

Book Review

By Francisco H. Vázquez

Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187, by Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop. 253 pages. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002. ISBN 1-56639-917-3. \$19.95 paper.

From Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, we learned about the manipulation of the economy, the unconscious, and moral values, respectively. From Foucault, we learned about a most insidious manipulation: the relationship between truth and power. Ono and Sloop believe that this is precisely what is at stake in the world today—and take immigration to illustrate their point: "Proposition 187 allows us to study the role rhetoric plays in shaping social borders and constructing immigrant identities and international relationships." This is, incidentally, especially true after 9/11.

This book makes an important contribution to our understanding of these complex issues. The introduction requires some work from the reader due to the specialized explanation of rhetorical criticism and how it leads to a "purposeful poststructural critical rhetoric." Yet, this is important because their notion that "critical analysis of culture and cultural texts can play a material role in shaping culture" is little known outside academic circles. Simply put, some scholars consider that words are material things (like rocks and water and trees). If so, then there is a political economy of words, of language. That is how some words about Proposition 187 became part of "chisme," others were published or quoted on TV, and others became law. That is how some words are accepted by society in general (what the authors call "civic discourse") and other words stay within a small group of people (what the authors call "vernacular discourse").

The authors make a further distinction between "dominant" and "outlaw" discourses, two "logics" that are incompatible with each other. Dominant discourse is supported by institutions (schools, courts, police, and armed forces) to such an extent that it becomes the norm (what some consider "common sense"). Outlaw discourse is illegitimate, so it can (1) become popular and thus be socially acceptable (like rap), (2) become part of the dominant discourse, or (3) remain outlaw and never become part of the civic discourse (it stays as "just crazy talk").

To analyze civic discourse, the authors look at television news broadcasts and news articles indexed nationally—for California, they analyze the *Los Angeles Times*. For the vernacular discourse, the authors study e-mail posts on a listserv dedicated to anti-Proposition 187 activism. With these tools, the authors propose to (1) deconstruct the assumptions of dominant civic discourses, (2) illustrate the complexities of the dominant vernacular discourses, and (3) highlight and promote progressive outlaw vernacular discourses.

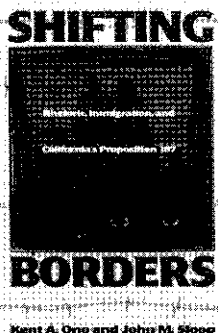
What they find is intensely thought-provoking. Their chapter on "Proliferation of Enemies to the National Body" is prescient of the 9/11 terrorist attack. The United States needed enemies after the collapse of the Russian Evil Empire. The enemy became the Mexican immigrants, portrayed as criminal, immoral, and diseased, and as breeders and human capital. For any Mexican-looking person, citizen or not, the climate in California in the 1990s paralleled the racial climate of Mississippi in the 1960s. In line with the dominant discourse, the significant number of undocumented Asians escaped these anti-immigrant attacks.

A key problem identified by the authors is that supporters and opponents of Proposition 187 (the civic and vernacular discourses) based their arguments on the same set of assumptions: (1) Mexican immigrants bring disease, infestation; (2) they are economic units of labor, not human beings (defining citizen as someone who contributes capital), and (3) their legal status as citizens is questionable (as opposed to their being deserving of universal rights or public citizenship). The overall impact of this ambivalent position was twofold. It created a "discursive bind," a way of silencing voices that opposed Proposition 187 (after all, who wants to be against California?). It also allowed state institutions like the *Los Angeles Times* and federal ones like Clinton's White House to be against Proposition 187 and yet support welfare and immigration policies that were even harsher than the Proposition itself.

The real opposition is the outlaw discourse, the voices of the marginalized communities; these voices provide alternatives to the existing system. But other questions arise: will the outlaw discourse propose a better system than the existing one? And how can one make it come about? Furthermore, if outlaw discourse occupies the current civic space, does it become co-opted, or does it change the system?

The authors succeed in providing a tool kit of sorts and a context for future struggles. Try applying them to the current immigration debates at the Center for Immigration Studies at <http://www.cis.org/>. To their credit, they also recognize the limits of rhetorical insurgency: "the key to changing logics lies in the hands of the changing needs of capital for workers in different areas and is not as much of a rhetorical battle as we would wish."

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