Editors’ Introduction

We chose the four articles featured in this volume foremost because they accord with and elaborate the principles of critical theory and social justice. What unifies these pieces is an ability to combine focus with openness. This factor we term their disruptive power, and it is the driving spirit behind this publication. We see in these pieces the demand to imagine something new in the face of totalizing systems of power; we see the power to redefine the terms of this engagement; we see a willingness to hope for the impossible. With such goals in mind, we were not seeking answers, already too aware that such a search would circumscribe our vision as editors. Rather, what captured us in each article was its ability to engender new lines of questioning.

And from questions follow new possibilities. Specifically, those of connection. Even—and maybe especially—in the case of an issue without a predetermined topic, it was the resonances felt between texts that determined the direction of this project. Even in the early stages, the pieces focused our attention on the problematics of postcoloniality as it functions within hegemonic but ambivalent terrains of power.

In the first featured piece, “Criminally Insane: Discursive Mutations of the Dangerous Individual,” we were struck by the epistemological possibilities at play within hegemony when it reflexes, spirals, turns inside-out. Sadie Mohler details this movement, one that mirrors Orientalism in its reliance on totalizing knowledge of the “other,” but in this case it is not the racialized Muslim or Middle or Far “Eastern” nation but the ambiguous, domestic, and thereby subversive “dangerous individual”—the psychopath—that both haunts and defines the normative order of personhood. Mohler traces the rise, involution, and multiplication of this discourse as it has proliferated from psychiatric diagnosis of the “other” to an undermining element in the formation of a coherent self under “us-them” paradigms, both challenging and reinforcing the modern injunction to “know thyself.” In particular, she directs our attention to the multiplicities of selves such a collapse produces and the evolution of technologies of the self in the age of Internet connectivity.

Mohler’s forays into discourse both anticipate and echo postcoloniality’s (if it even exists in the first place) trouble with language. But for Kate Keleher’s article, “The Hegemonic Ha: English in a Neoliberal Information Economy,” language’s fundamentally contested nature as a system of signs introduces into this aporia a critical ambivalence. Contending that the English language operates within the cultural, political, and economic circuits of transnational capitalism according to a modality of investment and exchange, Keleher’s critique outlines the possibility for a destabilization of Western determination of “proper English” and thereby also of “legitimate” power via subaltern transformation of English. As subaltern populations seize English as their own possession—one thus subject to re-(ef) facement and repurposing—they are met with a laughter that reflects elites’ unconscious efforts to retain the power over “their” language and, implicitly, “their” empire.
Continuing with concerns of materiality and empire, Marcella Maiki’s piece, “NAFTA, Environmental Crises, and Social Justice: Cases from the Agricultural Practices of Chiapanecos,” centers on the compounding environmental injustices effected by NAFTA and elaborates the continuing iterations of colonial power relations as they operate in the vectors of international trade, transnational migration, indigenous land rights, and consumerism. Her analysis reveals the persistent violences accompanying capitalist “development” and the reliance of global society on accumulation by dispossession. But in its iteration of colonial repetition, Maiki’s piece calls also for a broader vision in which the artificial boundaries between nations and economies and between environments and bodies may be deconstructed.

Nevertheless, in the face of such violence—a violence that spreads across the borders of nations and bodies and is waged on the interwoven terrains of materiality and discourse—one might begin to wonder at the possibility of interruption, and, moreover, reconciliation. Given, on the one hand, the current configuration of power and, on the other, the great and bloody debt owed to the colonized of history, such a hope is impossible, which makes a reimagining of the terms of engagement all the more imperative. With this in mind, this issue concludes with a piece by Lucy Britt, “Derrida and Conflict,” in which she examines this (im)possible hope in her application of Derrida’s aporia of forgiveness to the Rwandan genocide.

The problems raised within this issue are not new. Rather, it is their recurrence, their stubborn repetition despite shifts in power, paradigm, and system of transnational magnitude, that makes them continually troubling. However, upon a closer examination through a kaleidoscopic lens, what becomes visible are the new possibilities within repetition, even the possibility of interruption. Accompanying the authors herein, we followed as they explored the ambivalences within the contemporary terrains of discourse, language, material production, power, and forgiveness, and, as editors, we have had the privilege to experience their critical lenses syncretically and to arrive at small moments of wonder at the spaces in between, where new questions emerge. And our hope is that you, as the reader, will find something similar, here and elsewhere, so that the unimaginable can become something more than might be understood as only otherwise.

This volume would not have been possible without the brilliant dedication and efforts of some of the finest student-leaders and alumni that the Department of Critical Theory and Social Justice at Occidental College has had the good fortune to encounter and engage. To Tania Flores (2013), Zachary Ehmann (2014), and Declan Creed (2016): You have put in place a discourse of empowerment and ambition that has oriented this journal to a decidedly more solid path—one that requires the courage and perseverance to create and critically examine. This journal cannot thank you in enough ways for your willingness to stretch yourselves as thinly as is imaginable to ensure the success of this publication. To the members of the Faculty Editorial Board: There is little more to express other than an absolute sense of gratefulness and joy for your willingness to share your analytical expertise
and passion for critical theory and social justice; thank you for demanding the best, both in terms of scholarship and character, from your students.

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