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Response to Reviews of “The Colonization of Psychic Space: Toward a Psychoanalytic Social Theory”

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Before I begin my response, I would like to thank Professors Keltner and Winnubst for their thoughtful and provocative comments on *The Colonization of Psychic Space: Toward a Psychoanalytic Social Theory*. I would also like to say that I agree with Stacy Keltner that what psychoanalysis calls “the third” does not guarantee justice; and even though I transform the concept into one of social support for the subject position and subjectivity of each person, one person’s support may be another’s misery. I agree with Shannon Winnubst that no theory can completely account for sexism or racism or moreover differences between types of oppression; and colonization is not the beginning and end of the story, which is why throughout the book I try to identify points of resistance, contradiction, shifting power relations and

alternative cultural values (the second part of the book is entitled “The Secretion of Race and the Fluidity of Resistance” and includes an entire chapter on the “Fluidity of Power”). Certainly, by reinterpreting Kristeva’s reading of Freud’s totemic feast, I do not intend to identify indigenous cultures with animality or timelessness. Rather, I was pointing to a fantasy, nostalgia even, for a nonexistent timelessness, imagined as the temporality of the body (not of any particular culture) and associated with our stereotypes of what time must be like for animals. I am currently finishing a book, entitled *Animal Pedagogy and the Science of Kinship: The Role of “Animals” in the Creation of “Man,”* on the role of “animality” and “animals” in the philosophies of “man” that will provide a more nuanced interpretation of our fantasies about “the animal” in relation to “the human” and hopefully will go some distance to redress what Winnubst sees as my endorsement for Kristeva’s notion of timelessness.

By “totalizing,” Winnubst seems to mean generalizing, in which case any theory and any philosophy necessarily would be subject to her critique. We can’t even talk about “oppression” without making generalizations. In fact, the word makes sense only if there are some common elements that different types of oppression share. But to say that there are common features of oppression is not to say that all forms of oppression take the same shape or can be assimilated into the same set of characteristics, causes, or effects. As I have done throughout my work, I try to steer between extremes that do not reflect the complexities of life as we live it. It is not the case that we are identical in every aspect if we have shared features; and to have things in common does not mean to be the same. Indeed, the way that we inhabit those shared features may be radically different. Yet, it is also not the case that our differences separate us by an abyss that precludes any possible communication or relationship; to be different is not to be forever cut off from each other in essential ways that foreclose any similarities. Life is more complex. Throughout

Colonization, I try to suggest both similarities and differences between different types of oppression and different histories of oppression as part of my meditation on the meaning of oppression and how it operates in different contexts. To this end, history and context are precisely what I insist on adding to psychoanalysis in order to make it useful to social theory.

Following on my book *Witnessing*, in *Colonization* I emphasize both what I call subjectivity and what I call subject position. Our experience of ourselves as subjects is maintained in the tension between our subject positions and our subjectivity. Subject positions, although mobile, are constituted in our social interactions and our positions within our culture and context. They are determined by history and circumstance. Subject positions are our relations to the finite world of human history and relations—what we might call politics. Subjectivity, on the other hand, is experienced as the sense of agency and response-ability that are constituted in the infinite encounter with otherness, which is fundamentally ethical. And, although subjectivity is logically prior to any possible subject position, in our experience they are always profoundly interconnected. This is why our experience of our own subjectivity is the result of the productive tension between finite subject position and infinite response-ability of witnessing. In talking about the subject we must consider subject position because subjectivity is inherently political. One's social position and history profoundly influence one's very sense of oneself as an active agent in the world. Yet, the contradictions and inconsistencies in historical and social circumstances, and competing cultural values, guarantee that we are never completely determined by our subject position. It is possible to develop a sense of agency in spite of, or in resistance to, an oppressive social situation. In addition, the open structure of witnessing at the heart of subjectivity insures that establishing and reestablishing a positive inner witness is always possible. Moreover, along with the political dimension of subject positions, the infinite response-ability

constitutive of subjectivity makes it inherently ethical. We have an obligation to our founding possibility, the ability to respond.

This theory of subjectivity as ethical response-ability brings together political questions about race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference, and gender as they are experienced within particular cultures by insisting that subject position is an essential element of subjectivity, along with phenomenological questions about the nature of subjectivity and its relation to ethics. The tension between finite subject position and infinite response-ability becomes productive insofar as it makes ethics and politics of difference inherent in subjectivity itself. The double meaning of witnessing opens up the possibility of both an ethics of differences and a politics of differences at the heart of subjectivity.

In *Colonization*, I argue that we cannot comprehend either subjectivity or the subject position, either ethics or politics, without accounting for the unconscious. In order to address ethical or political injustice, we need to understand both conscious and unconscious motivations; we need to avow our own conscious and unconscious investments in violence. I argue that existentialist and psychoanalytic notions of alienation cover up specific forms of racist and sexist alienation that serve as the underside of subjectivity and the human condition. Many contemporary theorists maintain that alienation and violence are constitutive of subjectivity and humanity. I reject this thesis. Rather, I argue that these leveling notions of alienation and violence are symptomatic of the subject's anxiety and guilt over the oppression upon which his privileged position as subject rests and that rather than constitute subjectivity and humanity the alienation unique to oppression undermines them. I maintain that sublimation and forgiveness constitute subjectivity, not alienation. I explore the complex ways in which the alienation unique to oppression leads to depression, shame,

anger or violence, which are misread and misdiagnosed as individual or group pathologies and then used as rationale for more violent forms of oppression. I conclude that the affects of oppression—depression, shame, anger and alienation-- can be transformed into agency, individuality, solidarity, and community through sublimation and forgiveness.

In the course of my analysis, I develop a social theory of melancholy as a counter-balance to medical and psychological discourses of women's depression. I also develop a social theory of sublimation to explain the dynamics of the colonization of psychic space. Using, revising, expanding and reinterpreting traditional psychoanalytic theory, I offer a psychoanalytic social theory through my development of notions of social melancholy, social sublimation, and social forgiveness. I conclude by suggesting that a model of subjectivity based on what I develop as a notion of social forgiveness enables ethics in a way that models of subjectivity based on alienation cannot.

Stacy Keltner challenges my analysis of social melancholy, social sublimation, and social forgiveness by putting pressure on the psychoanalytic notion of the supportive third. I disagree with Keltner's suggestion that contemporary culture can do without the psychoanalytic third—she suggests that perhaps we are better off without it. My account of the psychoanalytic third is much broader than either Freud's or Kristeva's. Most basically, I am arguing that each individual must be able to find the resources within culture to positively value his or her own body and life-style. I associate the third with the possibility of sublimation. And, as I elaborate in my more recent book *Women as Weapons of War*, without possibilities for sublimating violent impulses, we act on them, which leads to violence and war. As Keltner rightly points out, the concepts of social sublimation or social forgiveness themselves cannot insure that resources that affirm one

person's values don't trample another's. Indeed, I address this very issue in *Colonization* when I discuss power differentials between the psychic resources given to some but not others. In a sense, the entire book is an attempt to think about inequities in the distribution of psychic resources—what we might call inequities in access to sublimation--that accompany inequities in the distribution of economic resources.