The *Phaedrus* Complex." He argues that, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato has "relegated rhetoric to the negative pole of binary oppositions that privilege a particular truth claim: presence/absence, light/dark, man/woman, truth/appearance, and philosophy/rhetoric. The term for this kind of metaphysics is phallogocentrism: the primacy of the phallus and the philosopher's word as law" (p. 18). These epistemological assumptions of both racist and sexist language can also be traced to the essentialist presuppositions of language clearly evident in the debate between rhetoric and philosophy.

These presuppositions are explored by Lanham (1976) in his examination of the "serious premises" of epistemology that underlie Western discussions of style as it relates to rhetoric. The significance of Lanham's essay as regards race and gender is its explication of the essentialist presuppositions of *serious* reality and the resulting historical disenfranchisement of rhetoric by philosophy. The relationship between rhetorical and philosophical reality is grounded in, and perpetuated by, the same assumptions concerning language and reality that create the social divisions of race and gender. What Lanham calls "the Rhetorical Ideal of Life" constantly calls into question the assumptive grounds of serious reality in much the same way that race and gender studies have challenged the legitimacy of eurocentric and phallogocentric discourses. Contemporary rhetorical theory, like radical critical theory, has witnessed a re-emergence of the primacy of language that necessitates a consideration of how the principle of negative difference functions in argumentative and critical discourse.

Indeed, this re-emergence of the primacy of language in radical critical studies has confronted critics of race, gender, and language with the problematical possibility that they have, through argumentative discourse, participated in the creation of the realities of racism, sexism, and logocentrism. This is the problem of complicity, and it is rooted in the tendency of critical discourse to privilege itself even as it calls privilege into question. Baudrillard (1988) explains complicity in terms of seduction: "This is what happens initially when a discourse

seduces itself; the original way in which it absorbs meaning and empties itself of meaning in order to better fascinate others: the primitive seduction of language" (p. 150). In attempting to privilege itself, radical criticism has been seduced by the very "abduction of meaning" that it attempts to oppose. Baudrillard continues: "Every discourse is complicit in this abduction of meaning, in this seductive maneuver of interpretation: if one discourse did not do this, then others would take its place" (p. 150). Confronting radical criticism, then, is *the distinct possibility that it represents a mere replacement of one oppressive discourse for another and a reproduction of the very principles and practices that it ostensibly rejects*.

Marxist Considerations of Hegemony

Laclau (1977) discusses complicity in Marxist considerations of hegemony in terms of the concept of *articulation*. According to Laclau, the problem of radical antagonism emerges within discursive structures in such a way as to undermine the practical possibilities inherent in discourse. Within this context, hegemony can be seen as an agreement to disagree, which re-articulates itself in the collaborative nature of hegemonic praxis. To the extent that critics of race, gender, and language oppose hegemonic discourses based upon positions that subscribe to this rhetoric of negative difference, they become complicitous with those discourses, and in effect reify them. Laclau and Mouffe (1989) explicate the concept of articulation as it applies to the complicitousness of feminist and antiracist struggles:

The political space of the feminist struggle is constituted within the ensemble of practices and discourses which create the different forms of subordination of women; the space of the antiracist struggle, within the overdetermined ensemble of practices constituting racial discrimination. But the antagonisms within each of these relatively autonomized spaces divide them into two camps. This explains the fact that, when social struggles are directed not against objects constituted within their own space but against simple empirical referents—for example, men or white people as biological referents—they find

themselves in difficulties. For, such struggles ignore the specificity of the political spaces in which the other democratic antagonisms emerge. (p. 132)

Both feminists and antiracist theoretical struggles are in difficulty when they ignore the assumptive grounds of the linguistic spaces in which epistemic antagonisms occur, and, thus, complicitously re-articulate the problem of negative difference in their own critical discourses.

Complicity thus manifests itself in terms of an adherence to the problematical ideological assumptions of position and privilege inherent in critical discourse. Radhakrishnan (1987) makes the point powerfully clear in "Ethnic Identity and Post-Structuralist Difference": "The assumption that there exists an essence (African, Indian, feminine, nature, etc.) ironically perpetuates the same ahistoricism that was identified as the enemy during the negative/critical or 'diconstructive' phase of the ethnic revolution" (p. 208). Radhakrishnan then asks the question most central to the problem of complicity of the linguistic level: "Doesn't this all sound somehow familiar: the defeat and overthrow of one sovereignty, the emergence and consolidation of an antithetical sovereignty, and the creation of a different, yet the same, repression?" (p. 208). His analysis of feminist historiography suggests some strategies for critics of language sincerely committed to transcending, and not simply reconstructing, the problem of negative difference.

Feminist and African American Literary and Political Theory and Practice

Indeed, it is within the arena of feminist literary and political theory that the problem of complicity has become increasingly evident and problematical, perhaps because it is within this space that issues of gender, race, and classification most clearly converge. Dobris and White (1989) suggest that this complicity is most evident in terms of the inconsistencies of feminist discourse in regard to women of nondominant populations:

Exclusivity, ignorance and blaming the victim all contribute to a feminist discourse that is devoid of

the experiences of non-dominant women. Thus, while the dominant discourse of feminism presents itself as all-inclusive, it is clear that members of non-dominant groups construct images of feminism that project a white, Christian, heterosexual, middle-class identity, leaving most other women excluded from its purview. (p. 17)

Their insights provide an important point of departure for the consideration of how complicity is problematized within contemporary feminist theory.

hooks (1984) explicitly recognizes the problem of complicity and its articulation in feminist theory and practice in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

Women must begin the work of feminist reorganization with me understanding that we have all (irrespective of race, sex, or class) acted in complicity with the existing oppressive system. We all need to make a conscious break with the system. . . . We cannot motivate [other women] to join a feminist struggle by asserting a political superiority that makes the movement just another oppressive hierarchy. (pp. 161-162)

hooks suggests that contemporary feminist praxis contains within it the possibility of perpetuating the same type of privileges legitimated by the oppressive system from which it must break, and argues for a recognition of complicity as a first step in transcending that possibility.

Christian (1987), in her critique of French feminism, illustrates how critical discourse, ostensibly aimed at transcending the hegemonic dialectic, reifies it. She registers her concern that this particular school of feminist scholarship "has become authoritative discourse, monologic, which occurs precisely because it does have access to the means of promulgating its ideas" (p. 60). Christian confronts the same problem in black feminist literary criticism. "Since I can count on one hand the number of black feminist literary critics in the world today, I consider it presumptuous of me to invent a theory of how we *ought* to read" (p. 53). Like hooks, Christian's analysis of the complicitous privileging of discourse enables her to transcend

the problematical dualities of race, gender, and identity and confront the underlying epistemological concerns that are problematic in feminist theory and practice.

Christian generalizes her analysis of these concerns when she contends that many "critics do not investigate the reasons why that statement—literature is political—is now acceptable when before it was not; nor do we look to our own antecedents for the sophisticated arguments upon which we can build in order to change the tendency of any established Western idea to become hegemonic" (1987, p. 55). One way to facilitate the type of change that Christian and many other critics of race and gender are attempting is to recognize that our complicity with hegemonic discourse begins with the very language we use to call that discourse into questions: critical, argumentative language. Christian's observations that "the new emphasis on literary critical theory is as hegemonic as the world which it attacks" and that "the language it creates is one which mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene" (p. 55), must be extended to a general discussion of the epistemological presuppositions of argumentative language. In contemporary radical criticism the problem of negative difference is manifest in an adherence to principles of essentialist epistemology and the problematical divisions in constructs in terms of symbolic and social action.

Awkward concurs, and returns us to the juncture of race, gender, and language in his discussion of the essentialist presuppositions of justificatory positions taken by contemporary African American and feminist literary critics concerning cross-gender/racial critical abilities. Using principles of psychoanalytic criticism, he responds to the assertion that men are incapable of doing feminist criticism, and compares the assertion to the arguments presented by black critics during the 1960s regarding the abilities of whites to analyze African American literature. Awkward (1988) suggests that psychoanalytic theory deconstructs traditional feminist criticism by exposing its essentialist presuppositions in terms of its "problematic appeals to an authority of female experience,"

and calls into question "the neither biologically nor culturally justified nature of feminist criticism's practice of a whole reverse discrimination." He concludes: "To simply reverse the binary opposition man/woman, when we are painfully aware of its phallogocentric origins, is to suggest complicity with the male-authored fiction of history. No feminist should be comfortable with such a suggestion, despite the potential institutional gains." One can easily extend Awkward's analysis to the practice of criticism itself, which is a privileged discourse in the mouths of its practitioners that is rarely, if ever, turned back upon itself.

Indeed, no critics should be comfortable with such a simple reversal of any of the binary oppositions that criticism so eloquently calls into question. And yet, within the context of essentialist epistemology, critical discourse is often limited to perpetuating just this type of dialectical binary opposition. Criticism, whether or not it calls into question privileged discourse, *is itself a privileged discourse, and thus must strive to perpetuate one position at the expense of another*. This is the rhetoric of what Lanham calls *serious* reality, the rhetoric of dialectical critical discourse that becomes little more than an ideological discourse of self-legitimizing privilege. This is the discourse that radical criticism calls into question, but which at the same time legitimates the theories and practices of critics who would oppose eurocentric, phallogocentric, or other discourses of negative difference. This is the problem of complicity, which demands a self-reflexive reassessment of the underlying assumptions of critical inquiry and their reification of *serious* reality, and calls forth a coherent rhetoric of judgment.

This, I believe, is precisely what Valesio attempts in *Novantiqua: Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory*. Valesio (1980) concurs with Lanham's observation that "rhetoric's real crime, one is often led to suspect, is its candid acknowledgement of the rhetorical aspects of 'serious' life" (p. 7), and argues that

the real "enemy" of rhetoric is: not logic but ideology. If the struggle has been between rhetoric and logic, it would not have raged with such a continuity and force; but it did, and still continues to do so, because rhetoric is more or less clearly

perceived as a threat to the assurance that any ideological system requires and confirms—and this perception is quite correct. (p. 61)

Valesio reconstructs the debate between rhetoric and philosophy by arguing that rhetoric is not a counterpart to dialectic, but *is* dialectic, when he asserts that dialectic is “*the dominant form in which rhetorical structure manifests itself*” (p. 113). This reconstruction of the relationship between rhetoric, dialectic and ideology transcends the problem of negative difference that historically has circumscribed symbolic and social interaction.

Valesio suggests that rhetoric, in its capacity to call into question privileged discourses, transcends the principle of negative difference by its insistence that all discourses are “at every point shaped and slanted according to specific argumentative structures” (p. 62). The implication of this insistence cannot be simply dismissed, for it suggests that when critics of race, gender, and language engage in argumentation they risk re-articulating—being seduced by—the very ideological structures that they are attempting to transcend.

Radhakrishnan (1988), in his analysis of feminist historiography, concurs: “Could it not be the case that we are either flogging a dead horse or that our interest is not in achieving a ‘break,’ but in the eternal and timeless maintenance of a ‘tradition of opposition’ that has perforce to keep alive the very tradition it questions?” (p. 201). The challenge for feminist criticism, Radhakrishnan suggests, is to transcend the problem of negative difference embedded in the language of gender, and this challenge, I believe, is applicable to all practitioners of radical criticism concerned with issues of gender, race, class, and classification.

Although complicity is evident in contemporary feminist theory and practice, to isolate this one arena of discourse would be to ignore the extent to which the same issues exist in terms of race, class, and classification, and merely to allow “one weasel term [to] substitute for another” (Crapanzano, p. 20). Complicity arises out of a failure to acknowledge and call into question the essentialist presuppositions of critical discourse. The underlying principle of essentialism is the principle of negative difference, which

is central to argumentative and critical discourse and, thus, a basic element of our linguistic and symbolic interaction. This raises an important theoretical question that confronts scholars in women’s studies, communication, and contemporary black thought: To what extent are non-dominant population groups, through their participation in the prevailing essentialist linguistic system, complicitous in constructing oppressive social realities? As critics we are confronted by an important epistemological dilemma, in the sense that breaking with the system is reifying the system in its most basic form: negation. This paradox points to the underlying problem of complicity.

To the extent that we all participate in discourse—practical and theoretical—presupposed by essentialist assumptions, we participate in the construction of oppressive social realities. As scholars and social critics we are privileged by ontological and epistemological principles of negative difference that we readily use to participate in the argumentative and antagonistic symbolic systems that sustain and perpetuate the problem of negative difference. If criticism is to be radical in terms of its own presuppositions, it must look to its own assumptive ground for an epistemic stance that transcends the tradition of opposition of which Radhakrishnan (1987) speaks: “The task for radical ethnicity is to the matize and subsequently problematize its entrapment with these binary elaborations with the intention of ‘stepping beyond’ to find its own adequate language” (p. 216). In order to step beyond the binarity of essentialism, I believe it is necessary to step into it: that is, to confront it on its own terms, in its own language, to call into question the necessity of negation by legitimating it through affirmation.

COMPLEMENTARY DIFFERENCES

Such a view goes beyond essentialist conceptualizations of reality by positing the possibility of articulating a social reality in which differences might be complementary, and not merely antagonistic. The possibility of such an affirmative transformation is perhaps best articulated within the context of the narrative paradigm, in the rhetorical realm of literature. Woolf (1978)

indicates the impact of subscribing to the discourse of negative difference on human consciousness in the final chapter of *A Room of One's Own*: "Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of mind" (p. 145). The challenge for contemporary critics is to remove this interference, to begin to give voice to that element of the other that is within each of us, and find within discourse the possibility of achieving a unity of mind and method that transcends and transforms negative difference.

Certainly, this is what Baldwin (1974) does with the character of Tish: he transcends the reality of gender in order to live within the space of *the other*, and this is a rhetorical move. Lanham (1976) amplifies the possibility of making such a move when he writes that rhetoric "provided a training in tolerance, if by that we mean getting inside another's skull and looking out," and goes on to explain that rhetoric teaches what is perhaps the most important lesson of being human: forgiveness. "For what is forgiveness but the acknowledgement that the sinner sinning is not truly himself, but plays a misguided role? If always truly ourselves, which of us shall scape hanging?" (pp. 7, 8). If we can make this rhetorical move in the realm of fiction, perhaps we can learn to make it in the realm of critical theory and eventually in the realm of social praxis as well.

The rhetoric of which Lanham speaks seems peculiarly different than the traditional view of rhetoric that we have inherited, defined by philosophy and limited to the "forms and mannerisms" of persuasive discourse. The traditional view, Lanham suggests, is in opposition to the actual practice of rhetoric, and this opposition "goes far to explain the two persistently puzzling facts about the history of rhetoric: why it has been so deplored and why it has so endured" (p. 5). Philosophy for centuries has denigrated rhetoric in a fashion similar to the way Europeans have denigrated Africans and men have denigrated women, through critical discourses that have focused on, and reified, *essential* differences. "Such criticism," writes Lanham, "points to differences so fundamental they indicate a wholly different way of looking at the world" (p. 5).

Certainly, this is what contemporary critics in race, gender and language studies are suggesting, and many have focused the reconstruction of rhetoric on articulating afrocentric, female, and non-persuasive linguistic strategies. Arthur Smith (Asante, 1974) suggests that "*Rhetoric as concept is foreign to the traditional African ethos*," primarily because of its emphasis on persuasion (p. 139). Gearhart (1979), in "The Womanization of Rhetoric," equates rhetoric as persuasion with violence. "My indictment of our discipline of rhetoric springs from my belief that any intent to persuade is an act of violence" (p. 195), she declares. Young, Becker, and Pike (1970) have pointed to the importance of Rogerian rhetoric as an alternative to persuasive discourse, and echo Gearhart's concerns by observing that "users of this strategy deliberately avoid conventional persuasive structures and techniques because these devices tend to produce a sense of threat," which is precisely what users are trying to avoid (p. 275).

In order to understand this concern with persuasion we might begin with the Platonic dialogue *Gorgias*. In this dialogue, Socrates questions Gorgias and his two students, Callicles and Polus, and induces them to admit that rhetoric has to do with persuasion. Using dialectic, the question and answer method of philosophy that emphasizes definition and through which an understanding of *true* reality can be achieved. Socrates questions Gorgias until he admits that rhetoric is "a creator of persuasion." At this point Socrates goes on to argue that rhetoric is, in fact, not an art, but a mere set of techniques used to pander to an audience. This argument has shaped definitions of rhetoric from that time forward.

However, it seems unlikely that Gorgias would have defined rhetoric as persuasion when he stated in the *Encomium of Helen* that "persuasion by speech is equivalent to abduction by force" (Freeman, 1977, p. 132). Gorgias, who readily admitted to being a teacher of rhetoric, called into question the Platonic assertion of the primacy of dialectic, and this is the basis of Socrates' attack on rhetoric. Pirsig (1985), in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, concurs: "Socrates is not using dialectic to understand rhetoric, he is using it to destroy it, or at

least to bring it into disrepute, and so his questions are not real questions at all—they are word traps which Gorgias and his fellow rhetoricians fall into” (p. 333). Pirsig sees the debate between philosophy and rhetoric in terms of the conflict between *classical* and *romantic* reality, and arrives at a conclusion similar to Lanham’s: “What you have here is a conflict of *visions of reality*” (p. 49).

Pirsig’s character Phaedrus counters the definition of rhetoric as persuasion with the concept of rhetoric as quality, and in his discussion of the “classic-romantic dichotomy” points out the underlying logic that separates the two: “Persons tend to think and feel exclusively in one mode or the other and in doing so tend to misunderstand and underestimate what the other mode is all about. But no one is willing to give up the truth as he sees it.” Pirsig’s insights touch on the problem of complicity in terms of the agreement to disagree, which points toward the importance of the philosophical definition of rhetoric as persuasion. When viewed as persuasion, rhetoric is used to impart the knowledge of a pre-existent reality, one arrived at through dialectical attenuation and understanding. This is the conceptualization of rhetoric that we have inherited from Aristotle, who defined rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering in the particular case the available means of persuasion,” and conceptualized it as “the counterpart of dialectic.” It is also the definition of rhetoric articulated in the Platonic dialogue, *Phaedrus*.

The *Phaedrus* initially seems to be a reversal of Socrates’s earlier condemnation of rhetoric, but actually it is an explanation of the hierarchical relationship between rhetoric, dialectic, and knowledge. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggests that rhetoric can be an art of persuasion, but only when used by the dialecticians, who alone have an understanding of *true* reality. Socrates equates dialectic with love, and argues that the dialectician understands the true nature of human souls and uses rhetoric accordingly to lead each soul toward the light of truth. The philosopher, who is the consummate dialectician, is the guardian of the knowledge of *true* reality, which is arrived at through the process of definition and which distinguishes things in terms of their natures. This is the underlying logic of essentialist epistemology, or *serious*

reality, and it attempts to free us from rhetoric in the same way that the Socratic charioteer attempts to free us from the dark horse of the soul that would lead us from the singularity of *true* reality.

This dark horse is the same figure of negation that Gates and Whitson explicate, and it is at this juncture that the relationship between rhetoric, race, and gender becomes quite clear. The rhetoric of contemporary race, gender, and literature goes beyond a rhetoric of persuasion—one which reflects a pre-existent reality—and offers the possibility of a *rhetoric of coherence*, one that defines and constructs reality in such a way as to resolve the problem of privileging one position at the expense of another. Coherence allows us to consider seemingly competitive positions as complementary, offers an excellent metaphysical system for a reconceptualization of essence, and emerges in rhetoric in two ways: metaphysically and epistemologically.

Metaphysically, coherence represents the tendency of rhetoric, as Lanham observes (1976), to offer itself as “a coherent counter-statement to ‘serious’ reality” (p. 6), and, epistemologically, coherence theory provides the foundations of knowing, within which rhetoric can assert itself as a legitimate science of symbolism. Coherence theory synthesizes alternative possibilities by focusing on their shared and mutually dependent foundations, and views all propositions as contingent upon, and thus inseparable from, one another. Coherence theory, which is characterized by an epistemic stance, as Chisolm (1966) observes, posits “a being for whom all truths are evident, but also, that each of us is identical with that being, and therefore with each other” (p. 113). It transcends essentialist conceptualizations of knowing and being by positing that the truth of a given proposition must be measured in terms of its context, i.e. in relation to its assumptive presuppositions and to all of the other propositions with which it is consistent *and* inconsistent.

Coherence theory reconstructs the traditional relationship between rhetoric and philosophy precisely because it points to the underlying complementariness of any ontological or epistemological stance. Philosophy can no longer distinguish or separate itself from rhetoric without

reference to the extent to which they are interrelated and contingent upon one another. This reconstruction transforms the debate between rhetoric and philosophy, and, through implication, our conceptualization of the negative difference of race and gender as well. The debate between philosophy and rhetoric has two purposes closely aligned with those that circumscribe antagonisms of race and gender: first, to privilege one position at the expense of the other by constructing an arbitrary distinction between the two; and, second, to reify the first position by using the second to legitimize the first as essentially real. *Real* reality must invent *the inferior other* in order to remain real, in order to survive. This is best achieved by harnessing the power of the word to disempower the word and by articulating in language an argumentative discourse that fails to apply its own principles to itself.

Criticism is that discourse. And to the extent that radical critics, too, engage in critique and assert the existence of essential differences through that critique, they participate in the discourse of negative difference. Therein lies their complicity. Radical criticism cannot escape that complicity as long as it attempts to

ignore the simple fact that no case can be argued, no proposition stated—however radical in its intent—without falling back on the conceptual resources vested in natural language. And that language is in turn shot through with all the anthropocentric “metaphysical” meanings which determine its very logic and intelligibility. (Norris, 1987, p. 22)

When critics participate in argumentative critical discourse they are grounded in the very epistemological sensibility that they hope to transcend. They are privileged by the theory of knowledge that, ostensibly, they are calling into question.

Radical criticism, seduced by the very epistemic stance that it has called into question, is merely another manifestation of essentialism’s articulatory power. This seduction—this re-articulation of the discourse of negative difference—poses an important challenge in terms of radical criticism’s ability to articulate a

method that transcends the simplistic negativity of merely rejecting the language from which it arises. Radical criticism, in short, must acknowledge its complicity before it can transcend the discourse of negative difference in which it is grounded and recognize that the sociological realities of race, gender, and language are deeply rooted in the common ground of *human* consciousness and its classification and symbol systems.

A reconstruction of the insights of Kress and Hodge (1979) suggests directions for further theory and practice.

The basic system of classification is itself abstract, and isn’t manifest until it is made actual by human agents engaged in social interaction. This abstract character is its source of strength, in that the system itself is never scrutinized, so it is not usually open to criticism’s weakness, because it is constantly being subtly renegotiated by individuals who are responding to forces outside the language system. Classification only exists in discourse, and discourse is always at risk. (p. 64)

Rhetoric allows us to call discourse into question, and a rhetoric of coherence will allow us to renegotiate the risks of interaction and perhaps transform our classification systems so that we might emphasize similarity and affirmation.

In constructing a coherent theory of rhetoric, we need to recognize the complicity that is created by negation, both in symbolic and social interaction. As Kress and Hodge observe, “Negatives can create a universe of alternative meanings, which the speaker formally renounces but which exist as a result of his renunciation. His relationship to his meaning is peculiarly ambivalent” (p. 145). As we begin to scrutinize, reconceptualize, and reconstruct our classification system, we will find forces within the language that will formulate a discourse devoid of domination; one which, in its affirmative approach to language, thought, and action, will be both radical and revolutionary. Such an approach to language will enable critics to engage in a rhetoric that actively recognizes and seeks to transcend the illusory black and white divisions of race, gender, and the language of negative difference.