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A Look at Contemporary Minor Literatures

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* written in 1975 by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, they employed the writings of Franz Kafka as a way to examine the concept of a minor literature. Their academic interests derived from Franz Kafka's socio-political position within his writings, rather than from his status as a modern classic author. Deleuze and Guattari viewed Kafka's socio-political position (Czech Jew) as a fundamental force that shaped his writings, creating a minoritarian position which was then used as a revolutionary device to subvert the majoritarian state machine. Shortly after minor literature then transitioned into literacy theory due to its deep interest in political and social issues and particularly with the problem of marginality (Deleuze & Guattari ix-xxi). Following Deleuze and Guattari's lead, this essay argues that contemporary artists not only qualify as a minor literature, but use their position of minority to subvert the greater socio-political environment.

But what is minor literature? For Deleuze and Guattari the term literature denoted more than just writing, instead they expanded the definition to encompass the way information was shared or imposed on people. In this sense, literature included writing, pedagogical approaches to education, the scientific study and naturalization of health/sciences, politics, economics, media representation, and the development of the bureaucratic and judicial systems. The term minor named a form of cultural production from outside the dominant

culture; specifically a collective articulation; the calling forward of those who were from the outset alienated or masked by typical representational models of the dominant culture (Deleuze & Guattari 16-20).

In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari give three characteristics of a minor literature. Firstly, a minor literature should deterritorialize the major language (Deleuze & Guattari 16). The deterritorialization resulted in a severance of the social, political, and cultural practices and a neutralization of sense within one's own language. Deleuze and Guattari give the example of Black Americans' use of English, as well as Kafka's own use of German (Deleuze & Guattari 16-17). Additionally, one might look at the indigenous reservations of the North American First Peoples Nation and their usage of the English language resulting in what is often called "rez talk." Secondly, minor literature operates to counteract reigning deployments of power (Deleuze & Guattari 26). With a minor literature, everything is political. Political in the sense that individual concerns are always linked to the larger social element. It is through this sense that 'becoming minor' is always political and seen as an ethical action. Within these forced cramped spaces, minor literature allows for a purification and unobstructed view and critique of the power systems at play (Deleuze & Guattari 17). Thirdly, a minor literature is always collective (Deleuze & Guattari 17). It is collective in the sense that there is less emphasis on individual authors and talents and more on the collective production of work. In this way, we can see the artistic production as a statement or a kind of precursor of a community

(and often a nation) still in development. A minor literary machine then prepares the way for revolution. In many senses, a minor literature calls into being the revolutionary machine-to-come. "'We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literature but the revolutionary conditions for every literature'" (Deleuze & Guattari 18).

It is within this last scheme that contemporary art practices might be involved with the collectivization of subjectivity and the calling forth of new kinds of community. Deleuze and Guattari point out that a minor literature does not occur 'elsewhere' or 'apart from' a major literature but operates from within, using the same elements but in a different manner (Deleuze & Guattari 23-24). By producing movement from within the major, minor literature is subverting the dominant power structures and creating a new perspective.

By engaging with Deleuze and Guattari's theory and contemplating contemporary art movements such as modernism or postmodernism, we can identify practices that are specifically minor to each category and movement. Both feminism, post-colonial art practices, and some art histories are minor in this sense, involving the deterritorialization of the global language of modernism and postmodernism. For instance, take Monique Wittig's essay *The Straight Mind* published in the journal *Feminist Issues* in 1980. Wittig wrote from a minor socio-political position (female and lesbian) showcasing her theoretical and political views on the binary that the dominant political regime based their ideologies on: "man" and "woman" (Wittig 105-106). She advocated for the

necessity of problematizing the idea of the categories as natural. As she critiqued heterosexuality, Wittig rejected biological determinism and essentialism arguing that sex itself is a social, ergo ideological construct, and that “man” and “woman” are not eternal categories (Wittig 107-108).

Secondarily she focused on the use of language as a “linguistic index of women's oppression” and illustrated how through the practice of writing a radical reorganization of society could be affected (Wittig 109-110). Wittig opens with a post-structuralist critique on the systems of knowledge, (identified as meta-languages of psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy) through which our ways of organizing society are interpreted and validated. These scientific discourses are exposed as ahistorical and universalist - a mask of neutrality that established and reproduced dominant structures of knowledge. Wittig argued that the naturalization of heterosexuality as the dominant discourse propagated the obligatory social relationships, history, and social reality and formed what she calls ‘the Straight Mind’ (Wittig 107-108). Ultimately, Wittig used her position of becoming-minor to critique the dominant powers and their use of biological determinism, and the linguistic index as a way to oppress and create a space for societal difference.

As Deleuze and Guattari stated, the relationships between, and functions of, different languages will always vary depending on the specifics of space and time. Resulting in the definition of “minor” changing depending on the time, subjectivity, and the relation to the definition of the “major” (Deleuze & Guattari

18-19). Just as Wittig approached her revolutionary writing from the position of materialist feminism, Joan Semmel took a counter-position in the form of minor visual art practice. This also seems like a short paragraph.

I think you need more of a transition to this paragraph and topic shift. Censorship played a large role in the push for the freedom of sexual expression in the 1960s through the 1980s. Many women artists explored phallic imagery as a means both to critique the dominant obligatory social relationships, male supremacy, and to claim the male body as a site for female fantasy and desire. This approach to feminism is a counterpoint to the vaginal and gynocentric imagery and writings to which feminist art of the day was most associated (Meyer 368). Artist Joan Semmel sought to craft an alternative erotic language of images for heterosexual intimate exchanges that fought against the prevailing idea of penis penetration as aggressive towards women. Photographing real couples before, during, and after intercourse, Semmel used these images as inspiration for her paintings. Her work fought to find images that did not change gender roles, or romanticize the exchange, but instead presented it as normal and integral to the heterosexual experience. To achieve this she used high-contrast colors, unexpected angles, croppings, and sequential events to defamiliarize the sense of heterosexuality (Meyer 376). Her partially abstracted approach to rendering the scene allowed the viewer to connect and understand the scenario and yet distance themselves from the reality of it; furthering her hope of creating imagery that displayed a

heterosexual exchange as non-violent (Image 1). Stemmel approached the heterosexual experience from a place of 'becoming minor'; utilizing the existing dominant culture and major literature to re-evaluate and reinscribe meaning to the heterosexual experience. By tackling the dominant obligatory social relationship from a position of the minority, Semmel was able to critique the patriarchy's universal production of concepts that had become common laws over people, societies, cultures, and epochs.

Image 1: Joan Semmel, "Erotic Yellow" (1973)



Some examples of these codified cultural norms are the categories of race and identity. We argue that race, identity, and nation are imaginary, cultural constructions that shape our social interactions by constructing the foundation of the social contract (Fusco & Wallis 8). The social contract functions based on a series of naturalized premises - the established dominant race and identity (Wittig 110). In *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* edited by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, artists and academics alike explores how the naturalized construction of race "was largely defined by "whiteness:" racial categories of privilege that rationalized and justified the domination and exploitation of the 'other' who were non European, poor, and/or female", and how photography played a role in defining the look of race in America (Fusco & Wallis 13). This

book was co-created alongside an exhibition of 300 color photos, illustrations, and essays curated by the International Center of Photography. The collection repositions and re-examines the underbelly of American race relations as related to both contemporary and historical photographs, and uncovers through a post-colonial approach how photography was used to convey racist ideas (Fusco & Wallis 6-10). The racial attitudes that inform the photographs—from both the present and the past are brought into question within this exhibition. The historical photographs were created from within a major literature - one that hid its political agenda, and by re-evaluating the images from a minor position we are making overt what was initially implied in the photographs.

For example, race was considered a theoretically coherent system of human classification and white privilege demanded a clearly defined binary system. Photography, as a result, was the means by which race was produced as a visualizable fact (Fusco & Wallis 16). From its origins, photography has been indistinguishably linked with racial typography, fetishization, commodification, and exploitation. The art of photography was deployed in "the pursuit of scientific truths about race, and it played a crucial role in the construction of racialized viewing as a positive, pleasurable, and desirable experience" (Fusco & Wallis 19).

In the nineteenth century, scientist photographers worked to document all human 'types,' creating consumable images of tribal or 'primitive' peoples.

During World War II, Life magazine published an article called “How to Tell Japs From the Chinese” that diagrams the physical differences between two Asian men. Over and over, the camera was regularly used to make people, (non-European), appear brutish and animal-like. Garry Winogrand displays this ideology in his photograph *Central Park Zoo* (image 2). Garry Winogrand shows an upstanding mixed-race couple carrying a pair of chimpanzees in their arms. By placing the chimpanzees in the couples arms he is insinuating that a mix-racial couple is somehow primitive, animal-like, and unnatural.

Image 2: Garry Winogrand, “Central Park Zoo” (1967)



Returning to Wittig and her essay *The Straight Mind*, we can see repeated in the exhibition of visual and literary re-evaluations, that again the relationship between literary form (categories)

and the dominant social ideology (biological and naturalized ideas) created forms of exclusivity within the existing systems of knowledge, i.e. the social and cultural construct of race. The difference created and performed in these photographs are not a state of mind but an ideology that serves to conceal the fact that the social differences always belong to the economic, political, and

ideological order and that order relies on both the overt and subtle domination of the 'other' (Wittig 108-110). Fusco and Wallis, through their exhibition and writings, created a space in which past documentations and archives could be re-visited, re-framed, and re-examined from a position of minority. Once again subverting the dominant social contract but questioning open-endedly, the social contract.

This method of critiquing the naturalized systems of knowledge would be one that served many academics and artists well and soon lead to the post-colonial methods and the decolonization of art histories and art practices. From Wittig to Fusco and Wallis we can see a pattern of creating and re-framing past and present archives, art practices and histories as a way to subvert the status quo. By embracing a position of becoming-minor contemporary writings, curators, and artists are using their positions of minority to subvert socio-political structures of power.

Works Cited

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