Whitney Anspach, Kevin Coe, & Crispin Thurlow

THE OTHER CLOSET?:
Atheists, homosexuals and the lateral appropriation of discursive capital

Previous studies have considered different forms of economic and/or cultural appropriation between status-unequal groups, for example young, White, middle-class people cashing in on the music of urban, African-American culture. In this paper, however, we are interested in what we call 'lateral appropriation', the process whereby the discursive capital of one marginalized group is usurped by another similarly marginalized group. In particular, drawing illustrative data from a number of organizational websites, we examine the atheist movement's remetaphorized use of the homosexual 'closet' and the related notion of 'coming out'. Within the framework of critical discourse analysis, we view this particular instance of appropriation as a discursive recontextualization achieved primarily by strategically establishing certain 'relations of equivalence' which allow atheists to invoke a more immediately recognized identity politics. Specifically, we show how their appeals to the closet metaphor provide a cathartic vehicle for individual identity formation, activate a marginalized status, and mobilize political action. On this basis, we reflect on the consequences this lateral appropriation might have for the personal and political experiences of homosexuals in the context of a hegemonic order in which marginalized groups are bound to compete over reduced material and symbolic resources.

Keywords lateral appropriation; discursive capital; atheists; homosexuals; marginalization; identity politics

[U]tterances are not only (save in exceptional circumstances) signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority, intended to be believed and obeyed.

> (Bourdieu, 1991/1999, p. 502)

In the mid-nineteenth century, women's suffrage activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton famously used 'slavery' as a means of dramatizing and thereby publicizing the mistreatment of women in US society (Davis, 1983). In turn, homosexual groups have more recently borrowed the rhetoric of women's rights to generate a

greater public awareness of hate crimes (Jenness, 1995), while African-American drag queens have expressed themselves by adopting the styles and manners of White women (Barrett, 1995). What each situation has in common is that one marginalized group is seen to highlight its own identity politics by drawing on – or appropriating – the experiences and, specifically, the semiotic resources of another subordinated group. For the most part, however, scholars have attended only to appropriation between marginalized groups and dominant groups, as either imperialistic or counter-hegemonic strategies (e.g., Bacon, 1999; Harris, 2003; King, 1991; Pearce, 1999; Rowell, 1995; Shugart, 1997). There has been very little consideration of appropriation occurring between two similarly low-status groups. This paper seeks to fill this void in the literature by examining atheist organizations' discursive appropriation of the homosexual 'closet' and the related notion of 'coming out'. In doing so, our paper also starts to draw scholarly attention to atheists – a significant social group that language and communication studies have tended to ignore.

Theoretical background

According to Shugart (1997), appropriation is 'any instance in which means commonly associated with and/or perceived as belonging to another are used to further one's own ends' (p. 210). In this sense, appropriation implies something more than mimetic consumption or intertextual reference; the process referred to here usually implies a more deliberate or strategic arrogation or usurpation – in denotative terms, the taking of something as one's own (*Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*, 1996). This distinction is akin to the one drawn by Fairclough (2003, p. 112, after Habermas) between 'strategic action' and 'communicative action'. Much of the scholarship that has examined appropriation has done so under the rubric of cultural appropriation and has considered the appropriation of a broad array of cultural forms and practices, ranging from property and scientific knowledge to music, dance, and fashions of clothing (e.g., Hladki, 1994; King, 1991; Rowell, 1995; Young, 2000; Ziff & Rao, 1997). Appropriation, however, is by no means limited to these more obvious cultural forms and practices. Languages, genres of writing, and even particular stylistic patterns can be appropriated as well (e.g., Bacon, 1999; Harris, 2003; Pearce, 1999; Rampton, 1995; Shugart, 1997). Such appropriation is significant because, as Volosinov (1973/1994) points out, every 'social group has had and has its own repertoire of speech forms for ideological communication in human behavior' (p. 54). That is to say, the language practices of a given social group, like the material artifacts it produces, inevitably define and shape its identity. Thus, appropriating a group's discursive resources is, in a sense, equivalent to appropriating aspects of its identity.

It is also the case, as Bakhtin (1981) reminds us, that 'there are no "neutral" words and forms—words and forms that can belong to "no one"; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents' (p. 293). Although the inherent dialogicality of language ensures no group ever really 'owns' a given phrase or speech pattern, particular linguistic formations do over time come to be commonly associated with a particular group and infused with

the meanings, understandings, and experiences of that group. As Bakhtin continues, 'Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions' (p. 293). It is for this very reason that sociolinguists working in the area of linguistic variation (e.g., Eckert & Rickford, 2001) and speech accommodation (e.g., Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) have been particularly concerned to examine the ways in which people mimic or imitate accent or other dialectal features for various interpersonal and identificational ends. In addition, where such choices of communicative style are typically implicit (i.e., made unconsciously), sociolinguistic stylization is thought to entail a more marked, self-conscious performance or even parody (Coupland, 2004).

In this paper we consider a mode of appropriation which is explicit and deliberate in its appeal to the symbolic (i.e., both semantic and ideological) resonance of a linguistic formation. What marks discursive appropriation as distinct from sociolinguistic stylization, however, is that the 'borrowing' is not merely a matter of performing an accent, style, or register. Rather, our interest is the appropriation of discourse as a form of cultural appropriation, whereby the utterances (or speech acts) of one group are co-opted and used strategically by another group for their own sociopolitical gain.

Following Bourdieu (1991/1999), the appropriation of discourse can, in both literal and figurative terms, be thought of as 'an economic exchange which is established within a particular symbolic relation of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer (or market), and which is capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit' (p. 502). Taking this view, the decision to appropriate the language of another is invariably made with the intention of profiting from the symbolic cachet already accrued. As Bakhtin (1981) explains, however, the appropriation of discourse is not always easy: 'Not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation ... many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them'" (p. 294). What this points to is the potential difficulty of 'recontextualizing' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 51) discourse: in seeking to move communicative practices from one domain (or group) to another, the transfer may not be successful or the transformation incomplete. Indeed, the appropriation may also be resisted.[1]

Given this, it is not surprising that, at different times, social groups have had mixed success in their appropriations of symbolic capital. For example, early White rappers faced a certain amount of resistance in appropriating a musical form that originated as an African-American cultural practice. The commercial success of rap among White teen consumers prompted music producers to market White rappers in place of African-Americans. This appropriation failed, however, because White teens perceived the White rappers to be both inauthentic and inappropriate (Samuels, 1991). In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, the appropriations could not be assimilated into the new context: '[I]t is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the speaker' (p. 294). Another example of problematic discursive appropriation is African-American drag queens' appropriation of White women's manners and styles. Feminist scholar bell hooks' critique of a film containing African-American drag queens illustrates this; she writes: 'The fixation of becoming as much like a White female as possible implicitly evokes a connection to a figure

never visible in this film; that of the White male patriarch' (quoted in Barrett, 1995, p. 210). In this case, the cultural practices of White women were not easily assimilated into the African-American drag queens' own context and instead had the unintentional consequence of affiliating them with the 'White male patriarch'.

Despite the problems inherent in discursive appropriation, some groups do succeed in tapping the discursive and other symbolic resources of groups to which they do not belong – often by creating more hybrid or 'intertextualized' genres and identities (cf. Fairclough, 2003). One example of such a successful appropriation is the rock/rap music hybrid now dominated by White musicians, which has had great consumer appeal (especially among young White people) without so readily falling victim to accusations of inauthenticity (Middleton & Beebe, 2002). Even in such apparently successful, uncontentious instances, the creation of hybrid discourses raises questions about the impact of discursive appropriation upon the originators of the discourse. For example, Smith (1999) suggests that the appropriation of cultural practices such as music and art potentially minimizes the 'voice' of their originators because those who appropriate the practices are often ignorant of the original groups' intentions and sociocultural history. In Bourdieu's (1991/1999) terms, the originators seldom stand to profit from these symbolic exchanges. In fact, as he points out, appropriating moves by dominant group members into the discursive realm of the 'other' can be opportunistic acts of 'condescension' which merely serve to reinscribe hierarchical relations of inequality. In other words, while the high-status group or individual may choose in passing to stylize themselves in the language or social practices of the subordinate group, in the mouths of the subordinated the same language may leave them stigmatized and/or marginalized.

In other instances, of course, it is possible that appropriation may enhance the value of the cultural practice being usurped. This certainly seems to be the case, say, when local, culturally-specific practices become popularized into the mainstream – for example, the much talked-about globalization of rap music and hip-hop (e.g., Pennycook, 2003). Nonetheless, even these apparently celebratory commodifications often work hegemonically to the disadvantage of 'appropriatees' (Jordan & Weedon, 1995). Hill (2001), for example, argues with reference to the use of 'mock Spanish' by Anglo-Americans that this type of playful 'crossing' (Rampton, 1995) into Spanish actually serves to elevate the identities of the appropriators rather than those whose language is being appropriated. We return to this point later in the paper; for now, we mean simply to raise the possibility that, irrespective of appropriator intention, the consequences of discursive appropriation (and other less strategic modes of stylization) are not necessarily benign. However flattering or harmless an appropriation may appear to be, it can have quite the opposite effect on the group to whom the discursive resources properly, or at least initially, belong.

Although, as we have suggested by reference to Bakhtin's ideas, the voices of originators always continue to resonate in discourses, and originators thereby inevitably retain a sense of ownership over the appropriated discourse, in extreme cases the originators' ideas and the historical context of their discourse can be completely concealed/obscured by multiple recontextualizations and transformations. (In lay terms, this would be the difference between imitation as the greatest form of flattery and imitation as simple plagiarism.) As such, both the tenor and the ideological

texture of the discourse are called into question, as is the originators' continued commitment. What all of this suggests, then, is that appropriation is a complex and often uncertain process that has significant implications for both the group undertaking the appropriation and the group that is being targeted. Although we do not seek to prove (nor can we) that damage is necessarily and/or intentionally done to the appropriated group, we are motivated to examine the process of discursive appropriation and to reflect on its possible consequences. We are also especially concerned to consider how this might work when the appropriation occurs between similarly marginalized groups.

Lateral appropriation

In terms of directionality, studies that have examined appropriation have, almost exclusively, done so in one of two ways: appropriation as a top-down strategy in which dominant groups utilize their power to usurp or exploit the social practices of marginalized groups, or appropriation as a bottom-up strategy which marginalized groups use as a means of wrenching power and prestige away from dominant groups. For example, scholars have examined numerous practices which dominant groups have appropriated from marginalized groups, including music (e.g., Samuels, 1991; Young, 2000), artistic images (Harris, 2003), and spiritual ceremonies (e.g., Hernandez-Avila, 1996; Smith, 1999).[2] Conversely, other scholars have focused on various instances in which marginalized groups have appropriated cultural forms from dominant groups, such as African-American abolitionist rhetors' appropriation of dominant texts in antebellum America (Bacon, 1999), radical feminists' appropriation of the manifesto genre (Pearce, 1999), and activist filmmakers' technique of highlighting oppressive gender norms by appropriating traditionally masculine characteristics and attributing them to female characters (Shugart, 1997). Additionally, inverting the meanings of terms traditionally used to degrade a marginalized group is another common bottom-up strategy of appropriation. Such linguistic reclamation has been seen, for example, in civil rights groups' 'black is beautiful' campaigns (Harris, 2003; Sheffield, 2002), the use of the term 'nigger' by African-Americans (Kennedy, 2002), and the recovery of 'queer', as in queer theory (e.g., Eldeman, 1995).

   This scholarship, though valuable, fails to consider one important type of appropriation that is neither top-down nor bottom-up, but rather occurs laterally between two marginalized groups. By marginalized groups we mean those that break dominant cultural norms in some way and consequently lack societal power or respect and face a certain level of discrimination. As Cheng (1999) puts it, a marginalized group is one that has 'peripheral or disadvantaged [and] unequal membership' (p. 295). There are, of course, problems inherent in making overly simplistic judgments about the sociopolitical equivalence of groups characterized by terms such as 'minority', 'low-status', 'marginalized', and 'subordinated'. Song (2004) details this difficulty in assessing status:

   There are many . . . dimensions of a group's status and experience. While it is
   possible that some groups are consistently disadvantaged across a whole range

of indicators [e.g., income, media representation, etc.], it is also possible that a group may fare badly according to some indicators, but may be relatively privileged according to others. (p. 867)

This difficulty in assessing status equivalence between social groups has clear implications for our notion of laterality. Given this, we chose to understand 'marginalization' in this paper as the *relative*, shared experience of different groups subjected to prejudice and discrimination by a common hegemonic majority. (We return to this issue below.)

Only a handful of studies have considered appropriation occurring between such comparatively low-status groups. Barrett (1995), for example, discusses African-American drag queens' appropriation of the style and manners of White women, but, while recognizing the marginalized status of both groups, focused on determining whether the drag queens' appropriation of the dominant White discursive practices could indeed be considered counter-hegemonic. Likewise, Davis (1983), in noting the use of 'slavery' by White women's-suffrage spokeswomen, did not examine in any detail the discursive process itself or the implications that this appropriation might have had for either of the groups. The lack of scholarship examining such appropriation is particularly significant because marginalized groups are consistently forced into situations where they are vying with one another for limited symbolic resources (Collins, 1974; Coser, 1956; Yousman, 2004) – the exchange of which, as discussed above, can yield important sociopolitical capital. Thus marginalized groups face 'real or imagined threats' to their status, putting them in 'a predicament of conflicting goals or competition over scarce resources' (Jackson, 1993, p. 397). Such competition inevitably puts marginalized groups in a potentially difficult position as they attempt to foster a positive public opinion of their group. Indeed, these groups are forced to choose between competitively distinguishing themselves from others, to create 'a shared sense of social identity' (Price & Oshagan, 1995, p. 192), and working with other marginalized groups to create coalitions that might better their chances of meeting collective goals. The presence of this tension – and its political implications – makes understanding the appropriation that occurs between marginalized groups particularly germane.

Given this, our focus in this paper is on what we are terming *lateral appropriation*. Adapting language from Shugart's (1997) definition of appropriation, we define lateral appropriation as any instance in which means commonly associated with and/or perceived as belonging to one marginalized group are used by another marginalized group to further its own ends (cf. Shugart, 1997, p. 210). With this conceptualization in mind, we now consider the process and reflect on the potential effects of the atheist movement's lateral appropriation of the discursive capital available in homosexuals' 'closet' and 'coming out' metaphors.

The current study: methodological framework

In this paper, we frame our analysis and discussion of the atheist movement's lateral appropriation of the closet metaphor by means of the broadly-defined

principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA; e.g., Fairclough, 1999, 2003; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Lemke, 1995; van Dijk, 2001). Importantly, CDA is not a method in the sense that content analysis or conversation analysis are methods; there are no neat, step-by-step procedures for the analysis of discourse. (This does not mean that critical analysis is unsystematic or that it lacks rigour.) As a theoretical approach to the study of language use and social practice, however, CDA works from the understanding that texts are 'socially constitutive as well as socially shaped' (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). As such, discursive practices are not simply constrained by social forces but also contribute to their transformation (Fairclough, 2003). Furthermore, CDA also assumes that power relationships are necessarily constructed and maintained in discourse and, as such, it is important to understand 'the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk' (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). Such an approach is particularly useful for our analysis here, because appropriation is both a manifestation and an enactment of relations of power being negotiated in everyday language use. Our discussion and analysis here also work within that style of CDA which orientates less to the inner workings of texts and rather to the distinctive 'texturing' (Fairclough, 2003) of social processes.

> Critical discourse analysis aims to provide a framework for systematically linking properties of discoursal interactions and texts with features of their social and cultural circumstances. . . . Particular discursive events . . . are described in terms of the potentially innovative ways in which they draw upon the orders of discourse which condition them.
>
> (Fairclough, 1999, pp. 79–80)

The texts analyzed in this study were taken from the websites of the four major US-based organizations that are either professed atheist organizations or that actively work to promote a naturalistic worldview and freedom from religion: American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Brights. These four organizations were identified via three Internet search engines (Google, Yahoo, and Dogpile). These Internet searches revealed the presence of 17 primary national atheist/humanist/free-thought organizations, of which the four selected appeared the most prominent. We judged prominence by triangulating the organizations' position in the search returns, their activity in other forms of media (e.g., publishing their own periodicals and being referenced in news articles), and their own claims about size and influence. Additionally, in order to include regional atheist voices, we also looked at materials from the Secular Web, a leading atheist web ring.[3]

Texts on these sites took a variety of forms, including postings on discussion boards, question and answer areas, press releases, and position papers. Two of the organizations also archive their magazines, from which some extracts were taken – the American Humanist Association archives *The Humanist*, and the Council for Secular Humanism archives *Free Inquiry*. During August and September 2003 we reviewed these online texts for references to 'the closet' and 'coming out', as well as references to homosexuals/homosexuality. In the discussion which follows, we refer to multiple examples from a range of these text sources to indicate

how the atheist movement's appropriation of the closet metaphor was organized and the functions it appeared to serve for the movement. Our intention throughout was to avoid a quantitative assessment in favour of an interpretive, critical review – highlighting striking themes rather than statistical patterns. As is true of much qualitative analysis, the specific extracts which we include do not necessarily make a claim to representativeness but instead appeal to an informed judgment of typicality based on our careful and multiple readings of the texts in question. Although singled out for comment, it is also important to remember that individual extracts instantiate a matrix of discursive moments by which the closet metaphor emerged as a recurrent narrative resource across all our data sources. (Each extract is identified by the organization from which it came.)

At this point, we think it is also important to acknowledge in broad terms our own relationships with the two sociopolitical identities under discussion: as individual writers, we are two homosexuals and one atheist. Accordingly, we do not take issue with the atheist movement *per se*; nor is our purpose to judge the intentions of those atheists whose words we critique here. Nonetheless, as participant observers and critical scholars, we do mean to question, theoretically speaking, these atheists' intentions in appropriating the closet metaphor and to reflect on the implications this might have for homosexuals.

Atheists, homosexuals, and the closet metaphor

> We speak with the voices of our communities, and to the extent that we have individual voices, we fashion them out of the social voices already available to us, appropriating the words of others to speak a word of our own.
>
> (Lemke, 1995, p. 24–25)

The notion of the 'closet' – that is, being in or coming out of the metaphorical closet – was initially used to describe the need 'to conceal one's homosexuality' (Johansson & Percy, 1994, p. 6), and was primarily associated with homosexuals (Eskridge, 1997; Sedgwick, 1990). It is somewhat difficult to ascribe the etymology of this metaphor to a specific instance or individual. According to Johansson and Percy (1994), Jim Kepner is thought to have coined the term in a speech at the 1966 conference of the Mattachine Society, an historical homosexual organization. In some senses a mark of its widespread recognition, by the 1970s journalists and non-homosexuals had already started to remetaphorize the 'closet' to refer to the disclosure of any previously undisclosed aspect of oneself (Baker, 2002; Johansson & Percy, 1994; Lazerson, 1981). Indeed, nowadays it is quite common to hear the closet metaphor being used to self-disclose anything from a taste for sweets (a 'closet chocoholic') to an affiliation with a particular political party (some traditionally liberal college campuses have recently witnessed Republican 'coming out' parties; e.g., Trantham, 2003). Nonetheless, despite its use in these wider, often flippant ways, the closet metaphor is still predominately associated with homosexuals and usually retains its original 'gay semantic specification' (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 72).

In many respects the history or etymology of the metaphor is of less interest than the social practice and affective experience it describes. The closet metaphor 'gives expression to the dramatic quality of privately and publicly coming to terms with a contested social identity' (Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen, 1999, p. 9). Seidman et al. (1999), for instance, illustrate the various effects of 'coming out experiences' on some homosexuals' lives and identities. By most of those interviewed in the study the closet was considered a repressive space that many choose to live in due to the threat of stigmatization, physical aggression, and/or loss of livelihood. Nonetheless, in spite of the potential hazards, many homosexuals do find coming out to be an empowering and positive experience (Johansson & Percy, 1994; Seidman, 2002; Seidman et al., 1999). In both political and personal terms, it is, as Chirrey (2003) notes, a tremendously powerful speech act.

With this context in mind, our particular interest in the closet metaphor is its strategic, politicized deployment by the atheist movement.[4] Even a cursory review of the websites of US-based atheist organizations reveals that atheists have made the closet metaphor a key feature of their promotional literature. For example, American Atheist, one of the largest atheist organizations, has an entire section on their website dedicated to 'coming out' which features an article entitled 'Coming Out – Atheism: The Other Closet'. Indeed, atheists' use of the closet metaphor has gone far beyond the kinds of casual use found in everyday popular discourse (see above). As will be discussed below, atheists have instead strategically appropriated the closet metaphor in a largely political attempt to raise awareness of, and organize around, their experiences as a marginalized group in the United States. In this way, the closet has been remetaphorized to become a metaphor for marginalization generally. However, we suggest that the appropriation is particularly important because the original closet metaphor is inextricably linked to the particular identity politics of homosexuals – that is, their combined cultural and historical experience. In particular, if, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, metaphors function as conceptual frameworks that shape our thought and action in important ways, then the closet metaphor has done more than simply give homosexuals the words to describe the experience of revealing their sexual orientation in the face of severe condemnation; it has arguably helped to shape the entire experience (cf. Chirrey, 2003). Further, because 'metaphorical talk often presupposes and reinforces an intimacy between speaker and listener' (Tilley, 1999, p. 9), metaphors have the power to build identity and increase solidarity within a given group. All of this suggests that there is much at stake in the appropriation of a metaphor that serves as a powerful discursive icon for a particular group – as the closet metaphor certainly does for homosexuals (cf. Chirrey, 2003; Sedgwick, 1990).

Beyond simply being an important instance of appropriation, the atheist movement's appropriation of the closet metaphor is a particularly fitting example of lateral appropriation as we have conceptualized it above. This is so for two reasons. For one, both groups involved in the appropriation – atheists and homosexuals – are, by the standards discussed in the above section, marginalized groups in the United States. Homosexuals are typically denied many of the rights enjoyed by heterosexuals, and are still all too frequently the target of hate crimes. Atheists too have often been treated unequally in the United States. One indicator of this, we suggest, is the dearth of scholarship dealing with atheism. Beyond this,

however, there have been laws throughout US history that have barred atheists from certain government offices, and there remain today several states with constitutions that deny atheists the same rights as theists. For example, the constitution of the state of Texas has this provision:

> No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this State; nor shall any one be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, *provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being*. (Article 1, Section 4, emphasis added)

Similarly, North Carolina's constitution allows any person 21 years or older to hold elected office, with three exceptions: those who are not eligible to vote, those who have been convicted of treason or other crimes against the state, and 'any person who shall deny the being of Almighty God' (Article 6, Section 8). Such discourse is not limited to constitutions. When, in 1987, George H. W. Bush was campaigning for the presidency, he said in an interview, 'I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God' ('Bush on atheism', 1988, p. 16). That Bush went on to win the presidency (which he very well may not have had he said similar things about Jews or Muslims rather than atheists) is to some extent indicative of the willingness of the public to allow atheists to be disparaged and marginalized. Indeed, public opinion polls suggest that both homosexuals and atheists are held in contempt by significant sectors of the US public. For example, in a 2003 poll, 52% of randomly sampled US adults had an opinion of atheists that was either 'very unfavourable' (33%) or 'mostly unfavourable' (19%; Roper Center, 2003a). Somewhat similarly, a second poll in the same year reported that 49% of US adults felt homosexuality should not be considered 'an acceptable alternative lifestyle' (Roper Center, 2003b).

In addition to the fact that both groups involved in the appropriation are marginalized, atheists' appropriation of the closet metaphor is a particularly useful instance of lateral appropriation to examine because it is occurring at a time when both groups are in the public eye. Indeed, both atheists and homosexuals have been behind significant legal proceedings in recent years – the former in the flag-salute case brought forth by atheist Michael Newdow and the cases dealing with the legality of posting the ten commandments on government property (e.g., Biskupic & Locy, 2005; Herel, 2005), and the latter in relation to the rulings on sodomy laws and gay marriage (e.g., Greenhouse, 2003). Thus atheists' appropriation of the closet metaphor is an important contemporary example of lateral appropriation between two groups arguably under fire from the hegemonic mainstream.

Atheists' appropriation of the closet metaphor

From the start, our analysis suggests that the closet metaphor was not simply something expounded by a few key figures in the atheist movement; rather, it was present in the general discourse of the many individual atheists who would visit the websites and share their experiences. Indeed, when someone wanted to talk

about the experience of telling people about their beliefs, the closet metaphor was frequently the way this was framed – as with Extracts 1 and 2.

> Extract 1: I decided it was time to come out of the closet and let my thoughts and beliefs be known to at least my two best friends. (American Atheist)

> Extract 2: [F]amily and close friends are well aware of my ideas and opinions, so sharing some of them with a wider audience is merely opening the closet door a little further. (Council for Secular Humanism)

From these texts and many others like them, it was clear that atheists drew readily on the metaphor, appropriating it easily into their texts. That said, this familiarity of usage was also problematized in some instances by a tendency for the closet metaphor to be marked metalinguistically by the use of 'scare quotes'. In Extract 3, for instance, one person describes an experience in which he and his friend realized they were both unsure about their religious beliefs.

> Extract 3: However, I finally discovered that he was as ambiguous about religion as I, and we both 'came out of the closet' about our atheism. (Council for Secular Humanism)

The use of quote marks to mark the remetaphorization indicates a metalinguistic awareness of its having been appropriated and a sense of its sounding somehow 'alien and foreign' in the mouths of the atheists (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294; see also Coupland, 2004; Slater, 1995). In drawing a comparison with Unitarian Universalists, the individual contributor in Extract 4 hedges his/her appropriation in a similar way.

> Extract 4: Joining a Humanist group, 'coming out of the closet,' if you will as a Humanist, may be a bit harder to do. (American Humanist Association)

Here, again, the use of the 'if you will' indicates that the association of the closet metaphor with Humanism entails an additional metaphoric transposition of meaning, again marking the metaphor as being clearly 'borrowed'. In Extract 5, another visitor to one of the websites – an apparent newcomer – used a similar modifier, while also noting explicitly the origin of the appropriated metaphor.

> Extract 5: If you could only find some popular celebrity to 'come out,' so to speak. . . . There's a thought, are you going to usurp the gay community's terms for 'coming out,' 'out of the closet' etc. or shall you use different terms? (The Brights)

So, while the closet metaphor is common in the discourse of those visiting the websites, it is occasionally set off in a way that suggest atheists are also aware of the origin and wider currency of the metaphor.

In the texts examined, the modality or evaluative basis of closet metaphor appropriations was not always clear. On the one hand, metalinguistic qualifications

certainly point to the possibility of atheists' underlying awareness of the political implications of the appropriation. On the other hand, the simple invocation of the language is no guarantee of any attempt to identify with or to understand the experiences of homosexuals (cf. Thurlow, 2003). Nevertheless, references to the closet metaphor by atheists are *de facto* politicized by the social practice and ideological context of which they are a part; for the most part, therefore, in the texts we have analyzed they were accompanied by statements reflecting an active and overt attempt to use the currency of the closet metaphor to establish certain preferred 'relations of equivalence' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 100) between the experiences of atheists and those of homosexuals. Consider, for example, the following extract:

> Extract 6: Being an atheist or agnostic in America is relatively cost free, so long as you remain in the closet. Most public institutions have a 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy when it comes to disbelief. (Council for Secular Humanism)

In Extract 6, the combination of the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy and the closet metaphor exemplifies nicely what Kristeva (1986, p. 37) sees as the 'mosaic of quotations' by which discourse is inevitably organized. Here, reference to the official policy governing homosexuality in the US military appears to extend and reinforce the link – or intertextual 'chain' (Bakhtin, 1994, p.87) – established between homosexuals and atheists through the use of the closet metaphor in the first sentence. Therefore, while the initial use of the closet metaphor could be interpreted as another instance of the more general usage of the phrase, when combined with the reference to the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, it clearly attempts to link homosexuals' experiences of discrimination with those of atheists.

This attempt by atheists to appropriate the identity politics of homosexuals begs the question: What purpose does this lateral appropriation serve for atheist organizations? Our analysis points to certain functional themes that show atheists using the closet metaphor in three ways:

(1) as a vehicle (or cathartic outlet) for emotional expression;
(2) as a way to activate a marginalized status; and, in turn
(3) as a unifying call to action.

The closet metaphor: a vehicle for emotional expression

The first functional theme identified in the texts we analyzed was the use of the closet metaphor as a vehicle for expressing the kinds of feelings and personal experiences atheists report in having to hide their beliefs or in undertaking the process of sharing their beliefs with others for the first time. In these instances the closet metaphor gave atheists more than simply a convenient way to talk about the act of revealing their beliefs to their friends; instead, it provided atheists – such as the person, in this case a teenager, in Extract 7 – with a powerful conceptual framework for pinpointing and exploring the feelings of pain and isolation that they felt prior to self-disclosure.

> Extract 7: I'm in the process of killing myself by suffocation, living in that closet. A confrontation is inevitable, but I am not looking forward to it. I'm currently

figuring on waiting until I am living on my own to let my family know … my parents are so absorbed in the religion that I really doubt life would be very comfortable with them afterward. (Secular Web)

Here the closet metaphor is not used merely as shorthand for describing the political context; rather, by drawing on his image of the closet and extending it further, the author is able to convey both her/his sense of personal isolation and despair, and her/his anxiety in the face of condemnation. A similar sentiment was offered by another young atheist (Extract 8) who expressed his/her feelings thus:

> Extract 8: Sometimes I feel so alone being an atheist. I am surrounded by those who just 'know' there is a god. . . . I have tried so hard to believe but I have finally accepted my intelligence and 'came out of the closet' and expressed my atheism. (Secular Web)

Once again, in this extract, the closet serves as a metaphor which helps reveal not just the act of telling, but also the loneliness that the individual felt prior to revealing his atheism and sharing it with like-minded people. By the same token, it is not only the closet itself, but the experience of coming out of that closet that was sometimes presented as a cathartic outlet for atheists. One writer, for instance, indicated the potential difficulties inherent in revealing one's atheist beliefs:

> Extract 9: I have succeeded in remaining a loving son and a caring, trustworthy friend, and I have finally found some peace of mind. I know I am very fortunate to have gotten through the storm of 'coming out' so easily and so quickly, facing only the occasional drizzle today. (American Atheist)

Here 'coming out' was layered with an additional metaphorical storm that was, for this person, fortunately only short-lived. What each of the extracts illustrate, then, is how the closet metaphor offers itself to individual atheists as a valuable discursive resource for conveying emotions as a means of release and affiliation through shared experience. Therefore, the appropriation of the closet metaphor affords personal (and interpersonal) gain for the atheist movement. This attempt by atheists to appropriate the discursive capital of homosexuals becomes somewhat more problematic, however, when it is used more strategically to promote the marginalized, sociopolitical status of atheists.

The closet metaphor: activating a marginalized status

The atheist movement's attempts to use the closet metaphor as a means of activating and promoting their own status as a marginalized group are manifested in their implied understanding of homosexuals' experiences as a marginalized group. This is the key component of atheists' strategic appropriation of the closet metaphor because it creates an association between their own political struggle and that of homosexuals – this association is the foundation upon which the other uses of the closet metaphor are built. Woodward (1997) suggests, 'Identity politics involve claiming one's identity as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group as a

political point of departure and thus identity becomes a major factor in political mobilization' (p. 24). In this sense, atheists' appropriation of the closet metaphor is an attempt to select certain aspects of homosexuals' identity politics as a way to construct their own. Atheists attempt to make this link by establishing a relation of equivalence between homosexuals and themselves, in which any differences tend to be ignored or at least minimized.

> Extract 10: One of the most painful experiences for a gay person, particularly a young person, is the *excruciating suffering* caused by *family rejection* of that person's 'coming out of the closet'. A striking parallel type of *horribly painful ostracism* is suffered by many non-believers, particularly young people, who 'come out of the closet' as not believing in god. (Secular Web, emphasis added)

There is little doubt that the feelings and experiences of family rejection and ostracism indicated in Extract 10 may well be shared by both groups. However, given the documented reality of homophobic persecution in the United States at this time (Amnesty International, 2005), one cannot help but wonder if the material consequences – the 'excruciating suffering' – of coming out would indeed be comparable or equivalent for atheists and homosexuals. Like the person in Extract 10, another man identified his experiences as an atheist as essentially synonymous with the experiences of homosexuals:

> Extract 11: For unbelievers passing is easy, just as it was for gays. That's why the gay movement invested so heavily in exhorting its members to come out of the closet – to make that hard, dangerous choice not to pass – and to keep making that choice until not passing had become less dangerous. Our movement needs to send the same message. (Council for Secular Humanism)

In the case of Extract 11, the attempt to associate the experiences and identity politics of homosexuals with those of the atheist movement was made even more explicit by the inclusion of an illustration depicting homosexuals welcoming atheists out of the closet (see figure 1).

In highlighting the perceived similarities between the experiences of homosexuals and those of atheists, the authors of Extracts 10 and 11 purport to understand the experiences and identity politics of homosexuals. It is not clear whether either individual identifies as being a homosexual as well as an atheist; regardless, the possibility remains that these interpretations of the homosexual experience, which have been appropriated for the purposes of comparison with atheists, may not accurately reflect the actual experiences of homosexuals. Thus the relation of equivalence established has the potential to minimize or at least misrepresent the extent to which homosexuals have been marginalized. This possibility is brought to light most clearly in Extract 12 where, in the appropriation of the closet metaphor, the atheist movement is seen to present the marginalization of homosexuals as a somewhat simplified romanticization.

> Extract 12: 'Coming out of the closet' is a term most associated with gays and lesbians announcing to the world that they are homosexual. *Few regret it, having*

FIGURE 1   This image originally appeared in *Free Inquiry* (2003) volume 23, issue 3, and is reprinted here with the permission of the artist. All rights to this image are reserved by Don Addis © 2003.

found their way toward a more open and satisfying life. But there is another closet which is hiding a different minority, atheists. Many of us, *like many of gays of previous decades*, hide in the shadows due to fear of hostility and aversion to confrontations. (American Atheists, emphasis added)

Implicit (at least) in the reasoning of Extract 12 is an understanding of the homosexual experience of coming out of the closet as a relatively beneficial and liberating experience. It simultaneously suggests that homosexuals, unlike atheists, no longer need to be in the closet for fear of oppression – a representation that unfortunately belies the oppressive experiences homosexuals have faced, and continue to face, as a marginalized group (Lambda Legal, 2003; Leap, 1995; Seidman, 2002). These statements of comparison and equivalence elevate and strengthen the status of atheists, but appear also to underestimate, and possibly undermine, the identity politics of homosexuals. The use of the closet metaphor by the atheist movement to appropriate laterally the identity politics of homosexuals is evidenced in the texts analyzed by even more explicit comparisons of atheists and homosexuals, such as in Extract 13.

Extract 13: Gays comprise about 10% of the population. Jews comprise less than 3% of the population, yet everyone knows someone who is gay or Jewish. Non-believers in America comprise 14% of the population so you know that everyone knows a non-believer. It's just that so many of us are in that awful closet. (American Atheists)

Regardless of the validity of the percentages claimed, the discursive strategy employed here is particularly notable because, unlike those references to the closet metaphor used to establish atheists' equivalence as a marginalized group,

this strategy seems to suggest that atheists are in fact a larger social group than homo-sexuals (and Jewish people). This rhetorical manoeuvre arguably reflects a shift from comparative identifications with homosexual politics to a more contrastive identifi-cation. This contrastive identification strategy could stem simply from a desire on the part of the speaker to illustrate how atheists trail behind homosexuals in their attempts to gain greater public visibility for their cause. This strategy of contrasting with other social groups was also used – perhaps even less ambiguously – by another member of the Council for Secular Humanism in Extract 14.

> Extract 14: If there are twenty-three million serious unbelievers, that means we are approximately two-thirds as numerous as either Hispanic- or African-Americans. We're four times as numerous as American Jews – eight times as numerous as religiously active American Jews. In other words, we are sufficiently numerous to demand and receive more respectful treatment. (Council for Secular Humanism)

This shift from comparative to contrastive identifications with the identity politics of other social groups present within Extracts 13 and 14 could be perceived as relatively harmless to these other social groups. However, it is also possible that this rhetorical shift may pose an unfortunately competitive threat to the identity politics of homo-sexuals – especially were this strategy to be widely adopted by atheists in the future.

The claim made in Extract 13 that atheists are indeed a larger social group than homosexuals could be interpreted as a claim that atheists are currently a more legiti-mate political minority – they just need to come out of their much larger closet to claim their rightful place in society. There is, in fact, an historical precedent for the use of statistics for the purpose of competing over the legitimacy of opposing social groups (Urla, 1993). With this historical precedent in mind, it may be useful to reflect on the potential effects of such contrastive or competitive identifications with homosexuals on the part of atheists. As with previous examples of atheists' explicit association with homosexuals' marginalized identity, this contrastive appro-priation, through its recontextualization, effectively turns the metaphor against homosexuals and potentially degrades their status as an otherwise substantial political minority. This is an effective strategy in terms of gaining limited resources (e.g., social status, political voice), but this erosive impact on the status of homosex-uals could possibly prove a problematic strategy for atheists looking to create coalitions with homosexuals towards reaching collective goals (see Jackson, 1993).

The closet metaphor: mobilizing a call to action

Having established a conceptual and political association with homosexuals through their lateral appropriation of the closet metaphor, the texts in our dataset are seen to expand on attempts to identify (but not necessarily affiliate) with the homosexual experience by using this appropriated identity as a way of mobilizing a call to action or as a rallying point for other atheists. The use of the closet metaphor as a call to action for atheists overlaps with attempts to compare homosexuals and athe-ists, but is distinguishable by the addition of concrete proposals and exhortations for future action. The most illustrative example of this use of the recontextualization of

the closet metaphor can be found in atheists' proposals for a national coming out campaign (Extract 15).

> Extract 15: Every October 11 since 1988, gays and lesbians have held a 'National Coming Out Day'. . . . Campus free thought [atheist] activities could be similarly galvanized by an annual event of a similar theme, but with somewhat different and carefully planned objectives. (Council for Secular Humanism)

In much the same way, in Extract 16 another person argues:

> Extract 16: We need a consciousness-raising 'coming out' campaign similar to the campaign organized by homosexual activists a few years ago. (Council for Secular Humanism)

This last argument was supported with a graphical representation of a man coming out of the 'non-god' closet (see figure 2).[5]

These exhortations operate under the previously problematized assumption that atheists share a common identity politics with homosexuals as a marginalized group and, as such, the exhortations are subject to the same critique outlined above. What is nonetheless notable is that these mobilizing appeals were common

FIGURE 2   This image originally appeared in *Free Inquiry* (2002) volume 22, issue 3, and is reprinted here with the permission of the artist. All rights to this image are reserved by Brad Marshall © 2002.

throughout the data and, as in Extract 17, rhetorically styled as calls to action (see our emphasis):

> Extract 17: *The time has come* for atheists, agnostics, skeptics, and humanists to come out of the closet and to openly confront the religious hegemony in America. . . . Unless such a *challenge is mounted*, the situation will simply grow more dangerous. (Council for Secular Humanism)

Another member of the Council for Secular Humanism (Extract 18) states the case even more evocatively:

> Extract 18: Perhaps a far more serious phenomenon in the long run is that intellectual criticism of religion in America . . . has become muted. It is considered bad taste to attack religion. The last oppressed minority that needs the courage to come out of the closet are the secular atheists. (Council for Secular Humanism)

Here, the speaker is clearly arguing that atheists, like homosexuals, are a political minority oppressed by a common 'enemy'. However, it is notable that the author of Extract 18 seems to imply that, as the 'last oppressed minority', atheists are perhaps the most oppressed – or perhaps that others are no longer as oppressed due to their greater visibility. This same member of the Council for Secular Humanism (Extract 19) repeated this claim in yet another text:

> Extract 19: As the last repressed minority in America, religious dissenters need to stand up and be counted. . . . The democratic movement for equal rights has made enormous progress in recent years. It has been made more and more inclusive, applying to racial and religious minorities, feminists, the handicapped, the aged, abused children, and gay people. Is it not time that the rights of religious dissenters also be appreciated? (Council for Secular Humanism)

In framing the lateral appropriation in this way that subtle shift is realized again in the relation of equivalence, whereby an attempt to bolster the status of atheists is established contrastively or competitively. It is, we think, this type of appropriation strategy that potentially has negative ramifications for atheists in terms of gaining outside support, and for homosexuals in terms of maintaining 'ownership' of a key symbolic resource with strong personal and political significance.

It is important to acknowledge again that atheists' intention is not necessarily to marginalize homosexuals further or to denigrate their experience of 'coming out of the closet' – although this may indeed be the outcome. The reality of any political environment is that minority voices are inevitably forced to compete for the limited material and symbolic resources made available by the hegemonic majority. To some extent, therefore, inter-group conflict is inevitable whenever there is competition for scare resources (Collins, 1974; Coser, 1956). This fact, of course, also works to the advantage of those in power: keeping lower status groups divided and battling for resources reduces the potential for organization and collective action against the hegemonic order. Indeed, the minimization of – or distortion of facts

about – another group will probably only cease when a situation arises that calls for cooperative action: that is, when 'superordinate goals serve as the broad motivational base which induces in-group members to reformulate their opinions about the out-group' (Jackson, 1993, p. 399).

That the appropriation of discursive capital arises out of a particular sociopolitical context engenders competition between marginalized groups is evidenced also in the kinds of negotiation that occur within the groups themselves. In fact, in all the atheist websites we studied (with the exception of the Brights) we found clear instances where the movement appeared to be struggling with the ideological and identificational implications of their association with the political agenda of homosexuals. As just one example of this, Extract 20 is taken from a hate-filled letter, and Extract 21 is the response from a person who self-identified as both gay and atheist.

Extract 20: If you can't understand this and plan on more propaganda for a bunch of shit-chute fuckers and dick-sucking, diseased faggots, refund my subscription. (American Humanist Association)

Extract 21: Here is honest hatred, unalloyed and uncensored. Liberal heterosexuals may have the luxury of dismissing such pronouncements as extreme or eccentric. Queers, on the contrary, know all too well that such hatred is radioactive throughout our culture. If a token queer gains a regular column in *The Humanist* at this late date in history, anti-gay bigots may well perceive the propaganda of a 'gang'. (American Humanist Association)

Notwithstanding these external and internal tensions, atheist organizations and their individual members ought not to be absolved of all social responsibility in their lateral appropriation of the closet metaphor. Regardless of their intention, the atheist movement's use of the closet metaphor still privileges a particular interpretation of homosexuals' experience: that 'coming out of the closet' is easy and successful, on the one hand, and that homosexuals are no longer a marginalized group on the other. In this sense, the overall effect is similar to the way that Bourdieu (1991/1999) describes linguistic 'condescension': in momentarily stylizing themselves in the accent or dialect of a low-status group, individuals merely serve to highlight and reinscribe the hierarchy of inequality (see also Hill, 2001; Jordan & Weedon, 1995).

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the atheist movement's lateral appropriation of the closet metaphor as a discursive resource whose symbolic capital and sociopolitical cachet were originally established by, and have traditionally 'belonged' to, homosexuals. We have suggested that this appropriation involves a strategic attempt on the part of atheists to associate aspects of their own identity politics with the identity politics of homosexuals. As such, we have seen how lateral appropriation stands to benefit the atheist movement in several important ways. First, the lateral appropriation of the closet metaphor provides atheists with a valuable discursive tool for describing the shared emotional experience of having to repress (or, at least, not

express) their beliefs. Second, atheists' alignment of political agendas functions to activate and promote their sense of themselves as a marginalized group and, in turn, has served as the foundation for their attempts to mobilize – or call to action – their members. It would seem, then, that lateral appropriation – like more explicitly hierarchical forms of appropriation – clearly has the potential to advance the interests of the group doing the appropriating. Specifically, lateral appropriation is particularly useful as a discursive strategy for representing and organizing marginalized social groups in the hope of gaining visibility, status, and a shared language for expressing personal experiences.

However, despite these benefits to atheists, we have felt compelled to reflect on the potential for this particular instance of lateral appropriation to affect homosexuals much in the way top-down – or status-unequal – forms of cultural appropriation are invariably at the expense of other marginalized groups. At the very least, these are matters which may help to explain some atheists' reservations about usurping the metaphor (see Extract 5). In this sense, homosexuals' experiences of being discriminated against and their struggles to redress their oppression publicly by coming out of their closets are arguably minimized and, at times, unfairly idealized by atheists' (mis)appropriation of these metaphors. By their remetaphorization and recontextualization of the closet, atheists assume – whether explicitly or implicitly – an understanding of the individual and collective experiences of homosexuals; additionally, the implication is that homosexuals' (limited) success in challenging certain civil inequalities serves as a measure of how transparent and straightforward this process is – and could be for atheists themselves. Together with the more widespread casual use of the closet metaphor in popular discourse, it is the potential diminishing of the historical and experiential specificity (or poignancy) of the social practice – or speech act, even – indicated by the closet metaphor that may also have the effect of mollifying its continued political and personal force. At the very least, the (re)framing of the closet metaphor by atheists may unintentionally end up reinscribing those discriminatory discourses which intentionally obscure the material consequences of homophobia.

Atheists' use of the closet metaphor to gain recognition as a marginalized group may also impinge on the political status of homosexuals through the, perhaps unavoidable, register of contrast and competition which appears to accompany the appropriation. It is conceivable, therefore, that some homosexuals may even experience this lateral appropriation as a disincentive to support the atheist movement against an otherwise common enemy. Such an outcome would probably work to the ultimate disadvantage of both groups as they attempt to increase their sociopolitical status.

Albeit with a semblance of solidarity, it appears that lateral appropriation has the potential to be like traditional forms of appropriation that seek to wrest power away from other social groups. As such, there seems to be the risk of losing discursive capital as the act of appropriation diminishes, or detracts from, the particular resonances of the original group's identity politics — an undesirable consequence for marginalized groups which might otherwise be working together to redress and challenge hegemonic discourse practices. Such an outcome is, unfortunately, almost inevitable in a sociopolitical environment that forces marginalized groups

to struggle over limited material and symbolic resources. Nevertheless, we believe that this is all the more reason for continued examination of lateral appropriation, and its implications for the groups involved in such complex discursive, or other cultural, recontextualizations such as the one we have examined here.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   This is not unlike the way the 'hypercorrection' (Labov, 1972) of a particular phonetic or grammatical feature can so easily betray the use and the user as inauthentic or illegitimate. Furthermore, Coupland (2004, p. 251) notes that the parodic sociolinguistic reframings of stylization may deliberately invite 'reappraisal of the stylized performance'.

2   Scholars like Preston (1992) and Rampton (1995) have likewise examined how sociolinguistic stylization (in their terms 'variety imitation' and 'crossing', respectively) play out across otherwise hierarchically differentiated or power-unequal social groups.

3   The respective websites of these five organizations are: American Atheists http://www.americanatheists.org, the American Humanist Association http://www.americanhumanists.org, the Council for Secular Humanism http://www.secularhumanism.org, the Brights http://www.the-brights.net, and the Secular Web http://www.infidels.org

4   By 'atheist movement' we refer to the large-scale atheist and humanist organizations in the United States, epitomized by American Atheists and the Council for Secular Humanism. In recent years, there has been an effort by groups such as these to increase the prominence and awareness of atheism in the United States – an effort that can be seen, for example, in the attempt by some atheists, Humanists, and other non-believers to unite under the label 'Brights' (see Dennett, 2003).

5   In figure 2, we also see a kind of double-parodic intertextuality in that the image is itself strongly reminiscent in its style (i.e., the hand-drawn, square-jawed Caucasian) of a particular genre of Christian morality literature directed at young people. In this case, the discursive appropriation is also rendered multimodal through the use of visual as well as linguistic resources (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

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Whitney Anspach is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. [email: wda@u.washington.edu]

Kevin Coe is a doctoral student in the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Illinois. [email: kmcoe2@uiuc.edu]

Crispin Thurlow is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. His research focuses on discourse and difference: critical intercultural studies of interpersonal and mediatized communication in contexts such as adolescence, global tourism, and sex/uality. [email: thurlow@u.washington.edu]