

“TRANSCULTURE,” CIVIL SOCIETY, OR CAPITALISM?: AN INTERVIEW WITH DELIA AGUILAR

By May Penuela

Kritika Kultura, <http://www.ateneo.edu/kritikakultura/>

Delia D. Aguilar teaches Women’s Studies and Comparative American Cultures. She has had a long-standing interest in the development of women’s movements and feminism, particularly in peripheral formations, and their interaction with feminist theoretical production in the metropolis. She firmly believes with Deniz Kandiyoti that feminism is not autonomous, but always bound to the national context that produces it. On behalf of *dis/content*, May Penuela conducted this interview in December 2000.

May Penuela: I’d like to begin by revisiting your article “Questionable Claims: Colonialism Redux, Feminist Style” that appeared in *Race and Class*. In this article you critique those who embrace “globalization” exclusively as a concept of transnationalism and transculture, a popular trend in the US academy, thus obscuring analyses of international and global political economy. Can you comment further on this issue?

Delia Aguilar: What immediately prompted my writing about “transculture” in that article was a team-taught graduate class that I had occasion to take part in several years ago. Although the six or so faculty designing the course were, I’m sure, cognizant of the globalized economic order serving as the backdrop for our discussions, the direction of our thinking was guided by its proposed title: “Critical/Cultural Spaces.”

As one might surmise, a course so labeled would indeed present an unwarrantedly optimistic view of globalization, one that applauds the “borderless world” of transnationalism purportedly now come into existence, seeing in this apparent seamlessness a radical decentering and displacing of Western culture. I think NAFTA had not yet been three years in place, and there was no foreshadowing then of protests against powerful international bodies staged in Seattle, the other Washington, and Prague. High-tech communication and

cheap access to information superhighways, especially, were cheered as heralding entirely new channels for instantaneous exchanges that would now include every remote corner of the world, resulting in the evolution of a “transculture” with its presumably leveling consequences.

It is probably no exaggeration to say that we indulged in unmitigated flights of fancy, the kind that a group constituted by race and class privileges and academic training is prone to. After Arjun Appadurai’s five “scapes” were presented, my thoroughly mundane contribution — globalization and women migrant workers from the “Third World,” calling attention to the culpability of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank — was new and disturbing information to everyone. It was also decidedly out-of-sync with Appadurai’s rendering of diaspora as amorphous, flowing and deterritorialized, and globalization as a “global cultural economy.” We talked about “transculture” in ways that were completely dissociated from anything that might imply or invoke the social relations of production. Unspoken was the assumption that the realm of production had been replaced by consumption as the activity of the historical moment, for hasn’t post-Fordism obliterated the working class, along with the assembly line? In the wink of an eye, consumption had emerged as a kind of labor, and we were the new workers!

This concept of “transculture,” then, fragments the social totality by claiming detachment from class and production. Ironically, this presumed detachment only functions to reinforce the commodifying process of the capitalist division of labor, now international, in which everything translates into cash or exchange value.

Along with the discourse of transculture came associated notions of borderless landscapes in whose interstitial spaces diasporic communities of transmigrant individuals improvise and reconfigure their fluctuating identities. No room here for nationalism, in all instances retrograde, anti-imperialist nationalism having become (in a global cultural economy), thankfully, a thing of the past.

MP: Over the last fifteen years or so, a segment of feminist scholarship has addressed transnational labor of women through local and mid-level narrative analyses of women workers themselves, particularly Asian women. However, while some mention is made of

global capitalism in these works, though not its imperatives, an explicitly political economic framework seems strikingly absent. In what ways do you think this constitutes a brand of reformism, emanating from US feminist discourses, that actually reinforces the imperatives of neoliberalism?

DA: Yes, and “reformism” might be too gentle a word to describe these currents. At least, those who are engaged in thinking along the lines of “transculture” — that is, culture conceived in purely aesthetic terms — are so detached from the dirt and grime of the workaday world that they have somewhat of a pretext for their vacuousness. But in the case of feminists who write about domestic workers, mail-order brides, or prostitutes (“sex workers”), spotlighting women’s ability to “resist and oppose” (what they are opposing and resisting is rarely specified) serves to conceal the determining power of international production relations — U.S. imperialism, to be precise — and results in a distortion that is simply unforgivable, given claims of empowerment if not emancipation.

So you have Nicole Constable (*Maid to Order in Hong Kong*) telling you how Filipina maids in Hong Kong manifest individual power by demanding more ketchup or asking for extra napkins at McDonald’s on their days off — at which moments they are also, in case you haven’t guessed, subverting ascribed roles by being served rather than serving. Why 10% of the Philippine population is outside the country and why over 65% of overseas contract workers are women employed primarily as servants or caregivers, despite their professional credentials, is rarely addressed. A newfangled angle is offered by Arlie Hochschild (“Importing Motherhood”) who, acknowledging the unprecedented migration of workers from developing countries, proposes that the phenomenon be viewed as a “global care chain” or, better yet, the “globalization of love.” Beginning from the peasant woman in the Philippines paid a pittance to look after the children of the domestic helper now in Beverly Hills caring for offspring not her own, the chain ends with the affluent white woman whose on-the-job duties as a female include that of creating a caring corporate climate. A caring corporate climate for what purpose? Hochschild fails to say. Her political stance is further disclosed in her outright dismissal of poverty as a causal factor because, she explains, some women who were interviewed spoke not of escaping poverty but domestic violence. And even if poverty generated by underdevelopment were the problem, she continues,

immigration scholars have demonstrated that attempts at transforming these societies would merely have the effect of raising expectations, initially increasing rather than decreasing migration. So much for social change.

For the moment, however, Constable and Hochschild represent the sanctioned and rewarded orientation in feminism and in cultural studies in general, and to call it “reformist” is perhaps too generous. In the absence of an explication and critique of the international socioeconomic and political forces leading to the exportation of female labor, the end result is hardly reform but a continuation of the current state of affairs. What’s to reform when women’s coping and survival strategies are already touted and proclaimed as struggles for empowerment? Never mind that these strategies — cajoling and chicanery, insider jokes understood only by cohorts, confronting the boss — are enacted on a personal, individual level. Interestingly enough, a favorable review of Constable’s book prescribed its translation into Chinese, supposedly so that employers might begin to appreciate their servants’ labors.

Something of a left-handed commendation of subalterns’ capacity to make do that may well be spawned by liberal guilt, works like Constable’s and Hochschild’s more significantly perform the probably unintended but necessary function of mystifying socioeconomic realities so that, in the final analysis, the exploitative global social order as it exists becomes legitimized. I should mention in this regard that even a Marxist like Fredric Jameson (“Globalization and Political Strategy”) seems to accept only two possible response categories (to cultural imperialism, in this case): to foreground the ingenuity of the subaltern (how the Indian, for instance, stubbornly resists the power of an Anglo-Saxon imported culture), or to insist on their miseries in order to arouse indignation. But a good look at what “Third World” peoples are actually doing at this historical moment will tell you that they are confronting their miseries wreaked by globalization not by sticking their tongues out at their exploiters, but by waging old-fashioned revolution!

Here three Filipina women come to mind, all of them vitally involved in genuine struggle. I think of Vicvic Justiniani, who spent a good 20 years of her youth underground, organizing peasants with the New People’s Army during the Marcos years. In 1986 she briefly emerged as the Makibaka (the underground women’s organization) spokesperson during the cease-fire

talks called by President Cory Aquino, attracting international attention. Today in her mid-40s and a “legal” personality, she set up an innocent enough non-governmental organization of poor, illiterate widows that soon became a beacon for other dispossessed sectors — sidewalk vendors, laid-off government workers, etc. Gathered together under the banner of human rights, these sectors, now politicized and united, drew the ire of the Mayor who promptly called in the military. With the entire city subjected to military repression, Vicvic has been forced to flee to Manila, but not before exhausting all legal processes, including the formation of a Senate investigative committee.

I also think of Ma. Theresa Dayrit-Garcia, a convent-school bred 43-year-old mother of two teenagers, born of landowning parents. She and her husband had been student activists in their youth. Choosing not to work in the “democratic space” opened up by the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship, she instead continued in the underground and became a ranking officer of the New People’s Army. Last July she was killed by the military in retaliation for the slaying of an officer in a prior encounter.

And there’s Nanay Mameng Deunida, high-school educated 72-year-old Chair of Kadamay, a militant association of slumdweller. Also a veteran of the nationalist movement who has had numerous encounters with truncheon-wielding cops in front of the U.S. embassy and in countless rallies, she speaks on a number of issues: poverty, contractual labor, transnational corporations, women and patriarchy. A mother of seven, grandmother of 14, and great grandmother of 2, Nanay Mameng now suffers from the afflictions of the old who are poor, none of which deter her from summoning the anger “in the pit of her stomach” when addressing anti-Estrada, anti-U.S. demonstrations.

You can see from these examples that the picture we are getting from academic accounts, because of their framing device, is a fundamentally lopsided one, one that effectively warps our understanding of the global situation. Worse, in spite of ostensible efforts to valorize the experience of the subaltern, it actually denigrates the real struggles of oppressed peoples. Now in some instances retreat from the political economy is not as flagrant and, precisely for this reason, requires a bit more savvy to unmask. In an influential book on Caribbean and Filipino migration (*Nations Unbound*) Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc begin by

taking into account a global historical perspective, and then in a deft maneuver shift attention over completely to the ways in which “transmigrants” negotiate the spaces they inhabit between two, now presumably co-equal, states. What the reader is left with is the notion that, indeed, nation-states have become unbound and that transmigrants have the power to challenge and contribute to hegemonic processes in several separate states, which is the thrust of the book. I must remark that these authors are not at all averse to the deployment of “dated” vocabulary symptomatic of an earlier era, bruiting about phrases like global capitalism, the global relations between capital and labor, control of productive forces that is ultimately protected by force of the state, etc. Moreover, they do not shirk from the concept of class, stressing that it is a description of social relationships and that issues of class are inevitably woven into their analyses. Yet because the center of attention is transferred to and ultimately fixed upon the freedom and agency of individual transmigrants who have decided to engage in transnational projects (note how the prefix “trans” flattens and equalizes power-laden relations of domination), invocations even of imperialism and colonialism become purely gestural or rhetorical and vacated of their meaning. What meaning can labor exploitation, racism and sexism have when “transmigrants” can and do practice “transnationalism” — that is to say, “create social fields that cross national boundaries?”

Pondering these things brings to mind a statement that Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz made in her visit to WSU last spring. She said that the fear of ideas that characterizes the current period, the restriction on ideas of what is possible, is paralleled only by the McCarthy era. A frightening thought, but not wholly untrue! I think that with the postmodernist turn in the university and the rejection of Marxism as an outdated tool of analysis, two key concepts have taken hold in feminist and cultural studies that are mainly responsible for the distortions I have outlined.

The first concept is globalization. A number of Marxist academics have noted that the displacement of “imperialism” by “globalization” has succeeded in diverting our attention from the predations of global capitalism and bringing into view what now appears like a wonderful New World Order! Thus transculture enthusiasts like Miyoshi and Appadurai can imagine that the nations of the world, now assembled into a seamless whole by high-tech communication, lowered transportation costs, and unfettered commerce, will usher in a

liberating, emancipatory culture in which voices from the South will have equal time, if not occupy centerstage. I remember a graduate class I taught in the early '90s in Ohio where the students blithely informed me that there was no longer a working class as everything had been turned over to finance capital. And the most outspoken had been a union organizer not too far back! It's amazing how silly ideas can ruin an ordinarily sensible person's mind. I had just returned from a visit to the Philippines then, and had been witness to the usual wrenching poverty, student organizing, labor and women's struggles, etc. I must say that I was discombobulated, to say the least.

In the meantime, sectors of the ruling-class can speak the truth, as when an assembly of the business elite and conservative economists gathered at the Fairmont in San Francisco in 1995 and discussed future society in a pair of numbers: 20:80. These numbers indicate that in any given country in the world, only 1/5 would have access to production and consumption; that is all the labor power required to produce all the goods and services that global society can buy. For the 80% without employment, the choice, if any exists, would be "to have lunch or to be lunch" (Martin and Schumann, *The Global Trap*). Is this what my students meant, perhaps, by the disappearance of the working class?

I agree with James Petras ("Civilization and Citizenship") who strongly argues for the use not of a generic imperialism, but of U.S. imperialism, and proceeds to present incontrovertible evidence for his contention. I think that most of the world's peoples know that the U.S. is the greatest power and the most dangerous threat to world peace today, even if this is evidently a secret from most academics in the North who persist in fantasies of the demise of the nation-state, seamlessness, border-crossing, fragmentation, multiplicity, heterogenous and fluctuating identities, among others.

This brings me to the second related concept, that of civil society. If globalization has been substituted for U.S. imperialism, civil society has jettisoned capitalism, with equally dire consequences. Here I call on the authority of Ellen Meiksins Wood (*Capitalism Against Democracy*) who states that the distinction between the nation-state and civil society has been useful insofar as it calls attention to the dangers of state oppression and the need for popular vigilance in order to limit actions of the state. She adds that the notion of civil society has

also prompted attention to a whole range of institutions (households, churches, etc.) and relations (gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) heretofore unacknowledged. But its primary defect, and a crucial one, is that it denies the totalizing logic of capitalism and the determinative effects of class relations, locating class and submerging it along with other forms of domination, stratification, or inequalities. The upshot is seen in the familiar “intersections” formula, where the holy trinity of class, race, and gender may be expanded to accommodate sexuality for good measure; that is, if you wish to be really “inclusive.”

What’s wrong with the notion of civil society and its corollary, identity politics? First of all, recognizing difference is a goal not to be demeaned or scoffed at; identities previously marginalized are now given play and viewed as legitimate categories. The issue is not the recognition of difference as such, but the way in which, through an intellectual sleight-of-hand, civil society has relegated class, the constitutive relations of capitalism, to merely another identity or set of social relations like race, gender, sexuality, and so on. Historically, “civil society” was used as an ideological weapon against the statist distortion of socialism in the Soviet Union, so it is not quite an innocent notion.

Since civil society has rhetorically deleted capitalism, it has virtually erased that totalizing system whose impetus is capital accumulation and expansion (leading to imperialism, now benignly called globalization) based on the extraction of the surplus value of workers’ labor. Having been dissolved into an unstructured and undifferentiated set of institutions, capitalism with its totalizing logic has been rendered innocuous! This is the feat that “civil society” accomplishes, and it is not insignificant. It has deflected much-needed attention, particularly at this time when global capitalism is tightening its grip on workers throughout the world, away from class as a set of relations upon which the profits of transnational corporations rest, to a mere matter of identity, lifestyle, or occupation. To be sure, Meiksins Wood clearly apprehends the perfectly warranted moral claims of race, gender, and sexuality, and the need to respond with complex concepts of identity to people’s different needs and experiences. But all of this has transpired in a discursive context in which the concept of class as the set of relations that is the foundational undergirding of capital has been discarded.

Fortunately, there are a few courageous feminists who have dared to take the unfashionable theoretical route, linking the outflow of domestic workers and caregivers from the periphery directly to the imposition of structural adjustment programs by the IMF and WB, both U.S.-controlled international agencies. Two such books came out in 2000: one by Grace Chang (*Disposable Domestic*) in the U.S. and the other, a sophisticated study exploring the connections between North/South relations, middle-class based feminism, and the subjectivity of migrant domestic workers by Bridget Anderson (*Doing the Dirty Work?*) in the U.K. (Predictably, even otherwise approving critics balk at the “economic reductionism” of writers like these two who unflinchingly assign ultimate blame on international policy-making institutions.) There are hopeful little signs, then, that academic perspectives might alter as they must, if so-called progressive academics do not wish to find themselves tailing behind at the rearguard of change.

Meiksins Wood asks simply, can capitalism exist without class? Without an understanding of class as the main axis of capitalism, in fact, one really can't begin to comprehend the operations of sexism, racism, or homophobia. This explains exactly why the “resist and oppose” agenda that foregrounds individual human agency is characterized by such indeterminacy. It can only tell you that it is resisting and opposing some variety or other of some unspecified “power.” How this will bring down the larger system is out of the question, as this has been wished away apriori. It is not surprising, then, that what preoccupies academics these days is a search for “complexity” in analysis, or a push to “complicate identities.” To what end, who knows? Such complexity, as we have seen in the works I've reviewed, tellingly excludes a class analysis of capitalism, now global, the very social order that is the cause of their subjects' miseries. Reformism? Long live the status quo!

An old friend once told me that the capitalist system needs academic servitors. He said this during the Vietnam War, referring to conservatives. The supreme irony today is that the ideas I've discussed are those espoused by people believing themselves to be radical and progressive.

ON *VAGINA MONOLOGUES*

Although I'd heard from students and read about "The Vagina Monologues" (I've taught women's studies for more years than I'd like to count), I only actually saw it the other day at the University of Connecticut where it was roundly applauded by kids in a packed theater.

The issues of academic and artistic freedoms that have been raised in discussions here vis-à-vis the *Monologues* are of tremendous importance, as is the need to demystify and celebrate women's bodies. But the presentation that I saw the other night was very clearly class-bound and, worse for us colonials, reeking of imperial hubris. "What would your vagina wear?" The recommended apparel—Louis Vuitton boots and a matching bag, cashmere and Lolita Lempicka perfume, Birkin bag, etc.—is hardly within the reach of U.S. white, working-class women who, by these standards, would be reduced to sporting vaginas au natural. So where does this put those of us, members of the non-elite, living in the "Third World?" The references to "saving" Afghan women and those poor benighted African "sisters" whose clitorises are cut up, labias infibulated, and who in all other ways are subordinated and repressed by their men, well, we've got to rescue them too! Who's the "we" here? VM is curiously devoid of social context, except when Bosnia and other such places are cited. More precisely, the context is merely implied and has to be unmasked, as I'm trying to do.

As someone on this site remarked, VM has worldwide circulation. And why not? Who's to prevent the US from going anywhere these days? Moreover, VM also has liberal appeal as a fundraiser for "eliminating violence against women." But it's violence of an interpersonal sort, never institutional or systemic. It's men who are the problem. I don't know how much license is given local presenters to innovate and revise. But I must say that as it stands, "Vagina Monologues" is just one more conduit of cultural imperialism. With those Green Berets and Navy Seals already in Basilan, do we really need more of the same?

Delia D. Aguilar
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