

Working Women's Words and the Conditions of Their Production(s)

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La Table. Paroles de femmes (The Table. Women's Words) by Michèle Foucher exemplifies, as process, working text and production, both the paradox of institutional production, and problems of populism, identification, and projection which plague the political theatre. *La Table* calls into question not only the banality of the urban working class woman's existence, but the theatre itself and its portrayal of both the female character and working class life. The play is also an institutional product which legitimizes the institution, its practitioners and its public by its very marginality in relation to theatrical norms.

II

Michèle Foucher, a product of the politically oriented textual theatre of the 1960's, works within the overlapping sectors of public and political theatre in France. Her orientation reflects that of many practitioners within the public sector: socially and politically oriented and motivated, critical of the institution and in some way desirous of exploding it from within--in much the same way contemporary French theatre talks of exploded characters (*personnages éclatés*)--of exposing multiple and often conflicting facets, personalities, and functions through different physical and psychological representations. At the same time, these same practitioners, heirs to a less politically pointed leftism and faced with the relatively new professional frame of a public theatre system, are attempting to create definitions for themselves, definitions afforded or at least made possible by the institution. *La Table, paroles de femmes* produced at the *Théâtre National de Strasbourg* allows us to read some of the resulting compromises within the multiple contexts of the public sphere: political theatre, state culture, gender and class. In *La Table* Michèle Foucher sets out to

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explore theatrical possibilities beyond the institutions of established texts, traditional roles, traditional role definitions in the production process, legitimate (and legitimized) theatre.

III

Foucher defines her project as "the search for the popular female character" ("A la recherche de *la* personnage populaire") (Foucher, "Mon histoire" 21). The working text was based on conversations with and among groups of working class women throughout Alsace. These tapes were first rigorously transcribed to include every pause and exclamation, then edited to create a script which would be read back to the women involved, and which, after more editing and revision, became the pre-text to production, always incomplete and fleeting, changing, not intended to remain as Text. Where many works concerned with representation of women and women's issues tend towards a feminist mythology of Woman, singular and universal, the great force of *La Table* rests in its explicit recognition of the predominance of class dispositions. The character is not universal. She is solidly situated in the working classes. Although there are many problems relating to political effectiveness and implicit populism involved in this project and its production, the play does succeed in reproducing a habitus (Bourdieu 119), that is, a system of dispositions which function as a system of generative schemas which in turn generate behavior strategies. The production deals explicitly with one set of dispositions¹ belonging to and defining the working class and specifically the women of that class. It does not generalize those dispositions to society at large.

The project was initially and primarily theatrical. Born of dissatisfaction with existing roles, it took the form of a search for a character. The resultant character is specific in its social as well as its sexual designation, a popular female character. The popular female character is not a representative type. She is a presentation of the various dispositions which set women of the popular classes apart from those of any other class: the specific gestures, language, dress, possessions, desires, and concerns which situate these women. Because these dispositions delimit a social group, she is singular. Because they are not always, everywhere, lived in the same manner, the popular female character is many. By refusing to make her character either a type or an individual, the author is able to demonstrate the extent to which the collective exists within the individual, but also to reproduce factors within the collective where change, tension, difference, reside: age, sex, social trajectory, occupation.

The author creates this multiplicity within singularity in the text

by designating neither specific (named) nor even anonymous but distinct characters. There are line breaks in the published text, but this printed text notes that they do not correspond to a change of character. Rough paragraphs correspond more to a (rambling) conversation topic than to one presupposed speaker. Yet, they are obviously conversation, not monologue.

The language of the text reveals the habitus and its modes of generation and regeneration there where they are the most unconscious, in the banality of everyday existence and in the objects, gestures and topics of conversation associated with that existence. It seeks to lay bare what the author calls "the strangeness of the everyday" and the discourse which brackets out the realization of that strangeness. This is not to be interpreted as what is strange viewed from the outside, but rather as the dispositions which conflict within the habitus, the gesture which, juxtaposed with speech, says something different than intended, the explanation which doesn't explain. Showing these conflicts and tensions blocks their neutralization, arrests the underlying assumptions which cause them to be taken for granted, viewed and lived as natural.

IV

In the text there are no obviously delineated characters, no story line. The conversations concern tradition, the family, the household, the budget. Topics relate specifically to the household not because of the choice of the table as the central object, nor because the author intentionally chose to emphasize those themes, but because the words belong to a popular female character, and those are her concerns. A character of a different social class with sufficient value on the marketplace and sufficient economic and cultural background might make a conscious effort to associate 'table' with tables outside the home, or to analyze relations to the tables within the home. It would be exceedingly untrue to her class and to the initial conversational situations to give such dispositions to the "unpopular female character". The popular classes demonstrate a much stronger recognition of sexually defined roles. The higher one is in the social hierarchy, the weaker these definitions.

The working text remains firmly anchored in those areas which are most unconscious and yet most revealing of any lifestyle: social practice--what is and is not done, what the young are trying to change--and domestic life--household rules, budgetary concerns, family hierarchy, family traditions. . . . The language of the text reflects both the intimacy of the proposed situation--groups of women who know one another and share a common lifestyle are conversing around

a table--and the presentational aspect of the situation. The anecdotes seem without censor. The language is not the hyper-corrected French of the petty bourgeoisie. Rather it is full of popular phraseology: "eh ben" . . . "ça se . . ."--and local exclamations: "yo!" Yet it is not the open speech (*franc parler*) of the popular classes. Real slang is limited. There are no Alsatian expressions without corresponding translation.

In Alsace there is a proverb which says: "Di liebe des Mannes geht durch de Magen" "The love of a man goes through his stomach! / The Parisians say: You hold on to men by the gut."

This is not merely avoidance of a dialect which not everyone may understand; it is recourse to authority--first to the traditional wisdom of the proverb, then to standard French and finally to the equivalent Parisian expression, the authority of tradition, of the dominant language, and of the dominant culture within the language. The clarification expresses not only class discomfort, but linguistic and regional discomfort as well. The rules of the game have been relaxed, but not entirely lifted. The play was staged for publics unfamiliar with the particular patter of the Alsatian working class and the language of the text is true to the character. Had the 'popular female character' used intimate speech patterns with and before a bourgeois public, the production would have tended in the direction of exoticizing the popular lifestyle; it would have established a pretense of equality between public and character. The presentation of popularisms, such as specific slang, in theatrical text or production, has the effect of mythologizing that culture in relation to the lifestyle of the public. It turns the popular lifestyle into folklore on a par with traditional dance or pastoral poetry. This text acknowledges an openness in the popular lifestyle without ignoring the rules of the linguistic marketplace and largely manages to avoid an exoticizing effect thereby.

V

By definition and process, this project demands critical consideration of a myriad of important issues. It refuses traditional legitimations in the forms of authorial, directorial and textual authority, as well as in those of standard language and dominant discursive structure. It breaks many institutionally imposed barriers, yet in so doing it opens onto other potential conflicts. The production should, by its stated intent, follow the procedural work outlined above by critically working to avoid exoticizing the non-legitimized dominated other. But

the production cannot avoid the exoticizing effect resulting from occurrence of the production proper within the social and discursive frameworks of dominance--those of the national theatre. Contradiction arises between project and production when the production context (both that of the production of written text and that of theatrical production proper) is seemingly taken as natural and unquestioned by the author/actress, that is, when the institution framing creation, public and reception goes unquestioned in production, even if it is questioned in process.

Several problems arise once one turns from process to text and from text to production; the first is that of conversation itself. A speaker presents him/herself to the other according to culturally coded linguistic, gestural, proxemical codes. Conversation is always presentational and always engaged in full knowledge of the rules of the exchange, rules which differ according to the relative social position of the participants and to the general context of the exchange. In conversation a speaker supplies the required material for exchange. Relative social position, acceptable and expected levels of language are evident to any speaker of the language from the first moments of exchange and the structure is modified accordingly and largely unthinkingly. The presentational nature of theatre in general and of politically oriented theatre in particular resembles conversation in many respects. This theatre presents itself *as theatre*, that is as a representational art to be received not as reality but as representation. It attempts to foreground the codes under which it functions. However, the unequal discursive situations of practitioner and public, do not lead theatre to follow rules of the linguistic marketplace exactly, or it leads to following them differently. In conversation there is a literal exchange of linguistic 'goods', be they explicit and informational or implicit and hierarchical. In the theatre the exchange necessarily takes on a more figurative sense. Information is still received and decoded, but the audience is largely deprived of the capacity to exchange linguistic capital and highly restricted in its deployment of gestural communication as well. The codes of exchange are different, if no less defined. The public side of the exchange tends to be limited to reception and emotive emission. Even in the political theatre true exchange is limited, if more open than in traditional theatre. If presenting the working class habitus to a public of different dispositions, a play like *La Table* risks exoticising the speech and the lifestyle presented--all the more so the truer the images presented.

VI

La Table, paroles de femmes, was staged in a small intimate playing space for an audience of no more than 100 spectators providing no visible separation between playing space and public. At the *Théâtre National de Strasbourg*² the stage itself was used as hall--with playing space and audience seating on stage, the curtain down to enclose the space. Elsewhere undivided halls were used. It was a one-woman show with the author playing the multi-figural "personnage feminine".

The production takes the form of a series of conversations spinning around the central image of the table, an image made real in its diversity on stage. Different tables of various sizes, shapes and colors occupy the playing space throughout the performance. All require different kinds and levels of physical contact and proxemics, providing a basis for the gestural language which compliments and contradicts the spoken words of the character. Realistic props of varying scale are also in evidence--a covered birdcage on a small table, a potato sack under another, at one point a giant fork, at another a doll size table.

Although setting the production on the stage itself simulates smaller more intimate playing spaces, spaces often associated with political theatre, and although such playing spaces were indeed used in some touring of the play, the particular use of the official stage for the official production is not insignificant. The first act of the production is not the raising of the curtain or the entrance of the actress--she enters unnoticed with the public--but rather the invitation of the public into a specific intimate space. This space is intimate not only because of its size, but because of its specific qualities since it is normally reserved for a small group of people with a particular social relationship--specifically, a relationship of common employment and specific task. The wings of the theatre through which the audience enters and which remain visible throughout the performance are both that which is hidden from the normal public, the inner workings of the theatre where the secrets of production are hidden, where only the initiate may enter, and which are somehow unworthy of visibility, precisely because they represent work, labor, rather than magic and inspiration of the stage. This is the space of a particular intimacy and freedom for those participating in it--precisely because it is not open to everyone and maintains its own rules, which need not necessarily coincide with those of the outside world. Admitting the public into this space acts as a metaphor for what the production intends to do: to reveal the inner workings, what is behind what we normally see. Even as Michèle Foucher was a stranger in the homes

of the women she spoke with, the bourgeois public of the national theatre is foreign to what it is being shown of the theatre and ultimately to what it will be shown of the working class habitus.

The stage and wings are also a metaphor for the intimate space represented, that of the popular interior. The stage is not set realistically. Nonetheless, the objects on stage are representations of a specific part of the household, a most intimate, most hidden space. The kitchen, like the bedroom, is not a presentational space. The living room or the dining room are 'decorated' for special occasions and special guests. The kitchen table is where one invites friends *entre soi*, and where the family eats. Primarily a work space, but for work which has no value beyond the home, it is both a space for particular concern on the part of the woman of the popular classes--like the back stage mechanics for the crew of a theatre--an islet of freedom where the rules can be temporarily suspended when one is among friends. This intimacy and freedom extend--somewhat--to action as well as to language, somewhat because so many of the limits on specific freedom are regulated unconsciously by dispositions produced by the juxtaposition of educational and family background, lifestyle, work and living environment within the lifestyle.

VII

A final significant element in Foucher's staging of *La Table* resides in the explicit desire to reproduce a truth, not a reality. The real lives of real people is not at issue, rather the socio-cultural truth of a clearly delineated group. The primary vehicle of this reproduction is theatricalization, which is heightened by the particular staging. By theatricalization I mean overt indication to the public that this is indeed theatre, that there is no pretense of a fourth wall, that the public is recognized as such and is not a group of pretendedly unnoticed voyeurs. Realistic theatre presents a work *as if* it were reality, *as if* the public were observing actual people and events, yet theatre is always marked with a negative sign. The public knows it is in the theatre and that the people and events presented on stage are not real. Presentational theatre acknowledges the position of the spectators as such and attempts to create a self-conscious attitude in the public through distance. Theatricalization puts a second negative sign into the equation, rendering a positive truth, not a reality, but a truth.

Theatricalization in *La Table* takes many forms. The conversational situation is in itself presentational. Since the popular female character presents herself according to the implicit rules governing conversational exchange in the linguistic marketplace. The decor

establishes three separate playing spaces within the larger space which is itself the stage. The public itself is theatricalized to the extent that it is asked to enter into the playing space and take a place therein. The actress rises from the audience to begin playing and by separating herself from the audience creates the secondary playing space necessary to theatricalization. The essentially theatrical nature of the work from beginning to end does much to block negative identification.³ Theatricalization tends to counterbalance elements of production which would create popularizing and universalizing readings in a more realistic staging.

When text and scenography were combined in production, the relationship was neither direct nor mimetic. Although the actions and proxemics of the production can be seen to complete the women's words, they do this by pointing out the feelings, dispositions, and habits not expressed by words, by manifesting contradictions between words and meaning, by saying what the words do not. Staging is not a physical reproduction of the content and sentiment of the spoken word.

VIII

La Table resembles epic theatre in its lack of causal relationship between segments. It does not share epic's explicit historical base nor its intent to force the public to complete the picture and judge its own situation thereby. *La Table* calls for no judgement or critique. It intends to present a truth--the truth about the particular way in which the working class woman lives her daily life. The production seeks to do this through theatricalization of space, decor, characterization, speech, gesture, and overall acting style. To show the truth of the popular female character implies exposing parts of her daily life in which she is trapped without knowing it, where she reacts automatically, speaks unconsciously, holds herself a certain way without thinking about it. It must reproduce the levels of the double oppression to which she is subject--as member of the working class, and as woman.

In production all aspects of the multiple character are played by one actress (the author). Yet the multiple parts of the character are not interchangeable. The body of the old woman does not say the same things as that of the young, nor is her position within the class the same; and these differences are expressed physically, in relation to the tables and other everyday objects on the stage. Both do belong to and function within the same habitus. Specific props, actions and topics of concern underline the unifying aspects even as specific applications may emphasize difference within and between.

The acting style employed in the production was presentational. The character consciously presented herself to the audience. The presentational style did not self-consciously reflect back onto the condition/position of the actor and public, however. Where incongruities appear in word and gesture, for example, they are not due to the actor/character dialectic, but rather to contradictions and discomfort within the character.

La Table does succeed in portraying the lifestyle of the working class woman. The character is played as open yet produced by a particular social situation. It is in recurrent gesture and word that the particular social identity of the character is reproduced.

In the production, the social identity of the popular female character is constructed, as it is in the habitus, around her unconscious choices in the objects which surround her, in her speech, mannerisms, gestures, and dress. That appearance as defined by dominant images is of little importance is evident in choice of dress--comfortable, easily washed, easy to work in. The character never primps or looks in mirrors. (Also consistent with the fragile intimacy of the presentational situation.) Her dreams are of new wood worktables for the kitchen, not new dresses. She does not calculate her movement in order to present herself well. She sits with legs spread wide. She works around the kitchen without shoes. Her gestures are expansive, expressive. She has no training, no means of making more than a minimum wage. She must worry over getting enough potatoes to make it through the winter, but she is not miserly with what she is or what she has. Her mode of expression, in speech and gesture, is ample.

Recurrent gesture reinforces inculcated behavior--especially where it threatens class solidarity. "Ca, ça va pas, non" (That's just not done, huh) coupled with a finger shaken at the audience and a click of the tongue sets limits on acceptable behavior. It is not acceptable to want to control like Papa does, that is Papa's place not the daughter's! It is not acceptable for a man to beat his wife over nothing. It is not acceptable for Mom to want to join the Resistance and leave her family, no matter how good the cause. Each remonstrance is coupled with an exhibition of how things ought to be. Mom always sits in the same place at the table and is restricted physically as well as psychologically, by the thought of sitting elsewhere. When explaining this "idea one gets" the character's shoulders draw in toward her chest, she makes herself small and tight. The character clears the table, placing the chairs on top as if closing up a restaurant while telling about beaten wives. She's closing up shop; a wife hasn't much to give, but, if she runs a good show, she shouldn't have to be beaten on top of everything else: "alors, ça, . . . moi non!" (well then,

that . . . not me). Mama's first concern was food for her family. She left them to get a pig for them to eat. As the character realizes that Mama's heroism wasn't necessary, that it didn't really have anything to do with *their* needs, her body slumps, her face becomes puzzled, the finger points--"C'était pas normal . . ." (It wasn't normal . . .) (LT 30)

The speech of the popular female character takes something from both the presentational linguistic situation and from Brecht's alienation effect. She speaks as if her words were natural, but belonging to someone else, like a well-learned foreign language. This is another means of breaking psychological identification, of theatricalizing the character. It also emphasizes the unconsciously learned aspects of any speech--that area where oppression is part of the very words one uses. This is most evident in the instances where recourse to authority or cliché recurs. It is also prevalent where the words spoken take the form of historical discourse.

Historically, the Romans said: "The Gods watch he who eats"! Vesta is the goddess of the table--There should be at least three and no more than nine guests because three is the number of the graces and nine that of the muses--Salt purifies the child at baptism--in the city of antiquity, before eating one placed the portion reserved for the gods on the alter.(LT 23)

The text is pronounced as if recited in a schoolroom, yet the character is kneeling on top of one of the tables with her arms outspread. The gesture does not reproduce the words, it is on a most literal level: that which is on the table/altar is the sacrifice--the woman. This use of the alienation effect of speaking as if the words belong to someone else tends to reinforce the image of repression in the production, rather than to give the audience a truly critical view of the lifestyle. It is not as if the actress is making the public aware of the difference between herself and her character, but rather of the imposed aspects of the habitus and in particular of male dominance. This can function to increase identification ("I too am repressed, especially by men") and popularization ("The working class man really is a brute isn't he!") Again the problem lies in lack of critical perspective and in the institutional frame for production. The specific dominance exercised by the bourgeoisie as dominant class through language is implicit in the presentation, in the 'borrowing' of words, in recourse to the authority of standard legitimized discourse. It lacks a foregrounding which would make it truly critical.

Throughout the production, gesture and speech reinforce the

openness of the working class lifestyle--the lack of concern for propriety on the one hand, and the repressions manifest in that lifestyle on the other. Since the dominance of man over woman is essential to both class and to the play, the production loses in not staging a male character--or in not making the absence speak more forcefully, more critically. Within the habitus the man takes *his* place, he gets all the food he needs, he makes decisions, he disciplines the children, maybe he beats his wife. The weight of male force is conveyed in the anecdotes of the play--even to the extent of implying that eating horse meat imparts strength like that of horses at stud. The specific domination of the popular female character is not clear without some presence of the working class male. It becomes much easier for the female bourgeois audience to identify with the domination of the working class woman in the absence of her male counterpart. Paradoxically, in her very multiplicity, she becomes more easily identified with. So the middle class woman can say, "The job's not the same, but I too have to work *and* take care of the children *and* the house . . . My husband doesn't understand either. . . ."

The weak point of this production may in fact be in not pushing theatricalization and its critical implications far enough. Theatricalization which called the actress/author and public into question, which so juxtaposed the existent and conflictual differences between played and playing, figure and receiver of the image would have much more impact. If the project questions the taking of the strange as normal, the production should force the public to question and act on its acceptance of identification and assumed commonality in the midst of difference. Lack of self-critical perspective, manifests an underlying populism. If the production recognized conflicting dispositions between character and public, character and actress, the objectification of the popular lifestyle would be greatly reduced. The attempt to block judgement of this lifestyle is not sufficient if there is no dialectical presentation of difference. Although not presented in realistic manner, gesture, clothing, props, and language are painstakingly popular. They speak the working class lifestyle. Without an accompanying critical discourse or self-reflective distanciation, this presentation places the popular character on display, even as the culture of a 'primitive' tribe is displayed in a museum, in order that we, the 'civilized', may see and understand. Even the admonition against judgement manifests a certain condescension. It reproduces distinguishing dispositions in regards to difference and distance which both disengage the spectator from the lifestyle portrayed and add to his/her cultural capital in the form of disinterested cultural knowledge. The intent is full of good will as is the audience response, but cultural goodwill is a distinguishing characteristic of the ascendent bourgeoisie and implies

no change in social formation. Playing to the defining goodwill of this class fraction negates the political project of the play. Culture is a primary vehicle to social promotion. Oriented towards passive learning intended to increase social and cultural capital, such good will is devoid of critical content. The empty good will towards culture of groups lacking in cultural capital asks to be filled with demonstrable knowledge. What is in fact produced is a certain passive recognition of cultural artifacts and their forms. Legitimized popular culture, that is folk, ethnic, marginal or even commercial culture presented as, in the context of, Art, is a preferred choice of such groups. Michèle Foucher feeds the inclination to passive learning inherent in bourgeois good will when she insists that her intent is to show a truth and not to judge or to create judgement. Her production choices reinforce this intent. The project struggles to avoid populism yet lack of overt critical frame allows a well intentioned public to assume the pose of well-informed (or wishing to be) acceptor of the popular other, while other mechanisms of production create equally passivating moments of identification. Had the representational style of the production turned their goodwill back on the audience, shown the public its own dispositions in relation to the particular lifestyle presented, the play would have more fully escaped both the populism and facile identification which the project worked to avoid.

The production did attempt to distance the public from the character. Since the explicit goal of the production is to provoke not judgement but understanding, a certain distance is required. Discontinuity on the levels of language, character, gesture, and situation block the possibility of abstracting one or several typical characters representative of woman's nature. It also blocks identification with a character viewed as representative of a psychological being. The figures presented do not mobilize passive identification; they do not mobilize both interest and good will. Such an attitude is produced by the uncritical juxtaposition of bourgeois public with popular character within the atmosphere of fragile intimacy created through staging and presentational style to the partial and momentary suspension of the rules. Within this fragile space, the public can participate rather than look passively on. Because all exposition of contradiction, of underlying attitudes and dispositions comes from within the character, from a juxtaposition of those very attitudes and dispositions, well-intentioned identification by the public with the popular class and the figure depicted is in the fact reinforced. The character is repressed and doesn't know it; she is caught in tradition and doesn't know it. Her body speaks the unease she doesn't consciously feel, yet there is joy. The audience recognizes these traps and contradictions as generalized, in spite of the specificity of presentation, and finds elements to

identify with. There is no decisive differentiation between the character and her audience, either through juxtaposition of values and dispositions or through the physical aspects of the production. Despite the specificity of the lifestyle presented, there is room for universalization on the level of gender and for the projection of the audience into the lifestyle presented. Assumption of generalized common experience based, for example, on specific complaints of the character, negates the specificity of the habitus presented. It places socially marginal dispositions once again in a position of being considered in light of dominant norms, in terms of the culture of the spectator rather than that of the presented habitus. It allows for neither a critique of the working class character's lifestyle from within its own set of dispositions which privilege physical force and male virility as the only power available and unique to the class, nor a critique of the assumptions of the audience in light of a presentation of difference.

X

Foucher's *La Table* attempts to reproduce an authentic image of the habitus of the working class woman. The representation of the choices and dispositions reproduced by and within this habitus is indeed true to character. The problem lies in the relationship between production and public and in a critical and self reflective perspective not being foregrounded in production. However many times the play is produced for groups of working class women, its official public is that of the national theatre: well intentioned new bourgeois. While the project reached beyond the institution, the product did not succeed in breaking the barrier between art and life, professional and non-professional, dominant and dominated. Even when the public is working class, the production only makes contradiction evident within the limits of the working class habitus. It in no way gives the character a voice with political or social clout. In reproducing the working class lifestyle, the production articulates objectively a human and political reality, but by staging itself within the confines of that lifestyle, it denies any possible mobilization on the part of either the real public or the potential popular public. The new bourgeois public identifies and projects; it is not directed toward action or even toward self-reflection and analysis. The working class public and the women within that public are caught, even as is the character, in its fragmentary discourse and lack of legitimate means to power, political or social.

Notes

1. I use dispositions in the double sense of spacial or hierarchical placement and of tendencies toward certain choices which in turn manifest values and self-images.

2. *La Table* was first staged November 4, 1977 at the National Theater in Strasbourg, France. It was subsequently staged at the Théâtre Gerard Philipe in the working class parisian suburb of Saint Denis (September-October 1978), toured small theaters and halls in France (January 1979), was restaged at the National Theater in Strasbourg and the Théâtre National Populaire in Villeurbanne (February 1979) and toured France, Italy and Germany (Spring 1979).

3. Negative identification here refers to the tendencies of all cultures to be defined in relation to the dominant culture. Marginalized groups are identified negatively, by that which they are not--not white, not bourgeois, not male, not heterosexual...

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