Thomas R. West. *Signs of Struggle. The Rhetorical Politics of Cultural Difference.* **Albany: SUNY Press, 2002.**

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1 Thomas R. West's monograph seeks to provide rhetorical and pedagogical approaches to dealing with difference. His conception of cultural difference is based on Bhabha's (1990) distinction between "cultural diversity" in the multiculturalist sense and the notion of "cultural difference" characterised by the ambivalence originating from the relationship between coloniser and colonised. The title hints at West's attempt to synthesise insights from the fields of rhetoric and composition, cultural and critical theory, and postcolonial studies in order to situate them within a pedagogical framework. His overall concern is to show that culture as well as race, gender, and sexuality have to be understood as signs, or sites of agonistic political struggle and resistance affected by the impact of emotion.

2 The author invokes the three main guiding questions throughout the book:

> What kinds of rhetorical politics should be advanced in order to encourage differences to be more than merely expressed, tolerated, and celebrated?
> How can we accept the risk of disruption to the status quo that irreducible difference may represent […] without resorting to an "anything goes" style of rhetorical politics?
> How can we foster social relations dependent on states of knowledge that are prepared to suffer modification and interrogation by what they neither possess nor claim as their own? (3)

West intends to answer these questions by formulating a rhetorical politics that takes into account the "critical gravity of differences, accepting and engaging differences on their own terms", and by positing "a guideline for viewing community as an assemblage of 'compositions of difference'" (3). Thereby, he focuses on the pedagogical relevance of learning and teaching the engagement with difference. While the first part of the book is concerned with the "critical negotiation" of difference, the second part addresses issues of coping with anger and strong emotion which originate from difference. In the so-called "anti-conclusion" West finally posits a "multi-critical rhetoric of difference" viewing culture not only as a sign of struggle, but also as an "assemblage of compositions of differences." Proceeding from a critique of the shortcomings of existing traditional models of engagement with difference, he offers alternative models in each of the five chapters. As a consequence, he runs the risk of confronting the reader with a number of juxtaposed "theories," "models," "politics," "pedagogics," and "rhetorics" which make it difficult

to discern how they relate to the guiding questions quoted above.

3   The first chapter tries to suggest a model of engagement with cultural difference on the basis of theories of hybridity by Anzaldúa (1987) and Bhabha (1990). On the level of identity politics, the author sees hybridity as a critical strategy of negotiation that challenges restrictive and reductionist negotiations of racial identities. His attempt to appropriate hybridity as a *rhetorical* strategy of "critical negotiation," which he wants to be understood as a strategy of resistance in the colonial and postcolonial sense, does not seem to be very convincing. According to Bhabha (1990), the potential for resistance in cultural difference and hybridity is based on the psychoanalytically defined uncanniness of ambivalence that characterises the colonial strategy of "mimicry." Ignoring "mimicry" as a strategy of resistance, West's intention is to make use of the critical and transformative potential of colonial and postcolonial ambivalence in order to avoid taking reactionary oppositional stances during the critical negotiations of racism, sexism and homophobia. However, the main problem with this attempt is that - when theorising about Bhabha's colonial strategy of resistance - it is neither unproblematic to separate ambivalence from "mimicry," nor to equate it with anger and other strong emotions as signs of collective political struggle. Thus West's "theory of critical negotiation" at times appears to be misleading because it fuses a radical call for a passionate political struggle with psychoanalytically based issues of the ambivalence of hybrid "in-betweenness" without recognising its psychoanalytical roots.[1] Finally, it remains to be questioned whether hybridity can function as a *rhetorical* strategy of negotiation.

4   However, chapters two and three aim at providing concrete examples of the critical negotiations of race, gender, and sexuality which seek to counter racism, sexism, and homophobia. Proceeding from a critique of institutional discourses (such as multiculturalist and liberalist ones) which continue to represent racial, gender, and sexual difference as diversity or otherness, West calls for a reconceptualisation of race, gender, and sexuality as signs of struggle, or "ideologies of difference" that influence the conception and deployment of difference. While pseudo-scientific discourse misconceptualises race, gender, and sexuality on the basis of essentialism and naturalism, poststructuralist approaches do so, because they conceive "ideologies of difference" as mere illusory textual constructs. Critical race theory, the critical study of whiteness, and the movement of "race traitoring" examine the cultural significations of

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[1] West's "critical theory of negotiation" is based on the following four characteristics of critical negotiation: 1. the role of the affective in critical negotiation, 2. negotiation as mutually constitutive, 3. the influence of anteriority during negotiation, and 4. the histories and contexts of negotiation (20, 21).

the privileged status of whiteness as an unmarked marker of difference accounting for its socio-historical constructedness. In order to avoid recentring whiteness, the critical study of whiteness must remain self-critical and self-reflexive. In a similar vein, queer studies, the critical study of men and masculinity, as well as the concept of "gender traitoring" critically negotiate gender and sexuality in terms of questioning the social construction of ritualised hegemonic masculinity.

5   In chapters four and five West analyses the affective politics of difference in rhetoric and pedagogy. As he puts it, differences do not only involve the ways in which people think about one another, they also involve the ways in which they feel about one another. While chapter four investigates the relations between violence, oppression, emotion, and rhetoric introducing models of engagement with anger and strong emotion which stem from difference, chapter five advances an agonistic pedagogical model that accounts for the relations between anger and conflict as political action. Ways of feeling are not purely psychological and individual, they are structural and political as well, for emotions are teachable and learnable. On the basis of Lorde's (1996) distinction of hatred and anger, and Mouffe's (1999) differentiation between "antagonism" and "agonism," West describes a "politics of hate" characterised by destructive antagonism towards external enemies as opposed to a "politics of anger" considered as the agonistic relation between adversaries which is characterised by mutual respect. "Dominant pedagogy," psychology, and therapy are accused of mystifying emotions by presenting them as an exclusively individual and psychological matter that subordinates emotion to reason and dismisses "women's emotions" and "black anger" as exclusively individual emotions, erasing difference as motivation for violence, and of causing feelings of shame, guilt, and of self-loathing. According to West, the transgressive potential of anger should be used to challenge the politics of othering and to counter pedagogies of hate. Anger is seen as the first step towards political action; the author then goes on to devise an agonistic pedagogic model, "the praxis of shelter" which rests on two primary premises:

> 1. that people are motivated to act socially and politically because of their affective conditions and investments, and
> 2. that suffering is one of the fundamental motivations for human community and action. (104)

Thus, the "praxis of shelter" seeks to politicise and universalise psychological "problems" as closely related to, or even caused by, political, social, and economic conditions.

6   In the so-called "anti-conclusion" of his book, West finally engages with the notion of culture as a sign of struggle. On the basis of a critique of democracy and its rhetorics of "civility" that connects "culture" with "civilisation," and thereby leads to rhetorical strategies of othering

allegedly "uncivilised" cultures, as well as depoliticising relations with "other cultures," West develops a "multi-critical rhetoric of difference" which he considers to be an extension of Hall's (1998) rhetoric of "cultural composition." With reference to Hall, such a rhetoric does not only seek "to understand how 'cultures' and identities are 'composed' *in relation to* other cultures and identities" (119), but it also defines culture as an "assemblage of relationships" formed within the asymmetrical politics of difference. While West views Hall's "cultural composition" as a kind of postcolonial dialogical rhetorical field of study "that examines the use of discourses of authenticity to create and affirm cultures," the "multi-critical rhetoric of difference," he "recognizes that there is an increasing need to be critical of struggle concepts, or signs of struggle such as culture" (120). According To West, regarding culture as a sign of struggle means to be critical of existing concepts of culture - such as the notion of "culture as civilisation" -, and to transform them into a notion of "culture as difference," which takes into consideration issues of affect and emotion within the mutual processes of the formation of culture's politics and identities.

7   One of the most crucial shortcomings of West's book is that he attempts to fuse radical approaches to difference with postcolonial ones that are based on psychoanalytical concepts in order to posit "a rhetorical politics of cultural difference." While psychology and "the therapeutics" are criticised throughout the book, at the same time "psychological problems" serve as the very basis from which he develops the agonistic pedagogical model of "the praxis of shelter," which calls for a politicisation and universalisation of psychological matters. West himself argues that "it also would be helpful when listening to others, to attempt to think emotion and not merely feel and react to it" (102). So, when dealing with emotions like anger, anxiety, shame, or guilt on a theoretical level, it might be useful to take into consideration insights from psychoanalytical theory instead of demonising them. Furthermore, the attempt tp "reconceptualise" race, gender, sexuality, and culture as "signs of struggle" by simply trying to add the component of emotion proves to be not unproblematic. While claiming that poststructuralist approaches to difference misconceptualise race, gender and sexuality as mere textual constructs, West ignores the existence of feminist poststructuralist approaches which do situate difference within socio-historical contexts, account for the impact of emotion, and challenge homogenising multiculturalist, liberalist, and heterosexist discourses. However, the book provides a good and detailed overview, criticises current approaches to difference, and tries to situate them within a rhetorical and pedagogical context, thus relating theory to practice. All in

all, it can be said that West largely answers the guiding questions he poses in the introduction of his book. Therefore, it should be recommended to students and academics working in the fields of rhetoric and composition, critical and cultural theory, learning and teaching, sociology, and postcolonial theory.