Whose Meanings? Resignifying Voices and Their Social Locations

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Whose Meanings?
Resignifying Voices and Their Social Locations

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My philosophical reflections in this essay will revolve around the following question linking meaning and identity: What is the relationship between cultural products and the individuals and groups that create them? More specifically, what is the relation between racial and ethnic meanings and the racial and ethnic groups in which they originate? There are two extreme semantic views that answer this question in highly problematic and inappropriate ways. On the one hand, there are those who tie meanings to their originating expressive communities in a rigid way, claiming that there are proprietary relations between semantic structures and the people who created them. On the other hand, there are those who think that meanings can be completely detached from their originating cultural contexts and completely decoupled from the experiences of their users, becoming portable semantic structures as soon as they are created, that is, becoming usable by anybody in any context. Since meanings are treated as properties to fight over by these polarized views, I will use an economic metaphor to analyze and discuss them. I will call the first semantic view the Monopoly Model and the second one the Free Trade Model. By contrast, my own view departs from these economic views of meaning as property and understands meanings as relational—as complex sets of relations or relational structures—rather than as property.

In the first section of this article, drawing on Alain Locke and Pierre Bourdieu, I will identify the pitfalls of polarized (economic) semantic models and will articulate a critique of their central assumptions. In section 2, I will sketch my relational model of ethnic and racial meanings, which can overcome the difficulties of the existing polarized views. My discussion will highlight the opportunities and obstacles that exist for subversion and symbolic transformations in our cultural practices, trying to show how they are either obscured or clarified by competing semantic models.
1. The Dangers of Cultural Monopoly and Free Trade

Whom does the great art produced by the Harlem Renaissance belong to? And the political values and ideals articulated by the civil rights movement? To African Americans? To all of us? And do African Americans have a more legitimate right to appropriate the products of the cultural movements of the African diaspora (e.g., the Negritude movement) as well as those of cultural movements in continental Africa? It is hard to deny the importance of recognizing that these are the cultural achievements of peoples of African descent. At the same time, it is also hard to deny the importance of these cultural movements and their products being available to everybody. These two insights about the crucial importance of cultural affiliation and cultural availability will guide my reflections on racial and ethnic meanings. Although often ignored in the recent literature, these two fundamental insights were forcefully articulated by classic American philosophers such as Alain Locke.

In the 1920s Locke called attention to the cultural heritage that “New Negroes” were articulating and putting into use in their cultural practices. According to Locke, the Harlem Negroes were reclaiming their past cultural agency as well as remaking their own self-image in their present and for their future. Through this new cultural agency, Locke argues, the New Negro was achieving “a common consciousness,” attaining “a life in common”: “In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises to be—a race capital” (1925, 7; emphasis added). This Lockean notion of “race capital” can be understood in Bourdieuan terms as a form of “cultural capital.” The overall value of one’s modes of expression is what Pierre Bourdieu calls one’s cultural capital, which determines the profits that one can make in cultural exchanges. These profits can be gains in social status and influence, but sometimes they are direct economic profits: for example, the profit of the use of language in a job interview (that is, speaking with a certain diction, in a masculine or feminine way, using certain terms, etc.). Bourdieu talks about the cultural capital that particular individuals accrue in their lives and exhibit in their symbolic performance, but he also talks about the cultural capital that groups have or lack, which consists in the cultural resources appropriated by that group (whether of their own making or taken from others) and which members of that group can partake in to a greater or lesser extent.

The notion of a cultural capital can be used to identify different forms of cultural exploitation that take place through the expropriation of the cultural products of some people for the gains of others (e.g., the exploitation of hip-hop by record labels and suburban audiences). This kind of cultural capital is formed through symbolic spoliation and dispossession, that is, through the subordination of the symbolic agency of certain people and the appropriation of their symbolic products for the benefit of others. But the notion of a cultural capital can also be used in a positive way to call attention to the symbolic and cultural resources...
of a group and to facilitate its self-empowerment (as Locke did with his notion of “race capital”). This positive notion of cultural capital has come under attack in the recent literature on race and ethnicity. Many have voiced the objection that the idea of a cultural capital as the possession of a racial or ethnic group is intrinsically exclusionary and oppressive. This objection arises for any account of race or ethnicity that appeals to a common cultural heritage of the group. In fact, some have argued that the very notions of “race” and “ethnicity” are intrinsically exclusionary and oppressive because their use preserves social injustices that are inscribed in them, rigidly separating individuals into groups and implicitly legitimating the differential access to cultural and material resources. This is the view defended by David Hollinger in *Postethnic America* (2000). According to Hollinger’s postethnic perspective, cultural objects, ideals, and institutions belong to humankind and not to any group in particular; and to claim otherwise is inherently oppressive because it tacitly justifies that certain groups be prevented from enjoying cultural products and resources. Let me briefly discuss this critique of the notion of a cultural capital in order to identify what is right and what is wrong in it. What is right—I will try to show—is that cultural products cannot be monopolized. But, despite the problematic (and ultimately distorting) economic language, there is still something important that can and should be salvaged from the notion of a cultural capital.

Hollinger terms the appropriation of cultural products by a particular group “the will to descend,” which he characterizes as the illegitimate aspiration of “seeking empowerment through genealogy” (2000, 126). In order to show why this genealogical empowerment should be resisted, Hollinger takes as an example the democratic and egalitarian ideals of American culture. He asks rhetorically: “Are they not European?” (2000, 125). They are indeed, but, he remarks, “it should not follow that Euro-Americans of today have a greater claim on these ideals than anyone else” (2000, 125–26). There are two important points to consider here. In the first place, note the sociopolitical aspects of the case that Hollinger offers for your consideration. Hollinger’s choice of example is very revealing. This instance of “the will to descend” is unacceptable, among other things, because the group that seeks empowerment through genealogy already has all the power and, therefore, is using genealogy to legitimate its monopoly of power and to perpetuate an existing relation of domination. But would we say the same about the genealogical empowerment of disadvantaged groups that have not yet been allowed to enjoy and exploit the cultural products of their own agency? Whether or not the genealogical empowerment of a group is desirable depends on the context and the socioeconomic and political specifics of the case. The particular position of the group in question in relation to other groups is of paramount importance. However, Hollinger ignores this element entirely; and he goes on to argue that since the cultural appropriation of ideals and institutions is clearly wrong and exclusionary when done by Euro-Americans, it must also be so when done by other groups (regardless of their socioeconomic status
and political power). But genealogical empowerment is simply not the same for groups in a position of power and for groups that have been dispossessed of their own cultural agency.

In the second place, the key issue is whether a cultural capital is claimed as the exclusive possession of a group or as a cultural contribution of the group to society that can be used and enjoyed by other groups as well. If the appropriation of cultural products involves exclusivity, then it has the potential to be oppressive. Hollinger assumes that all instances of cultural appropriation are of this kind, but this is not necessarily the case. It is true that the language of “possession,” “capital,” “heritage,” and so on does have those exclusionary connotations. But claiming one’s cultural products as one’s own does not have to be done to the exclusion of others; claiming one’s heritage does not have to be exclusionary if one is willing to share. It is certainly possible to call attention to the link between certain ideas, artifacts, styles, institutions, and so forth and the practices and traditions of one’s group while offering these cultural products as contributions for the use and enjoyment of other groups in a multicultural society. This is indeed Locke’s view. Although he emphasizes the Negro’s cultural capital, Locke does not hold an exclusionary view. What he calls “the principle of cultural reciprocity” (cf. Harris 1991, 206) disarms Hollinger’s objection. In fact, Locke could have written the following passage as a rebuttal to Hollinger:

Culture-goods, once evolved, are no longer the exclusive property of the race or people that originate them. They belong to all who can use them; and belong most to those who can use them best. But for all the limitless exchange and transplanting of culture, it cannot be artificially manufactured; it grows. And so far as I can understand history, it is always a folk-product, with the form and flavor of a particular people and place, that is to say, for all its subsequent universality, culture has roots and grows in that social soil which, for want of a better term, we call “race.” (Harris 1991, 206; emphasis added)

Whereas the Harlem Renaissance was unquestionably the cultural achievement of African Americans, the civil rights movement was far more the accomplishment of a complex coalition in which African Americans played a predominant, but not the sole, role. It is only in this way that the meaning of a cultural product or symbol can be preserved as well as expanded across different contexts. And this is not only a point about genealogy but also a point about the projectability of semantic trajectories: the life of meanings cannot be fully controlled and rigidly fixed because it is always open into the future, that is, because it is in the hands of future users. Therefore, even if a meaning has been recirculating exclusively within the boundaries of a particular group, it is still possible for that meaning to reach eventually beyond those boundaries and to be used and resignified by members of other groups. But although the cultural contributions of a group can be used in a variety of linguistic markets by a variety of linguistic agents, doesn’t this exportability have limitations and dangers? Doesn’t the social location of their
users affect how meanings are recirculated (reproduced and reinterpreted)? Does the resignification of “spic” by Hispanics, of “nigger” by people of color, of “faggot” by queers have the same semantic implications for all users? I want to call attention to important dangers and potential distortions that appear in unqualified claims of exportability. Just as we saw that there is nothing wrong with “cultural heritages” and “cultural capitals” as long as they do not become exclusionary, we will see that there is nothing wrong with “importing” and “exporting” as long as these forms of cultural exchanges are not predicated on the dangerous illusion of a free trade that is independent of origins and genealogical trajectories, that is, as long as they do not involve the complete erasure of history, context, and social location. In other words, the problems arise with assumptions of exclusivity and complete exportability, which give rise to the Monopoly Model and the Free Trade Model, respectively. In what follows I will call attention to a central problem of the latter: the problem of co-optation, which can also be called the problem of appropriation, incorporation, or assimilation.

Co-optation does not always take the form of blatant economic exploitation and ideological instrumentalization. It can consist simply in a reabsorption (often quite unintentional) of new meanings into the mainstream, in the neutralization of their subversive power. New constellations of meanings are sometimes redirected by users who put them at the service of old ideologies, and thus they lose their transformative potential. Even allies of disempowered groups often fall victim to the problem of co-optation, indulging in problematic forms of appropriation or assimilation without even being aware of the problem. Even sympathetic and friendly users of transformative meanings often contribute to their co-optation. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre is to be commended for engaging with black intellectuals of his time, but nonetheless he made problematic use of the emerging race consciousness in the Negritude movement and of the articulation of their experiences and ideals. In Orphée Noir Sartre praises the Negritude poets and calls their poetry “the only great revolutionary poetry” (2001, 117), which is transformative for all of us. He describes the Negritude poet as “a beacon and a mirror,” “the herald—half prophet and half partisan—who will tear negritude out of himself in order to offer it to the world” (2001, 119). But in giving Negritude a universal mission Sartre de-racialized the poetic and liberatory meanings that this cultural movement was formulating: “I should like to show that this poetry—which seems racial at first—is actually a hymn by everyone for everyone” (2001, 117). With this universalization, the meanings articulated by the Negritude movement lose their specificity; the particular experiences of oppression that Negritude poets give voice to are assimilated to the experience of any form of oppression and to the class struggle that is claimed to be at the root of any oppression; and the experiences of suffering within racial oppression are treated as the universal symbol of the suffering of any human being: “One might call ngritude a kind of Passion: the black who is conscious of himself sees himself as the man who has taken the whole of human suffering upon himself and suffers for all, even for the
white” (Sartre 2001, 132–33). In this way an unfair burden is being imposed on the oppressed, who is treated as a sacrificial lamb whose suffering is exploited for the redemption of all. But besides (or alongside) this highly problematic universalization, Sartre’s elucidation and use of the Negritude movement also involve an instrumentalization that puts the liberatory potential of this cultural movement at the service of another (certainly related, but more general) movement of liberation: the Marxist liberation of the economically dispossessed. Here we have an example of how an advocate of the oppressed can co-opt their voices by falling into the illusion of the complete detachability or exportability of their meanings. Frantz Fanon’s critical reaction to Sartre’s co-optation shows very clearly what goes into the formation of this illusion and the kind of blindness involved in the co-optation in which it results.

Fanon’s critique of Sartre is summarized in his claim that “Orphée Noir is an event in the intellectualization of the experience of being black” (1967, 134). With this intellectualization, the specificity and density of black experience are lost. In Sartre’s hands, the meanings crafted by Negritude poets become devoid of their specific experiential content; they are intellectualized, rendered abstract and usable by humanity. The liberatory meanings of Negritude lose their particularity and are reabsorbed by a preexisting ideology of liberation: “And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger’s misery, my bad nigger’s teeth, my bad nigger’s hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for the turn of history” (Fanon 1967, 134). Fanon describes this Sartrean appropriation as a robbery: “When I read [Orphée Noir], I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance” (1967, 133). And the impact of this illegitimate appropriation is described by Fanon as the destruction of all hope, the shattering of a dream: “At the very moment when I was trying to grasp my own being, Sartre, who remained The Other, gave me a name and thus shattered my last illusion” (1967, 137). According to Fanon, Sartre’s intellectualization of black experience stems from a particular kind of forgetting: “Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man” (1967, 138). Sartre forgot who he is and the differences between his experiential standpoint and that of others. This forgetting creates the illusions of exportability and universalization that distort the black experiences of suffering. There is no freestanding experience of human suffering but only particular forms of suffering tied to particular social locations and experiential standpoints. Sartre’s imposition of an abstract, overarching narrative (the dialectic of class struggle) on the experience and agency of colonized peoples of color is made possible by this existential forgetting for which he has to take responsibility. Robert Bernasconi has elucidated Fanon’s critique of Sartre as an exercise in the epistemology of ignorance. According to Bernasconi, what Fanon’s critique does is to identify a particular kind of ignorance: “That Sartre forgot the difference between black and white experience of the body suggests that
if he knew at all, it was only intellectually: he did not really know” (2007, 237). And this form of ignorance turns Sartre’s resignification of the words of Negritude poets into a problematic form of co-optation. This is how Bernasconi describes the Sartrean co-optation: “When Sartre . . . says what Césaire had already said, it takes on another meaning because it reinscribes the white gaze” (2007, 236).

Sartre’s imposition of an abstract, overarching narrative on the experience and agency of colonized peoples of color results in his proclaiming the self-overcoming of black subjectivity, seeing the achievement of race consciousness as a transitory step in the dialectic of class struggle. According to Sartre, race consciousness will eventually lead to its own self-dissolution once it serves its purpose. And racial solidarity is thus seen merely as a step in a larger process of liberation. This proclamation of the overcoming of race—“the abolition of racial differences” (2001, 118)—is particularly problematic given the time at which it was issued (by Sartre in 1948) and given the social location from which it was issued (that of Sartre’s). More recently, there has been a renewed clamor about the abolition of racial and ethnic differences. Proclaiming the end of race and ethnicity, Hollinger contends that the ethnic roots of our cultural products should be de-emphasized: “At issue is how much of our appreciation for a doctrine or a work of art or an institution should be based on its perceived ethno-racial ancestry. From a postethnic perspective, the answer is, not much” (2000, 127). But the exploitation of cultural resources without the awareness and appreciation of their ethnic dimension is dangerous and irresponsible, for it amounts to being unwilling to control the oppressive consequences that such exploitation can have for the groups in which those resources originated. Hollinger’s claim that “Egypt, surely, belongs to us all, and so, too, does democracy” (2000, 128) is both right and wrong. It is correct insofar as it is a way of emphasizing the availability that these cultural products have (or should have). But it is incorrect insofar as it denies the different relationships or linkages that different groups have to these products.

The idea of culture as the universal property of humankind and not of any group or individual in particular is closely linked to the picture of language as a universal “treasure” in which everybody can partake equally. This is the philosophical picture that is the target of Pierre Bourdieu’s critique in *Language and Symbolic Power*. Bourdieu argues that a wide range of philosophers and linguists from Saussure to Chomsky have offered highly abstract and idealized pictures of language, which create the false impression that speakers are unconstrained in their linguistic behavior, making them blind to their linguistic oppression. Abstract philosophical accounts of linguistic competence are bound up with dangerous fictions of freedom and autonomy. These fictions rest on a (socially and politically dangerous) illusion that remains in the background: the myth of equality. This illusory equality gives ideological support to the Free Trade Model of meaning and hides the danger of co-optation, disguising exploitative symbolic appropriations as legitimate exercises of symbolic agency in a leveled field of free agents.
It is of paramount importance to recognize that in actual linguistic communities there is no equal access to linguistic resources. There are differences in upbringing, in schooling, in access to higher learning, and more generally in the social environment in which one leads one’s life. And these differences result in the mastery of different vocabularies and rhetorical devices; in different pronunciations, dictions, and writing styles; and in different discursive competences. It is important to note that language is not used in an abstract space of logical relations but in a social space that is structured by power relations. Bourdieu refers to communicative contexts as linguistic markets to emphasize the socioeconomic dimension of linguistic exchanges. In a linguistic market some people accumulate gains and accrue linguistic capital, while others accumulate losses and thus become linguistically dispossessed. The phenomenon of linguistic dispossession cannot be accommodated in formal and abstract accounts of linguistic competence, which ignore the unequal distribution of linguistic resources in actual linguistic communities. But only for those who have a good amount of linguistic capital can it make sense to abstract from the obstacles and inequalities that handicap verbal behavior and to explain linguistic skills with ideal models of the perfect speaker. Idealized accounts of linguistic competence speak from a position of privilege; and they can only benefit those who have not suffered from exclusions and marginalization in linguistic communities. 6

The alleged universal access to meanings and the “free trade” of cultural products are distracting and dangerous illusions: they create an illusory sense of equality that hides conditions of oppression and distracts us from the cultural dispossession of particular groups, from the roots and consequences of their disempowerment in cultural practices. In this sense, the illusory sense of equality and unhindered access to cultural resources is a dangerous ideological tool. It obscures the fact that semantic appropriations very often are (and always can be) acts of co-optation. The myth of equality creates a false sense of free trade that hides disparities in cultural agency and in access to cultural resources. In the next section I will discuss some important conditions for the responsible use of symbolic resources; and in so doing I will sketch a pragmatic alternative to the Monopoly and Free Trade models of cultural transactions.

2. Responsible Cultural Agency: Relationality, Reconstruction, and Openness

In the previous section, following Bourdieu and others, I used an economic terminology to describe our symbolic interactions. This language is metaphorical, and although the economic metaphor does call attention to something important (i.e., the power relations and socioeconomic conditions that are involved in our symbolic transactions), this metaphor is also problematic and distorting. Meanings
are not adequately described as *possessions* because, as argued above, they are not fully controllable products of our agency. Another way to put the point is to say that meanings are always in the making and, therefore, cannot be considered finished objects and treated as possessions. For this reason, I think that in the end an adequate semantic model must abandon the economic metaphor and conceptualize symbolic interactions in different terms. The model I propose does so, and, therefore, it operates at a completely different conceptual level than the alternatives considered in the previous section—the Monopoly and Free Trade models. I call it the *Relational Model* because the core philosophical insight that this semantic model unpacks is that meanings are relational. Meanings are relational in the sense that they constitute relations through which different communicating subjectivities—actual and possible; past, present, and future—become connected and able to share their experiential perspectives. Through the use of meaningful signs experiential perspectives interact; they are positioned with respect to one another; and they become communicatively linked (even if not always in positive ways). Semantic relational structures are constantly being reshaped by their users, that is, by the particular agents who participate in symbolic interactions and become connected and able to share through them. Meanings operate in a relational network of social locations in which they are resignified differently by differently situated voices. We must keep in mind not only where a meaning is coming from—the past history from which it emerges—but also what our relation to its trajectory (or relevant set of multiple trajectories) is, what our social location is vis-à-vis that of other users, including those who created it. Semantic relationality has a temporal dimension, and, therefore, acknowledging the relational aspects of meaning in our symbolic interactions requires that we examine our relations with others in a double sense: both retrospectively and prospectively. The temporal trajectories that keep alive the semantic life of a symbol rest on the complex relationality of its differently situated users—a relationality that binds them together. This point about the relationality of social locations calls attention to important constraints and risks involved in the recirculation of meanings across racial and ethnic boundaries (or cultural boundaries, more generally).

The responsible use of the symbols and cultural products of a group requires, minimally, a critical awareness of their history and of their possible future trajectories. In what follows I will briefly discuss two important conditions for this critical awareness and responsible use: the *reconstruction* condition and the *openness* condition.

In the first place, a responsible use of a symbol requires some familiarity with its historicity and projectability. A crucial part of this familiarity is an informed and critical sense of the symbol’s origin and trajectory—often multiple origins and multiple trajectories. Only through this kind of familiarity can one become critically aware of the presuppositions and commitments that have been attached to the uses of a symbol, and only thus does one become capable of elucidating one’s normative attitudes toward it. This is necessary in order to
determine whether to use the symbol or to refuse to use it; whether to contribute to the trajectories that its uses may have developed; whether to undermine, reverse, or to subvert one or many of these trajectories; or whether to assume the burden of creating new paths that can redirect the use of the symbol and transform its meaning(s). Critical symbolic agency and responsible use require the kind of critical reflection that pragmatists have called *reconstruction*. The required familiarity with the historicity and projectability of symbols can only be achieved through a process of reconstruction that is both backward looking and forward looking, involving both a good deal of genealogical reflection—as emphasized by John Stuhr’s *genealogical pragmatism* (1997)—and a critical exploration of possibilities for resignification—as underscored by the *experimentalism* of the pragmatist tradition. So I will term this first condition for responsible symbolic agency the *reconstruction condition*. This condition, uncontroversial as it may seem at first glance, would not be accepted by everybody. In particular, it would be rejected by proponents of the unqualified exportability of cultural products and universal “free trade,” such as Hollinger.

On Hollinger’s view, the ethnic roots of cultural products do not play an active role in their appreciation and can become obstacles for their use and enjoyment; they are something accidental to be transcended, mainly negative (biased) aspects to be overcome. In this sense Hollinger refers to examples of cultural products that, despite the ethnic specificity of their origins, have become the universal patrimony of humankind: for example, the scientific and artistic achievements of ancient Egypt. But the crucial mistake here is to think that one *cannot* make cultural products available universally and at the same time develop an appreciation for their ethnic ancestry, that we have to choose between these two things, that one can only be done at the expense of the other. This error gives plausibility to the claim that the cost of expanding the availability of cultural products is to detach them from their ethnic roots and to minimize the value of their ethnic aspects. But this is simply wrong. In fact, making cultural products available outside the cultural contexts in which they were developed, far from being incompatible with, actually *requires* an appreciation of their ethnic ancestry. Such an appreciation is a precondition for the full enjoyment and the responsible use of these products.

For better or for worse, cultural products and resources do not belong to all of us equally. But this does not mean that we cannot all use them or enjoy them; we can, but we will do so differently. For better or for worse, the cultural history of a people is inscribed (in various ways) in the ideas, artifacts, and institutions that they produce. It is true that these cultural “inscriptions” can become biases that have to be overcome. But in that case an appreciation for ethnic ancestry is all the more important if we want the overcoming of bias to be successful and a (real) cultural transformation to obtain. And, of course, cultural inscriptions are not always burdens for social development and progress that have to be countered and lifted; they can be (and typically are) reservoirs of possibilities that can be
exploited by many groups in many different ways (sometimes in old and customary ways, sometimes in novel and creative ways). In other words, cultural inscriptions can be resources, indeed cultural capitals. But note that, as articulated here, the notion of a cultural capital refers to the range of potentialities that have been (or can be) expressed and realized by the members of a group. These potentialities need to be uncovered and appropriated through a genealogical and projective reconstruction, for the members of the group are not automatically aware and in control of their cultural capital. Also, as argued above, the potentialities of a cultural capital are never the exclusive property of a single group, and its (actual and possible) trajectories are always open to complex processes of intra- and intergroup negotiations. Openness to these negotiations is the second crucial condition for responsible symbolic agency that I want to identify and briefly discuss.

The openness condition for responsible cultural agency is grounded in a general point about the relational nature of symbolic agency, namely, that our singular voices are always entangled with the voices of others and that it is important to recognize these relations and to be open to a process of negotiation and mutual influence with these plural and heterogeneous voices. Given the relations of mutual dependence between groups and their cultural agency, we cannot make sense of the development of each group and its cultural capital independently of other groups and their cultural capitals. Especially in today’s globalized world and multicultural societies, groups develop together, and they become mutually enriched or impoverished in and through their interactions. The simultaneous formations and transformations of interrelated groups are forged in their interactions and mutual adjustments. (In Deweyan language, the formation of group identity is transactional.) Groups just cannot develop independently of one another: even a self-professed isolationism makes the development of the group crucially dependent on a particular relation to and attitude toward other groups. Here Alain Locke is inspiring, for he explicitly denounced the myth of social and racial separatism: “The fiction is that the life of the races is separate, and increasingly so. The fact is that they have touched too closely at the unfavorable and too lightly at the favorable levels” (1925, 9). Locke emphasized that the “new American attitude” that the New Negro was helping to create was characterized by a “closer understanding” of the different racial and ethnic groups that compose American society (1925, 10). This “new American attitude” is to be understood interactionally, that is, as maintained by the different racial and ethnic groups in their continued communication, cultural exchanges, and mutual understanding of their respective expressive and artistic agency.

To conclude, I want to call attention to the fundamental significance of the social and dialectical aspects of the pragmatic semantic model that emerges from the two conditions for responsible agency I have formulated in this section. The achievement of critical familiarity with a symbol’s history and possible futures requires a far-reaching exploration that goes well beyond the parochial domains of one’s own experiences or the experiences of one’s group. This exploration
typically involves the reconstruction and critique of the collective experience of many groups; and it often requires opening channels of interaction and paths of communication between these groups so as to facilitate their mutual understanding. This puts discursive responsibility in a social light. As Judith Butler (1997)—among others—has argued, the responsibility of speakers is typically misconstrued because it is conceived in an absolute sense as deriving from an autonomous volitional source that chooses its own acts of enunciation. In the case of hate speech, for example, the person who uses injurious language is often viewed as the sole “culpable agent, as if the speaker were at the origin of such speech” (Butler 1997, 39). Of course, an individual speaker is not the originator of symbolic domination or of the performative chains through which this domination is sustained; but he or she is an active participant in the ongoing process of symbolic subjugation, and he or she contributes to the chains of performative iterations through which this subjection is maintained and reproduced. Therefore, speakers must assume responsibility for their contributions to the perpetuation of symbolic violence and symbolic domination. As Butler explains it: “The speaker renews the linguistic tokens of a community, reissuing and reinvigorating such speech. Responsibility is thus linked with speech as repetition, not as origination” (1997, 39; emphasis added).

Drawing on Butler’s account of resignifying agency, I have articulated a notion of discursive responsibility that I term echoing responsibility (2006, see esp. chap. 3). On my view, a speaker must assume responsibility for his or her speech acts as a contribution to a chain of linguistic performances that echo one another. Accordingly, discursive responsibility concerns how to contribute to performative sequences, how to continue or discontinue them, how to echo voices and their performances in and through these chains. As discursive agents, we are responsible for echoing or not echoing voices and their speech acts (including both utterances and silences). Echoing responsibility is a more robust notion than it may seem at first sight, for it concerns crucial normative issues and the mobilization of our discursive powers to tackle these issues. The issues we are confronted with as speakers are whether a legacy of use is worth maintaining and in what way. In any performative chain in which we participate we should ask ourselves: What are the transformations that are needed in this chain, if any, and how can they be produced? These normative questions involved in the echoing responsibility of speakers reveal that although our discursive agency is not autonomous, it contains nonetheless tremendous transformative powers that often go unrecognized and unexploited. Our echoing responsibility refers to the negotiations that are constantly taking place in our communicative exchanges and discursive responsiveness to one another. Although we are typically not aware of these ongoing discursive negotiations, our speech acts are nonetheless situated in them; and given the position our speech acts come to occupy in performative sequences, they make particular contributions to the implicit negotiations that animate the performative chains. Our discursive agency should be conceived as a
relational process of negotiation, of engaging and contending, of forging relations of continuity and discontinuity. When we speak, we are implicitly negotiating legacies of use with our interlocutors as well as with possible communication partners from the past and from the future. The relational processes through which the meaning and force of our speech acts are manufactured and reproduced, made and remade, are processes of resignification or *echoing.* This pragmatic notion of responsible, resignifying agency based on reconstruction and relational openness should serve as an antidote to the problematic semantic models that encourage “monopoly” or “free trade.”

**Notes**

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1. As Bourdieu (1991) has shown, symbolic spoliation and dispossession relate to class oppression in multiple and complex ways: being grounded in it while at the same time legitimating it, facilitating it, and reinforcing it.

2. Hollinger writes, “The will to descend has already been indulged, in a multitude of fields, to the benefit of Europeans and of white Americans. Correcting this need not mean cynically turning the tables and indulging this will on behalf of some other contemporary group” (2000, 127).

3. The image of the future of a signifier being “in the hands” of its users has been metaphorically depicted in a parable by Toni Morrison quoted and discussed by Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech* (1997). I have also analyzed this parable and discussed its implications for issues of symbolic agency and semantic instability in my *Speaking from Elsewhere* (2006).

4. For vibrant discussions of different forms of racial ignorance, see Sullivan and Tuana 2007. This volume contains a multiplicity of perspectives within the emerging field of the epistemology of ignorance, which calls attention to our epistemic duties and to the social and political dimensions of our epistemic practices of knowing and ignoring. See Medina forthcoming for a critical review.

5. Bourdieu calls it “the illusion of *linguistic communism*” (1991, 43).

6. As I have argued elsewhere (see the last chapter of *Speaking from Elsewhere* [2006]), it is socially and politically irresponsible simply to disregard the pervasive phenomenon of linguistic dispossession. This dispossession is most patent in those whose dialects, lingoes, or mannerisms have been marginalized and stigmatized.

7. See chapter 3 of Medina 2006. There I develop arguments that show that semantic relations cannot be conceived as proprietary relations.

8. My relational view of meaning is grounded in and inspired by a relational view of identity that has been developed in Latina feminism by Ofelia Schutte (2000), María Lugones (2003), and Sarah Hoagland (2007). I have also developed my own relational account of identity in “Identity Trouble” (2003).

9. This condition would be impoverished if it is understood only individualistically or academically: it is not only the task of individuals but also that of a community of users to inspect critically trajectories of use in a variety of ways (not just through the philological studies of academics but also artistically, politically, and socially, reaching all the corners of the cultural life of the community).

10. I have formulated a polyphonic view of symbolic agency that elaborates this point. See chapter 3 of my *Speaking from Elsewhere* (2006).

11. Now that Negro voices are heard, now that their cultural products become available to the whole of society, now that their artistic expressions find an audience, a set of “entirely new mutual attitudes” becomes possible—Locke argued (1925, 8). It is important to note that this interactive
and communicative view of the development of racial and ethnic groups in a multicultural society explores *enabling conditions* for the mutual enrichment of these groups, but it cannot provide a formula that guarantees success in interracial and interethnic relations. This view does not involve a naïve optimism or deterministic meliorism. It simply contends that mutual understanding makes it *possible* that groups support and enrich each other in their development. As Locke puts it: “It does not follow that if the Negro were better known, he would be better liked or better treated. But mutual understanding is basic for any subsequent cooperation and adjustment” (1925, 8–9).

12. My notion of echoing tries to broaden Butler’s notion of repetition or citation by including silences among the speech acts that resignify in performative chains (without explicitly repeating or citing). With the proper support of the discursive context in which speakers find themselves, a legacy of use can be echoed in a silence and critical demands can be imposed on this legacy by silent speakers. When properly contextualized, certain silences can be construed as the refusal to repeat, as a kind of *negative echoing*; and therefore, they constitute critical interventions in our performative chains. In our speech acts we can repeat words with fidelity or with a difference (whether a major or a minor twist), and in certain cases we can refuse to repeat at all. The general point is that all these forms of echoing are ways of resignifying. As Butler has recognized, the specific power of our discursive agency lies in the power of resignification. Accordingly, echoing responsibility is responsibility for resignification.

**Works Cited**


