

Consuming the Protest:  
Exoticism and Guilt in American Protest Literature  
Karen Rustad

During centuries of Western colonialism and slavery, racism was primarily expressed as the plain belief that Europeans were inherently superior to Others in all respects. Desire (particularly sexual desire) for members of colonized races was largely suppressed as unbecoming; society turned a blind eye to the mulatto children of slaveholders. More recently, however, a different approach to interracial relations has coalesced. Relationships are understood and products are sold based on the now freely-acknowledged attractiveness of minorities. Interracial mixing (both sexually and culturally) is encouraged as proof of one's worldliness or liberality; in many circles, Eurasians and other mixed-race women have displaced the blonde bombshell as the ultimate beauty ideal (Smith 1). Instead of assimilation being a one-way street from Black to White, Westerners are attempting to integrate Others' cultures with their own. As bell hooks explains in her essay "Eating the Other," this new attitude is just as racist than the old one; it simply expresses the same racist stereotypes in a different way. Because it can be easily confused with appreciation for diversity and liberal sentiment, though, it is a difficult target to combat. Chrystos, Richard Wright, Audre Lorde, and some punk rock songs attempt to protest the tendency of society at large, and protest movements in particular, to objectify and consume the Other.

In her poems “I Am Not Your Princess” and “Shame On!”, Chrystos attacks whites’ tendency to idealize and exoticize Native American spirituality. According to hooks, within the new racist regime

ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. Cultural taboos around sexuality and desire are transgressed and made explicit as the media bombards folks with a message of difference no longer based on the white supremacist notion that ‘blondes have more fun.’ (hooks 21)

This postmodern race-pastiche ideology celebrates mixed-race models as the new paragon of beauty; mixed-race faces attain even greater exotic qualities since their ethnic makeup is a “guessing game,” a mystery (Van Kerckhove 1). Native American culture is seen as a possible source for “spice” to be mixed in because, while still being deeply tied to Americans (at least, geographically), it is perceived as containing hidden wisdom and supernatural strength. Chrystos’ poem combats this perception by addressing Westerners’ myths about Native Americans head-on:

If you tell me one more time that I’m wise I’ll throw  
up on you ...  
If you ever  
again tell me  
how strong I am  
I’ll lay down on the ground & moan so you’ll see  
at last my human weakness like your own ...  
I have work to do dishes to wash a house to  
clean  
There is no magic                    (“Princess” 379)

Chrystos demands that non-natives “[l]ook at [her] heart not [their] fantasies” (379). Instead of adoring her as an exoticized, mystical Other (adoration which Chrystos finds indistinguishable from pity) Chrystos’ poetry forces readers to see her as an all-too-human being and challenges them to accept her on those grounds (379).

Chrystos' poetry also refuses to assuage post-imperialist guilt, forcing readers to deal with Native Americans on a more than superficial level. While their understanding of the term varies greatly, most Americans today believe that "racism" is bad. Many also acknowledge that the United States has a racist history that has an effect on present realities (though the degree and significance of this effect is heavily debated). This knowledge is uncomfortable for white, privileged Americans, however; it inspires feelings of guilt that demand some sort of resolution. The new racial regime operates on this guilt. It assures its adherents that their desire for the Other means that they are exceptions to the rule and exempt from the charge of racism. Chrystos notes that "america is starving to death for spiritual meaning" and questing for resolution of its contradictions and checkered past (381). However, many white people respond to this feeling by consuming Native American culture in superficial or colonizing ways--by drawing attention to their newly-discovered "Cherokee great-great-grandmother," buying "'Indian' jewelry from hong kong," or "learn[ing] to do beadwork" ("Princess" 378-9, "Shame" 380). Ironically, these methods of consuming the Other are a source of their original feelings of white guilt and inadequacy--"It's the price you pay for taking everything / It's the price you pay for buying everything" ("Shame" 381). Chrystos makes this ineffective, destructive feedback loop clear by calling out this kind of cultural appropriation for what it is: "there are many forms of genocide and this is one" (380). Possessive, knickknack integration is not going to solve the problem, and Chrystos is unwilling to "ease your guilt" by pretending that it will ("Princess" 378). Nor does Chrystos offer an alternative way for easing white guilt: she does not have much faith in any Western "attempts to understand us" and wants white people to leave her alone

(378). There is to be no easy, uncomplicated path for privileged Americans to come to grips with their historical genocidal guilt; all Chrystos hopes for is that they do not inflict any more damage on the Native American community than they already have.

While mainstream America might behave like a bull in a china shop when it comes to matters of ethnic integration and the resolution of historical injustices, would not liberal activists be better prepared to resist the new racist regime? Wrong. In order to relieve post-imperialist guilt, many protest movements unconsciously commodify Others and use them as objects of legitimation. A literary example can be found in the portrayal of the communists in Wright's *Native Son*. They believe (or want to believe) that the communist movement is not racist, but they feel the need to prove it (Wright 94). Jan and Mary attempt to learn about black culture, but their obliviousness and stereotyped ideas about black people overwrite their experiences. A trip to a "real place" like Ernie's Kitchen Shack is "simply grand" (69, 73). Having never visited the Black Belt before, it all seems new and exotic to them; despite their attempts to pronounce black slang and sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," their racial understanding is no more sophisticated than fantastic notions that "[blacks] have so much emotion! What a people!" (76-7).

Most importantly, the communists look for black recruits to legitimize the communist movement: "We can't have the revolution without 'em" (76). They do not want to just write "Black and White Unite and Fight" on their pamphlets; they want to make their reality match the slogan. The communists want to speak for all workers, black and white, but to do so they need more blacks active in their movement so they can credibly argue that "there'll be no white and no black" after the revolution (69). Thus, Jan and Mary aggressively try to recruit Bigger, despite his obvious lack of enthusiasm about

communism and his fear for his job. Jan tries to mimic the interracial illustrations on their own propaganda by shaking Bigger's hand, but such actions cannot make their raceless utopia real (94). Through their own naiveté and obliviousness, Jan and Mary see the problem of integration as simply learning to ignore racial tensions. However, as Jan painfully learns later,

“it is pointless to pretend [race] doesn't exist--merely because it is a lie... [S]imply by expressing their desire for 'intimate' contact with black people, white people do not eradicate the politics of racial domination as they are made manifest in personal interaction...” (hooks 27-8).

By seeking to resolve their white guilt and activist insecurities as painlessly as possible and failing to effectively address the power dynamics between themselves and Bigger, the communists merely perpetuate their own subtly racist attitudes.

Protest movements' use of minorities as legitimating objects is not restricted to literature. In “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,” Audre Lorde rages at the feminist Second Sex Conference for trying to use her and another black woman in such a manner. She points out that it should be obvious to everyone that “in a country where racism, sexism and homophobia are inseparable,” black and lesbian perspectives are key to building a meaningful and effective movement (Lorde 110). Clearly members of the movement do understand that minorities' views are relevant, as evidenced by their publishing a “Special Third World Women's Issue” once in a while (113). Yet at this conference, lesbian consciousness was essentially absent and “even the two Black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour” (110). It appears that, to organizers of the conference, Audre Lorde was “their black lesbian”--by giving her a couple phone calls and including her and one other black panelist, they felt they had enough minority participation to legitimize the conference. The “occasional”

inclusion of black women's writing in feminist publications functions not to have those views truly heard and understood, but more to allow feminists to claim that they appreciate diversity (113). This practice is akin to the "token minority" phenomenon in the media. Previously, institutional and individual racism kept almost all minorities out of positions of power in the media. Nowadays, the ethnic makeup of the media is not much different--only 8% of news directors and 18% of the news workforce overall are minorities (Hunt 21). However, the existence of the few exceptions carries with it a troubling message:

[T]he juxtaposition of televised news images of poor and/or menacing blacks with those of accomplished black reporters and anchors may work--as did similar juxtapositions in *The Cosby Show* case--to reassure white viewers that society is now color-blind. (22)

By tacitly telling readers that America is no longer racist or sexist, shallow, politically-correct "integration" soothes American post-imperialist guilt and legitimizes the status quo without seriously challenging established privilege and power.

Minority groups, as traditionally understood, may not be the only groups with the "power" to legitimize; fringe group membership, particularly in the punk subculture, attempts to develop "Other"ness. The punk scene itself borrows from minority groups' "credibility," of course. Its music regularly declares solidarity with oppressed groups--commonly the proletariat, regularly with blacks and other minorities, occasionally with women. However, it also contains independent characteristics that are simply socially unacceptable--scary makeup, mohawks, screaming, etc. By vociferously denouncing whitebread American culture and marking themselves physically in ways that society frowns upon, punks attempt to separate themselves from the mainstream and become "Other."

Whether or not this separation is successful is the difference between a “punk” and a “poser”--a very difficult distinction to make. The psychological motives for eating the Other--exoticization and white guilt--also apply to becoming the Other. Many young people adopt the punk lifestyle because it seems cool and “hard-core”--for white, middle-class teenagers, the adrenaline rush of shoplifting and the “glamour” of hopping freights often feels fresh and exotic. They see fashion choices and juvenile delinquency as smashing the state, or at least divesting themselves of responsibility for it. The Daycare Swindlers punk rock song “White Bread” criticizes such posers, but still believes that genuine punks exist. The song mocks supposed punks whose “parents who live on Madison Avenue.” To those teenagers, “born and bred white poverty [seems] so cool” so they put on their “village face” to engage in that experience. Believing that they have successfully consumed the credibility of white poverty, the posers “[t]alk and they talk about the struggle and the price they pay”--even when the only “price” is what they are paying for “all the accessories” associated with the punk lifestyle. However, the singer is much more skeptical; addressing the posers, he calls them a “waste of space” and predicts that “they [the system]’ll have control of [them] next year.” He contrasts the posers with the supposed “real” punks, who “suffer to live” amid the “government soldiers occupy[ing] every corner of the street.” Even if the posers will always “run for cover to hide from what’s killing [him],” the song implies that there are still true punks like the singer who walk the talk and stand up to oppression.

Another punk rock song, “Anarchy For Sale” by the Dead Kennedys, is more skeptical, however. In the song, instead of anarchy being a social and political ideology, “circle a” is portrayed as merely a logo for just another brand name. The singer has

thoroughly commodified the punk lifestyle, selling pirated t-shirts and pins: “Like hula hoops, it’s a disposable craze / Another fast-food fad to throw away.” Unlike in “White Bread,” there is no counterpoint to the singer’s cynicism; there is no example of uncommodified punk life in the song. This omission does not necessarily mean that the Dead Kennedys believe that there are no “real” punks, but it does leave that possibility open. What if punk music and fashion is just white middle-class teenage boys trying to “make up” for their privileged position by engaging (and hopefully becoming) the “Other”?

Participation in protests is in some ways similar to donating to charity. Some people may do it because of their genuine belief in the cause, but many do it just because it makes them feel good about themselves--and telling the difference between the two groups is often impossible. When protest is itself a kind of “Otherness,” instead of advocacy on behalf of “Other”s, the ethical status of protest becomes complicated. When privileged young people consume zines, anarchist publications, and books like *Evasion*, how different are their motives or reactions from those of their peers who consume gangsta rap and ghetto fashion? Engaging in activism and seeking to understand the “Other” are no longer activities that can be taken at face value. The problems of overcoming white guilt and avoiding exoticism have never had an easy solution. However, as activists’ good intentions come under fire and protest consumes itself, the fine lines of racism become ever more impossible to ignore.

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