

# Xcp 14

cross cultural poetics



POCHO-CHE AND THE PRODUCTION OF A TRANSNATIONAL/TRANSCULTURAL POETICS  
(AN ESSAY BY ROD HERNANDEZ)

NEW POEMS BY RITA WONG, KAMAU BRATHWAITE, JEREMY CRONIN, & OTHERS

THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM REVISITED: BACK TO BASICS?  
(AN ESSAY BY RADHA D'SOUZA)

REVIEWS OF *IN THE BREAK: THE AESTHETICS OF THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION*,  
YEDDA MORRISON'S *CROP*,  
*BLACK FREEDOM FIGHTERS IN STEEL: THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRATIC UNIONISM*,  
DAVID HARVEY'S *PARIS, CAPITAL OF MODERNITY*,  
*SPECTRES OF 1919: CLASS AND NATION IN THE MAKING OF THE NEW NEGRO*,  
LINH DINH'S *ALL AROUND WHAT EMPTIES OUT*,  
& MUCH MORE



Xcp

cross cultural poetics

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THIRD MILLENNIUM RED





## MICRONESIAN DIASPORA(S)

Emelihter Kihleng

*I: interview*

EK: *Ahmw tepin kohla Seipan oh dah ke wia?*  
*Ke doadoak?*

When you first went to Saipan what did you do?  
Did you work?

IR: *Ehng. Doadoak nan factory.*

Yes. I worked in a factory.

EK: *Hmm. Dah ke kin wia nan factory?*

What did you do in the factory?

IR: *Wil kopwe. Re kin dehkada likou irail kin kidohng kit, wilikada kilahng ekei,*  
*song koh, koakoadihla.*

Fold clothes. They sew the clothes and give them to us, fold them up and give them to others, like that, as it goes down.

EK: *Doadoak laud?*

Hard work?

IR: *Ehng. Apw seh reirei eh, kin kiden aramas apw ngehi ongieh udahn ih kin*  
*pwangadah, ih kin lok.*

Yes. But we were long, lots of people, but for me I really got tired, exhausted.

EK: *Awa depeh?*

How many hours?

IR: *Ih kin tep clock isuh nek clock isuh ni soutik.*

I start at seven and finish at seven in the evening.

EK: *Aoooo. Werei ieu.*

Wow. That's a long time.

IR: *Werei ieu mwoh. Pweh tepda nimenseng eh, kohditehieu clock isuh ni soutik, nek, klous.*

That was a long time. Because we start in the morning and go all the way till seven in the evening till closing.

EK: *Ah ih kak idek rehmw ke kin ale tala depeh awa ehu?*

And can I ask you how much you made in an hour?

IR: *Ehng. Komplihdla week riau oh, ih kin aleh talah silipwukih limeisek isuh.*

Yes. Completing two weeks, I get \$357.00.

EK: *Aooo. Sohte itar.*

That's not enough.

*Ah kumwail kin lunchbreak apeh?*

Did you guys have lunch breaks?

IR: *Ehng. Eisek riau lunch, komoal lah oh clock ehu tep, kohditehieu.*

Yes. 12:00 pm lunch, rest, and 1 o'clock start until finish.

EK: *Ah ko mehn ia kei?*

You and who else?

IR: *Mehn Pohnpei, mehn Ruk, mehn Kusaie, mehn Pilipihn.*

Pohnpeians, Chuukese, Kosraeans, Filipinos.

EK: *Wei eh, sohte mehn China iang?*

Oh really, and no Chinese?

IR: *Adkih mehn China meh kin deidei eng kit.*

The Chinese sewed for us.

EK: *Oh.*

IR: *Aht kaun ko mehn Korea.*

Our bosses were Korean.

EK: *Wei eh. Ehri mehn China kau mihmi nan ehu pereh?*

Oh really. So the Chinese were in separate rooms?

IR: *Reh kin mwohd nan sehr irekdihdoh ehri kin deidei dohng kit ah se kin uhd wilik kilahng emen koakoadi.*

They sit in chairs in a line all the way down to us, and they sew, and give it to us, and we fold them, and pass it down, and onwards.

(she spits betelnut juice)

*Reh kin dir nan ehu sehr oh kak meh siliakan samwah mie, pweh udahn kin reirei koadihla, apw kaidehn pil ehu te, ehu room oh udahn kin line mwein kak meh wenou, ah kohla nih ehu room kak pil line wenou de isuh wen dir.*

They were so many on one chair; could have more than thirty because it is so long, all the way down, but not just one. One room would have a line of six to another room with six or seven, since so many.

II: dreamers

1

*Ih koalauh, ei doadoak oh, ong ie ih mwauki ei kin aleh nei sent, wiahki nsenei song koh eh. Ah ei mihmi Pohnpei eh, ih sohte kin aleh songehn lapalahn sentuwoh. Apw ih men pwurala likioh, apw ih sohte men kohla ngehi pwurala Saipan.*

When I went, I worked, for me I liked it when I got my own money, doing what I want with it. But staying in Pohnpei, I never get that much money. But I want to go back out there, but I don't want to go back to Saipan.

my dream is to bring my two babies with me  
to Hawaii, there are lots of us there and  
I hear it's the nicest  
get a job and eventually bring my parents  
to live with us too

2

they are lucky these Micronesians  
coming from their impoverished islands  
I've been there, they have no sewage system  
Filthy, nothing for them to do all day  
yea, so they might have to work a few extra hours  
I give them the American dream

3

North Pacific give me job at SeaWorld  
Janitor, I don't like but cannot leave  
they stop paying the rent  
my wife and baby at home  
they took the TV and the bed  
we sleep on floor

4

yes, they are my people therefore  
I know the economic conditions on our islands  
the FSM government encourages migration  
I'm doing them a favor

2

you can import maybe a thousand a year,  
and you don't have to worry about a quota system.  
they can fill any labor shortage you can find.

5

these islanders are taken advantage of  
literally bought for \$5,500  
they become indentured servants held in  
debt bondage upon arrival  
with no ticket home  
we are trying to do whatever we can

2

Micronesians don't need a lot to  
keep entertained, they play  
bingo and drink all night and  
on their days off they sleep  
they are happy, they don't complain

6

when we came, me and my sister  
we only have our slipper on our feet  
no clothes and when we got to the  
apartment we cry and cry  
they said it would be nice  
and we know they lie

### III: white house

they broke my body on the inside.  
I walk into the big white house.  
already I smell it, Pohnpei hospital smell but worse.  
*pwohn kent*, piss, stink.  
piss and old people smell.  
new smell to me.  
I see them sitting, quiet some of them,  
some talking to themselves but not crazy, just alone.  
I feel scared and the tile was sticky like white stuff from *pwomaria* tree.

my head hurt because I so sad for them.  
so sorry for the old white people and some black.  
so sad. I wonder where are their children?  
they must be dead.  
I never knew old people by themselves, no son, no daughter.  
in wheel chair, in bed, shake back and forth.  
I want to cry for the children gone.

I don't understand.  
I cannot.  
back home no piss smell on them.  
no shit smell.  
only coconut oil smell. nice smell.

Nohno Pahpa Nohno Pahpa Nohno Pahpa Nohno Pahpa Nohno Pahpa Nohno Pahpa

LIMPOAK MEHLEL!

only love we show to grandma, grandpa, uncle, auntie.  
all of them our mom and dad, we love them all.  
sweet smell.

AMERIKA.

in this rich country, I so surprise.  
so much french fries and cheeseburger,  
so much Safeway, WalMart, Mall, SUV,  
big house with fence, nice yard with flower.  
I think oh, must be so much happiness and so much love.  
I don't understand.  
why grandma and grandpa alone?  
no one visit, no one bring happy meal, no one talk to them.  
I talk to them, even in my language.  
I know they don't understand.  
I don't care.  
they want to hear my voice.

I tell them:

*mah ke mihmi sapweioh ke sohte pahn loleid,  
ke sohte pahn kelekelepw.  
seh pahn apwalihuiuk. kamwengeiiuk.  
kiht nomw seri limpoak.*

I tell them:

if you from my island. you never be lonely. you never be alone. you no scream  
late in the night time. no cry. no piss smell, never. I am your child and I feed you.  
the children you feed and their baby too.

## POCHO-CHE AND THE PRODUCTION OF A TRANSNATIONAL/TRANSCULTURAL POETICS

Rod Hernandez

Pocho-Che was a multicultural—though mostly Chicano/Latino—literary collective and publishing company based in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1970s. Among the notable writers associated with Pocho-Che were Chicano writer and artist José Montoya, U.S. Puerto Rican poet Victor Hernández Cruz, Chilean writer Fernando Alegría, African American authors Ntozake Shange and Ishmael Reed, and the Filipina American novelist Jessica Hagedorn. Unlike many artistic collectives of the Chicano Movement, Pocho-Che maintained a political and aesthetic vision that crossed national and cultural boundaries. The name itself—which rhetorically fused the figure of the “Americanized” Mexican, the “pocho,” to the image of Latin American revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara—expresses their desire to identify with decolonization struggles throughout the Americas. In 1972 Pocho-Che initiated the creation of a cross-cultural coalition of artists and poets called Third World Communications, which published one of the first anthologies by women of color in the U.S. And three years later it put out a magazine called *Tin-Tan*. By 1980, with the political climate in the U.S. shifting to the right and with members of the group dividing their time and energy among various geopolitical regions and causes (the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, for example), the activities of Pocho-Che culminated in the tenth-anniversary publication of collected works by three of the group’s most celebrated poets: Roberto Vargas, Nina Serrano, and Raúl Salinas.

Looking back at Pocho-Che, the subsidiaries and alliances, the rich milieu, one can’t help but appreciate the ways it prefigured contemporary discussions of the transnational and cross-cultural. It accomplished this through literary texts (poetry, essays) but also through a broad definition of poetics that encompasses a variety of social processes and cultural practices. In other words, the texts are not subject to strict or narrow literary definitions of what constitutes poetry (lyric, epic) any more than they’re limited to one national or cultural context.

This was important for Pocho-Che because the group saw itself making connections: between cultures and subcultures, between the local and the global, between cultural production and cultural activism. And while it succeeded to an unprecedented degree in opening up lines of communication between cultures that had been somewhat isolated from each other until then, Pocho-Che today raises questions about the nature of such communication.

For example, how did the group negotiate the contradictory embrace of Chicano cultural nationalism and multicultural internationalism? What linked the political priorities and aesthetic sensibilities of artists and activists from different socio-cultural backgrounds, whether they were Chicano poets or the

Euro-American writers of the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat Generation? What affinities and conflicts existed among these diverse groups and how did they lead to new political and aesthetic possibilities? What were the internal contradictions in artistic communities, particularly in Pocho-Che with respect to gender and cultural nationalism? How can relations within and among diverse literary collectives be conceptualized comparatively and dialogically in order to avoid stultifying binarisms? Lastly, how can such concepts and analyses account for the production of Pocho-Che's transnational and cross-cultural poetics? I want to discuss the cross-cultural and transnational issues raised by Pocho-Che and eventually focus on the marginal participation of Chicano writers in the San Francisco Renaissance. But first I'd like to address one of the items in my title, poetics, and its relevance for the writers of Pocho-Che.

### *From Ethnopoetics to Cultural Poetics*

In the September 1975 issue of Pocho-Che's quarterly magazine *Tin-Tan*, poet Victor Hernández Cruz notes in his brief column "El Rinconsito Sabrosito" (the delicious little corner) that he and editor Alejandro Murguía had recently attended an international poetry symposium whose theme was "ethnopoetics." Hernández Cruz writes: "coming from bi-lingual situations when we first heard the term we thought it was Es-no-Poetics" (12). In other words, "ethnopoetics" sounded like "no poetics" at all.

On one level, this comment playfully dramatizes the humorous aspects of interlingual clashes—the amusing misunderstandings that often occur when communicating with interlocutors who are accustomed to code switching. Its comic negation of a formalized artistic and intellectual program is also reminiscent of Dada (a strain of which we find in Hernández Cruz). Yet on another level, this editorializing reveals the conditioned mistrust on the part of ethnic subjects toward classic ethnographic discourses, which cultural theorist Renato Rosaldo has shown to be complicit historically in the imperialist projects of Western nation-states (1989, 31). Indeed, Rosaldo's critique of "imperialist nostalgia"—"the phenomenon of people's longing for what they themselves have destroyed" (87)—might account for the reaction to ethnopoetics by the African American poet David Henderson, who also attended the symposium. Hernández Cruz reports that Henderson aptly characterized the gathering with the coinage "Anthro-apologist" (12).

I mention this historical instance of tense interactions between Pocho-Che writers and the discourse of ethnopoetics to illustrate a couple of points. First, I wish to show that the writers and texts of Pocho-Che were not simply objects of poetic analysis. Nor did they merely evince an awareness of discourses such as ethnopoetics. Rather, they were active participants in contemporary critical and meta-critical dialogues about poetics and culture, often contributing alternative

perspectives as subaltern ethnic subjects. Second, revisiting the mid-1970s conversation on ethnopoetics helps to redefine the terms of the debate about poetry and culture, a debate which arrives eventually at what New Historicist scholars Stephen Greenblatt and José E. Limón call not “ethnopoetics” but “cultural poetics” (1988, 1994). Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate what I call the “transcultural poetics” of Pocho-Che.

“Ethnopoetics” was coined by poet/critic Jerome Rothenberg in the late 1960s, and conceptualized within the magazine *Alcheringa* (founded in 1970 by Rothenberg and mythologist/translator Dennis Tedlock) and at the 1975 international symposium hosted by the Center for Twentieth Century Studies in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (the conference about which Hernández Cruz comments in his column). One of its most distinguishing features is the interdisciplinary exploration of the relationship between anthropological and poetic discourses.

As Rothenberg defines it, the discourse of ethnopoetics follows the example of such fields as ethnomusicology and refers to nothing less than “a redefinition of poetry in terms of cultural specifics, with an emphasis on those alternative traditions to which the West gave names like ‘pagan,’ ‘gentile,’ ‘tribal,’ ‘oral,’ and ‘ethnic.’” (1983, xi). This serious ethnographic interest in alternative traditions—the ancient and modern poetics of indigenous peoples and people of color in the first and third world—concentrates upon oral practices and communal forms, displaying great enthusiasm for performance and other interdisciplinary work. Along with this comes a broader definition of writing and poetry that includes enactments of expressive culture and symbolic social processes. Thus, the formulation of ethnopoetics attempts to show “how ethnographic revelations can change our ideas of poetic form and function” (xv).

“There is a politics in all of this” (xii), Rothenberg says. He shows that the cultural politics of ethnopoetics links discontents with hegemonic definitions of poetry and its criticism to larger issues of social change. Paramount among these issues is the declared need to preserve communal values in the face of increasing mechanization and the vast ecological devastation wrought by industrial and postindustrial capitalism. Also imperative is the inclusion of the outcast and socially despised. Rothenberg situates ethnopoetics within the historical context of postwar decolonization movements in the third world as well as struggles by ethnic populations in the U.S. for self-representation and self-determination. The advent of ethnopoetics, then, marks a shift in social and literary history: an index of “the century itself and a crisis in language and thought” (xv) that connects the postcolonial and the postmodern.

But for all of its liberal inclinations, the discourse of ethnopoetics remains hampered by persistent contradictions of the modernist avant-garde vis-à-vis subaltern cultures. The discourse is a variant of primitivism: that set of tropes about primitive or exotic cultures by which modern subjects have constructed themselves and the subaltern according to social differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Rothenberg even promotes what anthropologist

Stanley Diamond calls “the search for the primitive” or the “attempt to define a primary human potential” (xi). Nevertheless, Rothenberg denies or disavows any associations with “decontextualized nostalgia” and instead sees ethnopoetics connected to “the most experimental and future-directed side of Romantic and modern poetry” (xii).

Despite Rothenberg’s claims and disclaimers, I detect in the discourse of ethnopoetics the elements of what Marianna Torgovnick has called “the sixties’ version of the primitive” used by the Left (1990, 12). This particular version of the primitive has been as guilty as high-modernist primitivisms of reifying indigenous and third world cultures, whether by conflating them with the environmental movement or by fetishizing them as salutary alternatives to a decadent capitalist modernity. In its search to recover “primary human values” (xii) and utopian (read pre-modern) models of social organization, the discourse of ethnopoetics reproduces the colonial language of discovery and establishes subaltern cultures as sites of social convalescence and renewal. Hence, the totalizing gestures of its artistic and intellectual agendas often read like holistic medicinal prescriptions designed to have restorative effects on the social corpus (“a symposium of the whole”). Moreover, its preoccupation with the myths and archetypes of subaltern cultures risks denying the very possibility of their modernity and reinforcing with a host of binary oppositions (primitive/modern, sacred/profane, etc.) the paradigm of center-periphery.

Writing about ethnopoetics in *Alcheringa* shortly after the first symposium, Fredric Jameson comments upon these contradictions in his essay “Collective Art in the Age of Cultural Imperialism” (1976). Jameson acknowledges the value of ethnopoetics as a social/collective form and as a mediating agent between different cultures; yet he also identifies its potential problems with respect to the forces of history and political economy. He proposes, for example, a reading of ethnopoetics that hypothesizes its advent as an indication not so much of ideological subversion but of the absorptive power of capitalism to co-opt difference. Equally important are Jameson’s emphatic admonitions not to leave out history in the discourse of ethnopoetics lest it become an idealist project. “From both ends of history therefore, from that of an adequate critique of our own type of capitalism, as well as from that of a meaningful clarification as to what the primitive really is, we can transform an ethnopoetics into a genuine sociopoetics only at the price of the old Poundian injunction to ‘include history’” (110-111).<sup>1</sup>

José E. Limón follows up on this, steering clear of idealist conceptions of cultural studies to embrace Jameson’s methodology of historical and political interpretation. In *Dancing with the Devil* (1994), Limón’s ethnographic study of working-class Mexican-American expressive cultures in South Texas and their various scholarly representations, Limón asserts the idea of “culture as practice, grounded in but not reducible to the ‘material’ conditions of social domination and speaking to essentially political interests” (14). For Limón, then, expressive

cultures articulate narratives of historical struggle between races and classes through social processes, enactments, and textualizations (Jameson 1981). These processes, enactments, and textualizations constitute “cultural poetics.”

The concept of cultural poetics, as conceived by New Historicist scholar Stephen Greenblatt, refers to the “study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices” (1988, 5). According to Greenblatt, cultural poetics are hermeneutic representations of collective practices. Ethnopoetics, therefore, is certainly also cultural poetics. Limón modifies this definition of cultural poetics, however, so that it comprises not just the study of cultural practices but the cultural practices themselves (14). In other words, Limón’s modification of the concept refers to sociocultural practices and to the ethnographic interpretations of them. Thus, the playfully subversive remarks about ethnopoetics made by the writers associated with Pocho-Che (“Es-no-Poetics” and “Anthro-apologist”) are good examples of what Limón calls “expressive culture about expressive culture” (12) or “a cultural poetics of cultural poetics” (14). They are meta-critical commentaries about ethnographic discourses.

This clash of voices exemplifies the contestatory nature of cultural poetics but also the complexity of intercultural encounters in what Mary Louise Pratt has famously designated as “the contact zone” (1991). Indeed, Pratt’s notion of the autoethnographic text—“in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” and which often marks “a marginalized group’s point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture” (1992, 7)—resonates with Pocho-Che’s representational strategies. What’s more, it underscores the fact that the cultural politics of cultural poetics are not polarized. As Limón himself states, the expressive discourses under his examination are “not seamless narratives of domination or resistance” (15). What Limón describes instead is transculturation, or what I call “transcultural poetics.” Transculturation, coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s, looks at reciprocal exchanges between dominant and subordinate groups rather than the one-way imposition of culture. Like autoethnography, transculturation acknowledges the very uneven and complex relations between cultures whose historical interactions have involved not just domination and resistance but also collaboration, appropriation and re-appropriation.

### *The Transnational Politics of Pocho-Che*

The inaugural publication of the Pocho-Che literary collective was a mimeographed journal issued from Oakland in July of 1969 and simply entitled *El Pocho Che*.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by local publications such as *The Black Panther* newspaper and *El Grito* (the first scholarly periodical for the study of Mexican Americans), *El Pocho Che* took a militant stance against racist stereotypes and toward the definition of a whole new identity.<sup>3</sup> The contents of the journal include

bilingual poems, polemical essays, and satirical drawings that deal with regional and national topics such as the struggle of the United Farmworkers; the rights of Chicano prisoners; and Chicano cultural nationalism expressed through the myth of Aztlán.<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, this debut publication even features the legendary manifesto of neo-indigenist Chicano cultural nationalism co-authored by poet Alurista, “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán.”

At the same time, however, this issue reflects the influence of local events in which diverse groups of artists, students, and community activists organized intercultural coalitions for political and social action. Of particular consequence were the student strikes at San Francisco State College and the University of California at Berkeley organized by the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) as well as the defense of “Los Siete de la Raza,” seven young Latinos accused of shooting to death a San Francisco police officer.<sup>5</sup> These events galvanized diverse communities to protest injustice and functioned as catalysts in the mobilization of the first intercultural coalitions among San Francisco’s Left. Chicano activists involved in these coalitions didn’t fail to relate the local struggles to national movements in support of civil rights and in opposition to the Vietnam War, nor to international youth rebellions occurring in Paris, Rome, Prague, Madrid, and Mexico City. Assessing the impact of this local/global consciousness on the Chicano Movement, historian Carlos Muñoz, Jr. writes: “Between 1968 and 1969, Mexican American student militancy intensified as more and more of them became convinced that they were part of an international revolution in the making” (1989, 71).

Ysidro Ramón Macias textualizes this belief in “The Evolution of the Mind,” an essay appearing in the first issue of *El Pocho Che* and serving as a keynote for the literary and cultural production of the group. Macias had been a student activist at UC Berkeley as well as a playwright for Luis Valdez’s Teatro Campesino before becoming the managing editor of *El Pocho Che* (Muñoz 53). With the essay he joins Valdez and other artists and intellectuals of the nascent Chicano Renaissance in the effort to define an emergent Chicano identity and to demonstrate contemporary Chicano thought. Macias formulates a theory of political and intellectual evolution among persons of Mexican descent in the United States; however, his formulation diverges from strict cultural nationalist representations of identity put forth by noted leaders such as Rodolfo “Corky” González, author of the influential epic poem “I Am Joaquín.”<sup>6</sup> Echoing the tone of Frantz Fanon’s psychological writings on the decolonization of the mind, Macias enumerates four “mentalities” through which Mexicans in the U.S. should pass sequentially on their way to political and social enlightenment. In the following order, these mentalities or identities are: Mexican-American, Chicano, Third World, and Humanist.

Ideally for Macias, the Chicano mentality is a necessary phase of radical consciousness that succeeds an assimilationist and accommodationist Mexican-American ideology. He contends that those who identify as Mexican-Americans

categorically repudiate their ethnicity and sever their ties with the Mexican community in the U.S. They can redeem themselves only by reversing this colonization and affirming “Chicanismo”: their mixed heritage as Americanized Mexicans or “pochos.”<sup>7</sup> Macias had dramatized this evolution from Mexican-American to Chicano in his play *The Ultimate Pendejada* (Muñoz 53). But in the essay he extends the notion of an evolutionary-cum-revolutionary consciousness two phases further. Evidently, the pocho is still too local and not too radical.

The third mentality is the Third World: “an extension of Chicanismo expanded to embrace those ethnic minorities who are also oppressed and are victims of Anglo exploitation and discrimination.” Poor whites also are included in this category, as decolonization involves a wide-scale critique of capitalism and an acknowledgement of solidarity. “One can thus state,” Macias declares, “that a Third World mentality exists when particular Third World groups recognize their common ties of misfortune and, tossing aside reluctance to work together because of past friction, make a commitment to work for the betterment and improvement of all Third World communities in this country” (n.p.). Macias notes that Chicanos and members of other ethnic groups do not quit identifying with their cultures of national origin once they join intercultural coalitions. “It does, however, mean that those groups do not allow cultural nationalism (ethnic identity and self-pride) to interfere with inter-group relations,” he writes. This restraint upon cultural nationalism allows for the evolution of what Macias goes on to call the “Humanist” or “ultimate mentality”: a consciousness of the human rights of all peoples, regardless of differences in race and ethnicity.

With its global scope, the essay by Macias opens a space for subsequent elaborations of transnationalism. And its endorsement of collective interactions among disparate cultures signals an understanding of transculturation as well. Nevertheless, the essay makes some rather disparaging remarks and draws very reductive conclusions, especially about those who choose to identify as Mexican American. Some of its claims about etymology and linguistics are quite strained. Moreover, the essay inscribes a particular narrative of education: a postcolonial *bildungsroman* in which one graduates to increasingly edified positions of decolonization. This is obviously an evolutionist paradigm: it presents a linear, progressive, and value-laden model of political and intellectual development that presumes one phase to be more virtuous than another. Furthermore, its utopian telos (Humanism) is quite remarkably detached from concrete material economic conditions and thus little more than a universalizing liberal bourgeois ideal of unity. For such a radical formulation, the essay concludes in a curiously normative mode.

More important, the essay’s all-embracing consciousness is flawed by the fact that Macias has a man of color in mind while characterizing the formation of the transnational subject.<sup>8</sup> Mala Efe, the artists group in Oakland that preceded Pocho-Che, had gendered the subject of decolonization in a similar fashion. Describing the group’s first exhibition in 1969, co-founder Esteban Villa writes:

“The exhibition was called ‘Nuevo Símbolos for La Nueva Raza’ (New Symbols for the New People) and attempted to visually project images of *El Hombre Nuevo*: The Chicano who had emerged from the de-colonization process” (Ybarra-Frausto 1977, 94). Women of color, particularly Latinas, are not just elided or subsumed in the essay’s repeated invocations of a new “brotherhood”; the transnational subject envisaged by Macias happens to be the construction of a specific type of ethnic masculinity and the articulation of a specific style of political resistance. Yoking the figure of the pocho (who is displaced between the national cultures of Mexico and the U.S.) with that of guerrilla leader Ernesto “Che” Guevara doubles the signifiers of transnationalism and political resistance but also of patriarchy. The pocho is linked not only with Che Guevara but also with other militant male icons (Emiliano Zapata, Fidel Castro, and Malcolm X) whose venerated images appear throughout the first issue of *El Pocho Che*.<sup>9</sup> This pantheon of patriarchs essentially furnishes the faces of Pocho-Che’s publications and associates revolutionary transnationalism with a certain kind of ethnic masculine subjectivity: virile, heterosexual, stoic, ascetic, and martyred.<sup>10</sup>

This construction of transnational subjectivity ties in with the tendency to gender the global or public sphere as masculine and the local or private realm as feminine. It’s no coincidence, then, that the chosen role models of Pocho-Che are the epic subjects of war or male warrior heroes perceived to be acting on the stage of world history as fully autonomous and self-realized individuals (Rosaldo 1991). These images are eventually challenged by *Third World Women* (1972) and subsequent texts, in which revolutionary transnational subjectivities are gendered with female icons that represent displacement as much as defiance. The pocho in Pocho-Che isn’t as concretely rendered until the 1975 publication of the quarterly magazine *Tin-Tan: Revista Cosmica*.

Like the journal *El Pocho Che*, *Tin-Tan* magazine is a bilingual periodical featuring literature and art by Latinos affiliated with the Pocho-Che collective. *Tin-Tan* advances the local/global politics and poetics of Pocho-Che. The pieces comment critically upon political, social, and cultural struggles occurring locally, nationally, and internationally. And they address several topics of transnational significance: articles on the 1975 Second Congress of Cuban Women, on poetry in El Salvador, and on incidents affecting the Oglala Sioux nation at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Clarifying the magazine’s *raison d’être*, editor Alejandro Murguía surveys the political and cultural scene from Helsinki to the Mission District and summarizes the mission of *Tin-Tan* in the second issue:

We approach our non-political articles thru political eyes, and our political statements thru our senses, we are both serious and non-serious, we search for the blends that make up our complexities, we are a duality of life, we are yin and yang, we are Tin-Tan...we want to pull out all stops, the blinders, the half-steps towards our upheaval of traditional Anglo-Saxon values and create the modern culture of this country which for better or worse is a *Mestizo* culture, a mixture of many races. That’s what Tin-

Tan is all about. Our literature, art, and struggle will lift the curtain on a new way of life and attitudes that will unite us with the many because we are a majority on this continent... the sun is free today, use it before they put a price tag on it. *Life without Boundaries—Todo Se Vale*. (15)

To embody this transnational and transcultural spirit, the magazine took as its emblem the eponymous pachuco character performed by actor/comedian Germán Valdez (1919-1973) in Mexican movies of the late 1940s. As was the case with Che Guevara, Valdez had died recently when the collective adopted his character “Tin-Tan” for the magazine’s image. Valdez created Tin-Tan from his encounters with pachucos at the border between the cities of El Paso, Texas and Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico (Mora 1990, 82). The figure of the pachuco actually originated in this region of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, where Valdez spent his adolescence. A pachuco is a pocho known typically for wearing a zoot suit (baggy pants and long coat) and mixing English and Spanish into a pidgin called *caló* (Muñoz 37).<sup>11</sup> In movies such as *Hay muertos que no hacen ruido* (1946), the version of the pachuco portrayed by Tin-Tan playfully crosses linguistic and cultural borders. Thus, we might say that his displaced subjectivity (zoot) suits well the transnational and transcultural identity of the magazine, humorously mediating contact between *pochos* and Mexicans through popular culture.

Pocho-Che tropicalizes the character of Tin-Tan, intensifying the already garish, musical qualities of the pachuco and broadening his appeal (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997). As a result, Tin-Tan becomes not just a symbol of cultural resistance to assimilation but a mediating figure among diverse groups of Latinos. The refashioning of Tin-Tan as a tropical pocho and of San Francisco as a tropical environment thematizes the cross-fertilization of rural and urban, desert and island Latina/o cultures. Poet Juan Felipe Herrera calls these diverse cultures “The Red and the Green Nations” (Aztlán and the tropical paradise), and recalls how their utopian desires converged in Pocho-Che (1998, 220). For example, the multicolored cover of the first issue illustrated by artist Mike Rios juxtaposes pictures of a pachuco and rumbera (female rumba dancer) against a background of city buildings and palm trees. The pachuco remains a patriarchal representation of cultural resistance; however, the use of Tin-Tan and the further tropicalization of his image temper the seriousness and solemnity of earlier constructions such as those modeled after Che Guevara. *Tin-Tan* presents different sides of Pocho-Che but also of cultural resistance, Latino masculinity, and transnational subjectivity; it shows aspects that are hybrid, pleasurable, ironic, mischievous, festive, and sensuous.

In addition to the influence of popular culture such as movies and music, the transnational politics and poetics of the collective were tropicalized through the reading of modern literary texts such as *Three Trapped Tigers* (1967) by Cuban novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. For example, the opening pages of *Three Trapped Tigers*—a humorously experimental novel set in the cabaret society

of pre-Castro Havana—bursts into a bold, bilingual voice that appealed to the tropical sensibilities of Pocho-Che.<sup>12</sup>

Tropicana! the MOST fabulous nightclub in the WORLD—*el cabaret MAS fabuloso del mundo*—presents—*presenta*—its latest show—*su nuevo espectáculo*—where performers of Continental fame will take you all to the wonderful world of supernatural beauty of the Tropics—*al mundo maravilloso y extraordinario y hermoso*: The Tropic in the Tropicana! *El Trópico en Tropicana!* (1971, 3).

The translation of Spanish to English and the transformation of a nightclub into a tropical landscape inspired the appropriation of language and urban space by Pocho-Che. This made it possible to imagine and represent, at least allegorically, the San Francisco peninsula as a tropical island.<sup>13</sup>

Another guiding literary text was the bilingual and transnational journal *El Corno Emplumado/The Plumed Horn* (1962-69), co-edited by Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón in Mexico City. Randall writes: “*El Corno* was born primarily out of the urgency felt by a small group of poets on both sides of the border to communicate with one another.”<sup>14</sup> Strained political relations among the nations of North and Latin America during the cold war were exacerbated after the failure of U.S.-backed Cuban exiles to overthrow the Castro government at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. The journal responded to this tension by publishing in English and Spanish the prose, poetry, and letters of writers throughout the Americas. Hence, the work of North American writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley appeared alongside that of Latin Americans such as César Vallejo, Octavio Paz, Rosario Castellanos, and Ernesto Cardenal.

*El Corno* was a decidedly political publication, collapsing the boundary between poetry and social action. In one of the last editorials, the journal takes a stand against both the Mexican government for the 1968 massacre of protestors at Tlatelolco and the liberal democratic press for suppressing critical information about the event. Comparing this state of affairs to the Johnson administration’s “credibility gap” regarding the Vietnam War, the editors discuss the ideological battles over the representation of reality (“WHAT IS and WHAT IS SAID TO BE”) and the need for alternatives to the mainstream media. The Mexican government retaliated against *El Corno* by cutting off its subsidy, and the next issue of the journal was also the last. As a political and bilingual literary periodical of the Americas, *El Corno* made a profound impact on the transnational politics (and poetics) of Pocho-Che.

### *The Transcultural Poetics of Pocho-Che*

The appearance of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti in the pages of *El Corno* reveals a little known fact about the interactions between the Beat Generation and

a group of writers in Latin(o) America. It also belies repeated claims that the Beats were apathetic or apolitical. I agree with Michael Davidson that much of this criticism from the Old Left subscribes to narrow conceptualizations of politics (1989, 25). Although the Beats articulated no specific political platform, they distinguished themselves in the arena of social/cultural activism primarily “through their creation of alternative forms of community” (Davidson 28). Diametrically opposed to the claim of apathy is the charge that the Beats were imperialistic. While there is a good deal of merit to this argument, I would refrain from a rigidly orientalist approach. One of the main limitations of the orientalist reading here is that it tends to reinforce the silence of subaltern communities by focusing exclusively on the dominant group.

I don’t dispute that critiques of apathy and imperialism can be leveled at the Beats in general; however, I do want to take issue with homogeneous and binary paradigms. Why must we see the Beats as either monolithically apolitical or imperialistic? In response to inquiries about the cultural politics of the Beats, we should be able to answer with questions concerning context, circumstance, and contingency. Who are the Beats in question? We can’t only read Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs; we must look beyond them to some other writers of the San Francisco Renaissance, especially those with a history of cultural activism such as Ferlinghetti and Bob Kaufman as well as feminist precursors such as Diane DiPrima. What specific periods of individual and social history are under consideration? The literary careers of these authors and cultural activists are not restricted to the 1950s. And how do we address the internal contradictions of this diverse generation?

We must think relationally and dialogically about the writers and cultural activists of the San Francisco Renaissance. What is the relationship between this group and the group that formed as Pocho-Che? Both were predominantly homosocial clusters of male writers who worked to establish local alternative communities and independent media yet differences in race and class as well as social history account for the popularity and longevity of one over the other. How do certain political, social, and cultural conflicts within and between these communities lead to the formation of new subjects of knowledge and to new poetic discourse? Both were changed over time, particularly by the contributions of women authors and cultural activists.

I suggest a comparative intercultural approach in order to understand the reciprocal though politically asymmetrical cultural exchanges among artists of the San Francisco Renaissance and their counterparts in Pocho-Che. As I discuss earlier, the notion of a transcultural poetics follows from Limón’s modification of cultural poetics and from his crucial point that cultural encounters between such groups of people are “not seamless narratives of domination *or* resistance” (15). Instead, they involve complex negotiations among expressive cultures in which domination and resistance occur along with communication, collaboration, and contradiction. These are dialogical processes inflected by multiple differences in

social position; at the same time, they constitute the means for cross-referencing, appropriating and reappropriating cultural elements. It's also important to remember that cultural poetics pertains not to discourse (poetry) alone but to a range of social and cultural practices (performance and production of texts) that make up expressive culture as much as discourse. A transcultural poetics would address such practices, too.

The legacy of the San Francisco Renaissance, especially the Beats, had a considerable influence on the popular culture of young Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. The artists and activists of Pocho-Che were no exception. Some of them came of age socially and politically during the 1950s, and had been affected by the Beats. Like many other young Americans, the members of Pocho-Che were impressed by their rejection of social values associated with the burgeoning postwar consumer culture and escalating cold war. The Beats also provided a model for the formation of a literary bohemian community and avant-garde with their hangouts, circles, and salons (Watson 1995). Their jazz-derived poetic rhythms and live readings resonated with the oral and musical traditions of the various Latina/o cultures represented within Pocho-Che.<sup>15</sup> The early poetry of local writer Roberto Vargas, who associated with the Beats, shows this influence, as does the fact that poet Nina Serrano originally moved to San Francisco in 1961 because of her fascination with the Beats.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the relationships among artists of the San Francisco Renaissance and Pocho-Che expanded beyond influence to interactions and collaborations. They participated together at several important political and cultural events: for example, the "Salvador Allende/Pablo Neruda Memorial Poetry Reading" in 1973 and the benefit poetry reading "For the Greek Resistance" the following year.<sup>17</sup> And they were featured together as a local community of artists in the anthology *Mark in Time* (Harvey 1971), which documents the transcultural poetics of the literary scene in San Francisco during the early 1970s with poems and photographic portraits of writers such as Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Kaufman, Serrano, José Montoya, and Victor Hernández Cruz.

Ferlinghetti, in particular, was a significant local predecessor. A well-known and respected poet of the San Francisco Renaissance, he shares with the poets of Pocho-Che an affinity for surrealist imagery and a preoccupation with the rhythms and textures of urban life. Nevertheless, it was as a bookstore owner, as publisher and editor of *City Lights Books* (which he founded in 1955), that Ferlinghetti made the greatest impact on Pocho-Che and others interested in establishing alternative and independent small presses.<sup>18</sup> The reputation of *City Lights Books* as an agent and defender of free expression had been secured in the famous censorship trial regarding the publication of Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956). Ferlinghetti and bookstore manager Shigeyoshi Murao were arrested yet ultimately acquitted of obscenity charges in 1957. *City Lights Books*, which Ferlinghetti patterned after bookstore/publisher combinations in Paris, served as an exemplar of cultural activism.<sup>19</sup> Murguía has recalled: "We used to

drive around the Mission and say ‘what the neighborhood needs is a coffee house with poetry readings and a publishing division like City Lights.’”<sup>20</sup>

Since the early 1960s Ferlinghetti also has been an unflagging critic of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, protesting with mordant wit the neo-imperialist economic and military invasions of the cold war. He traveled to Cuba in 1960 as a supporter of the revolution. By doing so he clashed with the isolationism of Kerouac, who once said, “I got my own Revolution out here in Northport—the American Revolution.”<sup>21</sup> In poems such as “One Thousand Fearful Words for Fidel Castro” (1961) Ferlinghetti mediates local and global politics through allegorical images and cross-cultural metonyms, humorously suggesting that Castro copied the Beatniks with his beard. As a supporter and representative of *El Corno Emplumado* and later as a publisher of revolutionary poetry from Central America, Ferlinghetti has continued his involvement in movements for radical social change in the Americas.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding his own transnational cultural activism, Ferlinghetti also has criticized the political provincialism of several local writers in comparison to Pocho-Che.<sup>23</sup> In *Literary San Francisco* (1980), for example, he and Nancy Peters note the following about the bicoastal political orientation of the collective: “In close touch with Newyorican writers in lower Manhattan (particularly at the Newyorican Café), San Francisco Latino writers were much more active politically in the 1970s, and in fact more effective, than their Anglo counterparts in town (227).” This candid admission refers specifically to the pragmatic cultural interventions (benefit readings, public demonstrations, conferences) organized by Pocho-Che for various political causes. The Beats may have lacked a political program but Pocho-Che didn’t. From ethnic studies to the Sandinista Revolution, Pocho-Che articulated its political agenda of transnational social justice through group action and cultural production. Intervention into print media was certainly a strategic part of this agenda.

Although the first Spanish language newspapers of San Francisco were started in the mid-nineteenth century, it wasn’t until the late 1960s that publications began to communicate news of the Latina/o community in an unabashedly bilingual format and militantly political tone (Lewels 36, 1974).<sup>24</sup> The main purpose of these publications was political rather than commercial. *Basta Ya!*, for instance, was primarily an organizing tool of the Committee to Defend Los Siete de la Raza. Pocho-Che saw itself engaged with hegemonic cultural institutions in an ideological struggle over representation— particularly against stereotypes— and provided local Latina/o writers with an alternative to the ethnocentric mainstream book publishing industry based in New York City.<sup>25</sup> It was Murguía’s idea to publish books in addition to periodicals. Mainstream book publishers not only ignored Latinos and bilingual literature; they were anathema to the politics of the collective.<sup>26</sup> Ediciones Pocho-Che published bilingual poetry books in a compact 2-for-1 format with artwork because it established an identifiable difference from mainstream book publishers; enabled the publication of more writers at a lesser

cost; and expressed the values of the group as a collective, which rejected the fetishization of the individual artist.

Among the books published in this series was *El Sol y los de Abajo* (1972) by José Montoya, doyen of Chicano arts and letters. Known chiefly as a leading multi-media artist (poet, painter, and musician), Montoya has also distinguished himself as a lucid and an insightful critic on the topic of Latinos and mass media. In “Thoughts on La Cultura, the Media, Con Safos and Survival” (1979, 1980), he argues that nothing less than the cultural survival of Chicanos/Latinos is at stake in institutional representations of social reality: a demographic reality projecting “that Latinos will be the largest minority before too long” (29) gives rise to a paranoid reality fomented by mass media.<sup>27</sup> Montoya writes:

In that deranged state, the man can still cut us down in a minute. Not because he has the tanks and sophisticated riot control squads, but because he controls the media! And he uses that media to tell the rest of the world that everything from drugs and crime to unemployment and engorged welfare rolls is the fault of us euphemisms, i.e., Hispanos, Latins, Mexican hyphenated Americans, etc. (28)

Montoya points out that this scapegoating of Latinos is rooted in biased and racist discourses that historically have served the interests of the dominant culture. He exposes here a link between the media and social sciences, tracing it to the colonizing effects of classic ethnographic literature.

Montoya discusses decolonization with an emphasis on the pragmatic role of the artist as a mediator in the process. For Montoya, the creation by artists of an alternative system or infrastructure—with its network of cultural centers and writer’s collectives—is a concrete if at times didactic way to critique internalized bourgeois, white-supremacist ideology and to develop a “practical body of knowledge which could be used as a relevant point of reference for all Chicanos” (29). The epistemological goals of the community are materialized by publishing houses circulating new self-perceptions and self-representations in newspapers, magazines, and books. Intellectual currents from sources as diverse as Black Elk and Karl Marx are cross-referenced. And cultural identity remains open enough so that the benefits of self-determination exercised through media ownership are coordinated with the advantages of participation in intercultural coalitions. Montoya concludes:

Y ahí está el detalle, Raza. If we are to become a viable force that will be an asset to the larger community of third world people in the future, first we have to become a nation. If that is nationalistic, then let us deal with that aspect creatively so we can go on to the next phase toward our total development. But nothing is going to go anywhere if we don’t have the means to convince our people of the importance of being self-sufficient. Control of the media is one very important way of facilitating the process of creative education, at least control of our own media. (31)

Montoya's use of the words "phase" and "development" in reference to cultural nationalism suggests an evolutionary paradigm of sociopolitical consciousness. Nevertheless, Montoya also insists upon the creative capacity of artists and writers to mediate between distinct yet internally heterogeneous cultures and their conflicts.

In "Russian Cowboys, Early Berkeley and Sunstruck Critics: On Being a Chicano Writer" (1979, 1980), Montoya recalls one such conflict with writing instructors who forced him to write according to the tenets of modernist poetics and the standards of New Critics. He writes:

They were always highly critical of bilingual [writing], especially in poetry—code switching and anything that went into *caló*—even though I was drawing from people that had impressed me like Eliot and Ezra Pound, who used *many* languages. (48)

This double standard only convinced Montoya "how important it is to read, just to read and read these guys so that you can take them on, spar with them like a boxer" (49). He began to look at writing as "getting away with something" (49). In other words, he started to see the subversive potential of his own writing with regard to conventional language and form. He took inspiration from poets such as Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and Dylan Thomas as well as from novelists such as John Steinbeck, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway while at the same time remaining fiercely critical of dominant literary representations of Mexican Americans.

Being in the Bay Area during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Montoya participated marginally in the San Francisco Renaissance. He attended the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland with other young Chicano artists on GI Bill scholarships after the Korean War. Occasionally, they interacted with the literary and artistic community in Berkeley; however, their feelings about these interactions were mixed. He writes:

We were learning a lot but we were also constantly being exploited by a lot of things that were happening in Berkeley about that time. Porque traíamos guitarras y cantábamos y gritábamos y nos empedábamos, cada rato nos invitaban a literary readings and Berkeley-type radical happenings. And I know we played for some people that are probably famous now, but we never knew. All we gave a shit about was going in there and stealing pisto, their instruments, anything that wasn't tied down we'd take it. And they knew we were like that pero for them—ours was 'an interesting life style.' So they always made sure we were invited kind of like for entertainment. Every once in a while we'd get mad at being considered buffoons and we'd kick their ass y luego se sentían. But at the very next Young Socialist Fair Play for Cuba rally allí nos tenían otra vez. 'It's a rally for you folks.' And we'd say, 'We're not Cuban,' and they'd say, 'Same thing!' Muy prophetic, los carnales liberals. (50)

Preceding by a decade what Tom Wolfe would define as “radical chic” (1970), these hostile incidents demonstrate the intercultural conflicts of the San Francisco Renaissance.<sup>28</sup> In particular, they betray the colonizing gaze of liberal American writers who see people of color not as fellow artists but as classic ethnographic objects and curiosities, or as exotic and primitive diversions that enhance the bohemian atmosphere. Ironically, however, it is the homogenizing perception of Latinos (their conflation of Chicanos and Cubans as the “‘Same thing’”) that first articulates — albeit clumsily — the eventually realized solidarity of Chicanos with the Cuban Revolution a few years later. Or as Montoya puts it: “Muy prophetic los carnales liberals.”

Nevertheless, Montoya describes his resistance to the racist treatment of Chicanos by his counterparts in the San Francisco Renaissance. In doing so, he reveals contradictions as well. To a degree, Montoya and his peers performed the transgressive roles of urban tough guys assigned to them at the Berkeley gatherings. For example, he characterizes these intercultural or intertextual conflicts as thefts (“stealing... anything that wasn’t tied down”) or as fistfights with literary patriarchs such as Hemingway and Kerouac (“spar with them like a boxer” and “kick their ass”). And he displays a gendered predisposition among male writers for the putatively superior bardic or epic modes exemplified by Walt Whitman or the Russian novelists Leo Tolstoy and Feodor Dostoyevsky (“Every poet started out wanting to write the epic Chicano novel”). All of this underscores the fact that these intercultural conflicts often were between two groups composed largely of male writers who subscribed to largely masculinist notions of art and resistance.

Raúl Salinas is a poet whose bardic expression derives in part from the impact of the Beats. Salinas published his first book, *Un Trip Through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions* (1980), with Pocho-Che and represented the collective in Seattle, Washington. Originally from Austin, Texas, he began writing poetry after being introduced to the Beats by a group of poets with whom he associated while serving time in Soledad prison. In an interview conducted by critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, he says that the Beats influenced his writing with their attitudes and techniques, with their deeply personal voices and free verse lines reminiscent of romantic antecedents such as Whitman.<sup>29</sup> Regarding two of his most famous poems, “A Trip Through the Mind Jail” (1969) and “Journey II” (1970), he says: “...I think ‘Trip’ and ‘Journey,’ certainly ‘Trip,’ is very much, technically laid out, the structure of it...in a Ginsbergian form. Which would then go back to the...earlier roots, of where he got his stuff, you know?” (9).<sup>30</sup>

Salinas refers here to what Ginsberg called “ellipsis,” a method of rendering subjective images in catalogues. Building on Kerouac’s principles of composition outlined in “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” Ginsberg compressed language into “blocks of sensations & images” by curtailing syntactical connectives such as articles and prepositions (Ginsberg 1970; Tytell 1976, 215). He then arranged these blocks in clusters that form long lines and dense stanzas. Whereas the stanzas in *Howl* begin repeatedly with the pronoun “who” and lament “the

best minds of my generation destroyed by madness” (9), those in “Trip” start with the noun “Neighborhood” and memorialize a community destroyed by socioeconomic marginalization and historical erasure: Salinas’s barrio of La Loma in Austin.

Neighborhood of my youth  
demolished, erased forever from  
the universe.  
You live on, captive, in the lonely  
cellblocks of my mind.

More testimonial than confessional, “Trip” captures memories that flash within the consciousness of the incarcerated speaker at a moment of personal and historical crisis (Benjamin 1968, 255). Salinas composed the poem while serving time yet participating actively in the Chicano and prisoner rights movements.

It is important to historicize the development of these imagistic blocks, given the tendency to interpret them idealistically or archetypally. The Beats themselves often were responsible for idealizing the vernacular rhythms and textures of workers, blacks, and other ethnic groups in their attempts to recover orality and the body in American literature. Perceiving the speech patterns of marginalized Americans as more intuitive than intellectual, they reinforced the antinomy of mind/body that designates subaltern cultures with the latter category. This relates as well to their association of the improvisational styles of jazz musicians (many of whom were black) with qualities that elevate feeling over thought. Even some of their critics accept this neo-primitivism uncritically. In *Naked Angels* (1976), John Tytell describes ellipsis as “a kind of mock American Indian dialect used ironically — which distinguishes between the flow of a mind’s perceptions and less intuitively sponsored flights” (215-16).

I would argue that the source of such a poetics actually is more historical yet no less popular and transcultural. Again, I would look at the mass media, particularly print media during the cold war, as a significant influence on the poetry of both Ginsberg and Salinas. The blocks of images in their poems often read like headlines rather than as “mock American Indian dialect,” suggesting a quotidian source more likely to be shared by poets from different cultural backgrounds. In “America” (1956) Ginsberg confesses ironically: “I’m obsessed by Time Magazine” (41).<sup>31</sup> And in “Nature of the Beast (or, Weep Imperialism)” (1994), Salinas reconfigures a sentence from a newspaper article about threats posed by certain Middle-eastern nations to the stability of Western governments and markets. In both cases the idioms of mass media are turned against the hegemony of institutions such as the Luce publishing empire or the imperialism of multinational capitalists.

This media source also would account for the element of chronicle or testimony found in their works. Ginsberg documented the Beat Generation as a co-founder of *Beatitude* magazine and as a photographer of his peers. In books such as *Planet News* (1968), he illustrates the Poundian maxim: “Literature is

news that stays news” (1934, 29). And he was a master at using mass media, as demonstrated by his interviews in literary journals or on television talk shows. For his part, Salinas has been a media activist since the early 1960s: as a writer for magazines inside and outside of prison, as an editor of journals, and as founder of Red Salmon Press. His earliest published writing includes a monthly jazz column—inspired by San Francisco Renaissance jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason—entitled “The Quarter Notes.”

Salinas shares with the Beats an affinity for jazz, especially for the improvisational styles and syncopated rhythms of bebop which he first heard in Austin: “You know, I started reading these people, and my experiences in the Black community, in the Black world up to this time. The jazz...was also very much a part of my life.”<sup>32</sup> With respect to social class and aesthetics, Salinas identifies more readily with the late Afro-Jewish Beat poet Bob Kaufman. Kaufman’s commitment to jazz-inspired prosody, urban sensibility, and radical politics is unique among the Beats. Before settling in San Francisco, he was a representative of the National Maritime Union, a labor organizer, and an area director for the 1948 presidential campaign of Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace (Kaufman 1996). His spontaneous readings at the Co-Existence Bagel Shop and on the streets of North Beach led to numerous altercations with local police. Like Salinas, Kaufman was arrested and jailed several times, conveying the pain of these experiences in his “Jail Poems” (1965).<sup>33</sup>

Critic Barbara Christian points out the loneliness in Kaufman’s poetry and attributes it not just to his position as a minority among the Beats but also to his unflinching vision of alienation in America. She writes: “The extreme objective correlative of this loneliness in our society is the prison. Kaufman’s ‘Jail Poems’ protest both America’s injustice and succinctly, painfully reveal his own psychic prison—the real prison from which he cannot escape” (1981, 111). Jail is both material reality and metaphysical condition in the poetry of Kaufman and Salinas. It literally signifies the legal status of each poet in his cell while figuratively representing the social status of ethnic subjects in the United States. For people of color during the 1950s—the latter part of which Kaufman composed “Jail Poems” and Salinas began writing his poetry—the “spiritual and political loneliness of America” could be quite acute.<sup>34</sup>

Salinas acknowledges this connection to Kaufman in the dedication of his most recent book, *East of the Freeway* (1995), and in the poem “Shame on the Shaman.” In the dedication and poem Salinas confers on Kaufman an honorific, “The REAL Beat,” and intimates a falling out with the other Beats. As Louis Mendoza writes in the Afterword to *East of the Freeway*: “Any recognition of the influence of the Beats in Salinas’s work must also acknowledge that a tension exists between him and these contemporaries” (108). In “Riff(t)s” Salinas openly addresses this tension with Kerouac, from whom he also takes as the epigraph to *East of the Freeway* a poem about returning home. Salinas recalls in “Riff(t)s” his youthful admiration for the leader of the Beats and describes this time as a

“Moment of Enlightenment.” This moment turns to disillusionment, however, as Kerouac—“fat and forty”—attacks the Left and embraces reactionary politics during the era of the Vietnam War. In his own middle age, Salinas resists the cynicism and alcoholism that consumed Kerouac (a.k.a. Duluoz). Through a mixture of self-deprecating humor and a commitment to radical social change, he eventually reaches a “Moment of Enjoyment”:

Bore you with some news,  
Duluoz?  
Unlike your jug o’ booze  
the struggle  
Turns Me ON.

As is often the case with artists of Pocho-Che and those of the Beat Generation, the difference between Salinas and Kerouac is generalized social rebellion versus organized political resistance. For Salinas the struggle involves him as a writer, publisher, and activist on behalf of Chicanos, American Indians, and prisoners.<sup>35</sup>

The discursive and extra-discursive practices of Pocho-Che must be seen within interlocking matrices of cultural production, marketing, distribution, and consumption. Against this backdrop, editorial work such as that undertaken by the members of Pocho-Che constitutes not only literary production but also social and cultural critique. Pocho-Che engaged classic ethnographic discourses through symbolic and material practices. Its autoethnographic textualizations crossed various national and cultural boundaries to produce a poetics shaped by resistance, by mutual influence, by collaboration, and finally by hybridization among literary predecessors and contemporaries in North and Latin(o) America. By historicizing and cross-referencing three literary and cultural movements—the discourse of ethnopoetics in the 1970s, the Chicano political and cultural movements of the same period, and the San Francisco Renaissance of the 1950s—by examining them comparatively and dialogically, I’m hoping not only to see each of them in a different light but to shed new light on the complex transactions between them.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Jameson responds to the question posed by Sylvia Wynter of whether or not an ethnopoetics can become a sociopoetics. See Sylvia Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics" in *Ethnopoetics: A First International Symposium* (Boston: Alcheringa/ Boston University, 1976).
- <sup>2</sup> A few members of the collective had belonged previously to Mala Efe (Mexican American Liberation Art Front), a group of Chicano artists based in Oakland. The members of Mala Efe held informal salons in which the topic of discussion was often the role of art and the artist in the Chicano movement. This first issue was released on July 26 in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Black Panther* newspaper was published in Oakland and *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought* was edited by Octavio I. Romano-V. and published in Berkeley.
- <sup>4</sup> Aztlán is the original homeland of the Aztecs that Chicano nationalists claim is the region of the southwestern United States annexed after the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846-48.
- <sup>5</sup> The strikes organized by the TWLF at SF State grew out of issues raised by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Black Student Union (BSU) regarding the school's cooperation with the draft board and support of ROTC programs; the reinstatement of suspended BSU members in school and Black Panther George Murray in his teaching post; and open admission for third world students along with the establishment of a school of ethnic studies. The demonstrations turned into riots when police used violence to disperse student protesters. The defense of Los Siete, who were eventually acquitted, tied in with the broader movement against racist harassment and brutality by the mostly white police force. The Black Panthers also had been engaged in this battle on the streets of Oakland and in the pages of their newspaper *The Black Panther*, which routinely depicted the police as pigs. Through their own publications, supporters of Los Siete such as Pocho-

Che exposed the prejudice of local politicians and media, which implied that the defendants were savages. See Marjorie Heins, *Strictly Ghetto Property: The Story of Los Siete de la Raza* (Berkeley: Ramparts, 1972) and *Basta Ya! The Story of Los Siete de La Raza* (San Francisco: Research Organizing Cooperative of San Francisco, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Although Luis Valdez is also known for advancing a cultural nationalist Chicano identity, particularly a neoindigenist type, the manifesto he co-wrote with Roberto Rubalcava in 1964, “Venceremos!: Mexican-American Statement on Travel to Cuba,” pointed Macias in the direction of internationalism. Valdez and Rubalcava declare: “The Mexican in the United States has been...no less a victim of American imperialism than his impoverished brothers in Latin America...As sons of Mexican manual laborers in California, we have traveled to Revolutionary Cuba...to emphasize the historical and cultural unanimity of all Latin American peoples, north and south of the border. Having no leaders of our own, we accept Fidel Castro” (215-16). See Valdez and Stan Steiner, eds. *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Originally a derogatory term applied by Mexicans to U.S. Mexicans, the term “pocho” has been recuperated by Chicanos in recent history. In this sense, it is like the word “Chicano,” whose meaning was once widely-considered pejorative too.

<sup>8</sup> Mala Efe, the group in Oakland that preceded Pocho-Che, had gendered the subject of decolonization in a similar fashion. Describing the group’s first exhibition in 1969, Esteban Villa says: “The exhibition was called ‘Nuevo Simbolos for La Nueva Raza’ [New Symbols for the New People] and attempted to visually project images of *El Hombre Nuevo*: The Chicano who had emerged from the de-colonization process” (94). See Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “The Chicano Movement and the Emergence of a Chicano Poetic Consciousness” in *New Scholar* 6 (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Since the 1990s, deploying the symbol of Che Guevara is a very ambiguous act. This may have always been the case. But in the late 1960s the name and image of Che were more readily understood as signs of decolonization, revolution, and third world Marxism. While the symbol of Che continues to resonate with these meanings, it’s now a postmodern commercial icon also. For example, in advertisements for the fast food franchise Taco Bell the notorious talking chihuahua wears Che’s famous beret. The many t-shirts and posters emblazoned with Che’s immortal Christ-like visage also confirm his celebrity status in popular culture. (Many of the same things can be said about Malcolm X as an icon.) All of this corroborates the Frankfurt School’s lessons on the awesome power of capitalism to absorb and co-opt dissident elements. Cartoonist Lalo Lopez expresses this idea satirically in his comic strip *L.A. Cucaracha*, which replaces the star on Che’s beret with the Nike shoe corporation’s swoosh logo.

<sup>10</sup> Artist Alex Donis deconstructed this sort of masculine subjectivity by crossing the social boundaries of sexual desire and pleasure in his multimedia installation at Galería de la Raza entitled *My Cathedral* (1997). The devotional yet iconoclastic exhibition featured depictions of historical and religious figures in fictionalized homoerotic embraces, including the pairs of Che Guevara and César Chávez, Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, Fidel Castro and John F. Kennedy. Its presentation in the Mission District initiated an intertextual dialogue with the local legacy of admiration (exemplified by Pocho-Che) for such personages. Unfortunately, some chose to express themselves with vandalism and a couple of the pieces were destroyed—notably the image of Che Guevara and César Chávez. See the catalogue *My Cathedral: An Installation by Alex Donis* (San Francisco: Galería de la Raza, August 19-September 26, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> See Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino, “The Pachuco’s Flayed Hide,” in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*, ed. Griswold del Castillo et al (Los Angeles: UCLA Wight Art Gallery, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Recommending the book in his column “El Rinconsito Sabrosito,” Victor Hernández Cruz writes: “If you haven’t read any good novels lately check out *Tres Tristes Tigres* by

the Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante, it is a verbal delight of Havana night life in the 50's, it is full of cabarets and guaracha and pre-revolution insight" (12). Alejandro Murguía recalls when excessive rains poured on the Mission District in 1972 and made it seem like Macondo, the legendary town in the fiction of García Marquez. See *Tin-Tan* (Summer-Fall, 1975) and Alejandro Murguía, interview with the author, July 16, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Herrera initially makes this observation about Pocho-Che and its representation of San Francisco as a tropical island: "It's a hard, urban cold steel city, and the last thing it is is a tropical island...There's no rumbas going on in the middle of Embarcadero, there's no marimbas on Kearny Street...But all of a sudden the writers were writing [and] you'd swear they were eating mangos and wearing colored shirts and staying up drinking ron..." (75). This sense of the peninsula as an island is grounded in literary and social history, from early Spanish accounts and maps of California to the naturalistic novel *McTeague* (1899) by Frank Norris. See Sesshu Foster, "From Logan to the Mission: Riding North Through Chicano Literary History with Juan Felipe Herrera" in *The Americas Review* (Fall-Winter 1989) and Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989, 8, 221 n.16).

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Randall, letter to the author, August 3, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Murguía claims that Pocho-Che resurrected live poetry in San Francisco after the Beats. Interview with the author, July 16, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with author, August 5, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> The first event took place at Glide Memorial Church on October 4, 1973 and featured Alegría, Murguía, Vargas, Serrano, Hernández Cruz, Ferlinghetti, DiPrima, Elías Hruska y Cortés, Ishmael Reed, Janice Mirikitani, Jean Franco, John Felstiner, and Joan Baez; the second at Fugazi Hall where featured poets included Alegría, Vargas, Ferlinghetti, DiPrima, and Andrei Codrescu. See reproductions of posters for these events in Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Nancy Peters, eds., *Literary San Francisco* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1980) and in *Rupert García: Prints and Posters, 1967-1990* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> *Beatitude* magazine, reflecting in its very title Kerouac's meaning of "beat," was edited by various poets such as Bob Kaufman since 1959. It continued into the 1970s. In addition to *Tin-Tan*, there were other local periodicals during the early 1970s. They include *Yardbird* (1972-76), edited in the East Bay by Ishmael Reed, Al Young, and Shawn Wong, and *City of San Francisco* (1973-75), published by filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola also served on the board of directors for the San Francisco Art Commission, which released through its Neighborhood Arts Program a booklet for non-profit organizations entitled, "How to Manipulate the Media" (1975).

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Peters writes about Ferlinghetti's vision for City Lights Books: "His idea was to encourage cross-currents and cross-fertilizations among writers and thinkers from different cultures and communities both in the books sold at the store and in its publication program" (212). See James Brook et al, *Reclaiming San Francisco* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author, July 16, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> See Ann Charters, ed., *The Portable Beat Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992, 245).

<sup>22</sup> See Alejandro Murguía and Barbara Paschke, eds. *Volcán: Poems from Central America* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1983). Most recently, City Lights Books has published a compilation of writings about the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico. See Elaine Katzenberger, ed., *First World, Ha Ha Ha!* (City Lights Books, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Ferlinghetti's politics, like those of fellow transplanted artist Kenneth Rexroth, took root in West Coast traditions of civil libertarianism, pacifism, anarchism, and anti-authoritarianism. Aware of the contradiction in being both a self-described "enemy of the state" and a successful capitalist entrepreneur, Ferlinghetti has acknowledged the truth of

Herbert Marcuse's statement regarding "the enormous capacity of society to ingest its own most dissident elements...I'm ingested myself" (Barolini 1990, 2333). This ingestion played out most recently when Ferlinghetti was appointed first poet laureate of San Francisco by Mayor Willie Brown in 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Two of the earliest newspapers in San Francisco were *El Eco del Pacifico* and *La Crónica*. Other overtly bilingual and political publications in California and throughout the Southwest during the 1960s and 1970s include *El Malcriado*, *El Grito del Norte*, *Con Safos*, and *El Caracol*.

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent account of the frustrating experiences faced by Latina/o authors who try to have their books published by mainstream institutions, see José David Saldívar, "The Hybridity of Culture in Arturo Islas's *The Rain God*" in *The Dialectics of Our America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> According to Murguía, mainstream book publishers disregarded bilingual literature so much that accents and tildes would have to be written in because their typesetters lacked diacritical marks and fonts in Spanish. Vargas declined an offer to publish with Dell because of political differences. Interview with the author, July 16, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> This essay was originally composed for the First Annual Chicano Film Series at Stanford University in January 1979. It was printed in color as a booklet at Galería de la Raza in San Francisco and reprinted in *Metamorfosis* 3.1 (Spring-Summer 1980, 28-31).

<sup>28</sup> See Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauiing the Flak Catchers* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970).

<sup>29</sup> Salinas acknowledges his debt to the Beats: "Tu sabes, I don't just have a connection. I guess that I can be honest enough to say that I have profound respect for them, you know?" (8). See "Tirando Rollo con Tapón" (1973) in the Raúl Salinas Papers, Box 11—Literary Studies on Salinas (1972-1994), Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University.

<sup>30</sup> Salinas Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Towards the end of this poem, the voice comes close to mimicking a "mock American Indian dialect" but closer still to the utterances of a chest-beating brute like the Tarzan of Hollywood movies. "That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read./Him need big black niggers. Hah. Her make us/all work sixteen hours a day. Help" (43). That it's the voice of the American white male in fear of the Soviet Union is fairly clear; however, the use of such a primitivism is also fairly problematic because of its ambiguity.

<sup>32</sup> Salinas Papers.

<sup>33</sup> According to his friend Raymond Foye, Kaufman was arrested 36 times in one year. The police considered Kaufman subversive and singled him out for harassment. See David Henderson, Introduction to *Cranial Guitar: Selected Poems by Bob Kaufman* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> According to poet Gary Snyder: "In the spiritual and political loneliness of America of the fifties you'd hitch a thousand miles to meet a friend" (45). See "North Beach" in *The Old Ways* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1977).

<sup>35</sup> In addition to his involvement with the Chicano Movement, Salinas has served the American Indian Movement and International Indian Treaty Council as a delegate, spokesperson, and translator at the United Nations. He also has been active in prisoner rights litigation and has traveled to Cuba and Nicaragua in solidarity with the revolutionary aims of those nations.

## QUOTIDIAN TERROR

Rita Wong

quotidian terror  
knifed and niked  
our backs  
tromped and stumped  
stunned by spectacle farce  
realty teeters  
middlefingers  
dystopia by subtraction  
marked economy  
stabs false prices  
onto water, air, land  
stuck pig grunts  
pumped full of antibiotics  
psychotic bacon  
beckons  
know thy enzyme  
transgenic estrogenic  
effluvium transfers  
into your porcine gut  
glow-in-the-dark hashbrowns  
come with the order  
spudmuffin  
let's haunch

blood myth blood paradigm

“the number of colonies of stable transformants”

gamma stun stunts stunted

blood amplitude blood magnitude

protoplast fusion fussing

over syn whelm tax

blood error blood engine

bidirectional bioinspectional

select if marker

blood turnip blood trapeze

invertebrate longings

my eggs heat-shocked

## THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM REVISITED: BACK TO BASICS?

Radha D'Souza

*[This article was originally written as my regular commentary for ZNet. ZNet declined to publish it. It is published here without any changes. The article raises important questions about the direction of the "New Social Movements" from "Third World" perspectives.]*

Why am I writing about the World Social Forum (WSF) again? At the NESCO grounds in Mumbai, the WSF has given way to other exhibitions and events. Across the road, at the veterinary college grounds, the students have returned to where the Mumbai Resistance 2004 (MR-04) held their events. And, the WSF is no longer headline news in the city papers. Indeed, if WSF I created waves, WSF IV has ebbed very quickly.

The principal actors have no doubt returned to their think tank organisations and research institutes to reflect over questions of 'where to next.' But, what of the large number of 'ordinary activists' who came there to occupy the 'open spaces' that the WSF offered for 'self-organised' events? Those participants too have returned to wherever they came from, taking with them what they could take from the events. It was fortuitous therefore to be in Canada on a speaking tour when the participants were reporting back on their experiences of WSF, MR-04 or both to their home constituencies. Undeterred by the merciless Montreal winter and the ice and sleet on the streets of Ottawa, people turned up on Sunday afternoons and late evenings on weekdays to hear about civil society, WSF, MR-04 and other issues.

It struck me that most people reporting back on the events, overwhelmed by Mumbai, spoke more about the city and the chaos at NESCO grounds, or about the specific issues their organisations focused on, than about the WSF itself, its wider politics, role or future. This is hardly surprising given the paucity of debates or critical assessments of the WSF. While a plethora of publications and writings on the anti-globalisation movements generally and on the WSF in particular exist, most of them are written by active participants and leaders. Often resources and funds from Western governments and large funding agencies support the research and publications directly or indirectly through think tank/research organisations.

Critical voices, and there are many, remain confined to smaller groups and organisations. There, there is unease and discomfort about the direction of the WSF and at least some of the trends within anti-globalisation movements. If lack of transparency and democratic functioning were matters widely

acknowledged, even within the WSF IV, it is at least in some measure, due to the growing strength of dissident voices within the anti-globalisation movements. However, transparency and democratic functioning may be symptomatic of the politics and ideology. In the absence of a critique of the ideology and characterisation of the movement itself, the growing disquiet and unease could well be reduced to individuals and personalities.

Taking cues from the rallying slogan, “Another World Is Possible,” the first question that needs to be asked is: in what sense is the WSF anti-establishment, if at all? For, implicit in the slogan is the idea that the WSF is anti-systemic.

The WSF claims it is the voice of ‘civil society’ speaking against the inhuman and devastating effects of ‘globalisation,’ meaning a set of economic policies and programmes premised on neo-liberal ideology. Neo-liberalism revives key concepts and ideas from the old liberal ideology of 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism and colonialism and adapts them to the present times on enlarged scales. Thus, ideas of sanctity of private property, privileging the economic dimension of social life over all others, the virtues of competition and competitiveness, ideas of ‘level playing fields,’ ‘trickle down effects’ from wealth creation as the panacea for social inequality, the idea of the state as the invisible regulator, or in Adam Smith’s words, as the ‘the night watchman,’ the sanctity of the market and market mechanisms are some ideas, the revival of which is readily identifiable in the present times.

The enlargement of scales and the deeper historical roots of capitalism and colonialism has lead some to characterise ‘globalisation’ as a borderless phenomenon that has transformed the world into a ‘global village,’ sans history or geography. Like the other ideas from 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism, the idea of ‘civil society’ too has seen a revival in the context of ‘globalisation’ and undergone expansion of scale and depth in its present avatar.

The idea of ‘civil society’ denotes the relationship between capitalism, state and society. It is the ham sandwiched between the state and the economy. Different theories and ideologies have characterised the relationship between state, economy and society in different ways. The architecture of capitalist societies rests on the way the relationship is constituted and reconstituted. Changes in the phases of capitalism or in the specific dimensions of capitalism have entailed restructuring the relationship between state, society and economy. Thus when mercantile capitalism under Dutch hegemony ended to give way to industrial capitalism under British hegemony, when the British Empire gave way to the post-war monopolistic finance capitalism under American hegemony, significant restructuring of state-society-economy relations occurred. The restructuring invariably entailed diverse debates, arguments, perceptions, theories and ideologies on the part of actors involved and affected by the restructuring. The arguments were economic, political, moral/ethical. What kind of state-society-economy relations emerged depended on the concepts and ideas that were thrown into the melting pot during times of transition. In that sense the re-emergence of the debates

around 'civil society' became inevitable when 'globalisation' in the post-Cold War era restructured the relations between state and economy. The question then is, is the ham between the sandwich fresh or recycled and stale?

Let us take Third World debt, an issue that has the sympathy of a wide cross section of Western (also capitalist) societies. The WSF would like Third World debt to be cancelled. Evidently, this is because of the poverty in the Third World. However, the idea of cancellation is based on forgiveness and compassion. It overlooks a small detail, namely, that what is called debt is in fact expropriation of the Third World and a means of continued appropriation of their land, labour and natural resources in a new form euphemistically termed 'development' in the post-war era. In that sense it is not a 'debt' at all. Not surprisingly, the Churches throughout the Jubilee year were most vocal in advocating cancellation of Third World debt based on the Christian idea of plenary indulgence and absolution so that the slate is cleaned and the old ties resumed. Every good banker too knows that periodically bad debts must be written off for banking to continue to be business as usual. For the 'Third World' then, debt cancellation will undoubtedly bring some respite, but whether it will end their continued exploitation, the continued decimation of their social and cultural life, is another matter. Did the end of slavery end the exploitation of black people? Or, the advent of western democracies the colonisation of indigenous peoples? Or, did national Independence end poverty and degradation? Already, the World Bank is saying some Third World debts will be written off if countries agree to restructure to conform to conditions of 'globalisation.'

Or, take the Tobin Tax, a tax to limit capital speculation, another favourite of many leading intellectuals in the WSF. Have not states taxed corporations in the past to address social strife? Have not states in the past given a portion of the taxes to 'civil society' (including churches) to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalism? Does the global scale of the tax and its use alter its essential character, i.e. to make 'globalisation' more sustainable and enduring? The WSF seeks to put a human face on 'globalisation' by modifying those aspects that make exploitation and injustice unsustainable for capitalism under its most recent incarnation of 'globalisation.' Thus it advocates for a more sustainable exploitation of society. The most important selling point in the case of the WSF has been the claim that it provides a 'space' for all sections of civil society (see my *Z Net* article dated 7 February '04). Western democracy as we know it is a product of this common 'space' where everyone could participate, provided of course that they eschew violence and abide by some form of constitutionalism. We also know that in those common spaces, some sections emerge as spokespersons for the whole of society. The moot point is who is the spokesperson for the whole of society today, a society on an enlarged global scale? If it is the WSF (or similar conglomeration of organisations), then what is the source of their authority within the economy-state-society nexus?

The question becomes pertinent for the 'Third World.' Historically, the idea of civil society has been an ambivalent one in the colonies. In the colonies it was first advocated by J.S. Mill who saw it as a means of strengthening relations between the British and sections of society in the Indian sub-continent who might collaborate with the British against native rulers. J.S. Mill was also the director of the English East India Company and an ideologue of colonialism. The benevolence entailed in the extension of the ideas and privileges of civil society to the colonies and the inclusiveness it suggests blurs important distinctions in the case of colonial societies.

In the colonies the boundaries between the economy, the state and what did or did not constitute civil society were blurred at the best of times. For example the East India Company was delegated sovereign power to govern. The colonial state undertook all sorts of economic activities during the hey-days of Free Market and Free Trade. The extension of ideas of civil society to colonies therefore was one of form while the reality, the politics, was something different. The politics of 'development' in the post-War era did the same. Industrialisation, development assistance, development planning and the like ensured the inclusion into 'civil society' of those who subscribed to the dominant ideas in the neo-colonies that the Third World had become. The restructuring of economy-society-state relations in the post-Cold War era and the renewed debate on the nature and role of 'civil society' quite naturally extended to those sections of the 'Third World' that were able to articulate ideas about 'civil society.'

More fundamentally, the economy-state dichotomy with a civil society sandwiched in between is alien to the architecture of colonial societies. That format of society is something Western capitalism inherited from the Greco-Roman civilisation based on notions of "the public," "the private" and the "state" as distinct social realms, a format of society that did not exist in the colonial world. Although colonialism introduced the distinction in juridical forms, the internal relations within Third World remain vastly different. However, the WSF and similar anti-globalisation movements overlook these important differences. Note the careful choice of words: 'economic globalisation' - not simply imperialism, 'corporate globalisation' - without the states that underpin it, promises of a 'new world' based on disarming the 'Third World' but not the 'First World,' a world where 'civil society' stretches out in a borderless 'globalised' world without repeal of immigration laws. Above all, reams and reams of facts, figures and statistics on poverty, inequality and all the rest of it with very little on the causes, on explanations that point to emancipation from the causes of poverty and inequality.

Are the paradoxes of our times surprising then? That at a time when racism is universally decried, it is on the rise, often in vicious forms? While nation-states get hammered everywhere, xenophobia is on the rise everywhere? That, when secularism is a universally accepted value, religious fundamentalism rules? Is the Pentagon about to wind up and close shop because of 'democratic voices' such as the WSF and other anti-'globalisation' movements that address the effects

of 'globalisation' but not its causes? Are we expected to believe that the French and Finnish governments and foundations set up by mega corporations will fund projects against themselves?

Consequently, the concept of self-determination of neo-colonial societies gets subsumed by the choruses of 'civil society' emanating from imperialist nations engaged in finding a comfortable space for themselves within the reconstituted economy-state relations in the wake of 'globalisation.' Unfortunately, all this happens at a time when anti-imperialist movements and self-determination struggles of different types are being demonised and militarily suppressed in the name of 'war on terror.' Often the anti-imperialist character of the struggles become difficult to recognise as they are forced to turn to religious, racial and other esoteric ideologies for articulation.

The 'development' discourse in the post-war era effectively pre-empted the deepening of the meaning of self-determination of colonies by the way the discourse was framed and cross-sections of society mobilised in support of dominant ideas. Now, especially since the UN Conference on Human Development in 1995, the 'civil society' discourse, espoused so unequivocally by movements like the WSF, threatens once again to pre-empt the search for a redefinition of self-determination, a renewed understanding of its relevance and deepening its meaning in the neo-colonies renamed 'Third World' in the context of 'globalisation.' Must we ready ourselves for a neo neo-colonialism under 'globalisation' then?

For those who seek true de-colonisation and emancipation from exploitation, the critique of movements such as the WSF needs to go beyond individuals and personalities, beyond questions of transparency and process, to debate the concepts, ideas and ideologies that inform the movements.



only got pen and paper  
hoping ancestral spirits  
rise within like water vapor  
unseen and existing  
cyclical lessons persisting  
until we learn each other's stories  
forever we'll be dissing the point  
like compassion missing from struggle  
lives locked in closed bubbles post-industrial  
rubble truth muddled in mud forgotten  
sleeping under rugs from birth bugged  
cointelpro mental spaces socialization  
fallacious teachin different races we can steal  
freedom like kool herc back in the day kid  
nat turner hanging master in ink(re)mental stages

yes yes in  
affirmation  
continual progression  
yes yes in  
conscious resurrection  
look within for the lesson  
yes yes in  
yes yes in  
yes yes

in

***This sweet  
windperson  
poem***

*for Dream Chad and Mary Morgan Brathwaite*

KAMAU BRATHWAITE

**T**his sweet air comes from a long sweet time so ago so ago  
before scissors before tractors & wheels before horses  
are tamed & cattle are penned  
in this ramshackle brown by the airport

it comes from the sweet lands of Africa  
crossing Atlantic w/ spiders & egrets & coconuts & thin tendrils  
plants on the slavetrade wind of the harmattan

it comes from how the land is sweet here. as a result of all these  
long ancient pressures of our coral times. lime  
-stone & sweetlime & loam

like a dark butter for green grasses of aroma  
- how the sweet scent of the sugarcane comes down the wide  
shallow valleys into our yards into the wide open rooms  
of our houses

**T**his sweet air comes w/ the white birds of seaweed  
& the blackbirds of tune  
-less & the sudden clatter of parakeets & the quick peck  
-ing of sparrows  
& these little blue chips that at dawn sing like raindrops  
or water of a sweet thought down the long throat of a bottle

- how you remember this sound from Browns Beach  
- the green bottle in yr hand yr head down under  
the water & sinking - all yr heavy body drifting slowly glowing

down down towards the sand & the bottle singing  
wlyou in yr hand & blinking w/ stars  
& this sweet sound of the dawn bird filling it down

**T**his sweet wind confirms all these memories  
w/ how it is present at this corner by the shop and the gas sta-  
-tion - how it comes from the hills - the long rising lines

of ancient beaches into terraces  
& the landscape of the future growing up towards us from  
Harrismith from Congo Bay from Chancery Lane

wher Margaret Gill sees all this as she sits sewing words  
& Indrani her Malayalam neighbour  
sets up her palette of paints for her NCF mural at RockDundo

as dreams from the sea drift up over the old sea-egg Silver  
Sands coast rounding South Point & the white waves  
of Oistins. the breakers coming in from blue distance

onto the bright powder silica beaches where the dunes  
are. their power curling their sound into silence. their mist  
drifting inward into our mangrove & seagrape

*& the blue spotted cactus & noo-noo  
& the unpainted wooden houses we have built along this  
shoar*

*to catch this silence of sound to breathe this sweet air  
to smile w/ it. shoring it up. as it were. grow greater w/ it into the  
green & blue*

*where the sunlight unlocks. where the flowers are  
& the bees playing all this attention to their fix  
-ed favourite colours*

*& the slow certain dance of the ants  
who prefer their long black slightly trembling line  
of silhouette & that fine instant fizz of them this morning*

*when they are not  
dead or disturbed. devouring what has been left from the fall  
of a fruit or the lipstick of blossom or the splash of some passion*

*and when i look up again the world is like a tuning fork  
the itself of its memory receding ceeding ceeding ceeding  
into its own sound its so certain & purpose & real &*

***T**his sweet wind which is here so long before we born  
so long even before we ever come here. before we loss  
the names of the lannscape  
on this Sunday morning of silence & worship*

when we can still hear the old dour churchbells high up  
in the toss of their steeples ringing  
at their certain times certain times certain times angelus

**W**atch how the birds fly up high & wheel  
away from the bronze iron sound even tho they have heard it  
before everyday & for centuries

like in S Marco in the steep solitudes of the Andes and Lhasa  
the deep tones as if coming out  
of wells. like the opposite of being drowned. falling up

-ward. full of free & sweet air. trees so amazingly green  
in yr ears. their tangles their crystal clear branches  
these churchyards sleeping in the sun where the wooden

stalls of their helmet-shape bells  
- cast in brass cast in bronze cast in iron - are  
like at St Leonards like at St Clements in St Lucy

like at St Margarets overlooking Martins Bay  
withe rope & the little gate & the triangle top  
nvr yet they say blown down in a hurricane  
my half-blind cousin Daddy O'Grady Elizabeth O'Neale

*muse & musician violinist organist & organizer at All Saints  
with the sweetest voice in the world in her throat  
dark woo-dove of contraltocello coming down the hill*

*from the Maynards curve & the corner down Ben Hill  
all the way down  
it is twenty minutes she takes in the hot sun after the service*

*is over but she comes floating down singing aloud to her  
-self and her saviour  
with her ivory*

*chaplet & hymnbook in that then silence of Sunday  
& the shak-shak in shadows of gold waiting for her at the door  
of her father's unpainted carpenter shop*

*closed now because it is Sunday  
so she goes round to the back. up that slow rocky pathway be-  
-tween our two houses & forever homes that the Government*

*now intends to make into a new road & highway to link M&Q  
with the new housing estates of Fairfield, Indian Ground  
& Mt Brevitor where all that time ago. now almost pass(ed)*

*me & my sister like Wordsworth & his  
(is there yet not a local literary connexion a great literary convention here?)  
discover this path up this hill where only silk grasses grow*

*at this time  
& reaching the top we could see Newstead  
& the wide redroofs of the Vicarage & beyond that & its trees*

the differently sweet sweet wind from the sea  
mixed w/the scent  
of the growing grass and the sea distant & blue & flattering

and we running already into the future  
where we are heading already thru the fat valley of canes  
in the hollow below us

towards the everlasting highlands  
of the Brevitor hills w/ their scarred white sacred  
limestone faces where they say in the village

**there's a place name Brevitor's Cave out there**

but nobody willing to show us or don't have no time  
& we find it ourselves one hot morning w/ fillmore  
running up the path along the cliff

-face & looking looking looking up until high  
up where there is no  
path

the dark open face of the adit we dimb up. as if we were dimb  
-ing down water as many years later  
I dimb up again w/ DreamChad

but by then it was lost  
we were out  
of that frame & wd nvr find that secret again

as we had when we was young in those green glorious  
tracks down the hill w/ my sister  
her eyes wide & clear sweating softly under her round panama

hat w/ the elastic under her chin which my aunts say she had  
to wear when she **runnin bout in de brollin hot-sun**  
and i think they say I had was to wear my black felt cap too

- nvr yr bare slack shiny ball-headed plate out in god's  
heaven

and we find the cave & its huge  
self. w/ the bats high up in the dark of the shelves & the ceiling  
& the cracks of light like some un

-hewn & wonderful cathedral . the festoons of candelabra  
& the green like cobwebs in the limestone  
corners. & the damp

echo or sometimes no  
echo at all in our voices  
-w/ something here much much bigger than we had ever known

before - beyond even ballroom or church or St Michael's cath  
-edral - that kind of interior size  
- as if we wasn't any longer in our island

at all or down in Mile & Quarter from school & on holidays  
as if we was somethings & somewhere else altogether  
the poem turning into a dreamstorie of forever

even as i write it  
this way. w/so little regular hundred metres or rhyme(s)  
but w/ sort-of margins & lines

so that its wide  
undergrounn riddim can capture some of what hides  
here in the dark as it happens all at once

thru so many different & at the same time time  
-tumblings & simultaneous  
space-palaces - the world of whirl & interface of memories

we call 'writing a poem'  
. and when we come back out of the cave  
this will remain w/ us all our Brevitor lives

where all our friends are & our loved ones & our parents  
- back there w/all of us in that strange special place  
of our island already losing sight of it

-self w/this building of houses this building building of houses  
& the white access angelus roads of death  
so that already. as i say. me & DreamChad cdn't find it

that NewYears Day morning before we get marréd  
high up above Time at the Old Windmill  
on that OrangetHill ridge. maybe even higher than Brevitor

- and tho none of them came w/ us on these journeys  
into up here. they was always here w/ us  
whenever we step down into that cave of creator

into that strange dark of memory. the cool the aglow  
- they was always here. always here. as i say  
w/ our future



so when we step back out into this landscape  
the air is so sweet on this Sunday  
from its long sweet time so ago so ago  
before scissors before tractors & wheels

before horses are tamed & cattle are penned  
so long before me writing this poem  
in this ramshackle brown  
by the Pilgrim Place airport of ishak meshak & abed negro

CowPastor 2 July 2000  
- the po (CowPastor/mia) writes itself that Sunday  
and i don't see it again until NYC May 2003 - all these three years into . line-shorten & rev here for Paul  
- the importance of the mirror of the native magazine - full moon 12/13/14 June - and then rain  
- putting the harp where the heart is

ps/Tom Clarke Polished Ho @ Polish Ho comes out 2002 like another full moon - a somehow indoors glorious full moon. See the conklor?  
i feel it is cited somewhere nr Pilgrim Place

**A DAY TO REMEMBER**

*October 25, 1997*

Tyrone Williams

All the king's men  
Count to ten.

All the king's horses,  
Twenty-five,

Almost twice  
As slow to anger,

1.5  
As many back-

Breaking straws.  
Almost the king's men,

All the king's horses  
Board the infallible

Slow boat to China,  
Women and children, at last.

**ANOTHER DAY IN HEAVEN, ANOTHER DAY ON EARTH**

*September 5, 1998, Harlem*

*September 7, 1998, Atlanta*

Tyrone Williams

Harlem on my mind  
we always get to heaven,  
nothing to it, no  
ifs or buts about it: Jew/  
Greek: :Atlanta/Atlantis...

: :

Two profiles--or one  
vase, faceless as the Holy  
Grail--"two warring souls"--  
or one Nation--unruly  
acts--Standards & Practices...

## FAUX ERSATZ

Tyrone Williams

Half-quotation, half-paraphrase, me and my  
little brother would have passed, cited by  
goose feet--unpronounced, if not invisible--superscripts:  
tribunes paying tribute to  
*taking a walk, taken for a ride*  
and the differences between the two.  
Having volunteered and not, we would have been conscripted  
into the services of the tribe:  
a black father, his black son. And you too  
would have passed as this-goes-there, you two  
would have passed by, invisible, white.  
Even when you took your other son from me  
(to wash the sleep out of his eyes with spit)  
he might have still been taken--with an asterisk--for my son,  
just as we might have been taken for a couple, if not a family,  
the differences between us, the blond misfit  
yanking a free hand, pointing toward the rides, notwithstanding.  
Everything except *without a doubt* and *taken aback*  
hung in mid-air--and then those two too  
as the half-brothers we were about to have  
in common for a few hours  
fell to either side of "ours."

## MACAW, FOR THE ISLAND

Bob Harrison

fleets of – points of,  
the untried trust of forest light  
that peels off my clown cap  
rented acorn –  
the whole rodeo  
of underwater  
divisors, the sea  
monkeys of stuff  
doctors that the most plowed  
screen dissolves  
by letters,  
post-script bubbles  
under my tent. fog horns

trail off with the soft  
parching noise.  
25%,  
the whole – or nothing  
islands,  
weather bus written at  
soon. *obeah*, window light  
reaching or coastal, pulp house  
together. from the year long  
walk through paces,  
ocelot, the planet,  
stoop. a lined face  
has the only lit

pacifier that a peace jane sews  
among the tents  
and Ready.  
a net of castaways  
that Galois shot  
the lead tome for –  
for every circuit  
the means of relay

refutes  
and grows flat by dew  
that jungles case more  
Guaymí  
like under  
light the fuselage  
door weather  
a circle lets the boat go by  
to the island  
each  
for every hammock

## AMERICAN FRIENDLY

Bob Harrison

speaking filling that mind circles  
the affront  
puffed for hearts. same trace  
for you that one has together,  
a light severing strings

goes. fine shining tops –  
you of everyone  
you of the walking field  
you of anything

go. one's up the currents  
that you claim for  
some pattern for Mercury  
gives its line reading. steps

keep wire crates, storms  
that one has you with  
under a firing  
kind that the star pulls under

for any word. one with any word  
that the sign to you  
that the plate you give  
that any size face will

on the step filled many  
under feet  
and with peak severance  
for simple steam & rodeos. put back

their time centered rice  
under the service  
that the plight of your  
mind steeps under  
re-grown stars. when the friend  
the cadaver  
the gun  
and the dress,  
all with infants on

spangled tops  
that you breathe, ends, give it sparks  
to turn the frown of insects  
into hands

## THE “FREE TRADE” HISTORY ERASER: HONDURAS, MAQUILAS AND POPULAR PROTEST IN LATIN AMERICA

Toni Solo

Three things hold people’s attention currently in Latin America, the nationwide protest in Bolivia in defence of the country’s natural resources, the ongoing popular defence of the Chavez government in Venezuela and the heavy political defeats suffered by President Uribe in Colombia. Uribe’s party lost humiliatingly both the mayoral elections in Bogota and the national referendum on his government’s policies. These events represent serious unravelling of US government aims in Latin America.

Despite the setbacks, official US policy is committed to forcing through as hard as it can the Free Trade Area of the Americas. That commitment is primarily a continent-wide strategy to safeguard US corporate commercial dominance. But it also works as a piecemeal country-by-country bilateral strategy to lock economically vulnerable countries into the US plutocracy’s international political agenda.

Latin American resistance to this centuries-old colonial practice is largely a forgotten history in the United States. “Free trade” ideologues pretend current conditions are inevitable and God-given. It is a profoundly anti-historical, carefully contrived illusion. Hard doses of reality help see through it.

### *“Max” – poetry and political memory*

Some say it was November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1993. Others remember it as the 17<sup>th</sup>. Rigoberto Quezada Figueroa pulled up in his car at the traffic light by the Hotel Siesta, just a few blocks from the centre of San Pedro Sula. The Hotel sits at a busy traffic intersection a couple of blocks south of the old banana company railroad tracks, the kind of cheap hotel handy for the centre of town where you lie awake at night wondering will the traffic noise ever stop.

In those days it was possible to think President Callejas’ 1990 political amnesty meant a new era. Maybe Rigoberto thought so too. In any case, waiting on the corner by the Hotel Siesta, witnesses said later, two assailants shot him in the head. The newspaper photos showed his body slumped forward over the wheel with kind of a look of surprise on his face.

Rigoberto was “Sebastian Rojas,” the poet. For clandestine organizing purposes he was also “Max.” The Honduran press called him “el ltimo guerrillero” – the last guerrilla fighter. Rigoberto was killed because he wrote and lived the meaning of lines like these:

“What do you think of your fingernails  
when you look at the lines of dirt  
that gather with each passing harvest  
and that dirt’s all that’s ever left of you?  
And then the boss calls you a thief  
(Can you really steal what’s yours?  
You can lose it. That’s different.)  
and hauls you up before a judge  
and then to gaol, since his judge condemned you  
(Condemned you? You’re damned to daywork  
if you don’t organize.....)¹

*The role of memory – 1954*

Another reason they killed Rigoberto was because he remembered history and refused to let it go. He remembered the epoch-making strike in 1954 that broke open the old National Party oligarchy and the stranglehold of the US fruit companies at the very moment the US was about to overthrow the democratic government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. The strike was a surprise to the US colonialists. Few had expected anything like that from Honduras. Wasn’t it the place Sam “the Banana Man” Zemurray had ridiculed, where you could buy a parliamentary deputy cheaper than a mule?

Honduras has long suffered from having been the original banana republic. In fact, Honduran working people played a vital role in building and sustaining labor rights in Central America through the 1950s and 1960s. If there is a single Latin American novelist who speaks for the rural and urban poor in the 20th Century that writer is Honduran – Ramon Amaya Amador. His novels are among the few sources that enable us to recover the lived reality of those times. No better antidote exists to the modish evasion of realism than to read his novels “Prision Verde,” “Constructores” or “Destacamento Rojo.”

*The great strike – from May to July*

The strike itself lasted over two months. It sprang from the awakening of nationalist and popular consciousness following sixteen years of the US-supported dictatorship of General Carias Andino. By 1953 newspapers were circulating like “Worker’s Voice” and “Revolutionary Vanguard,” a political party existed called the Honduran Party for Democratic Revolution. Leading demands were for a Labor Code and the right to form trades unions. Women won the vote in Honduras in 1955, the year after the great strike.

Based on demands for fair overtime pay, the stoppage began in the town of El Progreso on May 1<sup>st</sup>. It spread rapidly to the ports of Tela and La Ceiba and other areas of the banana enclave dominated by the United Fruit and Standard Fruit companies. 14,000 striking banana company workers paralysed the railways and the docks. Strike committees were set up throughout the area, maintaining discipline and avoiding violence so as to strip the army of pretexts for repression.

Within a month miners, bottling plant workers, textile and tobacco workers had joined the strike and the dispute had spread to the capital Tegucigalpa. By mid-June around 30,000 workers in various industries were on strike in support of the fruit company workers' demands. The government and the fruit companies accused the strike leaders of being Communists. Many were imprisoned. By then the companies and the government were losing up to a million dollars a week in lost revenues.

Repression deepened in June as employers and government attempted to isolate the different labor sectors and negotiate settlements by industry. Despite arrests, repression and financial hardship the strike held and its basic demands were met. Employers and government conceded wage rises and improved conditions. By July 12<sup>th</sup> it was over with a victory for the Honduran workers.

The US government blamed Guatemala for fomenting the dispute – a transparent fabrication. Eisenhower's Secretary of State Dulles had even mobilised the US Navy to be prepared to land marines "to protect US citizens." For the US, the strike made dealing with the moderate reformist government in Guatemala more urgent. Good democracy was bad for US business.

Following the overthrow of President Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, Honduran's civilian government was thrown out by the armed forces in 1955 until a constituent assembly was formed prior to new elections. In 1957 a Liberal Party government was elected under Ramon Villeda Morales. A cautious social democrat but with the 1954 strike as his precedent, Villeda Morales introduced a Social Security program, a modern Labor Code and the country's first Agrarian Reform legislation.

### *1963 – the forgotten coup*

Plenty of people know of the coup d'état in the Dominican Republic in 1963, when military officers overthrew the democratically elected centrist government of Juan Bosch allegedly to save the country from communism. Not so many people know of the coup in Honduras in October 1963 which ended the elected government of Ramon Villeda Morales. The coup was led by the chief of the Honduran Air Force, Colonel Oswaldo Lopez Arellano, who declared in a

radio broadcast, “The patriotic armed forces have intervened to put an end to flagrant violations of the Constitution and self-evident Communist infiltration.”

It might have been a model for Chile just ten years later. Only 12 hours before the coup, Arellano Lopez was saying publicly he had no intentions of intervening. Early the next morning, he put two squadrons of warplanes in the air, threatening to bomb the residence of the democratically elected President. Arellano Lopez was a man to warm the hearts of latter-day covert coup-plotters like Colin Powell and Otto Reich, understudies to Henry Kissinger and Vernon Walters.

On the ground, the army fought and disarmed the pro-government Civil Guard. The colonel forced Villeda Morales to resign and packed him and other Liberal Party leaders off to exile in Costa Rica. Rural workers and urban trades unionists were not so lucky, suffering imprisonment, torture and murder. Lyndon Johnson’s administration recognised the Lopez Arellano regime within a matter of months.<sup>2</sup>

*So that’s how the maquilas came about ...*

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Honduras toed the US colonial line. When banana workers again took the initiative in the 1970s, setting up the ground breaking successful “Las Isletas” workers’ cooperative, the CIA stepped in and wrecked it. The business was taken over by Standard Fruit.

During the 1980s, Honduran domestic agricultural protection was systematically dismantled. US PL480 “aid” distorted the country’s basic grains market with dumped US surplus wheat and maize. Provisions in the aid legislation to protect the indigenous market were waived year after year. That “aid” was tied to hard political conditions including removal of the country’s Agricultural Marketing Institute and any other effective support for small domestic producers. Policy was geared to promote cattle farming and non-traditional exports, favouring large farmers and big agribusiness. A main beneficiary was the US animal feeds sector.

As a result local basic grain production contracted. By the end of the 1980s, Honduras, which had been a net exporter of basic grains in the 1970s, was dependent on imports. Correspondingly, the 1980s saw wholesale acceleration in migration from rural to urban areas – in effect the creation of the unskilled urban labor reserve needed for US and US-allied maquilas. At the same time US ambassador John Negroponte helped oversee a “dirty war” in which as many as 180 leading members of the popular movement were disappeared or murdered – including many leading trades unionists. The Honduran people’s capacity for organized resistance was crippled.

The decade also saw the imposition of international financial institution “structural adjustment” policies, notorious for their failure either to promote real economic development or to overcome poverty. By the 1990s all the necessary conditions were established to promote low wage, non-unionised assembly

operations to serve the US apparel and other markets. The US government's preferred industrial model for Central America was in place.

Public sector cutbacks and the collapse in agricultural employment created a huge pool of unskilled labor desperate for work. The assault on the popular movement left trade unions in disarray and on the defensive. The government parroted free market jargon from its overseers in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and translated it into legislation, offering give away terms to attract predatory foreign, low-cost, light industrial pseudo-investment – the maquilas.

### *Honduran maquilas now*

Conditions in Central American apparel and other maquilas have been well reported over the years. Over 80% of maquila workers are women, the majority between 18 and 25 years old. They work minimum shifts of 9 hours with obligatory overtime. Their work conditions are usually stressful and unhealthy. Apparel workers typically suffer serious respiratory problems after a couple of years working while constantly inhaling lint microparticles. The women work in a deliberately high tension atmosphere which includes predetermined and timed rest-room visits. In those conditions the women perform repetitive micro-tasked work at an output rate of two to four pieces per minute so as to make their shift quota (anything from 800 to 1200 pieces). For that, workers are paid a basic rate of about US\$25 for a six-day week.

The companies keep the wage calculation complicated. The total wage includes an additional daily attendance bonus of around US\$3 and a similar weekly production bonus enabling the women to make over US\$30 for their week. But if they miss just one day they lose all their bonuses and their weekly pay can fall below US\$20. Days lost through sickness are treated the same as a day lost through unjustified absence.

Most women work in the maquilas for no more than six or seven years, often moving from one to another. Unable to save, unable to study, those years are lost to them. A Mexican sociologist has succinctly characterized the plight of women maquila workers: "To be a maquila worker is to be vulnerable, day in and day out."<sup>3</sup> It's just the same in Honduras. Women are stressed all day at work only to be faced each evening with completing domestic chores in desperately poor conditions at home.

### *Penniless philanthropists finance the free market*

The maquilas now employ more than 100,000 workers in over 150 factories. Honduras is the fourth main exporter of apparel to the United States. In 1999 those exports were worth more than US\$2 billion – a grossly exaggerated return on a total investment of just a few hundred million dollars. The US owns

over 40% of the maquilas in Honduras, followed by South Korea, Taiwan and then Singapore, China and Hong Kong. Local Honduran businesses run the remainder. Resistance to labor unions is common to them all.

With government concessions in practice exempting the companies from the country's labor laws, foreign businesses can open up and close down fast. In 2001, thirty-four companies closed down throwing nearly 30,000 people out of work. Many workers were left without their statutory severance pay. Foreign companies can soon open up again, maximising company profits at heavy social cost. In addition to the no-cost hire-and-fire culture, some of the companies dump toxic waste from their plants, frequently causing widespread pollution.

International and local pressure has led to slight improvements in employment terms and conditions. Some of the industrial parks housing these companies now run childcare centres – but few can pay the usual cost of US\$10 a week out of a total wage of barely US\$30. Attempts to organize continue based on small successes in the late 1990s. But resistance is fierce from both the companies and from powerful local politicians like Liberal Party business magnate Jaime Rosenthal.

#### *The maquila motive – high short-term profit*

Local women's organizations try to monitor conditions to ensure minimum standards are applied. But all efforts to improve conditions come up against a stark reality. The companies are only interested in maximizing short term profits. People and whole countries are expendable assets.

The argument for the maquila industry is that it brings economic benefits to Honduras. But the principal characteristic of these businesses is their almost total isolation from the local economy. Almost all the inputs for the apparel industry come from high-tech production areas overseas. In Honduras, extremely labour intensive processes complete the production process. The goods are then shipped back out to high-income markets in the US and Canada.

Next to nothing of value remains in Honduras, other than a mostly sick, exhausted labor and a polluted environment. Tax revenue for local and national government is virtually nil. But national and local government pick up the tab for the infrastructure and social costs that make extortionate maquila profits possible.

#### *National snapshot – look!....not so invisible hands*

Honduras has a population of just under seven million. Per capita income is around US\$920 per year. The poorest 20% receive just over 2% of the country's income while the richest 10% receive over 40%. Just as the rural-urban balance has changed from 1982 to the present, so has the balance between agriculture and manufacturing. As a percentage of GDP, agriculture represented over 20% in 1982.

Twenty years later that had dropped to under 15%. Correspondingly, manufacturing in 1982 represented nearly 15% of GDP. By 2002 that figure had reached over 20%. The symmetry is striking.

Honduras is highly indebted. In 2001 the value of international debt was nearly 50% of the country's gross domestic product and over 100% of the value of its annual exports. There is no Adam Smith "Wealth of Nations" invisible hand here. That debt is a jemmy in the all-too-visible hands of international corporations working in protective gloves provided by the international financial institutions. As elsewhere around the world, through privatization they have openly rifled Central American public sector resources. The maquila system is part of the same process.

Honduras is supposed to be a free market model. But Cuba – victim of 40 years of economic blockade and terrorism by the United States – sits dozens of places above Honduras in the UN Human Development Index.<sup>4</sup> You are unlikely ever to see that fact widely broadcast or published in the US or in Europe. The international financial institutions and the corporate controlled media tirelessly sustain the illusion of inevitability, that "free trade" is imperative, the only way to haul people out of poverty. It is a pathetic, easily refuted lie. The truth is there for all with a mind to see.

One of the reasons for the murder of Rigoberto Quezada Figueroa was that he worked relentlessly at grass roots to break the corporate illusory spell and expose the lie. Few poets are worth a bullet. He was one of them, a suitable metaphor for the global elite's systematic attempts to deny hope, dignity and autonomy to the region's poor majority. But no matter how hard the global corporate media try, people don't forget. They remember.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>From his "Jornalero," in *Regrese a quedarme*. Ediciones Martillo Tegucigalpa 1989

<sup>2</sup>Amaya Amador brought the Arellano coup to life in his novel "Operación Gorila" 1991 Editorial Universitaria, Universidad Nacional Autónoma, Tegucigalpa, Honduras

<sup>3</sup>In "Numerous Killings Of Mexican Women Unsolved" by Marion Lloyd, *Boston Globe* 2002

<sup>4</sup>"Latin America in Crisis: Cuba's Self-Reliance in the Storm," By Nelson P. Valdes, *Counterpunch*, November 7, 2003

## AFTER 1923: "THE SOCIAL COMMAND"

Louis Cabri

When  
you were a dream the world lived in you  
inviolate –

O Russia! Russians! come with me into  
my dream and let us be lovers,  
connoisseurs, idlers –

– William Carlos Williams (1948)<sup>1</sup>

In Karl Marx's writings, the term "social" scientifically points to an underworld of human relations negated for over a century by political economists and by the ever-expanding capitalist economy. During the Russian Revolution, "social" no longer referred to what was negated, as it did for Marx; rather, the term underwent a reversal of value. "Social" referred to what was conceived as embodyable and potentially theorizable as a positivity of relations coming into existence under the horizon of a new organization of society. A new and as the years passed increasingly explicit question – though fatefully directed – arose out of such collective affirmation. How might artistic and literary works embody aspirations of a communizing society? Artistic theories and practices said to positively embody the idea of a specifically Marxian social drastically altered between 1917 and 1934. Answers were openly contested in the early years. Among writers, there was debate over a new slogan, *sotsial 'nyi zakaz*, "social command."

The slogan has received almost no attention since. It is too easy to Stalinize (and thereby dismiss) "social command" by imagining that for it to make sense requires the context of a cynically-manufactured cult of personality. "Social command" then personifies society, big S, as great leader commanding performances from everyone for the collective good – a totalitarian slogan. I have been told by a Russian native speaker, an editor and poet: "The word 'social' is there [in the phrase] to imply that the work is commissioned 'by the working class'." This interpretation would explain an alternate choice made by some English translators since the 1950s, "social demand."<sup>2</sup> "Social demand" suggests, as in the everyday economic parlance "supply and demand," that the demand in question (but, in literary terms, for what exactly?) is coming from below by many (the people), not from above by one. My Russian language informant handles the phrase with merciless historical irony. Use of a contractual metaphor for verb (the work is *commissioned*) and of quotation-marks around "by the working class"

casts doubt on its imperative as one that is truly motivated from below, or in other words, that “social demand” ever did represent the people’s, or simply people’s, demands. Actually, the contractual term “commission” significantly plays the role of semantic counter to “command” in the phrase’s initial reception, as will become evident in the brief history that I shall reconstruct for this slogan momentarily. By contrast to a demand from below, a social *command* seems like the imperative not of many but of one, a head of state, “command economy” similarly referring by extension to an economy that is almost exclusively directed by the state (conceived as one), instead of by the market (conceived as many) – an opposition between state and market, one and many that, again, exists in the everyday ideologically-saturated metaphors we live economics by, but not necessarily in “fact.”<sup>3</sup>

A loose association of Russian avant-gardes conceived of the social as a “command” by 1923 – the Left Front of the Arts (hereafter, LEF). “Social command” gained currency among artists and critics identified with the Revolution and yet was used by them in the 1920s for conflicting agendas that dissipated its potential longterm value.<sup>4</sup> One of the first critics to introduce Russian Formalist theory to the U.S., Victor Erlich, notes that “social command” was “appropriated by the critical hacks of the *On Guard* faction and thus became associated with the political regimentation of literature.”<sup>5</sup> But Erlich also suggests here that at one time “social command” meant something other than “the political regimentation of literature.” Nevertheless, by the late 1920s, to go against the idea of *the* “social command” for literature meant facing the potentially serious accusation of lacking “party spirit” – as happened to Vladimir Pereverzev, despite his by no means reactionary views that the unconscious is (in critic Régine Robin’s recounting) “a social discourse, internalized noise” and that “every image is political, revealing a class-based imaginary.”<sup>6</sup> Yet by 1932 under Stalin just one answer was permitted the question of how to artistically engage some approximation of social revolution. The “correct” answer’s aesthetic formulation was, of course, Stalin’s officially designated Socialist Realism – “social” achieving a reductively highest score on the positivity meter (were ideology measurable, that is).<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, what the term “socialist realism” actually designated for artists and poets remained (and remains) so profoundly confusing that Régine Robin has dubbed the formulation “an impossible aesthetic.” Her description may sound theoretically flattering but at the time, as the shortened lives of many artists and poets attest (Mayakovsky and Esenin among them), it meant, rather, an ideology impossible to emulate in an aesthetic practice with any success. “To the end,” Robin explains – speaking on her own behalf as scholar, but also on behalf of the era’s participants in debates over the term (400 articles alone between 1932 and 1934) –

it never becomes clear whether socialist realism is a style, a method, one possible method among others [...], a trend, a form, a thematic; nor is there clarity as to the nature of its relation to the old realism, naturalism, modernism, or factography, or how it integrates into its own aesthetic a certain romanticism, the return of the epic and the monumental.

And yet, paradoxically, in official discourse and in aesthetic pronouncements tilted towards Party approval, “socialist realism” circulated with its meaning and value already presupposed and decided, as if the term were self-evident, “as if the object domain it refers to already existed, were already realized, as if it had already been constructed elsewhere,” and “as if this fact were beyond question, not subject to criticism, universally acknowledged.”<sup>8</sup>

The semantic valence of “social command,” by contrast, before it was conflated with Socialist Realism, was not presupposed, let alone authorized and officiated by the Party.

The same year that “socialist realism” was made official doctrine of the Communist Party by Stalin (1932), Georg Lukács, founder of “Western”-style Marxism,<sup>9</sup> critiqued the “subjective idealist character of ‘tendency’” literature as a whole, inadvertently casting doubt (he later became infamous for his unwavering support of the U.S.S.R.) upon the Stalinist program for Soviet culture. I shall examine some of his words, which offer an uncanny re-envisioning of the shift in Soviet literary polemics from the early 1920s’ ‘informal’ use of “social command” by a grouping of poets and artists, to the early 1930s’ official use of “socialist realism” by the state:

‘tendency’ is a demand, an ‘ought’, an ideal, which the writer counterposes to reality; it is not a tendency of social development itself, which is simply made conscious by the poet (in Marx’s sense), but rather a (subjectively devised) commandment, which reality is requested to fulfill... [N]o ‘tendency’ can or need be counterposed to [...] objective reality as a ‘demand’, for the demands that the writer represents are integral parts of the self-movement of this reality itself, at the same time the results and premisses of this self-movement.<sup>10</sup>

Lukács uses “demand” and “command” interchangeably here; but the structure of his argument clearly discloses a similar semantic tension that exists for translators of *sotsial’nyi zakaz* discussed earlier – namely, the tension that manifests via the question: Is “social” a command from above, or a demand from below? In Lukács’s case, the tension lies between two opposing ways of characterizing conditions for creating the social object in question (i.e., the culture of the future communist society). The first way is deluded, according to Lukács, for it claims that the social object must be willed into existence, “subjectively devised” – the social command (or demand) is a sort of Kantian categorical imperative inherent in some individuals. Lukács’s dismissive views of “Western” modernism and subjectivity no doubt factor into this counterpart assessment of “Eastern” tendency literature. The second way, says Lukács, is apparently more correct: the writer constructs the social object by discovering it in the “integral parts of the self-movement” of “reality” itself. That is, the “self-movement” of “reality” is objectively, not subjectively, devised – despite his clumsy-seeming Hegelian use of the word “self” in “self-movement, “which may suggest the opposite.<sup>11</sup> By 1932, then, it would seem that, on the evidence of Lukács’s passage, a particular

discursive field of literary and artistic debate had fused “socialist realism” with “social command” to form two identical phrasal assertions:

*the social command of Socialist Realism;*

and:

*the socialist realism of the Social Command.*

What these phrases meant in practice was profoundly uncertain, but what they meant as official doctrine was (officially) not.

Something of the sheer poetic ambition that initially energized the phrase “social command” is entirely lost in its rhetorical (and temporal) conflation with Socialist Realism. What bears stating is how it is only after the Russian Revolution via this slogan – the social command – that a Marxian conception of the social becomes explicitly modified for literary ends by poets. In the early 1920s, Mayakovsky and critic Osip Brik formed LEF and steered it by two interconnected ideas in one ambitious direction: an umbrella organization of artists and poets uniting aesthetic and political vanguardisms, LEF would “order,” by analogy to a Leninist sense of priorities of revolutionary romanticism, the differing tendencies of aesthetic production according to each tendency’s grasp of the revolution underway in most domains of Russian life. LEF, then, would unite aesthetic aspirations of pre-revolutionary so-called Bohemian avant-gardes (Futurist and Formalist<sup>12</sup>) with political aspirations of the Bolsheviks and their class-identified literary-artistic tendencies aspiring to interpret Marxist historical materialism via their own institutions-in-the-making.<sup>13</sup> LEF intended to fuse Futurist formal with communist social innovation by stressing how transforming literary form was as necessary to the ongoing Revolution as was transforming feudal land practices into collectivized soviets. To aid in achieving their two LEF objectives for the revolutionary transformation of Russian culture – those objectives being (to reiterate): identifying artistic with political vanguardism and evaluating aesthetic form on analogy to political revolution – Mayakovsky and Brik coined the term “social command.”

“Social command” intended to bridge Futurist/Formalist investigations of the literary word and Marxist historical materialism at a time after the Revolution when the former investigations (excepting Mayakovsky’s) were lumped together (famously, in Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*, 1924) as exemplarily “pre-Revolutionary” in sensibility if not redundant, and when the latter materialism was still a relatively untried hermeneutic that approached the aesthetic via reflection theory.<sup>14</sup> But LEF’s bridging efforts and international aspirations practically died with the first issue of its magazine, *Lef*, which was hostilely received in contemporaneous journals *On Guard*, *Press and Revolution* (ed. Polonsky), *Red Virgin Soil* (ed. Voronsky, “the Party’s major representative in the realm of literature”<sup>15</sup>), and *Pravda*.

Then, as now, the social command obtains to none of the conceptual rigor, let alone influence, of Viktor Shklovsky’s 1916 formulation that art’s function was *ostranenie* (making-strange). The latter is not derived from a Marxian notion of

the social, however.<sup>16</sup> An arguably successful example of bridging these debates between Formalism and Marxism is Brecht's later theory (1936) of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (with its practice in his epic theatre), which indeed is derived in part from a Marxian social as much as from Shklovsky.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Mayakovsky writes in a 1923 letter how the idea of a "social command" does not "yet lend itself to precise defining or theorizing" – how practice and intuition must lead the way towards a communist art. Brik also stresses in the 1920s how the social command is foremost artistic slogan, not yet theory.

It seems Mayakovsky comes closest to a definition of "social command" in the 1926 essay, "How Are Verses Made?" when he describes the first of five "basic propositions [...] indispensable, when one begins poetical work"; namely: "The presence of a problem in society, the solution of which is conceivable only in poetical terms. A social command."<sup>18</sup>

This is an outstandingly succinct, complex statement – far cry from a "doctrinaire monstrosity."<sup>19</sup> I would like to spell out in detail the social and political milieu in which this definition did battle for Mayakovsky in particular. The "problem in society" that Mayakovsky addresses in writing "How Are Verses Made?" is, on the intimate face of it, how to explain the suicide of fellow-poet Sergey Esenin (who committed suicide at thirty in 1926); but, on the public face of it, the problem was how to answer Esenin's slap delivered by the last lines of his suicide poem to those committed, like Mayakovsky, to the Revolution. Esenin was apparently "sometimes called 'the Russian Dylan Thomas'"<sup>20</sup> since he too came from a peasant village. The incorporeal transformation<sup>21</sup> performed by Esenin's suicide note upon the discursive field of the Revolution was such that, for Mayakovsky, it converted the symbol of social transformation through collective unity – the Revolution itself – into merely another revolution of the plough in a peasant's rented field. Through Mayakovsky's poetic response, Esenin's suicide comes to metonymically stand for the entire structure of conflicted relations between proletarian, peasant and intelligentsia classes in the Soviet Union during those precarious years. Here are the concluding lines to Esenin's "farewell poem" – whose symbolism was, furthermore, memorialized in blood, his own; the hotel inkwell was dry:

In this life to die is nothing new,  
But to live, of course, is nothing newer.<sup>22</sup>

A little background will help to understand the full force of these lines. To Lenin in Spring 1917, a crucial lesson from the failed revolutions of 1871 (France) and 1905 (Russia) was the importance of peasant support: "In Russia, the victory of the proletariat can be achieved in the very near future *only* if, from the very first step, the workers are supported by the vast majority of the peasants fighting for the confiscation of the landed estates (and for the nationalization of all the land [...])."<sup>23</sup> Lenin proved correct. Alexander Blok apparently once remarked that the myth of "Bolshevism – the real, Russian, devout kind – is somewhere in the depths of Russia, perhaps in the village."<sup>24</sup> This was due in part to the fame of

the Russian peasants' land commune practices. The Revolution was popularly conceived as a spontaneous uprising by the peasant class.<sup>25</sup> Thus the famous peasant Esenin ending his life problematized the beginning narrative of Revolution. Insofar as there was going to be a "solution" to this problem (but there *had* to be one: the Revolution was at stake, symbolically), the solution was conceivable only in figural terms – literally, since the interlocutor (Esenin) was dead.

In order to show how singular was Mayakovsky's response to Esenin's farewell poem, I shall first consider Leon Trotsky's memorial for Esenin, published in the official, mass-circulation newspaper *Pravda*. Trotsky affirms what *Pravda* readers already know, that the name Esenin is deeply linked to the myth of the peasantry, but then Trotsky separates Esenin as poet from the general interests and current needs of the peasant class. Mayakovsky will recognize these tactics of Trotsky's in his own response. Trotsky says:

Esenin's roots are deeply those of the people... But in this solidarity of the real peasant state of affairs lies the reason for Esenin's personal weakness. He was torn by the roots from the old, but the roots did not take hold in the new ... Esenin is intimate, tender, lyrical – revolution is public, epic, catastrophic. That is why the poet's short life was cut off by a catastrophe.

Trotsky then goes on to interpret Esenin's farewell poem:

He left of his own accord, bidding farewell with his own blood to an undesignated friend, maybe to all of us. Startling for their tenderness and softness are these his last lines. He left life without a clamorous insult, without a pose of protest – not slamming the door, but quietly closing it with his blood-soaked hand. In this gesture the poetic and human image of Esenin has blazed forth in an unforgettable light.[...] To whom was Esenin writing in blood for the last time? Maybe he was calling to that friend who has not yet been born, to a man of the future epoch, for which some prepare by battles, but Esenin with songs. The poet perished because he was not akin to the Revolution. But in the name of the future it will adopt him forever... The poet died. Long live poetry!<sup>26</sup>

This character-based, sentimental interpretation, unknowingly anticipating the later emergence of the "friend" and "man"-hero of the Socialist Realist novel, could hardly be more opposed to Mayakovsky's – who does find a "clamorous insult" in the text itself.

To return to Mayakovsky's definition of the social command, it may seem that examples of problems whose solutions were "conceivable only in poetic terms" would be so-called timeless themes of death, love, etc., the clichés of poetry. But this is exactly why Esenin's concluding line in particular, "to live, of course, is nothing newer," comes as such a slap to those hoping that public "life" (and "taste" – a famous pre-revolutionary Futurist manifesto is titled "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste") was going to be "new" in the sovietizing union. For Esenin, "life" means the natural, biological fact, the taken-for-granted attribute of every being –

in which case no “newer” now, in 1926, post Revolution, than at any other time, anywhere else.

Mayakovsky’s “poetic solution” to the impossible “problem” posed by Esenin’s words and suicide is to write the poem “To Sergey Esenin.” Contrary to the “socialist realism” that Robin calls an “impossible aesthetic,” here it is the “problem in society” that is impossible, not its aesthetic “solution.” Where Esenin asserts that both life and death are identical in their everyday occurrence in Nature’s earth-bound cycle – are, in other words, aspects of peasant life stripped of its myth as instigator of the Bolshevik Revolution and once again dependent on feudal ties – Mayakovsky hierarchizes, dichotomizes, artificializes. His concluding verse responds directly to Esenin’s last lines cited above:

In this life  
to die  
has never been hard.  
To make new life  
’s more difficult  
by far.<sup>27</sup>

Lost in this English translation perhaps, is that for Mayakovsky “life” signifies not biological being in general, as it did for Esenin, but – “more difficult / by far” – the *form* of a *specific* life, a delimiting condition requiring labor to create, and that cannot be presupposed to exist in advance of such creational labor.<sup>28</sup> Such a life would radiate out from those who made it together. This specific form of life can only be constructed. “To make new life” means in part to make a union of soviets, of course, but also, new poems. By contrast to making new life and poems, difficult as that may be – and this, next, is the extra turn Mayakovsky makes to redirect the force of Esenin’s lines – in Russian life without the Revolution, dying, even suicide, is just too common (“has never been hard”) evidently because of the living conditions for the majority of peasants. For Roman Jakobson and Lev Trubetzkoy, Mayakovsky’s startling reversal of values between life and death – *natural* to die and *unnatural* to live (under the pre-Revolutionary conditions) – produce an “upside-down view of the world” in which “not death but life ‘required motivation’ ... Life was a marked category and *could be realized only when there was a motivation for it.*”<sup>29</sup> Death, including suicide, is a natural, inevitable desire; life must be forcibly constructed against natural impulses. The social command thus articulates motivation to construct life. A poet who listens for the social command necessarily also renovates, so the implication here goes, the natural-seeming language of poetry as well – there is nothing timeless, typical, clichéd, about the demands of revolutionary invention of specific new life.

I have already mentioned that there was no agreement at the time on the use and meaning of “social command,” and this includes Mayakovsky’s definition. Brik characterizes the critic Vyacheslav Polonsky’s view as typical of many who opposed LEF’s aim of finding an artistic practice for “Marxist literary science.” According to Brik, in the 1920s Polonsky conceives that the “command” in “social

command” reduces the complex of relationships constituting artist and his/her public to a buy-sell relationship between craftsperson and client: “The word ‘command’ unmistakably evokes for him [Polonsky] the idea of a craftsman who is perfectly indifferent to working for no matter what client so long as he is paid.” Thus “if a Tsar came to reign again in Russia Mayakovsky would set himself to writing, with the same ease and with the same fervor, verses for the glory of autocracy.”<sup>30</sup> Polonsky’s criticism makes the social command seem to function in art very much like a commission – an enforced kind, a conspicuous production, doppelgänger of the “conspicuous consumption” Thorstein Veblen theorized (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899) as a new social feature of capitalist relations in the U.S.A.

Why didn’t Mayakovsky and Brik identify and theorize differences between commission and command? My conjecture based on Mayakovsky’s definition in the Leninist moment is that, more pressing than differentiating these terms was asserting via LEF how revolutionary conditions had made (must make) the social command *identical* to existing commissions, if the social command was to embody the communist revolution (if the communist revolution was truly under way). LEF was already theoretically disposed to view artistic production no differently than any other branch of productive commission – a thought made possible by the Formalists and that LEF renewed within a communist perspective: Mayakovsky imagined the factory as model for production in general. “[F]ormalism [...] is really a theory of production,” Mayakovsky asserted. A brief example Mayakovsky uses in “How Are Verses Made?” of writing from the social command is to voluntarily compose verses for the marching Red Army. As Mayakovsky apparently argued in a heated public debate with the People’s Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, in 1925, “the structure of the Red Army is a question of form; the bayonets and rifles are the content – and bourgeois rifles will shoot as straight as any others.”<sup>31</sup> The goal of writing ‘for’ the Red Army was in order to address and privilege new form, even as it is hard not to conceive of such writing as commission-work (even if unpaid).

This extreme identity of command and commission offers an explanation of why literary historians such as Halina Stephan characterize LEF’s social-command poetics with dubious distinction: “the first Soviet predecessor of the later Socialist Realism.” “Even though these two movements were *antithetical* in their treatment of artistic forms, the Soviet Futurists,” Stephan says of poets once Futurists now associated with LEF, “were the first to *reduce* art and literature to a method of shaping a world view in which the vision of utopia combined with astute politics.”<sup>32</sup> Boris Groys independent of Stephan has fully developed this view<sup>33</sup>; and recently Slavoj Žižek confirms it, but in a paradoxically redemptive way, when he states that “‘Leninism’ is a thoroughly *Stalinist* notion.”<sup>34</sup> For Žižek, the “inner greatness” of Stalinism *is* Leninism – or, translated into the literary context of Mayakovsky and Brik, the “inner greatness” of Socialist Realism is LEF’s social command. For Groys, the former-Futurists’ vanguard social command to transform Russian

culture was ultimately hollowed-out by historical circumstances beyond their control, forcibly made identical to commissions issuing from the desk of “artist-tyrant” Stalin (the gist of Groys’s thesis when set by the jig of Mayakovsky’s and Brik’s term). But, as in Mayakovsky’s response to Esenin, the poetic practice – filled, rather than hollowed-out, by its historical moment – tells a more nuanced and differentiated story.

I have only found the occasional allusion to “social command” (or demand) among English-language poets and critics after 1930. Erlich in a footnote, for example, calls it a “key term,”<sup>35</sup> and does not elaborate. Frank O’Hara encounters it in its negative guise as part of the constraining sociopolitical context that informs Boris Pasternak’s writings.<sup>36</sup> Barrett Watten’s ground-breaking 1979 talk on Russian Formalism cites a passage from Shklovsky’s *Third Factory* in which the term appears, but does not focus on it.<sup>37</sup> Joining the social and the formal (as in a “social formalism”) is very much the re-reading that Watten encourages of Russian Formalism itself – in order to differentiate it from misreadings as New Criticism in the Cleanth Brooks or John Crowe Ransom sense. “Social command” became one of the terms I introduced (within larger discussions by other poets) at two recent poetry events.<sup>38</sup> Watten’s *The Constructivist Moment* (2003), whose preface honors “How Are Verses Made?” uses the term “social command” to historically refer in various contexts to an ethical compunction in modernist art and literature. He uses it equivocally – which is fitting for the 1920s, given the attempted identity of “command” with “commission.” The ethical compunction is constituted, for Watten, either by a negative characterization due to association with Stalinist cultural policy (“the social command of the Socialist state,” as enacted in poetry by Mayakovsky) or by a positive characterization due to the poetic text’s timely involvement in an outward social projection (“the social command of revolution and civil war”).<sup>39</sup> “Social command” is the *ur* instantiation of social formalism in the revolutionary 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For a moment in France in the early 1970s, the social command is, moreover, completely perceived anew. One might say that it was perceiving, within their historical moment, a *non-identity* between social command and practical commissions that led a group of writers to split from *Tel Quel* and form a new journal, *Change*, in the late 1960s. Among this group was novelist and critic Jean-Claude Montel, whose 1973 essay “A propos de la commande sociale”<sup>40</sup> introduces Brik’s and Mayakovsky’s proto-concept to the milieu of French post-structuralist theory.<sup>41</sup> Montel’s extraordinary essay (moreso because brief) takes up the old debate between Polonsky and LEF and attempts to distinguish between “actual commission” and “social command” by recalling Mayakovsky’s 1926 definition:

One must not confuse [the social command] – as it seems that we have tried hard to do for almost half a century – with the “practical command” (i.e., “actual commissions”) constituted by the existence, in society, of solutions that the poetic work has as its function to *illustrate*. These two conceptions are irreducible to each other, and do not coincide. Passage

from the one conception to the other (a passage we can schematize in identical language as above: ...the existence of solutions that the poetic work could prolong {could complete, indeed, plan...}) is excluded, for the simple reason that the practical command (of an actual commission), produced by society and reproduced by “the work,” denies the specificity of poetic practice, depriving it in advance of all possibility of real intervention in the order of discourses. These discourses are established for the sole advantage of Power, serving it with the goal of reinforcing it, by generalizing it.<sup>42</sup>

Montel’s stated half-century of confusion (between command and commission) is a blunt reference to the aesthetic program of Socialist Realism under Stalin, and to the efforts elsewhere to emulate a similarly-committed communist literature of solutions – for example, in the French *roman à thèse*. A practical commission assumes there is “the existence, in society, of *solutions* that the poetic work has as its function to *illustrate*.” By contrast, what is distinctive about the social command is the “specificity,” or autonomy, that literary / artistic form can achieve under its sway. In other words, Montel attempts to align LEF’s legacy with “the specificity of poetic practice,” but of course, this can only be a partial success, since commission and command are no longer identical in the political moment. And with Montel’s argument for their *separation*, the idea of the social command becomes increasingly figural. Nevertheless, Montel’s line is that poetic specificity will be formally discovered/invented only when writing relinquishes the function of merely illustrating already-existing extra-poetic “solutions.” So that “the social command is a formal and aesthetic category, not given in advance but discovered and patiently constructed in the course of a series of transformations conducted through writing itself.” These “transformations” upon language, that disclose the social command, cumulatively stitch into a temporary whole the separated and semi-autonomous discursive fields constituting modern society: “once their separation (in which these discourses are artificially maintained) is broken,” it becomes possible “to put them back into connection in view of constructing a single and unique (but plural) text independent of those who served in its elaboration, and strongly attached to economic, political, juridical, sexual, etc., plans.”

For Montel, “social command” ultimately strives to articulate what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe will call, a decade later, “discursive totality.” Of course, Laclau and Mouffe theoretically usher-in a negation of the social that entirely renovates Mayakovsky’s and Brik’s inaugural Marxian usage and context. A significant difference between the social command coined as slogan in the Russian-revolutionary moment and the social command reformulated more-or-less as concept in Montel’s Althusserian moment, lies in the understanding of “totality.” In the Althusserian moment, the social totality is a “relational and differential logic” of discourses modeled on language, in which social relations lack a transcendental signified (Society) and “an ultimate literality” and fixity. During

the Russian-revolutionary moment, “social totality” is the Revolution itself, a positivity of events and forces led by the Bolshevik party. Society and its commissions during the Russian-revolutionary moment are identical to the social command, to, in Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, a “single underlying principle fixing – and hence constituting – the whole field of differences.”<sup>43</sup> For Montel and *Change* in the Althusserian moment, by contrast, the revolutionary principle no longer has empirical validation; and no return is possible to an understanding of the Russian-revolutionary social totality. For *Tel Quel*, such a principle, *in principle*, was still possible to imagine as a kind of literary Maoism.

Why focus on an obscure and vague “social command,” and not on more conceptually-influential notions from that Russian-revolutionary era, such as Shklovsky’s “making strange” or Brecht’s “estrangement-effect”? Fredric Jameson’s recent Brecht study rhetorically asks whether the estrangement-effect itself should not be estranged (which means estranged from its effects, i.e., its reception) in order to demonstrate, paradoxically, Brecht’s ongoing relevance and influence as the “first genuinely Marxist artist.”<sup>44</sup> I want to ask a somewhat similar question, not of a particular poet, but of the social command – does it need to be historically estranged from its inheritance, including the post-structuralism of Montel’s essay? Furthermore: Might there not have to be – however buried – some first principle of a social command as the presupposition of any Marxian aesthetics, that is, before there can be a Brechtian (or even Shklovskyan?) theory of aesthetic estrangement? To entertain such a possibility is to affirm that the historical frame of the Russian Revolution cannot be extricated from Brecht’s and (even?) Shklovsky’s theories – no matter how far they migrate to other fields (e.g., British film studies in the 1970s) and eras (1970s-’80s U.S. Language poetry); that, put another way, any revisiting of a Marxian social must bear in mind our own intractable historical distance from the Revolution (and I take this as Jameson’s point). Bearing in mind the Russian-revolutionary context, then, Brecht’s and Shklovsky’s theories might be seen as made out of notions of the social and the command – twinned since Marx and Engels, but containing rhizomatically-dispersed and distinct prior histories, including natural law and Enlightenment “sociality” in the case of “the social.”

To focus on the “social command” is to return (in a sense, for the first time) to the founding matrix of a Marxian aesthetics, and to ask at that historical threshold<sup>45</sup> to open prospects once again for rethinking methods which might be developed from a Marxian social. Perhaps acknowledging the social command in all its historical rawness – on the one hand, tainted by historical association with the aesthetic commandments of Socialist Realism; on the other, and no doubt related to the former, never quite a developed poetics in its own right – can go some way towards its reframing. Perhaps its 1905 Leninist cry – revolutionary romanticism! – must be dispensed with entirely; but then, what might a “social command” be left with? Still, there is something fanatically – in the psychical, political, aesthetic, and social senses – *categorical* (a Marxian categorical

imperative?), *vulgar* (in the economic sense Marxism knows too well), *Old Testament*, or even *inverted Socratic oracle* (i.e., an “oracle” that commands, but does not forbid<sup>46</sup>), about the idea of a social command that continues to compel as a way of discursively embedding poetry in relation to society. There is of course a certain lesson to be heeded from its history – the confusions and conflations with Socialist Realism, summarized by Régine Robin as “*what no one foresaw*” (her italics), namely:

*the substitution of the primacy of the political for the primacy of content*, which came crashing down on Soviet letters in 1930 by way of the silencing of the formalists, the internal struggles in the RAPP [All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers] – which brought the leadership and the Litfront (the leftist group opposed to psychologism) into violent conflict and which ended with the [Stalinist] decree of April 22, 1932 – and the dissolution of the RAPP and of all cultural organizations in order to form a Writers’ Union at last equipped with an artistic method, socialist realism.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the idea of a social command cannot ever be rejected, only ignored. Best then would be to (individually, collectively) conceive of it anew. In that case, the relationship between “social command” or “social demand” and poetic technique is arbitrary in a way that allows history to enter, but not foreclose, the sign. Every sign becomes, paradoxically, socially motivated (in the linguistic sense) to its minutest degree, every mark, a social mark, every necessity, a contingency: vistas onto and sounds of a new social command.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> From “Russia,” *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. II (1939-1962), ed. Christopher MacGowan (NY: New Directions, 1988), p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> For example, “Osip Brik: Selected Writings,” presented by Maria Enzensberger, *Screen* 15: 3 (Autumn 1974), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> On the economic metaphors of everyday life see, for example, Fred Block, *Postindustrial Possibilities: A Critique of Economic Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), chapters 2 and 3, and *The Vampire State And Other Myths and Fallacies About The U.S. Economy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Osip Brik, “La Commande Sociale: ‘Mot d’Ordre, et non Théorie’,” trans. Elsa Triolet, *Change* 4 (1973), pp. 188-195.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine*, pref. René Wellek (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1955), p. 90, fnote. 58.

<sup>6</sup> Régine Robin considers Pereverzev in *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter, fwd. Léon Robel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 194-6 and 211-2. Michel Aucouturier writes how for Pereverzev the artist is prisoner of a “social character” that her work cannot transcend. “Le ‘Léninisme’ dans la critique littéraire soviétique” (*Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 17 [Oct.-Dec. 1976]), pp. 418-9.

<sup>7</sup> I emphasize the *positive* turn to the term social, under LEF. This was not always self-evident at the time, however. LEF was not positive *enough*, tainted in the view of some

critics with its pre-Revolutionary Futurist associations. According to the Constructivist poet Zelinsky, LEF was still predominantly about critiquing the bourgeoisie, i.e. about negative critique, just as Futurism was; LEF was not sufficiently integral to the emergent class and its need for positive concepts of the social. The Constructivists, by 1928, according to Zelinsky, were the inheritors of the pre-Revolutionary vanguard mantle, for they had turned the vanguard toward positive ends. Halina Stephan, "*LEF*" and the Left Front of the Arts (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1981), p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> See Régine Robin, note 6 above. Citations are from pp. 43 and 49 respectively.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York, New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> Georg Lukács, "'Tendency' or Partisanship?" *Essays on Realism*, ed. and intr. Rodney Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (London, England: Lawrence and Wishart, Ltd., 1980), 33-44. My quotation is taken from pp. 37 and 41.

<sup>11</sup> Lukács's objectively-devised theoretical language is really no less slippery than statements made by Williams and Zukofsky as self-declared Objectivists. It is, after all, their poetry that demonstrates, better than any poetics statement does, what the Objectivist tendency was all about; and unfortunately, applying that same test to Lukács's theories would mean reverting to 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism.

<sup>12</sup> Notably Futurist poets Mayakovsky, Burluk, Kamensky, Khlebnikov, Kruchenyk, and Formalist critics Brik, Eichenbaum, Shklovsky, and Tynyanov, among others.

<sup>13</sup> Stephan, note 7 above, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of versions of reflection theory see Pierre Macherey, "Problems of Reflection," trans. John Coombes in *Literature, Society and the Sociology of Literature*, eds. Frances Barker et al. (Essex, England: University of Essex, 1977), pp. 41-54.

<sup>15</sup> Stephan, note 7 above, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Shklovsky's psychological definition of the function of art stipulates that perception becomes habitual and routine, requiring a "making strange" (*ostranenie*) in order for perception to perceive anew. See "Art as Device" in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher, intr. Gerald Bruns (Elmwood Park, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990). For precursors to Shklovsky's conception, see Carlo Ginzburg, "Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device" (*Representations* 56 [Fall 1996]: 8-28).

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Mitchell, "From Shklovsky to Brecht: Some preliminary remarks towards a history of the politicization of Russian Formalism" and Ben Brewster, "From Shklovsky to Brecht: A Reply" in *Screen 15: 2* (Summer 1974), pp. 74-81 and 82-102 respectively.

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, *How Are Verses Made?* Trans., intr. and notes by George Hyde (Bristol: The Bristol Press, 1990). p. 49. Incidentally, if one thinks of Alfred Jarry's definition of 'pataphysics as upside-down (as did Marx, Hegel's philosophy, or as in Marx's famous metaphor of the camera in *Capital*), Jarry's "science of imaginary solutions" bears an uncanny structural resemblance to Mayakovsky's definition of the social command. The missing ingredient in Jarry's definition that creates all the difference and the contrast between the two positions is, however, the social. Jarry, *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, eds. Roger Shattuck and Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963), p. 193.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Mozejko describes how the typical assessment of Socialist Realism is "doctrinaire monstrosity." "Socialist Realism: The Rise and Fall of a Literary Doctrine," *Socialist Realism Revisited*, eds. Nina Kolesnikoff and Walter Smyrniw (Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster University, 1993), p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Mayakovsky, note 18 above, in introduction by Hyde, p. 9.

21 “Incorporeal transformation” describes the role of a speech act in creating a change from one event-state to another, the change for example of a holiday passenger jet into a terrorist hijacking by the command of someone on board. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, trans. and fwd. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

22 Mayakovsky, note 19 above, p. 92

23 V.I. Lenin in *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917*, ed., intr. and aftwd. by Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 54.

24 Robert A. Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 105.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

26 Trotsky citations in George Annenkov, “The Poets and the Revolution: Blok, Mayakovsky, Esenin,” trans. William Todd, *Russian Review* 26: 2 (April 1967), pp. 142-3. The ellipses that are not in brackets, in Trotsky’s text, are Annenkov’s.

27 See Mayakovsky, note 18 above, p. 104.

28 Mayakovsky has invoked an ancient Greek distinction between two words for life that are lost to English today – the distinction between *zoë* (form of life) and *bios* (biological life; life as such). On this distinction, see Giorgio Agamben, “Form-of-Life” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 3-14.

29 Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, eds. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston. (Cambridge, MA, London, England: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 136 and 135; italics added. For Jakobson, Mayakovsky’s response to Esenin’s lines exemplifies the fundamental linguistic concept of the mark.

30 Brik, note 5 above, p. 188.

31 Citations from C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (London, England: The MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1973), p. 41.

32 Stephan, note 8 above, p. 96; italics added.

33 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Groys, “The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde” in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, eds. John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 193-218.

34 Lenin argued that all states, however democratic, dictatorially serve one class interest over another; utilizing state dictatorship to one’s own ends is a legitimate revolutionary strategy. Leninism therefore sanctions, for Žižek, Stalinism. Lenin, note 23 above, p. 193. For Žižek citation, also see Lenin, p. 193.

35 Erlich, note 5 above, p. 90.

36 Frank O’Hara, “About Zhivago and His Poems,” *Standing Still and Walking in New York* (Bollinas, CA: Grey Fox Press, 1975), pp. 99-109.

37 Barrett Watten, “Russian Formalism & the Present,” *Total Syntax* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 16.

38 In 2002 I translated Jean-Claude Montel’s revisioning of the idea of a social command (discussed later in this essay). In posting it to the UB Poetics Listserv (25 April, 2002), I suggested that Montel’s text indicated international resonances for 1970s-era Language poetry, especially Bruce Andrews’s. In Fall 2002, I introduced the idea of a social command via Mayakovsky, Brik, and Montel, in order to frame a statement (“To Our Depositors,” <[http://slought.org/files/downloads/exhibitions/SN\\_unitedbank.pdf](http://slought.org/files/downloads/exhibitions/SN_unitedbank.pdf)>) for a two-month

rotating exhibition of poetry and art in the street-level windows of a former United Bank in Philadelphia; which led to a poets' symposium, "The Social Mark," Feb. 28<sup>th</sup> to Mar. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002 (documents and audio by participants available at <[http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF\\_1132-1133\\_Event.pdf](http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1132-1133_Event.pdf)>), and again selected similar quotations as part of my part of advance symposium readings chosen by the twelve participants.

<sup>39</sup> Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003), citations from pp. 155 and 163 respectively.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Claude Montel, "A propos de la commande sociale." *Change* 4 (1973): 203-207.

<sup>41</sup> From its beginning, *Change* attempted to "carefully avoid the confusions entertained elsewhere between 'science of language' and problematic of history, or to confuse, by putting them on the same level, 'historical materialism' and the materiality of language, the economic writing of societies and languages" (my translation of Montel, "Littérature, avant-gardes et politiques" in *La littérature pour mémoire* [Paris: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2000], pp. 186-7), whereas *Tel Quel* insistently would claim a political efficacy for theory premised to a certain extent on homologizing language and world. *Tel Quel* insisted that command and commission were one. *Change* insisted they were nonidentical, in other words, that while revolution was desirable, it was not imminent.

*Change* arose from theoretical differences at the heart of the *Tel Quel* group between Philippe Sollers and Jean-Paul Faye. The *Tel Quel* group rediscovered and began to publish the Russian Formalists as early as 1964, but, as Montel anecdotally recounts, the group "would soon abandon bit by bit this work of research in order to profit from a theoretical and political activism that would end in the very great confusion of Maoism" in the early 1970s. Faye's *Change* attempted, in contrast, to prolong investigation and research into "a formal but dynamic approach to writing" that the Formalists had initiated in the 1920s. *Change*'s politics, according to Montel, "occupies a critical position on the side of the Communist Party, but on its left, that, with the passage of years, would become untenable except through joining the left wing of social democracy of the new hegemony." *Tel Quel*'s politics under the leadership of Sollers, on the other hand, were right of center, when they were not altogether unannounced (for instance, on the question of Algeria). Cf. Bourdieu, "Sollers *tel quel*," *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice (New York, NY: The New Press, 1998), pp. 11-14, and also Joan Brandt, "Politicizing the Text" in her *Geopoetics: The Politics of Mimesis in Poststructuralist French Poetry and Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 15-65.

<sup>42</sup> My translation of Montel throughout.

<sup>43</sup> Citations are from Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, New York: Verso, 1985), pp. 98 and 111 respectively.

<sup>44</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), p. 172.

<sup>45</sup> "Threshold" in the sense that the social command inaugurated revolution – aesthetic, political, for "Western Marxism" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>46</sup> The second reason Socrates gives, at his defense before the Athenian jury, for speaking the way he does is that, when he speaks, he obeys an "internal oracle" which "forbids but never commands." Plato, "Apology," *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1, trans. B. Jowett (NY: Random House, 1937), pp. 421 and 414.

<sup>47</sup> Robin, note 6 above, p. 211.

one sketch  
of the Stormy  
Petrel

one set of clothes  
not to be worn  
during the voyage

one log  
of the harm  
that came

you  
miss  
a man  
so much

music  
for Haul  
On the  
Bowline

slop  
chest

small  
stuff

prayer  
book

Green-  
lander  
with  
a stitch  
through  
his nose

coin in

his mouth

his custody

broken  
holy  
stone  
at feet  
sailmaker  
stitches you  
inside a sail

last to  
touch

your craft

slipped  
starboard

pig  
on  
foot  
does  
no  
good

to stay afloat  
to assure  
identity

one pot  
of ink

one paragraph  
on a miscellaneous  
custom

quit  
the  
American  
shore  
quit  
the  
shore

of Green-  
land

miss  
a man

pot of  
wood ash

box  
of blank  
cards

beef bone  
sculpture

deducted  
from  
wages  
what  
you  
bid

seldom  
mentioned  
in leisure

his form  
forecastle  
slip

cliché  
poor guy...

the oath  
and the laugh  
boom

skylark  
flicks a card  
in another's  
face

## A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Sudhanva Deshpande

### THE MULTIPOST WORLD

It's a scary thought. That dissent is impossible.

Could it be that as soon as dissent is articulated, it ceases to be dissent? That the megalstructures of market and state swallow every expression of dissent, brand it, and spit out something terribly benign and contorted? A bit like the Che figure on vodka bottles!

It's a post world. Postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, postsocialist, postcapitalist, postcoldwar, postempire, postglobal, postcyber, postpostpost. In this world of footloose signifiers and fancyfree signifieds, meaning is forever fluid, forever shifting, forever imperfect, forever beyond grasp. A bit like a Pentagon document: everyone knows it exists, no one knows where.

It's also a multi world. Multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic, multinational, multisexual, multigendered, multicuisine, multichoice, multimulti. In this multi world, 'difference' is all. Mao Zedong is dead and gone, and 'contradiction' is as dead as his embalmed body. It is a democratic republic. Contradiction is a hierarchical concept; there are antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions, there are contradictions that define a socio-political-economic structure in fundamental ways, and others that do not. Difference is always equal; the difference between hetero- and homosexual is equal to the difference between black and white is equal to the difference between worker and capitalist is equal to the difference between left handers and right handers. In this world of difference, there are no oppressors no oppressed, no exploiters no exploited. On the DifferenceCard, there is no limit to credit.

In this multipost world of floating meaning and ubiquitous difference, what do we dissent on? Who do we dissent from? Who do we dissent for?

### DISSENT BANISHED

Space for dissent is shrinking. Literally. Let me take you on a walk through India's capital, New Delhi.

One day in 1988, I was walking through the Central Park at Connaught Place, Delhi's premier shopping area, with some of my colleagues in Jana Natya Manch, a radical street theatre company. One of them was Safdar Hashmi, who attracted many young women and men, including myself, to street theatre. A policeman came up to Safdar and, pleasantly enough, said: 'Not planning to do a play here, are you?' Safdar laughed: 'What if we were?' 'I'd have to get into action!', the policeman laughed back.

As it happened, we were on our way to a performance and wouldn't have performed in Central Park anyway. But had we attempted to, we'd have been whisked away by the police. As Safdar and another comrade was, some

years before, a few hundred yards away in front of Madras Hotel, when they were performing a play on the recent bus fare hike.

Till the end of 1992, you could hold political rallies and street theatre performances at the lawns that run along Rajpath – the ‘king’s way’ – at the western end of which is the Rashtrapati Bhavan – Presidential Palace – and the Parliament, and the eastern end is India Gate, Delhi’s Arc de Triumph, commemorating Indian soldiers who died in defence of the (British) empire. In December that year, vandals of the Hindu Right demolished a nondescript 16<sup>th</sup>-century mosque in Ayodhya built at the instance of the Mughal emperor Babar, allegedly after a Hindu temple was demolished. Since then, a blanket ban protects the lawns and the buildings around it from political contamination, even though no one has threatened to demolish Parliament or the Presidential Palace. Many argue that the longer term agenda of the Hindu Right includes demolishing the democratic institutions that these buildings stand for, but that is likely to happen from inside Parliament. No threat to the building.

So no politics along the king’s way. Though if you were a big corporation, you’d be allowed to erect a stage in front of India Gate with the Presidential Palace as a backdrop to hold cultural extravaganzas.

The upshot is that if you want to demonstrate in front of the Parliament, you’d be stopped at the Parliament Street police station half a kilometer away, from where you cannot even see the Parliament building.

I suppose that’s better than taking a demonstration to the American Embassy and being stopped at Teen Murti House – Nehru’s official residence while he lived and now a museum – about a kilometer away. The building of the United States Information Service off Connaught Place is similarly out of bounds, as is the British Council.

Every time there is an all-India rally in Delhi, thousands – sometimes hundreds of thousands— arrive in the city, and have to be housed somewhere. There used to be lawns behind the historic Red Fort of Delhi where organizers would put up large tents to accommodate the rallyists. You can’t do that any more. The lawns have been ‘beautified,’ fountains and trees and benches have been installed, and the entire area fenced. Now, rallyists have to be put up miles away, on the outskirts of the very large metropolis that Delhi has become.

These are not isolated developments. The Calcutta High Court decreed that you cannot hold processions in the city on weekdays during working hours. This happened after the judge who passed this order reached office late one day because his car was held up in traffic while a procession marched. The Kerala High Court has passed a similar order. The Supreme Court of India has opined that there is a strong case for a ban on ‘forced’ strikes. There are moves to have a blanket ban on agitations and strikes by government employees. The Tamil Nadu government dismissed two hundred thousand government employees for going on a strike. The rest of the country applauded the strong willed Chief Minister and asked for more stringent measures to deal with strikes.

This is extraordinary. India is supposed to be a democracy. One would have thought that it is axiomatic that democracy cannot exist where the right to

protest, the right to collective bargaining does not exist. We have won our independence after a long and often bloody struggle against a colonial power. This independence could not have come without strikes, agitations, and traffic jams.

Indeed, the poor themselves are being banished from Delhi. Slum clusters are being demolished and the poor who live there are being thrown miles away where there is no water, no electricity, no jobs, no nothing. The outskirts, then, are for the poor. Here, they may live or they may die. In those barren outskirts, they may even dissent. It's a free world.

But then again, there are outskirts and there are outskirts. On some outskirts, you can see gigantic malls, all glitz and glamour, marble floors, glass fronts. Sprawling gated communities, complete with penthouses, swimming pools, bars and golf courses.

The airconditioned rich have seceded from India – those who have not migrated to Silicon Valley, that is. Their lives are sealed – no heat, no dust, no water shortages, no power cuts, no strife. And, most importantly, no dissent.

#### OUTSKIRTS AND OUTSKIRTS

Safdar was killed in performance. January, 1989. We were performing in Jhandapur village, on the outskirts of Delhi. The industrial workers of Delhi and its surrounding areas had gone on a hugely successful 7-day strike demanding, among other things, a hike in the minimum wage, dearness allowance, equal pay for equal work, an end to the contract labour system, and crèches for the children of worker parents. Employers felt threatened. Hired goons patronized by the then ruling party attacked the unionized workers and the actors who had gone to perform for them. A worker was shot dead, Safdar's head bludgeoned.

Safdar died on the outskirts of the city, performing for those who have been thrown to the outskirts, doing street theatre, a form on the outskirts of theatrical practice. Then there are other outskirts as well.

A few years ago, we were touring some districts of Rajasthan. It was still far from winter, and the afternoons were very hot. In a tiny village barely eight k.m. from the Pakistan border, we were asked to perform by our hosts, comrades from a peasants' organization, at 2.30 in the afternoon in front of the local police station where two constables and a dog slept blissfully under a whirring ceiling fan. It was blazing hot, and not a thing moved. I laughed: who on earth was going to come to watch us perform in this tiny village of barely a hundred houses? Our hosts, however, insisted. So we started playing our drum, and in about ten minutes had an audience of about 150 old people, children, women and some stray dogs.

I have been doing street theatre for some sixteen years now, and sometimes imagine that there is nothing about audiences that will ever surprise me. But of course I am wrong, and every so often I am dealt a lesson in humility. But that afternoon in that sleepy border village was truly astonishing. I remember some of us asking each other: why have these people come? What do they expect to see? Can we deliver what they expect? In the event, it turned out to be a good

performance we gave. It was tight, energetic, light, spontaneous: everything you ask of a performance. Afterwards, we were taken to the peasants' organization office and fed a delicious watery fruit that was somewhat like a melon. But stranger than the fruit was the language the locals were speaking among themselves: I realized that neither we, nor they, could understand a word of what the other were saying.

What is the transaction that takes place between actors and spectators in this situation? That a transaction does take place is certain. Anyone who has performed for a while, long enough at any rate to get over the initial hesitancy and nervousness, has experienced the unspoken, unsaid, almost unarticulated energy that flows from audience to performer and back. In that silence, the actor holds or does not hold the gaze of the spectators, the spectators strive, or do not, to catch each word, they recognize, or do not, the oppressions being acted out as their own.

Postmodernists would tell us not to fret. Meaning is Godot; it never arrives.

#### SINGING IN THE DARK TIMES

The multipost world is the world of gigantic disparities. Let me give you a few figures. In the mid-1990s, Nike paid Michael Jordan more per year for endorsing its products than the sum total of the wages received by all the workers across the world who manufactured the products Nike sold as its own. At the turn of the century – the twenty-first century, not the twentieth – half the world's population had never made a phone call. Surprised? Listen to this: there are more telephone lines in the Manhattan island of New York than there are in the entire continent of Africa. That includes Egypt, South Africa, Algeria, Nigeria.

Ensnared in the heady consumerism of the multipost world, maybe dissent looks impossible. From the outskirts though the world looks different.

The world of the outskirts is the world of that sleepy Rajasthan village, where women trek five miles up and five miles down daily to bring home drinking water. The outskirts is where a young man of 34 is killed for daring to do theatre of dissent. In the outskirts, the relationship between nameless faceless sweatshop workers and a megacorporation out to brand the whole world is not that of difference, but of antagonistic contradiction.

On the outskirts, oppression and exploitation are not empty words void of meaning. They have a very hard, bloody, gory feel to them. They spike you in the ribs, they pull at your insides, they smash your bones, they pour your blood down the gutter.

It was Brecht, wasn't it, who asked: 'And will there be singing in the dark times?' His answer: 'There will be singing of the dark times.'

## THE TIDE HAS TURNED

Jeremy Cronin

Sensing a trade wind  
on a wetted finger

The tide, we say,  
has turned

Our enclave ship, best-world, bench-marked, stirs,  
yearns for venture

There'll be, we'd concede, the inevitable  
left-behinds

The unspoken, the stigmatised, the cast-aways  
nursing their stuttering fire

From our crow's nest their stranded looks  
will soon dwindle

To less than a smudge  
on the south horizon

As we bound now,  
bound away, bound for global

Our lyrical sails billowing with  
the winds of denial

**Clarification**

It's now **PRECISELY** (if hypothetically) 1 pm, and this is your lunch-time news.

In today's top story: A spokesperson for government...

...bearing in mind "government" has not been isolated in laboratory conditions, and the orthodox argument can only point to architecture, say the Union Buildings, or some two dozen persons, who speak for and represent an assumed entity, without themselves actually **BEING** that entity, at least not the **TOTALITY** of that entity, as such, and who, as "cabinet" – to use a euro-centric term – are, therefore, metaphorically speaking, **SYMPTOMS** of an assumed but unproven underlying pathology loosely known as "THE government"...

...we were saying...

A government **SPOKESPERSON** (itself a term still undergoing trials)

Has clarified matters by saying that when we say we are working on the assumption of a **CAUSAL LINK** between something and something **ELSE**, and that something might be a quote-unquote "virus," we are not obscuring matters but stating the obvious.

There is, therefore, **ABSOLUTELY** (relatively speaking of course) no reason for any public confusion on this matter whatsoever

- which helps.

# THINGS ARE NOT AS BAD AS THEY SAY

Jeremy Cronin

After more than a casual contact

Mother to child

Epoch to epoch

White to black bourgeoisie  
*in utero* transmission

Living with the virus of righteousness

Ours the illusion  
self right must by right prevail

In this era of slippage  
from transforming power to

Transferring  
some of the same, which is not the same

Mass action becomes  
transaction

Liberation  
liberalisation

Equality  
equity

Sharing shares on the Joburg Securities Exchange

Things are not as bad as they. They say

Our sadness  
in denial

Living with a disappointment  
still not without cure

In this vale of those who spend  
Nine months in belly  
Few months amongst us  
Eternity buried in the ground

Or selling a child's shoes, because  
you can no longer keep her at school

Or wiping diarrhea off a bed-ridden aunt

Or pretending to cook the evening meal for so long  
a hungry family falls asleep

34-years old in a nappy  
White gum-sore  
Fungal throat  
No food

Or food  
that won't go down

It's not as bad as they say. They say because

Perhaps  
it's worse

All the more reason to keep faith  
To struggle  
To stay  
To stay on  
To be gentle  
To all of those, who  
Somehow, more or less  
(That's all of us)

Survive

## TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

Qadri Ismail

Newton Gunasinghe, in his 1984 essay 'May Day after the July Holocaust,' made a cortical, if now almost forgotten, intervention into the Sri Lankan debate on peace. He contended, about what was beginning to be called the "ethnic conflict":

It is now clear that the anti-Tamil riots of July '83 constitute one of the most important turning points in the recent history of Sri Lanka. A particular equilibrium within the Sri Lankan social formation has been irrevocably lost and a new equilibrium is yet to be achieved. Within the context of a heightened ethnic consciousness among the masses, the left and the democratic forces are in *a situation of theoretical disarray*. One symptom of the disarray is the dominant tendency in the old left to sweep the ethnic issue under the carpet, and to raise "safe" economic and class slogans.<sup>2</sup>

Let me begin my response to Gunasinghe by saying, somewhat perversely, that elements of this formulation could be quibbled with. It does not, for instance, quite escape the grasp of empiricism. Surely, to an Althusserian like Gunasinghe, any determination of a conjuncture cannot be a matter of self-evident clarity. But quibbling, of course, might sound as not a particularly comradely thing to do. Why, somebody might ask, criticize an ally, an accomplice, a friend, and in public at that? But it is an important part of my argument that comrades can – and perhaps even must – disagree, openly if necessary. Otherwise, one subscribes to a notion, always dangerous, of leftist infallibility, risks being dogmatic, refuses to work with, and within, difference. Having said that, the first point to be taken from his essay is that Gunasinghe made the case there for understanding what one might term the post-July 1983 conjuncture, understood not as a historical but a politico-epistemological moment, as "overdetermined." Class contradictions were no longer the primary questions the Sri Lankan left had to address in this changed conjuncture, this new state of disequilibrium; ethnic ones had assumed greater urgency. The task, therefore, was not to represent "the current view most popular amongst the masses," or "tailism," but to produce "a far-sighted strategic line, together with the tactical steps necessary to pursue it."<sup>3</sup> The most important element of this "line," its goal, would be an "optimum political solution to the ethnic problem."

Gunasinghe is not cited at the very beginning of this study because we have both been inspired by the Marxism of Louis Althusser. Neither is it sought here, by invoking the name of a leftist academic and activist, to imply that what follows, while academic, is also activist (despite my employment in the western academy). Unlike Gunasinghe, the concern here is not to produce a strategic line, or even a tactical one. This study sees itself as interventionist; but it seeks self-

consciously to intervene in an academic debate; even while it is informed and influenced by others, and seeks to influence them, too. Besides, it does not hold the position, somewhat fashionable within cultural studies, that academic work is also activist; it has a much more modest conception of such practice. Indeed, it holds rather strongly that one completely misrepresents academic knowledge production if one finds it synonymous, if not homonymous, with the work of those who actually take risks, get their hands dirty, stick their necks out. Rather, I begin this study by invoking Gunasinghe's name to acknowledge an inheritance (which is also, and there really is no paradox here, a debt I can never repay). This study would quite simply not be possible without his example, without his work, and that of many others.<sup>4</sup> But, then, the question arises, why this particular essay of Gunasinghe's? Why not another, better known or more substantial one? 'May Day after the July Holocaust' is the most apposite text, or accomplice with which to begin advancing my own position, making my own intervention because, for a start, it too is interventionary and situates itself explicitly on the left. Secondly, and more importantly, Gunasinghe's response to what he understood as a changed *political* situation, one that has apparently confused the left he is a part of, or abides by, is to call for *theoretical* reflection. Such theory must lead to changed practice, of course; the ultimate goal is a far-sighted strategic line, a solution to the ethnic problem. But the cardinal need of the moment as he identifies it is not what might be called knee-jerk activism but theory. To paraphrase John Mowitz's reading of Marx's second thesis on Feuerbach here, the strength of Gunasinghe's formulation is that he refuses to separate politics from theory, without conflating the two.<sup>5</sup> What he considers the old political realities can no longer be taken for granted. New concepts are called for as a response.

That, precisely, is the claim being advanced here, too. Or, to use a different vocabulary, that not just the current political moment confronting Sri Lanka, in the form of the question of peace, but the current epistemological or *disciplinary* moment – which I prefer to characterize as postcolonial and postempiricist rather than poststructuralist but, it must be stressed, without any prejudice or hostility to the latter term – requires that these theoretical advances be considered and, more importantly, *consolidated*, affirmed, abided by, not taken for granted or abused by casual reading and lazy citation, as all too commonly happens in social science, and literary criticism inspired by it. For such consolidation to occur in an abiding fashion, the postcolonial/postempiricist *reader* – and all three terms in this position are of equal importance – must make the social sciences in general, and anthropology and history most particularly in the Sri Lankan instance, account for their complicity in naturalizing a certain, ultimately empiricist and even colonialist understanding of the social and this political moment; and for their complicity in naturalizing the apparent fixity of the present. But it cannot stop there. It must also put “into question the system” or the episteme which enables such understanding in the first place.<sup>6</sup> Sri Lanka, in other words, is not simply a political problem, one to be addressed by the discipline of conflict management.

The question of peace, to this study, is a politico-epistemological problem. Sri Lanka demands, perhaps even desperately, the formulation and deployment of “new” concepts. The current, rather narrow, debate needs to be broadened. That is the inescapable burden facing both the leftist and the postcolonial/postempiricist thinker of peace. But what, though, is meant by postempiricism? It is an inelegant term, yes, but more exact than “postmodern” (and resonates, serendipitously, with post-empire). By deploying it, instead, I want to signal that the break to be made – which cannot be a complete or clean one, since the “post” signifies that one is still quarreling with, trying to displace, and therefore complicit with, empiricism – is not so much with the concept of structure but empiricism, and its postulate, the empirical. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, in his critique of Levi-Strauss, structuralism promised such a break, but did not deliver. Empiricism, as he puts it there, is the “matrix of all faults” infecting the social sciences.<sup>7</sup> So postempiricism refers, very broadly, to those literary critical persuasions which begin from this position; to those which take reading and/or textuality and/or semiotics as their point of departure. Empiricist understandings of language, of course, hold that language can, without too much difficulty, capture or represent the real, the event, the social. They operate within what Barthes called the “referential illusion.”<sup>8</sup> Language, in that understanding, has no signifiatory function. Even if self-consciously influenced by “postmodernism,” as in much contemporary social science, including the “interpretive” tendency, the object, to empiricism, is conceived as transparent, outside language and the process or play of signification. In contrast, the postempiricist reader does not conceive of herself as an autonomous or agential subject, conceives of her object as also subject, as simultaneously subject and object. Most importantly, she works towards the demise of this opposition.

But what connection does postempiricism have, you may wonder, with Gunasinghe’s argument or my object of study, the question of peace in Sri Lanka? What do the social sciences and/or anthropology/history and/or empiricism have to do with Sri Lanka? To these questions, this reader would respond with other questions which would get to the heart of what is at stake in insisting on consolidating the gains of postempiricism: what is this object, Sri Lanka, in the first place? What kind of a place is it? Do you know it? Really? How do you know it? Did you hear or see or read about it? Why are you convinced that what you heard or read or saw was persuasive? Did it occur to you, to anticipate my argument somewhat, that Sri Lankans and westerners, for instance, and to use two terms I will disavow soon, might comprehend it differently? Did you pause, consider, however briefly, that *different disciplines might produce it differently*? That anthropology might see one thing, produce a certain object, when it apprehended Sri Lanka, history another and literature yet another? Is Sri Lanka a country in which people are domiciled, as the social sciences – geography, anthropology, area studies – and their applied allies – the census, encyclopedia – by and large claim? Is it a state that issues passports – and kills its citizens, routinely and

randomly? Or, as the postempiricist might want you to consider, might it be comprehended differently, textually? Is its “conflict” best understood as about “ethnic” or nationalist violence, things that separate us (the “nonviolent” west) from them, or about peace and democracy, concerns we all share (or are at least supposed to)?<sup>9</sup> By what criteria does one decide? What is at stake in the difference? And to pose a more provocative question: might those disciplines that are still empiricist actually be an obstacle to peace – *not to be understood as homonymous with the absence of war*– in Sri Lanka? Can reading textually, patiently, make a difference? Can it not just complicate, or supplement social science understandings of, but actually enable a reconceptualization of the very question of peace?

These are not, of course, quite the same questions as those posed by Gunasinghe. But, in one crucial sense, they are not very different. Our concerns, one might say, rhyme. (OED, rhyme: “Agreement in the terminal sounds of two or more words or metrical lines, such that...the last stressed vowel and any sounds following it are the same, while the sound or sounds preceding are different.”)<sup>10</sup> He, too, asked the “old left,” as he put it: how do you understand Sri Lanka? You say that, to the left, it is about class conflict. I beg to differ; to me it is should be comprehended as about ethnic conflict. The reader will notice that, in so saying, the grain of the text emerges as postempiricist. That is, Newton Gunasinghe – and this is where our projects rhyme intellectually – wasn’t so much making a different interpretation of the country but an intervention within it; his text wants to produce a different *object* when the leftist thought “Sri Lanka.” An object he also conceives of as subject because he grants it, rather than his own thoughts/subjectivity/agency, or career for that matter, primacy. An object he wants to *intervene* within and so change. And, in so doing, to produce a different object not only for the leftist and the Sri Lankan, but for the postempiricist and the postcolonial. Like him, I seek to produce Sri Lanka as an object that cannot be grasped empirically. One that, when grasped textually, will not be conceptualized as merely object and existing outside the investigating subject, but as also subject and existing in language. This may sound like the repetition of old-fashioned terminology that we have left behind. After all, such a conception of the object is now, to those who think time through the calendar, many decades old. But the stakes in so doing are actually quite huge. In bringing the gains of the critique of empiricism, and of colonialism understood as a politico-intellectual project, to the study of not just Sri Lanka, but of non-western “place,” which is another way of saying the critique of anthropology, it is sought here to “finish” the critique of eurocentrism inaugurated by postcoloniality. In our current disciplinary moment we seem to take it for granted that certain intellectual victories have been won permanently – against the west (or eurocentrism). I am not so certain. *This study proceeds upon the conviction that postcoloniality – and postempiricism – still has a lot of work to do*; despite the arguments of those who hold that the project of postcoloniality has been superseded, whether by globalization theory or our historical moment. They forget, of course, that the object of the latter is very different. Postcoloniality still has

many questions to conceive, let alone address or answer; many positions to disappear; many others to make axiomatic. Thus it must be (de)fended: fostered, nurtured, protected; its gains consolidated; its indispensability for the current disciplinary moment (re)articulated; and, if necessary, reconceptualized. Included here is the indispensable enterprise of rethinking, from a minority perspective, and from that of the critique of social science and of representation, the problem of democracy; of considering whether representative democracy, understood not as an egalitarian mode of government or as the best possible form of government one can conceive of, but a structure of dominance (not hegemony) that enables the minoritization, the making insignificant, of no count, of minorities. Reading the Sri Lankan debate leads, almost inevitably, to asking a question about not just the necessity or practicality, but the very ethicality of what is arguably the founding structural principle of representative democracy, majority rule.

My argument then is that displacing Sri Lanka, producing a different object when it is thought, an object that is also conceived as subject, leads not only to reconceptualizing peace in this particular place, but to addressing a much larger problem; one that leftists everywhere must be concerned with, perhaps even as a matter of some urgency – especially given the conflicting pictures Kurds, Shias and Sunnis portray of the future of Iraq; one that anthropology, given its constitutive inability to see politics, but only culture (gone crazy and violent) in postcolonial places, cannot notice. But what do I mean by “displacing” Sri Lanka? The term is used here in two senses. On the one hand, I attempt to push aside, to replace, if not to delegitimize, the dominant account of the country produced by the western academy which sees it, as Pradeep Jeganathan has argued, as a place of violence and not politics.<sup>11</sup> In this disciplinary moment, that account is authorized by anthropology, the discipline that has dominated recent intellectual production on Sri Lanka in the conjuncture Gunasinghe would call post-July 1983. Thus, both the anthropological story of Sri Lanka and anthropology more generally *must* be scrutinized, critiqued, displaced before another object, also called Sri Lanka, could be produced. Or, rather, the displacement of the one would be the emergence of the other. In its second sense, the place – and place as a concept – is understood not geographically, or through area studies, but as a debate; not as an object that exists empirically, but as a text, or a group of texts, that is/are read. These texts constitute the object, Sri Lanka. Some of these texts are anthropological. Others abide by the country, see it as subject (and also object); as opposed to the anthropological, which only informs the west about the place, continues its objectification, cannot conceive of it as in any way subject.

My most abiding disciplinary concern in this study, however, is with history, not anthropology; with how and why the postempiricist/postcolonial reader must necessarily work against the authority of that discipline which enables, in the Sri Lankan instance, both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms to claim that the “ethnic conflict” is not a political one, but shaped by the objective working out of

the historical process, and that this working out also suggests incontrovertible methods of resolving it. Opposed to this, it will be asked whether reading textually, privileging not the empiricist but the literary, whether learning from the singular and the unverifiable, from what could be termed the minority perspective, might allow us to reconceptualize the very question of peace. But the first task, given the commitment to postcoloniality, to finishing the critique of eurocentrism, is to distinguish this project from that discipline which most enables and underwrites the epistemological dominance of the west, anthropology, which is still very influential, and not just within the discipline, in this moment that otherwise appears to be postcolonial. It functions, structurally, to represent or speak for the other; to inform the west about the non-west; it sees its object as only object and works to maintain this relation of dominance. It is an epistemological enterprise which emerged within colonialism and continues to this day to reproduce those relations of knowledge production – if only, as Fanon might say, in new forms. Opposed to anthropology, committed to reading after the critique of empiricism, I would rather conceive of my object – the question of peace in Sri Lanka – as also subject. (And also object, simultaneously; to just seek to make an object subject is to merely make a gesture of inversion, to work within the logic of nationalism, or identity politics.) To put this differently, a distinction is made between texts that anthropologize Sri Lanka and those that abide by it. The latter texts – Gunasinghe’s being an exemplary instance, despite him being an anthropologist by training – intervene in the Sri Lankan debate, the debate or text that is Sri Lanka, address its concerns, take sides in its quarrels, refuse to stand above and sound objectivist. They don’t want to wash their hands off the place; write about it one moment, forget about it the next. They desire to get involved with the present and to try and shape thinking about the future of the country. In very different ways, they want to intervene on the question of peace. In so doing, they abide by Sri Lanka.

One final word is necessary here; much of what follows is written in a polemical spirit. To Michel Foucault:

The polemicist...proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for truth, but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For him, then, the game does not consist of recognizing this person as a subject having the right to speak, but of abolishing him, as interlocutor, from any possible dialogue; and his final objective will be, not to come as close as possible to a difficult truth, but to bring about the triumph of the just cause he has been manifestly upholding from the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

Within western discourse today this may sound like a description of a jihadist; but, as often in Foucault, the immediate adversary here, unnamed, is Marxism. Of course, it also constitutes a more general argument against polemics as such. Should

it give me pause? Are all polemics bad, if not dangerous and anti-intellectual by definition? Do they prevent, if not prohibit, “dialogue”? Perhaps. However, the trouble with this position, at least to the postcolonialist perspective I seek to advance here, is that postcoloniality proceeds from the conviction – not from a truth, but a conviction – to put it crudely, that colonialism was a bad thing. What constitutes colonialism, how it should be conceptualized, are all open to question, to debate. That its lingering effects, if not its strong aftermath, must be opposed is not. This is not a “privilege” it possesses in advance. Rather, it is something postcoloniality must both take as axiomatic and argue for. From such a conviction certain things follow. I am always prepared to grant Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms, however opposed the Sri Lankan leftist might and must be to them, however much she may wish their abolition, a hearing; provided they would grant my position a hearing, too. Peace would be not be possible without such a conviction. But it is impossible, just impossible, to grant the same privilege to anthropology.

### *Insider, Outsider, Abiding*

This study, then, responds to a compulsion: to address the question of peace in Sri Lanka, to intervene in that debate from an explicitly leftist, postcolonial and postempiricist perspective. Coded as such, or as the ethnic conflict, as the problem of war, terrorism or genocide, this question – or something like it – is discussed every day in what geography, abetted by anthropology, areas studies and political science, not to mention Sinhalese nationalism, identifies and authorizes as a place called Sri Lanka; and, less frequently, in places geography would identify as outside it.<sup>13</sup> This study, while it doesn’t see itself as unrelated to these conversations, while it is certainly informed by and hopes in turn to inform them, while it would be impossible without them, and is thus also a part of them, is not directed at them. At least, not directly. Relevance is not the driving impetus here; though I don’t seek to be irrelevant, either. Rather, I endeavor to intervene in a more academic, conceptual argument. Not by asserting the ontological privilege of the citizen or “insider”; the nativist, in any shape or form, is not the ground from which I wish to, or can speak. And not either from the Archimidean, implicitly objective, perhaps even imperial distance asserted by the “outsider.” To the postempiricist reader these are untenable distinctions. I want to address Sri Lanka by taking into account both my insiderness or citizenship – inadequate terms that will be replaced soon – and outsidersness or what for lack of a better term could be called my employment – something not, in my understanding, synonymous with location – in the western academy. Given the latter, given the commitment to contesting eurocentrism, to opposing anthropology, I must confront (at least) the following questions: what might it mean to read Sri Lanka, and write it, from the western academy? What might be the implications, the consequences, of so doing? How could making just another contribution to western or anthropological, in the structural sense, discourse on Sri Lanka be avoided? What needs to be taken into account, by a self-proclaimed postempiricist/postcolonial

leftist Sri Lankan reader who wants to avoid doing so? Can it be avoided, in good faith, by someone employed in the western academy? Does such employment inevitably, inescapably, make me an effective outsider to Sri Lanka, imply or impose upon me a politico-intellectual position complicit with the west, and even worse yet with bourgeois capitalism, as some critics of postcolonial studies like Arif Dirlik have charged? Is my claim to be on the Sri Lankan left, an academic in the footsteps of Gunasinghe, self-serving and unpersuasive? Could someone employed in the western academy also be on the Sri Lankan left?

But the first question to be asked, before any of the above, must concern the production of Sri Lanka by this enterprise I seek to distinguish my project from: western/anthropological discourse. Shouldn't its contours be demarcated, its concerns specified, its categories identified, its inadequacies cataloged? Its dominant strain addresses what it calls the ethnic conflict – and what this study prefers to term the question of peace, so as to produce a different object – from the outside, through the mechanical, routinized protocols of conflict management. It proceeds by a very predictable move, from diagnosis – identifying the causes of conflict, the antagonists and their mutually exclusive demands – to prescription – a way of making these antagonists compromise upon these demands so that they become mutually inclusive. Peace, to this perspective, is the absence of war. This can be seen, to cite a convenient instance, in I.B. Watson's 'Preface' to a recent collection of essays on Sri Lanka (convenient because it was selected randomly from my bookshelf). Watson's is the type of generic text that produces and reproduces western discourse on Sri Lanka, that makes *authoritative* statements, the type that therefore must be taken into account, displaced, pushed aside, deauthorized in order to articulate my own position. The significance of this argument for the study cannot be stressed too much: *the anthropological account of Sri Lanka must be displaced, deauthorized, so that the postempiricist/postcolonial reader can write*. For anthropology, in my understanding, is the difference of abiding: it is what defers, delays and, of course, the opposite, what differs most radically from, abiding. Watson's text is an exemplary instance of such anthropology; it announces the questions that invariably occur from the discursive/disciplinary location of the "outsider":

The conflict, often so incomprehensible to an outsider...has been a profound shock. No less of a shock has been the awareness that Sri Lankans I know, while quiet, quick and gentle in themselves and with their immediate circles, are strongly partisan, vigorously intractable in their attitudes towards their opponents. Why has this situation arisen? What are its characteristics? Who are the leaders and what are their motivations? What are the consequences, both immediately and into the future? What can be done to ameliorate these consequences, to establish different paradigms under which to resolve at least the major conflicts?<sup>14</sup>

It is important to stress here that, to Gunasinghe, the conflict was not in the least incomprehensible. In fact, what was going on, the changed reality, was very clear!

But that might be the result of the special insight available to the insider, which Watson proclaims he is not. If his questions are those of conventional political science, one can also see the impress of geography and anthropology in the description of his object. For one thing, he understands Sri Lanka empirically, as a place on the map of the world where people (unlike him) reside, a place that he is – by definition to the empiricist – outside. For another, he understands it through the protocols authorized by anthropology: he will make generalizations about *all* of the natives, about their personality and character, based upon *some* of them; based, indeed, on his “experience” (does this count as “participant observation”?) of some of them.<sup>15</sup> The logic here is metonymic: the part can represent the whole; his experience of a few natives enables him to make proclamations, without blush, about the native character or condition, as such.

This is the kind of knowing, of course, one expects to find in living rooms, not common rooms. Dismissive, or just plain ignorant, of the critique of essentialism, this perspective does not subscribe to the slightest doubt that the individual could be unrepresentative of the species or that the part may not describe the whole. It cannot consider the possibility that there might be other ways of reading the social, other ways of understanding or coding difference; those that emphasize the singular; ways of reading that could be deemed characteristic of a minority perspective. And beneath its ostensible concern for the natives can be noticed one of liberalism’s most disturbing structural features: it must other, in an anthropological spirit, those it would be benevolent towards. For Sri Lankans, to Watson, are both “gentle in themselves and with their immediate circles,” and its opposite, “*strongly* partisan, *vigorously* intractable in their attitudes towards their opponents.” If uttered by a journalist, this could serve as a summary description of most fans, otherwise known as fanatical supporters, of sports teams, whether in Brisbane, Baltimore or Bogambara. But Watson produces such behavior as, amazingly enough, unfamiliar, downright incomprehensible, indeed shocking. He sees Sri Lankans as culturally different, as having a split personality; they are – and there’s really no other way of reading that unit – schizoid, sick, suffering. A conservative westerner might conclude from this that Sri Lankans languish from an incurable condition, that there’s something in the culture, if not the water – the country is an island, no? – that makes them thus. But Watson, clearly a good and concerned liberal, is not such a pessimist; he wonders how this affliction could be ended or at least be ameliorated; which signifies that he doesn’t see it as a permanent condition, or the natives as suffering from an incurable disease. Thus he insists that someone find out what kind of medicine can terminate it. For, while the conflict maybe incomprehensible, it is only so to an “outsider” like himself; the contributors to the volume – insiders, presumably, or at the very least experts – can be trusted to fill the prescription.

But what, you may wonder, makes this an instance of western discourse on Sri Lanka? Watson does not identify his writing or location as such. So, is it a fair or proper characterization? By what criteria is it made? Would his employment

in the Australian academy make it western? Would the article being published down under? Geography would respond to such assertions with predictable laughter. Australia is not a western country, at least not in its sense. But, of course, this is not a question to be settled by turning to the map. From my perspective, the westernness of Watson must be identifiable through a reading of the text. It turns out to have two related strands, one more important than the other. Firstly, Watson presents himself as “outside” Sri Lanka. This alone does not necessarily make his text western. It could, after all, be Indian. But it is a significant element of the discipline that produces authoritative knowledge of Sri Lanka in this epistemological moment, anthropology; the discipline that, more than political science, makes Watson’s text possible. Even in its most “sophisticated” variant, the so-called “interpretive turn,” anthropology cannot proceed without producing itself as outside its object of study and speaking for or objectifying it. (Indeed, as will be seen soon, the insider-outsider distinction is crucial to the very possibility of anthropology.) Is it, then, an irredeemably western way of knowing? Yes, but only provided one comprehends “west” not in geographic, sociological or essentialist terms but sees it, rather, as the *producer and authorizer of disciplinary knowledge, an “epistemological space.”*<sup>16</sup> The second element of Watson’s text’s westernness, following from the above, is its disciplinary allegiance: it approaches Sri Lanka anthropologically. It may desire a solution to the ethnic conflict, but leaves that work to others; it will make no demand upon or, in Spivak’s phrase, “speak to” Sri Lanka.<sup>17</sup> All it will do is make disciplinary statements, inform the west about the nonwest, maintain its object as only object.

If Watson’s is an instance of the trouble-shooting strand in western discourse, what of the others? Are there others? Like Watson, the anthropologist Jonathan Spencer also produces himself as writing from “outside Sri Lanka”; his subject-position is well within his discipline, which he does not seek to exceed. However, he has actually performed “field-work” in the country, so makes a good example of the foreign expert. Then, and most significantly, despite his allegiance to a discipline with a long racist career, Spencer calls himself a post-orientalist. This suggests, at the very least, an awareness of the bind between knowledge and power. That, after all, is one of the most important arguments made by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. So Spencer produces himself as politically correct. Additionally, the essays in his collection, *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* – also selected from my bookshelf, but not randomly – are said to be different from “that kind of political history which is based almost entirely on English-language sources and seeks its explanations only within the actions of the English-speaking elite.” Unlike those histories, the essays here “employ local sources and attend to the voices of people many miles from the capital.”<sup>18</sup> This, of course, is a self-authenticating move: my book is true because its authors have taken the trouble to converse with real people, not the elite. It should be pointed out, however, that more than half the essays in the volume do not actually “attend” to village voices – or any voices at all, in the sense Spencer uses the term: they

analyze documents, are archive-derived. Still, there is no great necessity to pause too long over this; after all, it is always possible that Spencer may not have actually read the essays in his collection. The question to ask is whether Spencer comprehends the conflict differently from Watson. Or, do both outsiders see it similarly? To Watson, the parties to the Sri Lankan conflict are “obvious”: “the supporters of Tamil Eelam and the equally intransigent Sinhala nationalists.”<sup>19</sup> Spencer finds the “conflict [to be] between the majority Sinhala population and the minority Tamil population...often presented, not least by the antagonists themselves, as the inevitable outcome of centuries of hostility.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike the antagonists, the contributors to his volume do not share such a “primordialist” perspective of the conflict; but, partly because these antagonists themselves emphasize the significance of history, they feel a necessity to address this question. Thus the subtitle of the book: “history and the roots of conflict.” Leaving aside the question of history and its significance, the point to take from his statement is that, at least when it comes to identifying the parties to the Sri Lankan conflict, Spencer is not very different from Watson. Both outsiders, expert and non-expert, see the conflict in binary terms, as between two entities: the Sinhalese and the Tamils; the difference being that Spencer calls one a majority and the other a minority.

I could, at this stage, keep reaching for my bookshelf – with a view perhaps to exhausting it. After which I could surf the world wide whatsit, looking for western writing on Sri Lanka, from newspapers to web pages. Indeed – if I felt sufficiently energetic – I could follow that with an excursion to the archives or, if I was fortunate enough to receive a grant, the British museum, throw the dust off old files, solicit books not checked out in a century and investigate the colonial roots of this discourse. And then, to bring the argument up to date, I might realize a lifelong dream and do some fieldwork – amongst faculty and graduate students in selected villages, oops I meant to say anthropology departments, and ask them how they think Sri Lanka, how the country was produced for them in their classes, courses and reading lists.<sup>21</sup> But Watson and Spencer are read here as symptomatic texts. So the reader should be prepared to concede, without further citation, that the elements of a discourse on the Sri Lankan “conflict” can be identified, at least provisionally, within western academic production: one that produces itself as situated outside the conflict, which it sees as comprised of two “antagonists,” the Sinhalese and the Tamils. That much, at least, appears to be common to the empiricist/outsider perspective shared by Watson and Spencer. Even if the Sinhalese are identified, alternatively, as nationalists or as the majority, and the Tamils as separatist, or the minority; the conflict, evidently, is between two and only two parties.

Now to the “insiders.” How do they comprehend the “conflict”? Do they see it in binary terms? Are nationalism and history important in their understanding? Rather than return to Gunasinghe – who did not identify himself as an insider, to whom the question would not have arisen – Valentine Daniel’s *Charred Lullabies*:

*Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* seemed an appropriate place to address these questions. Daniel calls his book an “anthropography.” That is to say, he is concerned with graphing, the problem of writing, with writing as a problem; he situates himself within the “interpretive turn” in the discipline. His work, unlike that of Watson and Spencer, to whom words are things, to whom signification is not an issue, appears to be somewhat postempiricist. His is an important book, for ethico-political reasons; he does not want to do business as usual, to simply represent. Situating himself explicitly as an insider, he says *Charred Lullabies* is about “the violence between Sri Lanka’s two major ethnic groups, the Sinhales and the Tamils.”<sup>22</sup> Here, a difference of crucial importance to this study can and must be noticed from Spencer: even though Daniel, like the foreign anthropologist, sees the conflict – a violent one – as between only two groups, he does not characterize one as a majority and the other a minority, but both as “major groups.” This is a cardinal significant difference. To the empiricist, “majority” and “minority” are straightforward terms, simple facts of number or arithmetic, a matter of things that are self-evidently different, that can be and are grouped together, counted. To the postempiricist, in contrast, language matters: for Spencer’s terminology places the Tamils at the bottom of a binary in relation to the Sinhalese; it displays a partiality, however subtle, towards the Sinhalese; or, more correctly, sees Sri Lanka in Sinhalese (nationalist) terms (perhaps a consequence of uncritically attending to only some of those voices outside the capital). In contrast, Daniel’s usage asserts an equality between the two groups; he refuses, one might say, to minoritize the Tamils. (“Minority” is not a descriptive term simply reflective of number, but an indice in Barthes’s sense, a metaphor loaded with meaning, demanding of interpretation.)<sup>23</sup> Daniel, that is, revises or rewrites Spencer, or the Sinhalese nationalist perspective on Sri Lanka. Can it be concluded, then, from this single instance, that the writing of outsiders and insiders, that western or “outside” intellectual production on Sri Lanka, differs significantly from the “inside”?

Actually, what the above discussion suggests is something the postempiricist reader knew to begin with: that easy, line-in-the-sand style distinctions between insider and outsider, inside and outside, cannot be drawn; that the border which separates western from Sri Lankan intellectual production is not hermetic. Spencer may produce himself as writing from outside, but he sees the Sri Lankan conflict, at least in one important respect, through the terms of Sinhalese nationalism. This coincidence of perspective signifies, of course, that Spencer is not really “outside” Sri Lanka. Or, rather, that to make the claim, one must have a naïve, empiricist, objectivist and anti-discursive understanding of place, authorized by geography and area studies. Whereas, if Sri Lanka in particular, and “place” more generally is understood textually, as it is by this study, then no “person” who produces knowledge of it, including Watson, can be considered “outside” it. Indeed, the Watsons and Spencers of this world, despite being employed as they are by the western academy, are very much “inside” Sri Lanka;

for they are the experts who produce authoritative, disciplinary knowledge of the place – which also makes their texts western. (Something, given my employment and disciplinary allegiance, I am also unavoidably complicitous with, even as I seek to contest this in my own work.) But Spencer, though he claims to have read *Orientalism*, has an objectivist understanding of the production of knowledge:

This book, most definitely, is not an attempt to rewrite Sri Lanka's national past. The aim is not to disprove or discredit any particular view of the national past...Instead the book seeks to analyze the appeal and effect in the present of certain dominant interpretations of Sri Lankan history...The broad orientation of this volume is toward the asking of new and unfamiliar questions...not the provision of fixed and definite answers.<sup>24</sup>

To this perspective knowledge is objective; one can “analyze” without “rewriting”; ask questions without answering them, even implicitly; produce knowledge that is outside power, that will have no impact on its object. Indeed, it works hard to keep its object at a sanitized distance. Epistemologically speaking, this is consistent with his empiricism; he works to maintain his object as only object.

Is Daniel's text any different? It certainly wants to be. It is a serious and thoughtful attempt at being different. But is it? Does it escape the trap of the anthropological, of speaking for? Though a “naturalized American,” he was “born to Sri Lankan parents” and says he writes with “a gentle prejudicial tilt, self-confessedly willed, in favor of the point of view of Sri Lanka's Estate Tamils.”<sup>25</sup> This admission of “bias” or non-objectivity, so rare in social science, so rare and thus refreshing, certainly produces the writer as an insider.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Daniel takes great pains to let the reader know how much inside Sri Lanka he really is, despite having “lived more than half my life in the West”: he speaks, for instance, not one but two dialects of Tamil, Sinhalese too (and of course English, the language of the elite). Thus, when doing his fieldwork, he was “taken into the prejudices of all three ethnic (sub)groups,” who told him their experiences freely.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Daniel had access, through a few informants, to the *entire*, representative Sri Lankan story. (This, of course presupposes essentialism: that his informants were representative of their groups.) He may be an insider, he may even be partial to one point of view, but that is a justifiable bias based on a knowledge of the whole story. His ethnicity, his subjectivity, was an aid to interpretation, not a hindrance. Still, the reader must ask, are Daniel's proclamations about being an insider enough to make him one? Does the text move in a direction consistent with the claims of its putative author? For a start, the reader would have noticed that Daniel understands place empirically, not discursively; he lived more than half his life in that geographic entity called the west. Then, in a crucial passage early in his narrative, explaining why he decided to publish the stories of his informants, mostly UpCountry Tamil victims of “collective violence,” Daniel tells his reader:

I took upon myself the responsibility of telling a wider world stories that they told me, some at grave risks to their lives, only because they believed there was a wider world that cared about the difference between good

and evil. The charge to tell a wider world also betrays these victims' despair over their own narrow world that has lost the capacity to tell the difference...<sup>28</sup>

This is the voice of orthodox anthropology to which, at least since Franz Boas, the insider-outsider distinction is indispensable: the scholar travels from the west ("wider world") to nativeland ("narrow world") and returns to inform the west about the natives. The scholar in question might be "native" himself, but that is not a significant difference because native informants don't only reside in the "field." The most basic, foundational *structural* elements of (colonialist) anthropology identified above are reproduced here without the slightest self-consciousness or irony: distinguishing empirically between inside (nonwest) and outside (west), informing this west about the nonwest, informing an authoritative or powerful place, about the powerless; and, perhaps most damningly, reinforcing the epistemological powerlessness of the powerless, or relations of knowledge production which emerged during colonialism.

It was Daniel, after all, who took upon himself the "responsibility of telling a wider world" the stories his informants told him; they did not demand it themselves (even if they believed the wider world cared about them). Daniel, in this regard, does not sound very different from Spencer and Watson. Indeed, by reproducing the claim that Sri Lankans have lost the capacity to tell the "difference between good and evil," he makes his natives sound sick and rhymes with Watson. Daniel, that is, might be an insider on one register, but his work produces him as an outsider. Or, rather, since these terms aren't very useful, this could be phrased differently: the most significant element in Daniel's intellectual production, that which enables it to be characterized as belonging in the same category as the intellectual production of Watson and Spencer, and not of the scholars, dramatists and novelists discussed later, is not that, like the avowed outsiders, Daniel lives and/or is employed outside Sri Lanka, or even the foreign citizenship of the three of them. What is at stake here is that *his text does not intervene in a Sri Lankan conversation*, or argument, or brawl perhaps; it seeks to *interpret* the country to a "wider world," presumably the west. This debate in the wider world is certainly *about* Sri Lanka but, in a very strict sense, it is not *of* it. Daniel might be an insider, he might interview other insiders and collect their stories; but it is outsiders to whom he explicitly wishes to relate and interpret them; it is outsiders who he feels can recognize their value; only outsiders – and I will stop using these terms momentarily – that he, like Spencer and Watson, finds intellectuo-political community with. They may "attend" or "listen" to Sri Lankan voices, travel miles from the capital, no doubt at great inconvenience, and without running water, in order to do so; but it is to the epistemic space of the west, and only that space, that their work is addressed. Spencer, after all, is not interested in "rewriting" Sri Lanka's past; that would be an interventionary act. All he wants is to comprehend, to "analyze" without getting involved. This produces intellectual activity as a sanitized exercise. Whereas, to a Gunasinghe, as already noticed, the very purpose

of intellectual, or theoretical, production is not comprehension or interpretation but involvement, getting one's hands dirty, taking the risk of being interventionary. To be entirely fair by Daniel, he does seek the same, at least in one sense: unlike Spencer, he wants his work to have an explicitly ethical level. He is not about being considered objective. He wants to be on the side of the good. But, alas, he locates that good outside Sri Lanka. In so doing, he "incarcerates" Sri Lanka, in Arjun Appadurai's telling term – keeps it in its place, imprisons it as a place of difference.<sup>29</sup>

If then the terms themselves, insider and outsider, do not turn out to be very productive in helping understand questions such as these; if they are not even a convenient shorthand; if they cause more problems than they solve, another is needed: to capture the difference signified by Watson and Spencer; the difference that emerges from reading Daniel; the difference between the kind of intellectual production that produces itself empirically and objectively, as about mere understanding, or empirically and subjectively, as about biased understanding, both of which seek to comprehend, master the object and then inform the west about Sri Lanka, or the nonwest; and the kind, like Gunasinghe's, that seeks to intervene in Sri Lanka. Between the kind of intellectual production that proclaims itself to have no great stake in its object, but only in its discipline; and that to which the stakes – *understood as ethical and political as much as epistemological* – are huge. Between, in short, the colonial and the postcolonial. Even if the former inevitably informs the nonwest's perceptions of itself; if the latter, that is, is inevitably shaped by the powerful, authoritative western discourse. Put differently: Gunasinghe cannot be considered outside the west; no one who cites Althusser can. His work must be understood as speaking to both Sri Lanka and the west, though not equally. A Daniel would not be compelled to cite Gunasinghe's work – and doesn't – even though he must cite that of the anthropologists, like Spencer, who objectify Sri Lanka. So, then, if insider and outsider are not useful, a more supple term, I suggest, is abiding. It does much work for this study. And, quite serendipitously, finds its way into the title.

To the OED, to "abide" is to: "wait, stay"; "pause, delay"; "tarry over"; "remain (after others have gone)"; "continue"; "sojourn...dwell"; "to stand firm by...hold to...remain true to"; to "endure...encounter, withstand, or sustain" and, finally, to "suffer," even. To abide by a place, then, cannot be to physically reside in it. One cannot, after all, physically relate to a text. Rather, it means to display a commitment to attending to its concerns, to intervening within its debates, to taking a stand – to sticking that neck out if necessary, even at the risk of what might seem like permanent frustration. (Thus making it an accomplice of Spivak's call for "transnational literacy.") It means to display patience; to stay with it, endure it, work with it, even if it appears – and I speak, of course, of the question of peace in a textual object called Sri Lanka – unbearable, unending, unendurable. For, as anybody who has endured Sri Lanka over the past few decades could attest, it has been a tremendously frustrating affair. So, abiding by Sri Lanka also

means suffering it, whatever the consequences. Daniel's informants, the attentive reader would have noticed, apparently did so, apparently spoke to him "at grave risks to their lives." His position, of course, is quite different. His text does not seek to stand by Sri Lanka (perhaps with good reason, he has nothing to say to a place that cannot tell the difference between good and evil). Neither does Spencer: the writers in his collection, apparently, are objectivist; they do not, as noticed earlier, intend "to disprove or discredit any particular view of the national past."<sup>30</sup> Abiding by Sri Lanka would require this, require a stand. Unlike those of outsiders, to whom a relationship to place is temporary or unabiding, nonbinding; who, to be exact, comprehend place, empirically, as an object (of study), texts that abide conceive of place as subject. Or, to be precise, texts that abide see Sri Lanka as simultaneously object (of knowledge) and subject (of intervention). These texts not only abide by Sri Lanka; they are also, crucially, abided by it.

It also follows from all this, if you insist on asking the question, which really doesn't make much sense to a postempiricist, that a "person" can be physically "domiciled" in a place, without abiding by it and abide by a place without being domiciled in it. (The question does not make sense because what concerns this study is not scholars but scholarship, texts not authors. This paragraph is included, at some risk, in the interests of clarity.) Fieldwork, however long in duration, attending to native voices, however further they may be from the capital or dangerous the enterprise, is not central to the question of abiding by. Neither is subjectivity. The pivotal factor, quite simply, is whether the *text* addresses, feels itself accountable and responsible to, the questions and concerns *only* of the powerful epistemological space of the west or to those of Sri Lanka as well. That is to say, my concern in this study is not with the subjects who produce arguments, but with the arguments alone; not with the author, but the text. How exactly these questions and concerns matter will be made evident in the pages that follow. I will conclude this opening salvo with a few examples of other intellectuals and their relationship to Sri Lanka; it will help, again at some risk, establish my claim. The science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke would be someone who, according to geography, has been domiciled many decades in Sri Lanka, indeed taken citizenship, without abiding by it; he is not in the habit of speaking out on the question of peace, despite having published copiously in these decades. In this same sense, Gananath Obeyesekere has, all his adult/professional life, abided by Sri Lanka. Even though he has resided and been employed primarily in the United States, he has consistently – and courageously – intervened within its debates, spoken to its concerns, refused to simply represent the country to the west, to address merely western questions. Similar claims can be made about the work of David Scott, Michael Roberts and, to cite a perhaps perverse example, Adele Balasingham. To move away from Sri Lankan examples, Fanon comes immediately to mind. Though born in Martinique, he abided by Algeria, if not Africa. And, to cite one last instance, about another of the most inspiring intellectuals of our moment – Said, in relation to Palestine. Even though exiled from the place, even

though enjoying the privileges of U.S. citizenship, Said has spoken to Palestine consistently, often at great personal and professional risk, producing work that not just challenges Zionism and its (imperialist) allies *and* elements of the Palestinian resistance simultaneously but our conceptions of community, of the necessary conditions for peace, of what we may need to forget or forego, to forget *and* forego, in order to achieve it. His intellectual production and interventions, over a long and consistent career, serve as an exemplary instance of what it means to abide by a place.

But, now, this argument should perhaps be rephrased somewhat more precisely, since it is cortical to the entire study. Abiding is a *concept* which allows a distinction between *texts*. The distinction is one the texts themselves call for; thus making abiding a “level” of the text. The term is needed because, having read texts which proffer Sri Lanka as their object of study, a difference emerges between them. That is to say, I only noticed the difference after reading the texts themselves – after, as it were, reading Watson after reading Gunasinghe. Some see the country empirically, objectively, anti-discursively, as existing outside the text, and work to maintain this distinction, thus contributing to the further objectification of the country, to its production as only object; to its incarceration. They have a stake in, or abide by, only the west; these texts, regardless of their particular disciplinary allegiance, are anthropological in the structural sense: they distinguish between (intellectual) subject and native (informant), then *speak for* the native, take her place, rather than address her concerns; the debates they wish to address are eurocentric. Thus they reproduce relations of knowledge production that emerged with colonialism and cannot be considered postcolonial in the strict sense – regardless of their publication date. Others intervene within Sri Lanka, have a stake in the country, produce it as both object of study and as the subject of intervention. They *speak to* the problem of Sri Lanka. Explicitly or otherwise, these texts make the emergence of postcoloniality worthwhile. To capture this difference which emerges from my reading, which the texts themselves call for, I deploy the term abiding: understood as an epistemological relation to, or intervention within, a place which foregrounds, explicitly or otherwise, the ethical and political interests at stake in such a relation/intervention; as opposed to those which foreground the merely disciplinary, which either present themselves as objectivist and noninterventionary (Spencer) or subjectivist and noninterventionary (Daniel).

That said, it cannot surprise the reader that texts which abide by the country are the ones that really concern this study. It is in these texts – which constitute the country as a specific place – that the question of peace emerges as a problem in a manner that I want to address. But the one kind of text cannot be read without also reading the other, or western, those which objectify Sri Lanka, produce it as a place of violence. Given their authority, they inevitably shape the questions and contours of texts which speak to the country; indeed, they even help shape the contours of what is understood by peace. These other texts, of

course, must be considered a part of the discourse of eurocentrism – however much their “authors” might protest such categorization. Their texts represent Sri Lanka in the sense of being a proxy, put themselves in its place, make them a substitute for the country, rather than speak to it; indeed, they actually ignore the Sri Lankan debate, erase it even. In so doing, they reproduce a structure of knowledge production which emerged with colonialism, most exemplarily in the discipline of anthropology. They are, therefore, to be exposed, they must be opposed, by the postempiricist/postcolonial Sri Lankan leftist reader. So doing being a matter of necessity, not one of choice. For one thing, as said before, anthropology is the discipline that has dominated academic knowledge production on Sri Lanka in this epistemological moment. For another, casting one’s lot with postcoloniality does not leave an alternative. Therefore, now, Daniel’s *Charred Lullabies* is more closely scrutinized. It enables further clarification of what is at stake to this study in the distinction between that kind of text, which produces itself as the work of a native inhabitant but turns out to be that of a native informant, and the kind produced by a Gunasinghe, which abides by the country. Between those texts that, when they see Sri Lanka, see violence as the problem to be explained, produce Sri Lanka as a problem for a theory of difference, and those that find the problem as about politics, something that should concern us all. It also enables closing, if only provisionally, the critique of anthropology, without which this study cannot proceed. For what unites Watson, Daniel and Spencer is an essentially anthropological understanding of their object, of place and intellectual production. Without displacing such a conception of Sri Lanka, I cannot advance my own. To displace such a conception is to advance my own.

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## (Footnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> This is extracted from the "Introduction" to my *Abiding By Sri Lanka: On Peace, Place and Postcoloniality* (University of Minnesota Press: forthcoming).
- <sup>2</sup> Gunasinghe, 1996:204; emphasis added.
- <sup>3</sup> Gunasinghe, 1996:205.
- <sup>4</sup> To mention only Sri Lankanists I have had a drink with here, the others would include: Ananda Abeysekera, Mala de Alwis, R.A.L.H.Gunawardana, Rajan Hoole, Pradeep Jeganathan, Ram Manikkalingam, Vasuki Nesiah, Gananath Obeysekere, David Scott, Serena Tennekoon, Rajani Thiranagama and, most of all, Kumari Jayawardena.
- <sup>5</sup> Mowitt, 1992:3.
- <sup>6</sup> Derrida, 1978:281.
- <sup>7</sup> Derrida, 1978:288.
- <sup>8</sup> See Barthes (1977).
- <sup>9</sup> If it is about peace and democracy, of course, then abiding by Sri Lanka, in a larger or extended sense, is to address these questions, wherever they may arise, or theoretically.
- <sup>10</sup> This term is taken from Ranciere (1999), though its deployment here differs from his. It allows one to conceive of a relation of sameness and difference simultaneously.
- <sup>11</sup> See Jeganathan (1998).
- <sup>12</sup> Foucault, 1984:382.
- <sup>13</sup> When coded differently it is not the same object that will be perceived. Those who understand the problem as about terrorism, and those who understand it as national oppression or genocide, do not really see the same thing. That, from a postempiricist perspective, is why a problem exists in the first place.

<sup>14</sup> Watson, 1997:1.

<sup>15</sup> The problem with “experience” as an authorizer of knowledge is not just that it is a foundational category, as Joan Scott (1992) has argued, but that it sees such knowledge as outside language, signification and narrativization.

<sup>16</sup> See Foucault (1973).

<sup>17</sup> See Spivak (1988).

<sup>18</sup> Spencer, 1990:4. These are the people, the unit continues, “who will decide the fate of *all* attempts to find a peaceful settlement” to the conflict (emphasis added). This populist, romantic and anti-subalternist representation of subalternity betrays, of course, a most naïve understanding of power.

<sup>19</sup> Watson, 1997:1.

<sup>20</sup> Spencer, 1990:3.

<sup>21</sup> It has long been a fantasy of mine to write to some anthropology departments in the United States and ask their chiefs whether they would let me study their rituals. I don’t, of course, expect to get permission. What I wonder about is whether any of the letters would be replied to at all.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel, 1996:9.

<sup>23</sup> See Barthes, 1977.

<sup>24</sup> Spencer, 1990:4.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel, 1996:10. I prefer, by the way, to call this group “UpCountry Tamils.”

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Daniel’s text is at its most moving and intellectually rich when it works within this “bias” for a subaltern group. Unfortunately, though, this is not consistently done; and, in any case, signifies a commitment to a subjectivity and identity, rather than a politics. This is not to imply that the one is not implicated in the other, but it does further indicate why my sympathy for Daniel’s efforts is very limited.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel, 1996:10.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel, 1996:5.

<sup>29</sup> Appadurai, 1989:37.

<sup>30</sup> Spencer, 1990:4. This, by the way, is a serious misrepresentation of the work of two of his contributors, R.A.L.H.Gunawardana and Serena Tennekoon, who make powerful critiques of Sinhalese nationalism, critiques originally published in Sri Lanka that have made lasting impressions on the debate.

Animals think in pictures: Temple Grandin thought she was a cow: Everyone in the audience began to twitch in their seats. A woman whose son is autistic began to cry:

*“He does not recognize me, his own mother!”*

*“We are cannibals,” said a man to his wife, in a picture. He took a picture of the page of words and saved it for processing later.*

\*

THIS PERSON IS THE ‘STICKER,’ HIS JOB IS TO SLIT THE  
THROATS OF THE COWS AS THEY PASS BY ON THE  
ASSEMBLY LINE.

poem: movie: lamp: blast: shadow: reinvention

\*

*There is a false rumor that Confucius was a vegetarian and advised people not to use knives at the table because knives would remind them of the slaughterhouse.*

“Can we please have chopsticks?”

“In Japan they’re called *hashi*.”

“East Asian scholars who are from Iowa and Pittsburgh?”

“Ee-o-wah Peets-ber-goo-ruh”

“*hashi*?”

\*

THIS IS THE ‘KNOCKER,’ ADMINISTERING THE STUN BOLT  
TO THE COW’S BRAIN.

coarse wood the color of late afternoon: conjoined twins in paper envelope:  
little brothers: every pair one image: porous organic matter absorbing flavor of  
meat or attendant seasoning.

\*

*Chinese chopsticks, called kuai-zi (quick little fellows with bamboo heads), are  
9 to 10 inches long and rectangular with a blunt end.*

\*

IN THESE OPERATIONS, WHERE A MINUTE OF “DOWN TIME”  
CAN SPELL A LOSS OF MANY HUNDREDS OF DOLLARS.

“Everything in Asia is so old!”

At noon they have no shadows, but they are with their brothers—chronological  
peers for eternity. They should have no difficulty addressing each other with  
appropriate informality.

“The clay soldiers in their open tomb eat nothing but the light from the flashing  
cameras.”

If they could speak, they might choose to communicate in images. Being clay,  
they are porous and have passively absorbed the odor of death and the language  
of tourists.

“Each soldier is an individual.”

# REVIEWS





# **BLACK FREEDOM FIGHTERS IN STEEL: THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRATIC UNIONISM**

Ruth Needleman  
Cornell University Press, 2003

# **UNION WOMEN: FORGING FEMINISM IN THE UNITED STEELWORKERS OF AMERICA**

Mary Margaret Fornow  
University of Minnesota Press, 2003

“What if labor were not white and male?” This is a challenge that historian David Roediger has posed to labor historians and activists. What does it mean if “the coding of labor as white and male cannot be sustained?” He meant this question neither rhetorically nor fancifully. To the contrary, his formulation had a practical foundation; it had come in the wake of the release of data in 1995 by the U.S. Department of Labor that white men had indeed become a minority of the working-class and that they were projected to account for only one worker in three by 2005.<sup>1</sup> It is time, past time, that scholars and activists consider Roediger’s question, that we explore the consequences of a recomposed working-class in which women and workers of color make up the driving force.

These two new books provide us with a fine place to begin our explorations. They offer readers a fresh look at steelworkers, a group of workers that labor historians and activists have known well for more than a century. But these are not the steelworkers we think we know, the militant Homestead strikers of 1892 who faced down armed Pinkerton agents, the southern and eastern European immigrant laborers who waged dramatic battles against U.S. Steel in 1919 or Republic Steel in 1937, or even the determined blue collar heroes who held out for 116 days in 1959.<sup>2</sup> The steelworkers in these books have long histories, too, but their presence, their participation, and their struggles have largely been left out. They are African American men and white and African American women. They, too, have struggled for justice, on the job, in the union, and in their communities. And they have much to teach us.

These books are wonderfully parallel from their authorship to their conception and their construction. Each is the product of a long-term project undertaken by a senior woman scholar-activist, an organic intellectual.<sup>3</sup> Ruth Needleman has been a labor educator, based largely in Gary, Indiana, for more than a quarter-century. She has worked directly with the workers whose stories she tells and whose experiences she analyzes. Mary Fornow has toiled equally long in the trenches of Women’s Studies, and she has positioned herself squarely at the intersection this academic discipline and the experiences of working-class women who have sought to use the victories of the women’s movement to enhance

their opportunities and expand their power. Both authors rely heavily on oral interviews, a methodology which not only generates information and offers voice to those studied, but in very deep ways shapes the authors' perspectives. As organic intellectuals, Needleman and Fornow not only synthesize working-class experience and focus it, but they also produce new insights that are accessible to their long-time friends/subjects and their descendants, as intellectual and strategic weapons in their continuing struggles for racial, gender, and class justice.

*Black Freedom Fighters in Steel* is organized around the stories of five African American men, whose lives in the steel industry ranged from World War I to the present. Needleman has selected her subjects (she has interviewed many, many others over the years) in order to convey the ways that black experiences with steel changed over time, from southern-born migrants who came north and entered the industry during the strike of 1919 to second generation northern urban dwellers, who entered the mills with different educational and political backgrounds than their predecessors. She is especially interested in exploring the ways that these differences, and of course the differences in historical context (1919, the 1930s, and the post-WWII era), gave birth to different strategies for struggle. At the same time, Needleman insists – and provides ample evidence – that these were strategies for *struggle*, and that all these men, from the most soft-spoken and subtle to the most militant and assertive, were fighting for an improved environment for themselves and other African American workers. Moreover, the struggles of each generation – their defeats as well as their victories – created an experiential foundation for the next generation's struggles.

Such struggles did not only mean possible risks from the companies or from opponents within the unions. There were deeper risks as well, the kinds of risks that keep us up at night. These were all “race men.” They fought for a better life for the African American men with whom they worked and socialized. They organized with other black men, informally in homes and through social activities, formally, at times, in caucuses within their unions. They were also “union men.” They saw unionization as a means to empowerment, and the union as a vehicle for racial as well as economic justice. As hard as they fought *for* a union, they would fight *inside* the union and *against* union leadership if they found the union being used as an obstacle to racial justice. Sometimes these two universes coincided tightly, and black workers found their internal union struggles rewarded by making the union a stronger vehicle for battles for racial justice. But sometimes these men felt these two universes pull apart from each other, and they found themselves dangling precipitously over a yawning chasm. It was at such times that they struggled with difficult questions about cooptation and incorporation, with whether to accept union posts offered to them which might risk their grounding with other black workers. Needleman's study suggests that, even though these five men (and others) may have answered these questions differently, they all understood that being an African American activist in the labor movement meant to face these questions.

While *Union Women* is organized differently from *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel*, it is strikingly similar in its structure of feeling, its ambience, its core. Fornow's project took shape over three distinct periods: the mid-1970s, when, for her dissertation, she interviewed women hired at the Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Plant in Steubenville, Ohio, under the conditions of a court-directed affirmative action order issued in 1975; the mid-1980s, when she returned to the same group of women to examine the impact of deindustrialization on their jobs and lives; and the 1990s, when she explored the changing employment of women in former steel towns, particularly those who became members of the United Steelworkers of America, despite working in white collar or service jobs. Like Needleman, Fornow relied heavily on oral interviews, and, like Needleman, she consulted union records, attended union conventions and conferences, and conducted historical research into newspapers and magazines. And like Needleman, her primary concern is activism: what prompts it; what facilitates it; what blocks it; and what its consequences are.

The patterns Fornow sketches are much like those laid out by Needleman. Faced with entrenched structures of discrimination, women workers turned to both the law and the union in their quest for opportunity and justice. They turned to each other for moral and material support. When the union was reticent to champion their cause and represent their interests, they organized *within* the union, sometimes *against* the union leadership, and sometimes threatened to seek remediation *outside* the union, even if that meant going *against* the union. Among women workers as well as African American men, such measures were not contemplated lightly and they were rarely pursued. Most of the time, struggles were kept within the house of labor, often with the positive outcome of *transforming* the union into a more determined vehicle for gender and racial justice.

As with African American men, women steelworkers found self-organization critical to their efforts to increase their power in order to improve their situations. Since women workers were low in number in any one mill, they quickly turned to district-wide organization. They pursued the dual strategy of demanding the integration of women into the union's existing decision-making machinery and the creation of separate spaces where women could meet, discuss their common situations and interests, and develop strategies. They created conferences, produced a regional newsletter, and urged women to create committees within individual locals.

In at least one important area, women steelworkers enjoyed a material advantage over African American men, and Fornow devotes an entire chapter to it: the influence of Canadian steelworkers. She argues that "the presence of feminists and women activists within the New Democratic Party (NDP) had allowed feminist discourse to circulate more freely in Canadian labor circles than is the case in the United States." In the 1980s, Canadian women steelworkers created a *Women of Steel* educational leadership course, which soon morphed into an organization of the same name. Over the period of a few years, both the

course and the organization had crossed the border into the United States. By the early 1990s, the USWA had become home to one of the most visible women's labor formations in the U.S. labor movement.

As the North American steel industry sank deeper and deeper into the morass of deindustrialization, displaced women steelworkers moved into jobs in other industries within their communities. Many of them sought to maintain their USWA affiliations, and the union began to represent clerical workers, health care workers, and other white collar and pink collar women. These women maintained their union identification *and* their independent organization, and they continued to seek to wield the union as a vehicle for economic and social justice in their lives and their communities.

African American male steelworkers had rather different experiences. They bore the brunt of deindustrialization. As mills closed in Birmingham, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Gary, Homestead, Braddock, and Chicago, they not only lost their jobs but also found little path into a hopeful economic future for themselves or their sons and grandsons. Needleman writes: "It had taken black workers almost a century to lay claim to their rights to equal opportunity and treatment. The legacy they hoped to pass down to the next generation vanished."<sup>4</sup> But Needleman does not end here, neither does Fornow, nor should we. There is a living legacy of struggle in these books, in these stories, in these workers' experiences.

Both Needleman and Fornow try to carry their analyses into the contemporary global economy. Needleman argues that we can find in the struggles of African American steelworkers for inclusion, empowerment, and justice templates and models for projects to extend existing unions to part-time, temporary, contingent, immigrant, and home workers, and to build international labor organizations that respect multiracialism and diversity. Fornow argues that struggles by women members of the United Steelworkers can provide a foundation for unions to make alliances with social movements and coalitions with groups fighting for social justice. She cites a resolution passed at the Steelworkers' 30<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Convention in 2000:

Keeping allies means being an ally. If we expect community, religious, student, women's, and civil rights, environmental groups and organized workers in other countries to support us in opposing a workplace closing or conducting an organizing drive, then we need to reciprocate when it is time to pass a civil rights ordinance or march for childcare or deliver a message to a corporation.<sup>5</sup>

It seems utterly appropriate to me that as I complete my review of these two books, there is a meeting going on one floor above my college office. It is chaired by a young woman organizer from United Steelworkers of America, District 11, and it features an ethnically indio labor activist from the Sinaltrainal Union which has been fighting to represent Coca-Cola workers in Colombia. The audience consists largely of Macalester College students. Together, they are determined to push Coca-Cola off college campuses across the U.S. and across

the world, as part of an effort to support these Colombian workers' struggle to gain economic and social justice from one of the world's largest transnational corporations.<sup>6</sup> Here we find a living legacy of the African American men interviewed by Ruth Needleman and the women interviewed by Mary Fornow, and here, perhaps, we find an answer to David Roediger's question.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Roediger, "What If Labor Were Not White and Male? Recentering Working Class History and Reconstructing Debates on Race and the Unions," originally in *International Labor and Working Class History* 51 (Spring 1997), reprinted as revised in *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). References to book version, pp. 182 and 292 (fn). Data cited from Howard Fullerton, Jr., "The 2005 Labor Force: Growing, But Slowly," *Monthly Labor Review*, 118 (November 1995), p. 30, and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics news release, February 9, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> For the history of steelworkers in America, see Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills*, edited and introduced by Tille Olsen (NY: The Feminist Press, 1972); Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992); Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976); David Brody, *Steelworkers in America, The Non-Union Era* (NY: Harper, 1960); David Brody, *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965); Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jack Metzgar, *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000)

<sup>3</sup> I draw on George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), pp. 9-11, for the best elaboration of Gramsci's notion of organic intellectual.

<sup>4</sup> *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel*, p. 210. See the documentary film "Struggles in Steel" (California Newsreel, 1996); also John Hinshaw, *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth Century Pittsburgh* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel*, p. 236; *Union Women*, p. 198

<sup>6</sup> For more on this campaign, see <<http://www.unionvoice/campaign/stopkillercoke>>

**Peter Rachleff**

## YEGHISHE CHARENTS: POET OF THE REVOLUTION

Marc Nichanian, editor (with the collaboration of Vartan Matiossian)

Mazda Publishers, 2003

Yeghishe Charents (1897-1937) was Armenia's national poet in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and remains one of the two most read, cited and recited poets of the far-flung Armenian diaspora. Yet he was a cosmopolitan. The poets to whose work he constantly alluded in his verse include, but are not limited to, Dante, Goethe, Pushkin, Poe (a particular favorite of his early years), Baudelaire, Heine, Mayakovsky, Pasternak and Mandelstam. They also include a tenth century monk and poet (Grigor Narekatzi), an eighteenth century poet-composer (Sayat Nova), a twentieth century folklorist and composer (Komitas) and the finest lyricist in modern Armenian (Vahan Terian). Like Charents, the collective authors of this volume review work across cultural frontiers. Two are Americans; eight are diasporic Armenian scholars who work in the US, France, and Argentina; and two are from Armenia. This is the first work of literary scholarship that achieves a transnational construction of knowledge about a poet who was with unusual effectiveness both national and transnational.

Charents navigated with, against and across the cultural and political currents of his time. He was a Communist when Communism was genuinely multinational and multicultural, attracting people of all the nations of the emerging Soviet Union and beyond. The cultural debates in which he was involved focused on what a revolutionary socialist art could be, other than merely socialist-realist. His poetry is, among other things, a profound meditation on the relations of truth and power in what eventually evolved into the terrifying Stalinist context. It is also a sustained deliberation on how not to betray revolution in the name of art or poetry in the name of revolution – on how *not* to permit political commitments to dictate simplistic literary commitments. Furthermore, while always the poet of a revolution that crossed cultural and national state boundaries, and without being a crudely parochial nationalist, Charents also cared intensely about Armenian poetry in the Soviet and international contexts. Much of his later work enacts ways in which poetry can cherish and must draw upon its linguistic and cultural traditions without reifying them as icons of a crude nationalism, as barriers to interaction with the *weltliteratur* whose outlines his hero, Goethe, had sketched in his conversations with Eckermann in the late 1820s.

Though well-read, Charents did not lead a bookish and sheltered life. During World War I, at eighteen, he fought in an Armenian volunteer battalion attached to the Russian Army against the Ottoman Turks who were engaged in the genocide of their Armenian subjects. His first significant work of poetry, *Danteakan araspel* (“Danteesque Legend”) “belongs to the literary expression of World War I,” as the poet and memoirist Peter Balakian affirms in this volume.

Though the victims of mass rape and mass murder he saw were Armenians, his poetry focuses not on the national aspect of the tragedy but on the nameless victims and on the horrified poet's struggle to convey horror without succumbing to the emotions it engenders. A woman, raped and slashed to death, is "naked/the blood-stained mouth holding a laugh, open like a hole, smelling of fear." The hole, invoking the laughter that it will never again utter, the violated vagina, and the grave, is the sort of concrete universal that is both embedded in a historical moment and transcends it, naming all similar horrors.

Three years later, Charents fought as a volunteer in the Communist forces that struggled with the remnants of tsarist armies for control of the northern Caucasus. Out of that carnage came *Ampokhner'e Khelagalar* ("The Frenzied Masses"). As a boy of fourteen, I used to rock back and forth as I half-read and half-recited its hypnotic, incantatory verse, sharing with thousands of other Armenian readers a linguistic experience that was and remains intoxicating. In the to and fro of its rhythms the armed masses move against each other across fields and villages in flames, banners and bayonets and the ardor of revolution above them. Its untranslatable cascade of sound and its images of collective violence far surpass Christopher Logue's *Iliad*. They function without Achilles or Hector, with no individual heroes, just the masses drawn to the sacrament of revolutionary violence. The editor's own contributions to this volume effectively explore Charents' fascination with sacrificial death and its religious overtones, a central component of both Armenian and revolutionary art. This fascination eventually encountered the obscenity of Stalinist mass death, which sought to make sacrifice meaningless.

Charents became a major figure in the Soviet Union, was befriended by the likes of Gorky, celebrated, lionized, then chastised in Soviet Armenia by its Communist leadership for not producing according to plan, told to tour Europe, told to come back, was made head of the writer's union, deposed, placed under house arrest, tormented for years, then murdered by Stalin's police. In twenty-five years as a working artist, he produced six substantial volumes of poetry and much prose: narrative, letters and important essays. He was addicted to morphine after a painful illness. He had numerous Bohemian affairs, shot and wounded a lover who spurned him, and arguably imagined in his verse love between men. In the grip of youthful Futurism and Communism, he wrote some bad poetry while rejecting the allegedly bourgeois past of national art. Doing so, he "merely opposes a set of abstract counters to a richly elaborated tradition, effectively confirming the power of the tradition he [was] out to destroy, rather like a little boy kicking his father in the shins," as Geoffrey Goshgarian observes in his shrewd analysis of modernization in Armenian literature and in Charents's work.

In the nearly seventy years since his death, the after-life of the poet, the struggles over the reception of his work by various audiences in homeland and diaspora have been impassioned. Critics have tried to claim him for Communism; for a failed but purer revolution; for nationalism; or as an icon of the universal

poetic soul so dear to some humanists. In one of the best analyses of the poet's abiding concerns I've ever read, Nichanian (professor of Armenian Studies at Columbia University) shows in his Introduction how the Stalinists who murdered him and others, including nationalist intellectuals, sought to claim, recover, recuperate, rehabilitate and appropriate the poet for their causes, always vainly, always doing violence to the characteristic and persistent tensions generated in Charents's work by the cohabitation of the cross-cultural and the national (Nichanian remains embarrassed about the latter, confusing all adherence to the national with nationalism).

This volume both encompasses and goes beyond the struggles over appropriation in ways that matter to the shared concerns of all readers interested in the trajectories of cross-cultural poetry. Nichanian launches – though he does not work through – a suggestive exploration of the role of Charents' work in the Armenian diaspora as a model “of an ongoing effort to redefine diaspora” – any diaspora, not just the Armenian – “as the invisible yet inevitable intermediary of a world literature in the moment of its self-constitution.” Equally important, he recognizes that Charents's oeuvre relentlessly addresses the insoluble dilemma of politically engaged art everywhere, be it in Nicaragua or Armenia, namely the problem of creating poetry that wishes to serve a popular revolution yet remain aesthetically ambitious and complex. After Mayakovsky's suicide, Charents wrote that “his greatest tragedy resides precisely in the fact that ... as an aesthete [he] was incapable of transcending himself in a new synthesis of modernity and aesthetic complexity.” It's a prophetic description of the difficulties he and others faced after the mid-1920s. In a subtle essay on these issues, the Parisian poet and critic Krikor Beledian traces the ways in which Charents variously and explicitly engaged three contending forces that construct this dilemma: the importance of the material world as underlined by Marx; of theory (“systematic wisdom/severe as Lenin himself”, Charents wrote); and of unsystematic subjectivity constructed by individual experience and imagination:

You are alive, you are breathing, you exist. But you are different  
every second.  
Your present becomes the past – you are different every second.  
But your present is the seed of the future; dying, it feeds the future.  
And thus you last, you endure – and you are different every second.

(From the *Rubaiyat* of 1928, which has as much to do with Heraclitus as Omar Khayyam)

Nichanian locates in Charents's sustained poetic meditations on poetry what he calls a work of mourning for certain inevitable failures. The engaged poet must try to synthesize systemic-political, experiential-subjective, and aesthetic truth, but under the conditions of popular revolution must fail, again and again, with

one or more of these truths as casualties. His beloved Dante had done better, capturing the conflicts between the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor and within the Italian city states in the amber of his verse – but that was only possible because he was not under the obligation to be accessible to the revolutionary masses – only to write in the Italian vernacular of an emerging high culture.

In a fine essay titled “The Armenian counterculture that never was,” James Russell (professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard) reflects on Charents’ career, from the publication of his first poem at age fifteen to the scraps of his unpublished work that family and admirers literally buried in order to hide them from Stalin’s police. From juvenilia to exhumed, posthumous work, Russell shows, Charents worked with an extraordinary repertoire of Armenian and other forms. He went through stages of Symbolism, Modernism, and something called Imaginism and Futurism-Constructivism, experimenting with forms ranging from the sonnet to the Armenian minstrel style to epic to autobiographical verse. His *Charents-nameh* (The Book of Charents) is the artist’s autobiography written at ... twentyfive. Russell rightly makes the comparison with Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, then available in the Soviet Union. Far from megalomaniacal self-indulgence, this self-confident and accomplished work constructs its title in an analogy with the Persian *Shah-nameh*, the Book of Kings whose myth and history are the foundation of Persian poetry. (Charents’s family hailed from the Armenian diaspora of Persia and had migrated to the Russian-held provinces of Armenia. He took pleasure in this “Oriental” connection). In this work, Charents does not “proletarianize Iranian epic” but rather audaciously presents himself as the bard for a people that deserves a non-royal epic of nobility without noblemen. Here, Charents eludes the danger of declamatory nationalism. His “people” is not exactly coextensive with the nation of Armenian nationalism. It consists of those who survive genocide – aimed at the destruction of a nation – and build a new supranational society based on Communism, which drew together the nations of the Soviet Union, at least for a while.

Here and in what some regard as his masterpieces, *Epikakan Lusabats* (Epic Daybreak, 1930) and *Girk Janaparhi* (Book of the Road, 1934), Charents uses traditional styles from the Armenian folk-epic to situate himself as the poet of ordinary people capable of extraordinary acts. More than any Armenian writer known to me, he was open to the possibilities of the actual lives people led. In a time of censorship practiced both by the Soviet police and Armenian caution, Charents found ways of representing a kaleidoscopic variety of cross-cultural behaviors: heroic, quotidian, quasi-pornographic, homosexual, anti-semitic and Christian, in Russell’s generous accounting. Between 1934, as censorship and police persecution became systemic, and his execution in 1937, he explored both the slow, hallucinatory strangulation of a culture’s way of life and the possibilities the poet imagined for his people. Russell hints at the ways in which “there budded an Armenian counterculture” in Charents’s work that was denied by brute force.

“One must mourn him for all his free spirit promised us, all we lost, all the art, the songs in new forms unwritten.”

This mourning for a counterculture that never was, that emerged in America in Whitman’s work and then in Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, according to Russell – only Whitman and Ginsberg are plausible – is taken up differently in Nichanian’s concluding essay on myth, history and mourning. Elsewhere, he has written at length on mourning, literature and the Armenian genocide. Here, he adapts that work in order to sketch Charents’s coming to the conviction that Armenian national “myth must die so that there can be history.” But this was followed, Nichanian argues, by the startled recognition that at least one, “the myth of resurrection,” may never die, and will always return as “resurrection of the myth.”

Finally, the key task of bearing Charents across cultures and to the educated American reader requires us to recall what makes it hard: the changing situation of poetry in the US itself. In the nineteenth century, poets like Whitman, who had met Lincoln and whose elegy on the murder of Lincoln, along with his photograph, was endlessly reprinted in American newspapers, had a public if not explicitly political role and place in the culture. In the twentieth century, as that role declined, poets like Allan Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka and perhaps Frank O’Hara sought to reclaim a fraction of it, wrote to and about America, or at least a substantial group of Americans defined by race, sex, or sexual orientation; Adrienne Rich became briefly the bard of a certain kind of feminism. But a more obliquely political poetry of private life and interiority, inspired perhaps by Dickinson, became the American norm. By contrast, for two centuries, until 1991, the end of communism and the full assault of consumerist globalization on Armenian culture, poetry had an exceptional place in that culture. The major poets – endlessly cited, quoted in fragments to support all sorts of ideological practices – had the role that Whitman may have aspired to in the nineteenth century. They could and did conceive of themselves as addressing a nation, even when writing lyric, meditative verse. They wrote in tones that were national, not necessarily nationalist in any crude sense. Charents was the poet of a political revolution – Communism – who became the national poet of a revolution in Armenian poetry that in this book at last receives the fully transnational gaze it merits.

**Khachig Tololyan**

## SPECTRES OF 1919: CLASS AND NATION IN THE MAKING OF THE NEW NEGRO

Barbara Foley  
University of Illinois Press, 2003

After reading the phrase “the crucible of 1919” one too many times, I did begin to wonder just what the spectre of a crucible might look like. But, mixed metaphor aside, *Spectres of 1919* is an extraordinarily valuable addition to the growing scholarship recasting our view of modernism and the politics of aesthetics in the first half of the twentieth century. Since Mark Naison’s *Communists in Harlem* we have had the benefit of a stream of well-researched revisionist studies of the Leftist influence in Modernism in general and the radical strand of African American cultural thought in particular. Especially useful volumes have included those by Cary Nelson, Walter Kalaidjian, Anna Everett, James Smethurst (who has a new study of the Blacks Arts Movement headed through press as I write), William Maxwell and Winston James. Barbara Foley, whose earlier book *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* has already gone a long way towards redirecting the debates around the much-maligned category of proletarian literature, here takes up a number of the central debates around the Harlem Renaissance.

Like Winston James, Foley advances a serious critique of Alain Locke’s version of the “New Negro” and of the literary movements associated with that trope. Like Cary Nelson, she has gathered together and reproduced stunning illustrations from the journals and papers of the day. Like Wilson Moses, Foley demonstrates the persistence of “a conservative black nationalism—civilizationist, genteel, mystical, acculturationalist” that had long been “a staple of African-American politics” and that serves as the context for Locke’s oft referenced assertion that “the Negro” is “a ‘forced radical,’ a social protestant rather than a genuine radical.” While Locke’s remark may seem perfectly rational to anyone who has spent much time in black protestant congregations, those same congregations are marked by a constant unsettling of the very set of assumptions hallowed in Locke’s classic formulation. In this book, Foley sets out to demonstrate, and largely succeeds, the wide-spread influence of radical ideas in the years following the first World War (Attorney General Palmer, he of the Palmer Raids, was heard to complain that “The Negro is ‘seeing red’”), and the extent to which what we now term “culturalism” (Winston James’s complaint is that Locke replaced the radical black with the figure of the black artist) was the “dialectical counterpart” or loyal opposition of radicalism.

Along the way there are numerous small revelations. I had not known, for example, that Garvey’s *Negro World* had thought Warren G. Harding “a friend of the Negro people,” had established a friendly relationship with Lothrop Stoddard

(author of *The Rising Tide of Color*, a book much admired by Fitzgerald's Tom Buchanan), and had joined in efforts to blame the African Blood Brotherhood for the horrific Tulsa riots of 1921. (We also learn here that Stoddard had lumped together futurism, cubism, vorticism and interest in West African art as a "revolt against civilization," a judgement that lives on in contemporary attacks in the culture wars.) It was news to me, and disturbing news at that, to learn that Floyd Dell, a key figure to students of Modernism, in a review of the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, declared, "I believe there is a Negro way of looking at a sunset." This was a sentiment he shared with any number of African American writers who held that "the Negro ... is an instinctive poet," but in Foley's view that's exactly part of the problem. I had previously been unaware of Alfred Kreyborg's "Red Chant," dedicated to black poet Fenton Johnson. Neither had I known before reading Foley's remarkable history that among the things that a secret British government report found threatening about A. Philip Randolph's *Messenger* was its excellent diction.

There are also, inevitably, minor dissonances. In one place, for example, Foley remarks the "covert but no less embedded anticommunism premised in the postmodernist antipathy to totalization." It is certainly the case that an opposition to totalization would lead one away from Marx at some point, but it is hardly the case that opposition to totalization is necessarily complicit with promotion of a myth of the typical 1920s author "as an alienated recluse from historical process and political praxis." (And this formulation tends to elide totalizing anticommunists on the Left such as C.L.R. James, who was closely aligned for a time with such subsequent anti-totalizing postmoderns as Lyotard.) When, on the following page, Foley applauds the "recent wresting of modernism away from the legacy of the New Critics and the New York intellectuals," she does not note that this wresting away, and with it the insistence on the "nonerasure of the Left," has in some significant part been accomplished by many of the same critics who indeed have severe questions about totalizing philosophies.

These, though, are minor quibbles when weighed against the major accomplishment of this book as much-needed revisionist history. Many others have remarked Locke's culturalist turn, but Foley's contribution is to chart convincingly the internal contradictions that help us to understand "fully how the New Negro class struggle warrior of 1919 could reemerge as the culture hero of the Harlem Renaissance." Foley poses a rhetorical question, which she proceeds to answer in the affirmative. "Did various features of the Left's own formulation of the relation of race to class and of class to nation contribute to the substitution of culturalism for class struggle?" Among these features were leftist debates over "self-determinationist nationalism," a debate that continues today in the work of such artist/activists as Fred Ho. A particularly powerful element among the leftist contradictions was what Foley terms "metonymic nationalism," which she defines as "a representational practice that treats a social group within a nation as empowered to signify the larger totality that is the nation." In the evolution of the

culturalism that haunts the Harlem Renaissance, this leads to a mode of nationalism that perpetuates the very essentialist view of racial difference that “these critics hoped to eradicate by asserting the Negro’s claim to full citizenship.” Symptomatic of this tendency is Locke’s essentialist privileging of the folk, and the “soilism” Foley finds attendant upon that privileging, trends that remain in evidence in the writings of the latter half of the twentieth century; witness the broad turn from novels of urban experience to fables of the southern past, replete with dialect, that became so popular in the post-Black Arts era (or, I suggest with some trepidation, contemporary white academia’s fascination with Rap) .

Crucial to Foley’s estimation of the culturalist turn is her insistence that Locke’s views were marked by the limitations of the leftist thought of his time (and perhaps of ours, she implies more than once). This is neither to dismiss Locke or the left; Foley hopes to bring much closer scrutiny and appreciation to both. It is, though, to draw powerful and humbling lessons for our comprehensions of our cultural past and for our ambitions for our mutual futures.

**Aldon Lynn Nielsen**

## PARIS, CAPITAL OF MODERNITY

David Harvey  
Routledge, 2003

David Harvey's *Paris, Capital of Modernity* is a study of how individuals, culture and socio-economic processes redefined the city of Paris in the Nineteenth Century, and how that city and its people contested and developed what was to become the modern age. The book documents the struggles between Monarchists and Republicans, Labor and the Bourgeoisie, craftworks and industry, and the variety of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries attempting to shape the city and the body politic of Paris. The battles take place on the streets, in the houses of government, in literature, and in memories, as the city, in the midst of unprecedented growth, convulsed under its traditions and its efforts to forge a new Paris. The conflicts are discussed with an eye to the effect their changes had on the living conditions of Paris's inhabitants, as well as the legacy the city bestowed on its contemporary incarnations. Harvey shows how the dreams and spectacles of Paris, its utopias and grand plans, and the struggles that accompanied them, helped shape today's urban identity, geography and consciousness.

For David Harvey, the geographer and urbanist, known for his work on uneven economic development, these contests are summed and rendered as competing visions of modernity. The first vision, writes Harvey, was "...thoroughly bourgeois. It was founded on the rock of private property and sought freedoms of speech and of action in the market, and the kind of liberty and equality that goes with money power." The second, "far less coherent... was founded on the idea of a social republic, capable of nurturing the population as a whole and dealing with the conditions of impoverishment and degradation in which the majority of the French people, both in the countryside and the burgeoning cities, lived." These competing visions are drawn variously sharp and diffused in the book's abundant maps, charts, and passages of nineteenth-century French literature.

Divided into two parts, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* is mainly a compilation of Harvey's earlier writings with a new introduction and some revisions. The lion's share of this book, "Part Two: Materializations: Paris 1848-1870" (247 pages) is a slightly edited version of the author's historical-geographical analysis of Second Empire Paris, which appeared in *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (John Hopkins University Press and Basil Blackwell, 1985).

The first section, "Part One: Representations: Paris 1830-1848" begins with "The Myths of Modernity: Balzac's Paris," an essay published twice in the recent edited monographs, *Cosmopolitan Geography* (Routledge, 2001), and *After Images of the City* (Cornell University Press, 2002). It closes with a new essay titled, "Dreaming the Body Politic: Revolutionary Politics and Utopian Schemes, 1830-1848." Together, these two essays in part one focus the author's case study

of Second Empire Paris, which began on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1976, around the cultural climate of Paris, its art and literature, rather than the scaffolding of Marxist analysis, which bound *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*. The “Paris 1848-1870” section, in its earlier manifestation, was positioned to anchor what has become one of Harvey’s major contributions to urban sociology: the foregrounding of spatial relations in the effort to understand the material development of a city and its modes of production. Here, seventeen years later, the author reconditions it. The essay is wrapped in a different mantle, to draw out the cultural archaeology of the modern.

To be sure, Marx’s presence is still large. Marx’s quotes still open each of the chapters of Harvey’s review of Paris’s material history, his analysis of the credit finances, and his analysis of the deindustrialization of the urban core. His essay is basically unchanged, but in this version, we see a more richly illustrated exhibit, with numerous reproductions by the photographer, Charles Marville, who was commissioned by Georges-Eugène Haussmann to document Second Empire Paris during its “creative destruction,” and a collection of insightful illustrations from Honoré Daumier, whose social-satirical drawings serve Harvey as a barometer of the rising pressures in Louis Bonaparte’s empire of law, order, and progress. The use of Daumier is so prevalent that a short analysis of his social impact might demonstrate the use of his illustrations, especially in light of the new recognition of his work in the realm of fine art.

Also in this version, prefacing what was once a case study for the virtues of his materialist analysis, Harvey chooses to explore the shifting sentiments, narratives and dreams contained in what he calls the “Parisian archive.” Among the volumes of files on Paris tucked away, in the histories, stories and detritus, Harvey finds the kernels of the modern, in utopian thought, urban literature and revolutionary pamphlets.

So while we are still treated to another view of the flow of capital, credit, and labor across the city, in a time when the streets became alternately sites of insurrection and monuments of empire, this time, the materialist analysis fades behind the interplay of personalities and ideas contesting those same sites. James Rothchild, Balzac, Daumier, Proudhon, Flaubert, Courbet, Louis Bonaparte, Thiers, and Blanqui, emerge, along with statistical renderings of the every-man and -women, to become the avatars the author uses to deftly weave the tangled archive. And no personality is annotated as colorfully as Haussmann. In him, Harvey seizes upon the “towering figure...” who “...dominates the state apparatus of Paris throughout the Second Empire...” Harvey traces his path down his boulevards and across his plazas, until the master planner is himself toppled, like the Vendôme Column, in a paradoxical instance of creative destruction. Haussmann’s fall however is not solely attributed to the Communards, but the responsibility is instead shared between his foes and friends as well as the social system that banked his fortune.

Harvey’s method this time is to “convey some sense of the totality of what the city was about through a variety of perspectives on material life, on

cultural activities, on patterns of thought within the city.” With this, the subject of this volume (modern urban consciousness and the idea of a body politic) is explored through a display of the contesting imaginations of capitalists and socialists, and workers and consumers. In part one, Harvey writes, “The period between 1830 and 1848 in France was incredibly rich in ideas about alternatives. It was the period when both socialism and communism began to take shape intellectually as well as politically. There was a general unsettling of thought. All manner of different visions and speculative possibilities were opened.” Harvey believes that the sociological imagination is vital for social change. This idea was articulated in his *Spaces of Hope* (University of California Press, 2000), “Critical reflection on our imaginaries entails...confronting the hidden utopianism and resurrecting it in order to act as conscious architects of our fates rather than ‘helpless puppets’ of the institutional and imaginative worlds we inhabit. If...we accept that ‘society is made and imagined,’ then we can also believe that it can be ‘remade and reimagined’.” The coming of this imagination is documented through an analysis of Flaubert and Balzac. “Rightly or wrongly, Balzac, along with many of his time (such as the utopian thinkers and urban theorists who sought an adequate reconstruction of the city), believed they could possess their city and make it their own, and in remaking it, remake themselves if not the social order.”

After this new preface the “Paris 1848-1870” section becomes an exposé on how the social visions of revolutionaries were negotiated to suit the dreams of empire. He writes in chapter two, “It was, we might infer, the idea of the city as a body politic that got smashed in 1848 and then interred in the commercial world of commodification and spectacle in Second Empire Paris.” If this sounds familiar it is because Harvey issues a similar assessment of Baltimore in *Spaces of Hope*.

Consider this in difference to the goals for the “Paris 1848-1870” section in *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*, which was published with the companion volume, *The Urbanization of Capital*. In 1985, these volumes focused implicitly on geography’s relation to economic production and the activities of the state, and parenthetically on the implications of those conditions on consciousness. In that pre- *Spaces of Hope* version, the dialectics of historical-geographical materialism were laid out at the onset in scientific terms. Modernity’s takes on space, time, and money were theorized, and the Paris case study was later used to establish the validity of those arguments: to document how capitalist societies must build the city to accommodate the circulation and accumulation of capital. Here, the changes in urban consciousness, as evidenced in literature before and after the revolution of 1848, are discussed as a way of foregrounding Harvey’s picture of social change and urban development.

How, one might ask, does the same text serve these different purposes? The “Paris 1848-1870” essay’s flexibility is derived from what some detractors of its debut admonished, its reliance on personal characterizations and its loose knit organization. Charles Tilly’s review in *Journal of Urban History* (May, 1988) stops short of accusing Harvey of abandoning his theoretical aims, but charges;

the actual accounts of Paris stress “political motives and conflicts rather than the logic of capital.” Ivan Szelenyi writes in *Contemporary Sociology* (September, 1986), “Harvey’s strategy is not to refute or go beyond ‘supposedly outdated Marxian formulations, but simply through the proper application of Marx’s own method’ to develop ‘from fragmentary comments’ and ‘hints’ in the Marxian oeuvre the Marxist apparatus and make it suitable for historical-geographical analysis.” Joe Feagin (*Sociological Forum*, Spring, 1987) calls the books “very disorganized and disjointed” because there are essentially two things going on.

The first is Harvey’s attempt to show how debt financing and capital construction projects were used by the Second Empire to solve the crisis of unemployment and other social problems. The scheme, which eventually collapses, according to Harvey, was disaster prone due to contradictions in the logic of capital rather than mismanagement of the state. To illustrate the effect of capital circulation and accumulation on Paris, Harvey employs the studies and figures of the economic historians (notably those of Louis Chevalier and Adeline Daumard). These help connect how the motion of capital altered the human geography of Paris. But critics were nonplussed. John Urry (*Antipode*, 20, 1, 1988) wrote the chapters “are rather uneven and some repeat material [sic]...is to be found in Harvey’s many other writings.” He continued, “the attempt to force all the material into a Marxist framework does not succeed. His own data on Paris shows the limitations of an orthodox perspective. He is forced to add trends, concepts and theories in an ad hoc fashion...” In the late 1980’s, in fact, nearly all critics cite the Paris chapter’s dual motives in their reviews.

The subtext of “Paris 1848-1870” the first time was to discover the changes in the way modern people viewed each other. He sought to learn how they represented themselves and others to themselves and others, and to discover how they pictured the contours of Parisian society and comprehended their social and spatial position and the radical transformations in progress. Harvey, in the first instance, wanted to know how the Parisian representations he studied transposed, and were used and shaped in the rhetoric of political discourse. But it was not until this reincarnation that they were truly brought to the surface. Here, Harvey attempts to draw both a map of Parisian political economy and then interlock this map with a map of the nineteenth-century Parisian mind. To Harvey’s credit, the overlays mesh at times, but the nature of the exercise demands the instances of congruency remain ephemeral, a characteristic Harvey admits, after Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, may in fact be desired.

This time Harvey writes in the introduction, “The most interesting urban writing is often of a fragmentary and perspective sort” as it is difficult to see the totality as well as the parts. The city implores us to think multi-dimensionally, to avoid wooden theories that “eviscerate the richness and complexity of what the urban experience is about.” Yet Harvey does not wish to abandon his former theme, instead he presses on “into the materiality of social processes, while acknowledging the power and significance of discourses and perceptions in the

shaping of social life and the historical-geographical inquiry.” The result is awkward, and the reader would most likely benefit from reading the introductory chapters from the earlier publication the “Paris 1848-1870” section. There, the significance of Harvey’s attention to time, railways, money, and credit is explained. A fuller edition might combine both sets of introductory chapters and perhaps even some of *Spaces of Hope*, so that both of Harvey’s most powerful contributions to sociology, historical-geographic analysis and dialectical utopianism can be properly illustrated by a versatile mining of the Parisian archive. Until the third edition is released readers are recommended to indulge in the growing Harvey archive.

**David Michalski**

**WORKING WOMEN IN MEXICO CITY:  
PUBLIC DISCOURSES AND MATERIAL CONDITIONS,  
1879-1930**

Susie S. Porter

University of Arizona Press, 2003

It is something of a commonplace for observers of Mexico to note that the country is riddled with stark contrasts and confusing intersections between modernity and tradition, and between official and unofficial national cultures, histories and politics. Mexican labor history is no different, especially as regards the circumstances of working class women, whose traditionally circumscribed roles within the sexual division of labor have long been grist for the modern capitalist mill. The most salient current example of this is, of course, the predominant use of women as cheap labor in Mexico's northern *maquiladoras*, where transnational capital has sought to instrumentalize the culture of *marianismo* – the docile, selfless, and long-suffering traditional femininity modeled on the Virgin Mary – in order to maintain a low-wage and union-free workplace. In her *Working Women in Mexico City*, Susie Porter demonstrates that this strategy, as well as a range of coordinate tactics, both pre-dates the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and continues thereafter at the urban center of modern Mexico, despite real gains for women in the workplace in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Porter's study documents the female industrial workforce in Mexico City from the years of the *Porfiriato*, the long dictatorial presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910), and into the revolutionary period and its aftermath. Using census data as her primary source of economic data, Porter begins by describing the extent of women's officially documented participation in a variety of industrial sectors – including textile and clothing manufacturing, cigarette and cigar production, and the expanding consumer goods industries. She then offers an account of how working women's social class, identity and workplace struggles for improved wages and labor conditions were shaped in the public discourse of the day. Porter's discussion of the construction of working women in public discourse constitutes the bulk of the study, and offers the most interesting insights into the pre-history of today's *maquila* conditions.

During her selected period of study, Porter finds a decline in the traditional female dominance of labor in the tobacco industry (which, interestingly, had dated to the Spanish Crown's tobacco monopoly and the colonial practice of hiring outside the guild system – which meant employing much cheaper indigenous and women laborers, both of whom were systematically excluded from the guilds.) Also during this period, the clothing industry expanded, initially financed by government contracts for military and police uniforms for the Díaz regime, a development that allowed for continued high participation rates for women in the

needle trades and clothing production generally. In addition, women workers entered increasingly into other industrial settings, where they typically provided unskilled labor at a fraction of the wages paid to their male counterparts.

In the contemporary news media, political pamphlets, petitions for redress of workplace grievances and letters from individual women to the Mexican authorities, Porter finds evidence of a consistent moral frame for articulating concerns about women's labor. Women's entry into the workforce was linked in 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse to the perceived endangerment of women's sexual morality by industrialization, via the mixed-sex workplace and middle class desire for luxury goods (and hence purchasing power). Although the revolutionary period brought with it greater labor agitation and more presence for working women in the public sphere – through strikes, protests and publication of female workers' pleas for public support for labor concerns – according to Porter female morality remained the primary frame of reference for public discourse on women's working conditions. As Porter puts it in an early chapter: “Discursively, the *obrero* came to embody the seeming contradictions of industrialization: the separation of the public and private sphere and the simultaneous creation of the working woman.”

*Working Women* is an interesting book, containing important insights into the discursive positioning of working women in the public sphere. Among its strengths should be counted the author's attention to the relationship between women's unsettled status in the workplace and public arena, on the one hand, and conflict over the nature and consequences of Mexico's modernization, a national project which drove the Díaz regime and continued to serve as principal impetus of the country's post-revolutionary governments. Moreover, because Porter is interested first and foremost in the experience of working women, the aura of the Mexican Revolution does not distract the eye from the circumstances of women's industrial labor. In fact, Porter argues that because the language of morality continued in force after the 1917 Constitution, “the Mexican Revolution does not represent a pivotal moment” for Mexican working women. Nonetheless, Porter's arguments are frequently unclear and, with regard to both the revolutionary period and the politics of modernity in Mexico more generally, inadequately fleshed out. It is a bit confusing, for example, to read her assertion that – in light of the exclusion of women from union participation she found in her study – Mexican historians' explanation for “the declining workforce participation of women as due to the attainment of a family wage by the late 1930s” is incorrect. While Porter might be right, the late 1930s not only falls outside the purview of her own study, it also represents the most important period of institutional consolidation of the Mexican Revolution under Lázaro Cárdenas. Challenging the Mexican historians' thesis, in other words, seems to require a different study than the one she has published.

It is important to note that Mexico's post-revolutionary history has been defined in great degree by intellectual disputes regarding the character of the revolution and of its institutional legacy. Some of the country's most prominent *letrados*, from Carlos Fuentes (most famously in his *novel La muerte de Artemio*

Cruz, 1962) to Elena Poniatowska (e.g., *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, 1969) to Gustavo Sáinz (*Quiero escribir pero me sale espuma*, 1997) have explored the gaps between the officialized narrative of revolution and national realities. In Mexico, of course, discrepancies over the institutional gains and promises of the country's revolution had for decades corroded the legitimacy of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, the dominance of which hinged on its status as the nation's modernizing paternity. Heavy-handed official defenses of the revolution's accomplishments in turn exposed and undermined the mythic centrality of the revolution to Mexican social experience. This process of claim and counter-claim has frequently played itself out at the juncture of public discourse, scholarly endeavor and cultural politics, as when the PRI-allied Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística repudiated and attempted to censor anthropologist Oscar Lewis for the portrayal of a "culture of poverty" in his *Sons of Sánchez* (1962), which, despite somewhat dubious claims of cultural causation, documented poverty as a baseline for urban Mexico. Similarly and more recently, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas (1994-present), predicated on the simple and credible claim that the revolution never happened for millions of indigenous campesinos, provoked repression and discursive quarantine imposed by a state that wound up looking decidedly pre-revolutionary. It comes as small surprise, therefore, that recent scholarship has nudged the revolution aside when focusing on social and cultural history.

Porter's own position within the post-revolutionary field is discernible at the confluence of two components of her discourse: the centrality of women as subjects of history and agents of social movement, and the firmly descriptive center of gravity of historiographical "objectivity" toward which she repeatedly gestures. This is precisely as expected from a feminist historian, and both components allow her to keep the ideologically-laden Revolution at the margins of her narrative. However, her bracketing off of the Revolution has an oddly de-politicizing effect on her arguments, and her discussion consequently appears almost avoidant of the very public sphere within which she wants to situate women's voices. The most obvious symptom of this is Porter's segregation of women's discourse from the revolutionary discourses of the early twentieth century (e.g., anarcho-syndicalism, communism, radical liberalism, feminism). How women's labor is constructed by these political formations receives little attention, and the discourse of Porter's women appears uninflected by radical talk of liberation of any kind. Porter often fails to draw connections between the details of the women's own language and the emerging official discourse of the post-1917 governments. When she discusses, for example, a letter from women tobacco workers to the Obregón administration in 1920 in which they denounce their factory's *maestras* (female overseers) as "enemies of the current Government and sanctimonious to the marrow of their bones," Porter fails to take note as parties to the utterance the strong official anti-clericalism of the moment or the growing Catholic reactionary movement that by the mid-1920s would explode

into the Cristero war. The public conversation regarding women's labor, and with it the full-bodied presence and construction of women in the public arena, is thereby emptied of much of its complexity and nuance.

Porter's view into the public sphere of the period is further dimmed by scarcity of analytical detail. A lack of attentiveness to the language of social actors is a weakness in any study purporting to rely on discourse analysis. Porter frequently shows signs of such inattention, as when she surprisingly uses the French term "fête" instead of the obviously more context-relevant "fiesta" in a passage describing Mexican workers' social practices. On a less stylistic note, her analysis of specific instances of discourse leaves the reader wondering about some of the key terms of the original Spanish – which are seldom provided. In fact, there is no indication anywhere as to whom the Spanish-English translator is, and while one must assume that Porter herself has done the translating, the author offers no discussion of the discursive nuances hidden by the English versions. She makes one of her more intriguing analytical points when discussing the distinction between the social class-nuanced terms "el pueblo" and "el público" in official discourse treating street vending and other informal use of public space, but undermines her argument by failing to provide any examples of this language in her primary source material.

Finally, it bears mentioning that, despite its subject matter, the book seems in need of a compelling political focus. A reader familiar with latter day Mexico's *maquiladoras*, the assembly plants designated as tax-free and largely unregulated for foreign capital, might expect a heavier dose of contemporary relevance and points of reference for arguments about the perdurance of gendered notions of labor despite the gains of the revolution, or in the teeth of modernization programs designed by the country's dominant political factions. After all, the *maquiladoras* in northern Mexico are infamous for relying on women's labor, and the managerial rationale for this employment strategy often instrumentalizes "women's morality" in ways that resonate with the discourses of Porter's period of study, just as the official rationale often references rural women's access to modernity. And then there is the seemingly endless series of unsolved rape-murders of young women, suggesting that sexual terror and intimidation is part of the package on Mexico's northern border, a compelling contemporary point of reference for the political relevance of Porter's historical discussion. However, while Porter does a fine job of describing some of the details of women's labor conditions for the period – i.e., common occupations, typical wage and benefits arrangements, organizational strategies, and prevailing public discourses on the nexus of gender and labor – it is only in the last paragraph of the book that the Mexican (and global) present comes into view. One does not read *Working Women* and sense what Michel Foucault termed "the history of the present."

**Bruce Campbell**

## SKINCERITY

Laura Elrick  
Krupskaya, 2003

## CROP

Yedda Morrison  
Kelsey Street Press, 2003

The hills are older than the hills: poets have been writing about ‘the body as landscape’ for ages. I have never liked this theme, because the body seems to come out always as victim, or else as imitative, and neither of those conclusions wholly match my experience, both lived and witnessed.

Of course, the body is part of a unified ecosystem, and that integration is certainly worth investigation. Laura Elrick’s *sKincerity*<sup>1</sup> and Yedda Morrison’s *Crop*<sup>2</sup> take this up this investigation, where the body is neither victim nor mirror, but agent. More precisely stated, Elrick and Morrison question the extent to which agency is possible. Do we affect landscape — meaning, policy, racism, capital, sex — or does it affect us? How might we pursue experience in which we remain distinct from these landscape elements and forces? What does the world look like when we merge into policy, and when capital merges into our minds, hearts, and bodies?

I have been talking about landscape with friends, Brooklyn-based poets Ethan Fugate and Allison Cobb<sup>3</sup> and Brooklyn-based musician David Daniell.<sup>4</sup> In late December, the NY MTA installed ad-bearing, LED screens at subway-station entries. The MTA has so far agreed to install 100 of these screens around NYC. Once while living in Los Angeles, I wrote, “today the weather blade- / runner, no umbrella,” in reference to an all-day smog occurrence. In NYC, the weather can be just as bladerunner, but it’s of a different kind; it’s of the kind that brands a vertical Ernst & Young sign into your vision, the kind that has you bask in electric advertising as logos and taglines are projected from over your head onto sidewalks.

Of the MTA LED screens, David said, “every inch of space is for sale.” I tell him I have been talking to Ethan and Allison about this reality. Ethan had gone to Western North Carolina for the holidays, and said he was looking forward to experiencing natural beauty for a couple of weeks. I asked him to tell me about his relationship to landscape while he was down there, as my own relationship to nature is woefully underdeveloped. I wrote to him, “part of what makes me feel so comfortable in urban spaces is, I feel I can control them. Nature is uncontrollable and I don’t know how to process that. Thinking of you last night & the prospects of being at the [di]still[ery], I wondered what it would feel like to be there, and how you are inhabiting all of these open spaces without barriers to keep certain beings out; to direct traffic; to regulate materials; and so on. I realized that I can

identify things in urban or suburban environments with costs – that everything here can be bought and sold. This is the only world I know” (December 23, 2003). Ethan responded, “I don’t think my relationship with my space is any different than yours with yours really. Certainly, I grew up in rural North Carolina, but even so, it wasn’t like we were fighting to keep nature at bay every spare moment of our lives. I grew up on a farm, the very nature of which is about control over nature. Think about it. Next time you are flying into, out of, or over a piece of rural land take the window seat and take a good long look at how farmers barter with space. Ever little thing is divided up into not only pockets of ownership but into pockets of control. Fields are tilled or not tilled with relation to how well they’ll yield that year” (December 30, 2003).

Allison is the friend who got me thinking about landscape in the first place. Upon return from a visit to Los Alamos, her hometown and the site of her book *Born 2*, she shared with me some details from her trip:

“I had some nice solitude in Los Alamos. I walked a couple of times 4 miles out to the end of the mesa next to my parents’ house. It looks out over the Rio Grande Valley and all the sacred peaks of the Pueblo Indian world, including a lone basalt outcropping known as Black Mesa or in Spanish El Huerfano (the orphan) where the San Ildefonso Indians held off the Spanish conquistadors in a months-long siege (they had a secret path down to the river for water that the Spanish never discovered). At the base of the mesa is an unexcavated ruin of an Indian settlement, probably from the middle ages. The whole area is riddled with these ruins, most of which have never been excavated. From this vantage one can also see the cliff road winding up toward Los Alamos. The landscape is huge; cars are literally swallowed by it. I watched an ambulance with sirens blaring go down the road and completely disappear, its sound buried by the rock walls, as it rounded a hairpin turn and reappeared again. My parents’ house is perched on the edge of a nearby mesa, and sitting on their deck I watched the giant ravens flying around at my head level and below, about 500 feet above the canyon floor. I could hear the sound of their feathers in the wind, like little knives thrown, and watch them do these weird, tumbling moves, fighting each other for food. Also there’s occasionally a hawk. One of the first white women to live in this area of New Mexico calls this experience of being alone in the giant landscape there the “earth-feeling.” I appreciate the scale and sense of experiencing a world with so few human marks, the irony of course being that those marks that exist are among the most destructive ever” (October 26, 2003).

And so it’s with great humility that I receive these accounts from my friends in relatively natural environments, to discover that the destructive elements in a landscape are often social. In Elrick’s landscape, “Were policy different, mortality might be” (LE, 17).

## I. SHE'S NOT WRITING SOMEONE ELSE'S FROM OUTSIDE MY OWN PICTURE WRITING?<sup>5</sup>

In *sKincerity*, Laura Elrick writes through the landscape of New York City in which she works and lives. Chronically, this landscape is partitioned as such: “one quarter of one day fer sleeping, one third of one day fer working, one quarter of one quarter of one day for commuting, one eighth of one third of one day fer cooking, one twelfth of one quarter of one day fer fucking, then set avoid minimize manage conquer plan” (LE, 23). Physically, the partitions go, “beds are for sleeping streets are for // CLICK (as in pistol cock) // “listen ahngonna be honest wichu // [another translation from the ffff- // RENT / FOOD / HEAT / WATER / DOCTOR” (LE, 19-20). And in cyboptics, navigation begs, “WHY / / (World Hunger Year) // attack888root cause of 888hung888er by promo888ing self // reliance?” (LE, 22). Yet we are “less / agent less less” (YM, 42). “flip author-it expectorant (*yeah, I'm white too*) what backs you / will back you. It's both true *and* not true it's not you, it's not you, it's not. You.” (LE, 25) “*a little girl knows what to do what to do— says hi...i... / I'm literal...iteral... (collateral) aren't you?*” (LE, 10).

“I'm / breaking in my hand lace rag might hold hand me together pulling hair from a face tying together boot / might hold writing me together but I'm *utilized*” (YM, 19). Yedda Morrison's landscape in *Crop* includes farm workers, female sexuality — *in* — public, chemicals and calculations, private-sector policy and its profits. Like Elrick's, Morrison's text explores the consequences of so-called “free” enterprise and its human consequences.<sup>6</sup> “keep me here — my option?” (YM, 24). Similarly and *Crop* unseen, I wrote in a poem called “substance,” “i can contribute & bemoan. my options dotted lines / they call it “cell damage,” or learning as i go.” Morrison makes me wonder where — how — did I think / I was going? “green / green / fork lift” (YM, 25). Morrison makes me realize that this dialog is “not yet ripe but swollen” (YM, 10).

“excess of water hypodermically injected” (YM, 10). The connections between land, (bonded) labor,<sup>7</sup> and sex are organic and effortless in Morrison's *Crop*. This is of course both beautiful and tragic; ultimately the book is far more the former, as its syntax and textures transcend this reader elsewhere. When I read “wet,” “each tissue commissioned” (YM, 8), and “Pipes gone dry inside me” (YM, 31), I think that we are not *nearing* but *in* a water crisis, and I like to remember this passage from an article I read by Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke:

Not only is there the same amount of water on the Earth today as there was at the creation of the planet, it's the same water. The next time you're walking in the rain, stop and think that some of the water falling on you ran through the blood of dinosaurs or swelled the tears of children who lived thousands of years ago.<sup>8</sup>

Yet we often make the mistake of suffering in isolation rather than uniting and organizing against the current, grossly imbalanced distribution of wealth, health care, resources, and rights. The call to justice as such is one of the many victories in *Crop*. “can only *in / in* and then *in / so much*” (YM, 25).

## II. THERE’S AN ISSUE OF / WHO AND FROM WHERE<sup>9</sup>

*the snake will be sleeping and I’ll pick the berry right over its head*<sup>10</sup>

*Arresting* — in *sKincerity* — a pregnancy: “When she was arrested she was arrested without sanitary pads no place to put / her children but under established law immediately after giving birth. This / still bleeding... // *at Rikers // at Crane // at Sing-Sing*” (LE, 35). “One example one woman special needs in a / nightgown “pleading her belly” shackled to a bed... // *at Lompoc // at Soledad // at Summit*” (LE, 35). “One gave the head its birth floor the she at // *Walkill // Terminal Isle & // Fort Dix*” (LE, 36). “If unable to deliver antibiotic borders... // *at // at // at*” (LE, 36). Location. Elrick helps us realize that it’s hard to get — going — if we don’t know where we are. In naming sites of imprisonment and other concrete measures of abuse and poverty, Elrick writes poetry as media, which serves to counter the versions of reality we are fed by corporate-owned news channels.

Back at the ranch, Morrison writes, “will the ones still identifying as women please stand up” (YM, 25). “If functional language is an anti-historical language, / she’s a violent surplus particle. get up!” (YM, 48). “Get up bound into this billboard carry your It / This That Words Hairless Waikiki instructs desire” (LE, 45) “to study through this well of want // to line the turns with letters” (LE, 56). Elrick addresses turns with letters in her poem “First Words,” which she wrote from her experience teaching adult literacy. Words are seen — landscape elements — and her students’ survival in the U.S. requires that these words become familiar. She opens the poem, “all about oil” and continues, “how *I* did go” (LE, 51), agency in past tense. Other letters: “We need / J-O-B-S jobs . . . // and a CURE (citizens united / for the rehabilitation of / errants // to keep our uh . . . heh heh . . . / *hotels* full.”<sup>11</sup> “dense and / speak in slow-surround the National and ‘precise’,” the TV as precision bomber, indeed, lulling us into waking dream states, how this LED blinding and surround [sound] deafening in assaulting decibels, growing “History’s / molasses plant” (LE, 64-65), producing “A privatized social memory that is / culture” (LE, 67). “Out / we stare over the expanse of early blinding” (LE, 63).

## III. ANXIETY – WANTS TO KNOW IF I WAS *THERE*<sup>12</sup>

“I was at the reception desk repeatedly writing then erasing my name / til the parch was / dust and the concierge” (LE, 65). “she’s hurrying, putting shoe to foot, lacing / the other clubbed in a ditch, hurry” (YM, 71). “We seek

out an old friend in her tatters and rage mumbling of nests / and what she can carry” (LE, 70) — “to ascend the stairs in / rags and wire” (YM, 42), “in the grace of the bright green wind machine, spitting artificial flowers” (YM, 59), “floral but never flowery. you conquer the economy from which it came” (YM, 60).

“let it be cared for and inconsequential” (YM, 12) — “the tinsel hostless” (YM, 11), “less / agent less less” (YM, 42). “instead of bills I bought / a coat, very patriotic” (LE, 76). “our sheltering / trash” (YM, 71) — “consumption / operatic” (YM, 35). “I mean “driven” // like a Hollywood / limo of myself // Into the catchment” (LE, 82).

In the landscapes of *sKincerity* and *Crop*, person merges to thing, thing to proper noun, transit to experience, policy to death. Here I hear Kaia Sand’s complex question, “How do / I shrug this empire off my shoulders?”<sup>13</sup> Morrison: “We gather on the Truck though the Truck is what we carry. We gather on the Truck and then the Truck / is what we carry” (YM, 79).

#### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Laura Elrick, *sKincerity* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2003). Hereafter, LE.

<sup>2</sup> Yedda Morrison, *Crop* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 2003). Hereafter, YM.

<sup>3</sup> With Jen Coleman and Susan Landers, Fugate and Cobb edit the journal *Pom2*, which addresses the real estate, barter, and ownership of poems.

<sup>4</sup> Daniell is a musician who runs the Antiopic label with James Elliott. Behold their Allegorical Power Series – gratis mp3s – at [www.antiopic.com](http://www.antiopic.com). Contributors to the series have concerns in common with Elrick and Morrison.

<sup>5</sup> YM, 23.

<sup>6</sup> One day on WBAI’s “Global Movements, Urban Struggles,” Deepa Fernandes interviewed Vijay Prashad, author of *Keeping Up with the Dow Joneses*, who said simply that “globalization” really means “privatization”: it is a drive to turn every aspect of our existence into a profit center.

<sup>7</sup> Morrison’s book does not address bonded labor explicitly, but it makes me think about bonded labor. An excellent resource on this topic is Kevin Bales’s *Disposable People*.

<sup>8</sup> Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke, “The Battle for Water,” [www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org), December 9, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> LE, 29.

<sup>10</sup> YM, 70.

<sup>11</sup> “Stan Saunders of the Columbia Theological Seminary writes that “prisons for profit now generate \$30-40 billion of revenue annually. The corrections segment of our economy today employs over half a million full time workers.” That’s “more than any ‘Fortune 500’ company except General Motors.”

<http://www.the-catbird-seat.net/PrivatePrisons.htm>

<sup>12</sup> LE, 63.

<sup>13</sup> Kaia Sand, *Interval* (Washington, DC: Edge Books, 2004), 19.

Carol Mirakove

## ALL AROUND WHAT EMPTIES OUT

Linh Dinh

subpress / Tinfish 2003

Linh Dinh's first book-length collection of poems, *All Around What Empties Out*, combines work previously published as the chapbooks *Drunkard Boxing* (Singing Horse Press, 1996), *A Small Triumph Over Lassitude* (Leroy Press, 2001), and *A Glass of Water* (Skanky Possum, 2002). Emblazoned with the image of a toilet seat sporting the dingy tiles common to public latrines, Tinfish has designed an apt package for Dinh's work, cleverly twinning his dark humor with the poem of the title, "All Around What Empties Out." Originally published in *Drunkard Boxing*, "From the seam of my scrotum to the rim of my anus is about 15/16<sup>th</sup> of an inch. It's called the perineum, meaning, I think, in Greek, all around what empties out."

Dinh's work conjures aspects of Samuel Beckett's absurdist plays and the dark sport of Jarry's *Ubu* in a book that manages inventive and original writing as it enacts a critique of globalism through the cultural legacy of post-war Vietnam. Dinh manages a clever multi-valenced examination of ideas; immigrating from Vietnam in 1976, his poems are infused with humor, human cruelty / failure, suffering and frequently fixate on consumption, defecation and the order of the human organism at its most base (humane and inhumane) needs and treatments. The poems rarely cite Vietnam directly. This allows for an expansive investigation of the human flotsam inherent to globalism, cultural and emotional dislocation, and the immigrant attempt to forge cogent understanding through the vehicle of articulation. Dinh enacts a wry and darkly honest examination of the incongruent facts of human experience as life irrevocably shaped by war, hunger, violence, fucking, and the minutiae of so-called 'everyday life.' What happens when the rules of an individual's dailiness fall outside of commonly accepted categories of human experience?

### THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WORD

I think "vesicle" is the most beautiful word in the English language. He was lying face down, his shirt burnt off, back steaming. I myself was bleeding. There was a harvest of vesicles on his back. His body wept.

Dinh embraces a poetics capable of simultaneously staging a hilarious send-up of identity poetry and politics through work that refuses to limit its scope to one national (or cultural) sphere. *All Around What Empties Out* is a project with ambition beyond the exact (and hubristic) perceptions of the individual as

relegated to a culture-specific category. In “The Most Beautiful Word,” Dinh never mentions Vietnam, per se, the reader is allowed to make his or her own conclusions or assumptions about which war, what ‘him’ of the text. Ultimately, war itself is the human horror; Dinh’s wry invocation of subtle aspects of the power of textual tactics to reach out beyond the page grip the reader instantly, namely through humor. In the current climate of unilateral global domination by the United States government and military forces, what apt gesture? What fitting response? Perhaps scenes from Jarry’s *Ubu* should be staged nightly on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Perhaps *All Around What Empties Out* should be broadcast in nightly installments as a radio play.

Play is at work everywhere in these poems. Imagine the book as a staged field of play; the poems echo Beckett with their frequently sharp (and hilarious) direct statements, as in “Parboiled Placenta,” where cultural elitism, xenophobia and the ‘authority of the text’ are swiftly (and hilariously) upended:

To skewer and burn meat is barbaric.  
To boil, requiring a vessel, is a step up.  
To microwave.

People who eat phalli, hotdogs, kielbasas,  
vs. people who eat balls.

To eat with a three-pronged spear and a knife.  
To eat with two wooden sticks.  
To eat with the hands.

Boiling vs. broiling.

To snack on a tub of roasted grasshoppers at the movies.

Dinh refers early in the collection to *commedia dell’arte*, a genre of public theatre popular during the Italian Renaissance. *Commedia* is relevant to consider in examining Dinh’s work: in Renaissance Italy, the players were some of the few citizens allowed to move with relative ease throughout the sovereign states as well as into neighboring countries; the actors were, by necessity, a polyglot group. Given their fluid ability to move between communities and employ multiple dialects as needed, they were also privy to the politics of each location as well as empowered with professionally sanctioned freedom to insert relevant, contemporary political commentary and social critique into their *lazzi*, the improvised comedic improvisations they routinely performed. In some instances, *jongleurs* who engaged more overt political propaganda work (against the ruling classes) were put to death for the social agitation they enacted through the vehicle of their performances / speech.

Immigrant citizens have a singular and unique perspective not only on American culture and the English language, but also on larger aspects of human experience not common to ‘the everyday’ of life in the United States. Perhaps Linh Dinh is conducting a facsimile of the *jongleur’s* ability to move with ease among communities and nation-states as well as framing contemporary *lazzi* with his particular uncanny spin. In Linh Dinh’s poems, the commedia is played out in intimate spheres: the gastro-intestinal tract, the bedroom, the bed: “Disheveled bed, sentimental sponge, love of my life, / Witness to all my horrors, my Valdez spills, my crimes, / Black-faced farces, commedia dell’arte—par-deux and solo...” Dinh pulls off a hilarious admission (note, *not* confession) of personal (unnamed, but we get the gist) foibles and larger global / shared human blunders, whether ecological devastation, infidelity, ill-begotten love, or other human messes. Later in the book, in the section “A Small Triumph Over Lassitude,” Dinh ups the ante of his language and the scope of his project to include cautionary tales (“A Wayward Daughter,” “A Reactionary Tale”), twisted takes on stock stories (“Sleeping Beauty”) and a more overt exploration of his poetics of dead-serious clowning:

#### THE RING

On my right shoulder is a clown. On my left, a clown. I  
balance a thousand teacups on my forehead, on top of  
which sits yet another clown.

This act takes very little real skills and some strength on  
the part of the person lying on the bottom.

This act takes a sunny outlook and a smooth disregard  
for the next sunset.

This act does not take a long day of practice, only a dis-  
honest disposition.

All things clever or difficult are intended to amuse,  
specifically a rapid movement of the hand or the mind  
to generate a sequence of brief illusions.

The rapidity of his ‘brief illusions’ accelerate in “A Small Triumph Over Lassitude” with collages that more overtly refer to an immigrant experience of cultural dislocation, regardless of the speakers’ implied point of origin or departure. Poems with titles like “Lang Mastery,” “A Note On Translation,” and “Scansion” include the lines: “Rehearse the oral language in the indigenous manner,” to “A blindfolded native speaker reenacts continuously the syntax of a fading tongue he cannot decipher having not so long ago emigrated by a lisping dinghy down the muddy

white stream of gunboat diplomacy,” and recombine aspects of divergent cultural experiences such as scavenging for yams, poetic inventories of the practical aftermath of war, food cravings, bodily functions, comic riffs on faux ‘traditional’ dreams/values for offspring as they approximate the mental and linguistic overload of assimilation into a culture largely committed to the erasure of ‘difference.’ Dinh traces performances on the page on purpose, frequently eliciting audible laughter from readers as his sly logic and apt cynicism reveal aspects of human experience under the press of cultural collision and appropriation.

In some cultures, select citizens assume the role of ritual clowns for the purpose of ritual dances and other traditional social gatherings of significance. The clowns, or citizens-in-disguise, are imbued with the ability to communicate the ideas of the god/s by illustrating (or enacting) the realities of human failure. The ritual clown publicly displays all manner of human foibles and atrocities, forcing the citizen witnesses to voyeuristically experience the crimes of guilty individuals and collectively examine and expunge their guilt. In Linh Dinh’s poems, he stages a similar and darkly absurd collage by publicly exposing private/public events. In “Laced Farina,” the first poem in the collection, the speaker addresses an invisible victim to deftly elide the global consequences of war, rape and human atrocity through slant dialogue: “Who touched your hair? / A rifle butt to the side of the head. / Who kissed you on the forehead? / Three knocks on the door at midnight. / Who put his fingers in your mouth? / It is like fireworks. One is thrown in the air. / Who unbuttoned your tunic? / Unbutton your tunic. / Who touched your breasts? / It is a crime to conceive. / Who rested his head on your belly? / One is undressed by the whizzing bullets. / Who played with your sex? / To be lying here in this ditch.” He contrasts the difficult (and poignant), questions with directives. The poem could be read as two poems—one composed of only the questions; one composed of only the non-answer / statements. A huge part of Dinh’s method for (poetic) survival is the clown/minstrel/player’s device: pointed irony and blank admission of the brutal facts. In these poems, it’s so funny, it actually *hurts*:

#### MOTATE

General emission from all orifices.  
Blink left eye, then right eye,  
Then left eye, then right eye.  
With index finger, jab at right temple,  
Then wheeze quietly as the bullet enters.  
Touch all forbidden zones simultaneously:  
The crooked teeth, the singed eyelashes,  
The crushed fibula...  
Insert one’s penis into one’s vagina.  
Assume the drunk position, the Chinese position,

The eunuch position.

Throw a javelin out the window.

What adequate response at the moment of the torturer's electric current? What laughter? What pain? In Dinh's work, the response is finding the word 'vesicle' amidst the absolute horror of finding someone else's disfigured and dead form; the impossible awful beauty of the invisible architecture of the human body thrown open by bullets and bombs. Linh Dinh maneuvers the reader through surfaces of horror laced with the survivors' keen eye for poetic irony, wit, and brutal honesty regarding the 'human condition.'

In the final section of the book, "A Glass of Water," Dinh's linguistic rhythms switch into swingy, cheeky indictments, "The meters and rhymes of this my time are syncopated by a toy monkey. / Once more let us all meet this minstrel show our versifier" ; "A primer in elemental Ynglish is needed to buttress this five-word-vocabulary: a grunt, a squeal, a hiccup, a gambol. I shlemiel I balembol I lose myself when I don't gamble... Stop levitating man I've seen it already." *All Around What Empties Out* is a collection of work long overdue by a poet who unflinchingly and hilariously examines language acquisition, cultural dominance, immigrant assimilation/alienation, war and its human aftermath through innovative, sinuous poems marked by his singularly absurd eye and ear. In Dinh's work, truly: "All countries exist right here the jagged edges of my stamp will scarrify themselves into your life with a tenderness you didn't know existed this side of Saint Jerome."

**Jane Sprague**

## THE ACTIVIST

Renée Gladman  
Krupskaya, 2003

Kafka's K meets Invisible Man, with a goodly dose of the Underground Man of Dostoyevski's *Notes*, in the pages of Renée Gladman's *The Activist*, which tells a story of politics and friendship from a floating subject position moving among a group of comrades in a political cell — now wait. K and Invisible Man — not to mention the underground man — are utterly alone, that's what makes their tales so harrowing; and Gladman's characters are intimately committed to group activity both social (as in socializing) and social (as in politically activist). How do I come by the comparison? Because each of the characters, several of whom the narrative inhabits sequentially, seems so isolated, paranoid, caught up in quasi-autistic reveries or failing attempts to speak, it's as if they were alone though they are in each others' company, sometimes erotically, sometimes in friendly or contentious debate, sometimes in silly playfulness, sometimes in scenarios of politically motivated torture of the kind one can imagine is taught at the School for the Americas. The paranoia of being a political activist in troubled times suffuses this book and gives it a schizoid, dissociated tinge; even while its characters are deeply engaged, committed to their cause and to each other, they are lonely, introspective, and self-doubting — in other words, they are refreshingly if hauntingly recognizable — as ourselves and/or our coevals in troubled times. This book is an historical allegory for any time, though it echoes with contemporary, new-millennial traces of post-9/11 urban and national anxiety, governmental lies, media soundbites and journalistic shorthand.

The graininess of the cover photo suggests the porousness of the narrative, and its “black-and-white” starkness. A bare-floored room — an office in an underfunded social agency? a relatively posh prison cell? a writer's workroom? — with a desk chair on the left at an angle as if someone had to get up to go get some coffee, three lightgiving surfaces on the far wall that appear to be a mirror flanked by two windows, one of which has what may be a small framed photo on its sill — and a shadowy, indeterminate piece furniture at the right edge of the photo (a highbacked wooden bench? a storage trunk? some sort of bed or cot?) — looks both abandoned (so stark) and inhabited (the chair at an angle). There is a forlorn radiator with something — an ashtray — on it and a heating pipe. There's something on the floor by the shadowy piece of furniture: a book? a telephone answering machine? Did someone have to leave in a hurry? Is this a living or a working space or a space of incarceration? The whole is made up of pixels — a grid — the non-generative grains of “graininess” — that estrange the scene as if it dwelt behind a perpetual veil, screen, or memory-haze, be it a sociological divisor (as in Du Bois's “color line”), a deliberately disinformative obfuscation (the tissue

of lies veiling what passes for news coverage channeled through corporate-controlled media), or cognitive-affective (the partial amnesia — “screen memory” — that mercifully besets victims of intense, politically-inflicted pain, or any kind of primal trauma for that matter, and the flat affect that often accompanies such traumatic semi-“forgetting”).

The stylized, choreographed regularity of the image’s pixilated distortion, moreover, reflects not only the systematic nature of these types of social/semiotic estrangement but also the literary phenomenon of “ostranenie” — defamiliarization, in which meaning is created by literary language’s “otherness” from normative discourse. One could also relate this to Rimbaud’s famous statement that the production of literature under regimes of modernity requires a “systematic derangement of the senses” — how interesting — how more than interesting, how unsettling and ominous —, to think of a nineteenth-century literary/aesthetic mandate \*pre\*script as \*de\*scribing not only the effects of political torture (see Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*) but the very conditions of modernity — and even more so postmodernity — itself (see Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”). *The Activist*’s opening invitation — its cover that is — both draws the reader in through its permeable porousness, a distortion that is a provocation to further exploration — and also keeps the reader at arm’s-length distance through the very indeterminacy of its subject/style.

This textual porousness allows the reader to seep into the characters’ bonds of eroticism, friendship, ideological agreement, tension about decision-making and leadership, and also to glimpse snippets of governmental lies, smug pronouncements by police about catching evildoers and making them pay. The distancing — the above-mentioned defamiliarization as well as the muffled, minimalist nature of the prose — prohibits agreement about even the most rudimentary and material of facts — was a bridge central to commuting workers’ abilities to get to their workplaces blown up or is it still fully functional? Not only are readers subject to this extreme degree of indeterminability — the personae of the narrative are as well: police, the US government, a team of Canadian scientists and officials, concerned commuters and city citizens within the unfolding series of vignettes all hold sharply differing opinions about what one might assume any idiot with two eyes could establish with one glance. “Investigators combed shards from the collapsed bridge for signs that it had been blown apart,” reads one sentence, and on the next page, another states that “The bridge remains intact to this day, despite reports that it is long gone.”

The activists — Monique Wally, Freddie, Alonzo Mendoza, Stefani, Lomarolo, Barry —, an alliance of people of color, some of whom appear also to be in homoerotic relationships with each other (Stefani/ Monique? Lomarolo/ Alonzo?) — may be members of the CPL, the Commuters’ Protection League, a group which may or may not have blown up the J. Gifford Bridge or may be insisting that it is not blown up but that they are being denied access to it by the government, which in turn is insisting that not only has the bridge been blown up,

but it has been blown up by *them* —the CPL —in an act of terrorism. And we know what that means in this Patriot Act Era; it means ruthless retaliation regardless of established culpability: one has only to remember Senator Eagleberger on the evening of September 11, 2001, insisting that we go after the hypothesized culprits with all our military resources, and that we should start right away, even before we know who they are. *The Activist's* circle of friends/comrades/"operatives" is particularly vulnerable to the repression, infiltration, oppression that result from being targeted by a powerful government hostile to one's very existence, crime or no crime; even playful or sheltered moments in the park are interrupted by white misperception that turns into surveillance:

When the grass is this high, the neighbors want it cut. But the park keepers can't stand the loss of beauty... Since noon, there has been a group of whites marching along the edge of the park, cheering for the grass to be cut. They worry that we are doing drugs in the weeds —that the colored people are.

The paranoia of living underground is exacerbated by interpersonal tensions and the daily difficulties of city life for people of color in the U.S. Consciousness can become hallucinatory and ordinary objects used to orient oneself become strange and distorted: a map of the city, stolen from the Office of Transportation, that is central to the cadre's plans becomes vague and distorted before their very eyes: "...now I think the Feds set us up. ... Reality is not static; it is in constant flux." And that includes the reality of the city they supposedly live in and know; it becomes opaque and unreliable when fear ratchets up beyond a sustainable level.

Certainly, members of the group —especially "Alonso Mendoza" as well as six other people with similar names —become the targets of an intensive search and at least one of them the object of an apparent torture/interrogation scene which is quite harrowing:

...something has swung and bounced off my face, and now I am on the floor... Legs of pants with militaristic creases surround me; congealed body water falls on my cheeks and slides into my ears...A hand slams against a surface, a light comes on, my insides respond as if set to a timer, and I begin talking.

And, perhaps most unsettling of all, the witnessing, possibly of oneself, possibly of a friend, being interrogated:

When I turn my head and see someone familiar at the other end of the table, I lose confidence that this is my dining room. Though we are close enough that we could extend our arms and almost touch, he appears unaware of me. In fact, there is someone sitting in front of him. I watch the former move his mouth while the latter scribbles frantically across a page. ...I don't think my friend knows where he is. His mouth moves incessantly, but his manner is not his own. What did they do to him? Seeing him violated in this way infuriates me....

These scenes, which comprise the section entitled “The State,” underscore the depersonalization resulting from the infliction of pain or, more directly, political torture during an interrogation session; one hears one’s own voice as if it were someone else’s or sees oneself as if from another, outside, perspective. This is physicality emptied of subjectivity — the abject inability to speak from one’s own consciousness or with one’s own agency. One is not onself, or one is more than one; one is at least two, even though the CPL ringleader, Monique Wally, is quoted by the newspapers as saying, “It is impossible to live in this country and think of oneself as a group.” Her charge, that the individualism so stressed in US culture makes collectivity virtually unimaginable, is to some extent countered by the actions of the CPL, but at the same time, it is clear how very fragile and fraught this sense of collectivity is, how uphill the struggle. The multiplicity of fractured, dissociated double consciousness, if it operates as weakness or survival instinct in “The State,” is also the group-strength of the collective, the embattled cadre. They take care of each other, love each other, are each other; they are a “cell” — at times metaphorically confined to a prison cell but also a vibrant, necessary microcosm of a much larger body of aspiration. This is the power of a collective narrative as well.

Yes — why the singular “activist” rather than plural, since the book dips into different points of view and describes the activities of a group — is it that the collectivity acts not in unanimity but as single though fluid and heterodox entity?

For that matter, what exactly is a book review? A paraphrase? An evaluation? A series of observations, reactions and (we hope) insights masquerading as a whole — an “essay” that is a whole shot through with ambivalence, contradictory impulses, expansions of affirmation and recognition, contractions of puzzlement and resistance? A review is a collectivity, an engagement responding to the provocation, the occasion/object, the “book” which is itself a collection — multigenre though minimalist and muffled in tone — and this book describes a collectivity as a singularity — “the activist.” The book itself is the activist, the provocateur, deliberately inviting interaction by its transgressions against standard narrative, against safe topics, against complacency. It invites allies, co-conspirators who are willing to undergo the undergroundedness and the in/visibility of these appealing characters who sometimes speak in nonsense and often can’t read or hear each others’ words. Creating a flawed utopia in a dystopic “White City” (the title of the last two sections) while hunted by the police, the government, the military, it’s all an act of faith. Activist=act as if=act of us.

**Maria Damon**

**AFRO-BLUE:  
IMPROVISATIONS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN  
POETRY AND CULTURE**

Tony Bolden  
University of Illinois Press, 2004

Reading Tony Bolden's *Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture* brings to mind the following passage from Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act*:

Behind each artist there stands a traditional sense of style, a sense of the felt tension indicative of expressive completeness; a mode of humanizing reality and of evoking a feeling of being at home in the world. It is something which the artist shares with the group, and part of our boyish activity expressed a yearning to make any—and everything of quality *Negro American*; to appropriate it, possess it, re-create it in our own group and individual images.

And we recognized and were proud of our group's own style wherever we discerned it—in jazzmen and prize fighters, ballplayers and tap dancers; in gesture, inflection, intonation, timbre and phrasing. Indeed, in all these nuances of expression and attitude which reveal a culture. We did not fully understand the cost of that style but we recognized within it an affirmation of life beyond all question of our difficulties as Negroes.

This recognizable style, this culturally defying performance, Ellison refers to in 1953 is what Bolden now defines as *blues poetics*: "...shaped by the resistive energy inscribed in scattin' and scratching... the funk expressed in Buddy Bolden's horn, the beautiful pain in Billie Holiday's voice..." This thing called blues, an expressive folk form that originated from the sorrow songs of slaves, infuses into the nooks, crevices, and crannies of Black Americans' lives. Sometimes it's bearing witness; often it's a plucky response, a challenge to the rigors of living a life wrought with personal and societal conflict. It's Louis Armstrong lamenting,

*What did I do  
To be so black  
And blue?*

And Langston Hughes instructing in "Wake":

*Tell all my mourners  
To mourn in red—  
Cause it ain't no sense  
In my bein' dead.*

Whatever it might be, you know it when you feel it! In *Afro-Blue*, Bolden investigates the nuances, controversy, evolution, and practice of the blues tradition in African American poetry.

It is fitting that Bolden begins his investigation in chapter one, "Trouble in Mind: Early African American Criticism as a Site of Ideological Conflict," by

quoting William Dean Howell's damning criticism of Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems. In the June 27, 1896 edition of *Harper's Weekly*, Howell writes that Dunbar's poems are "delightful personal attempts and failures for the written and spoken language." Howell's back-handed compliment means that Dunbar, being a "Negro," succeeds only at writing authentic, charming dialect poems; such a feat would ultimately overshadow both his ability and desire to write poetry in Standard English. As Bolden writes, "...Dunbar would later tell a friend that Howells had harmed him as a writer... and [he]feared that he could only satisfy readers by continuing to write in that form." Apparently, Dunbar initially thought he could exercise poetic license in his work by using both Black southern vernacular and Standard English. However, facing opposition from the literary mainstream and encountering what W.E. B. DuBois would later define as *double-consciousness* in his 1903 seminal study, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dunbar soon fell victim to self-contempt and concluded in "The Poet," that he wrote "A jingle in a *broken* tongue" (italics mine). Just as Bolden observes, at this point *double-consciousness* or white supremacy began to set the stage for instituting ambivalence in the minds of black poets: "...since Dunbar believed complex artistic expression and black culture to be mutually exclusive, he could not question the hegemony of the dominant culture..." Only thirty-odd years had passed since the abolition of slavery, making it difficult for most black people to challenge the notions of black inferiority.

In analyzing both the personal and societal struggles that black poets met while identifying and creating a relationship between vernacular expression and literary style, Bolden asserts that the "...categorical denunciations of black poets who have challenged literary conventions constitute an opposition to the development of an Afrocentric redefinition of modernism as well as a quest for literary authority in terms of that redefinition." Such opposition paved the way for ambivalence among black critics, like William Stanley Braithwaite, the first successful African American critic, who contributed essays to the *Boston Evening Transcript*. Although Braithwaite understood and criticized the consistent and relentless racist representations of black people, he failed to recognize the artistic integrity, beauty, and value of the vernacular that black poets rendered themselves. Bolden notes that this blind spot "...established a basis upon which later critics would build." In his examination of the complicated but growing awareness among both poets and critics of the need to establish *an Afrocentric redefinition of modernism and a corresponding literary authority*, Bolden presents rich insight into the conflicting theories of later critics, including Benjamin Brawley, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, Houston Baker, Saunders Redding, Margaret Walker, and Amiri Baraka.

Although Bolden reveals the combatant theories of the critics, especially among the earlier ones, it's apparent that over time, as each critic offered varying degrees of complexity to the critical discourse, the gap in ideology grew smaller among these selected critics. For instance, Johnson, being among the earliest critics, was initially ambivalent about the use of the vernacular but later

acknowledged the beginning of a national poetics, and welcomed Langston Hughes' and Sterling Brown's use of dialect forms in their poetry. Unlike Johnson, Brown appears to have been of one mind from the start. Witness his declaration:

Dialect, or the speech of the people, is capable of expressing whatever the people are. And the folk Negro is a great deal more than a buffoon or a plaintive minstrel. Poets more intent upon learning the ways of the folk, their speech, and their character, that is to say better poets, could have smashed the mold. But first they would have to believe in what they were doing. And this was difficult in a period of conciliation and middle class striving for recognition and respectability.

Like Brown, Locke felt that striving for recognition and respectability mattered less than challenging the literary mainstream's hegemonic notions regarding the limitations of the black vernacular as a poetic language and a form of literary discourse. And, Richard Wright's concurrence with Brown and Locke is evident in his 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing."

Nonetheless, Wright's vision went a step further, incorporating an evident political and international agenda: he viewed the use of vernacular-based poetry as a means for creating a poetics for black workers, for building a black working-class audience, and for mobilizing class resistance. Bolden states that "...[Wright] envisioned a global audience for a radical internationalist poetics framed in a Marxist paradigm to address the concerns of all marginalized peoples. In such a revolutionary movement, African Americans would be 'the most representative voice of America and of oppressed people anywhere in the world'." Unlike his fellow critics, Wright subjected form to content because he was more concerned with the subject matter of worker's lives. However, as Bolden astutely surmises: "[Wright] illustrates how vernacular forms can serve revolutionary purposes and repeats his idea from "Blueprint" that these expressive forms depict not only the material conditions in which the slaves and their descendents lived but also their responses to them." Twenty-five years later, as a major player in the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka acted as the anchor in the relay race against "...the most spiritually debilitated imitations of literature available." Like Wright, Baraka, decrying white bourgeois ideology, believed that black literature was irrelevant unless it pertained to the lives of most black people, who tended to identify with the "real" experiences of athletes. Although Baraka made this observation in 1966, it appears to still hold true today for many working-class black folk.

In light of Baraka's comment, Bolden insists that if writers want to make inroads into the minds of black readers, both subject and form must be reflective of their cultural experiences: "...writers must create a literature that more closely resembles [African Americans'] expressive forms." Bolden's conclusion, while reasonable, speaks to the age-old ideological discord about the role of the black writer and its corresponding structural and thematic concerns. Much of what Bolden recounts in this first chapter is familiar, especially when one considers each era and generation individually. Yet, it is apparent that Bolden attempts to render a fresh perspective in his apt intersection of the literary histories and the ideological progression regarding black poetic form.

Bolden's attempt to offer the reader a fresh perspective is weakened, however, due to the exclusion of two major writers and critics, who succeeded Wright and preceded Baraka: James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. Although Baldwin, a prose writer, like Wright, may not have spoken directly to the use of vernacular form in black poetry, he adamantly voiced his opinions about the black writer's challenge of writing authentically about his/her experience, adding his two cents to the critical discourse. In *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin professes:

One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. . . I do think, since writers work in the disastrously explicit medium of language, that it goes a little way towards explaining why, out of the enormous resources of Negro speech and life, and despite the example of Negro music, prose written by Negroes has been generally speaking so pallid and so harsh. . . I don't think that the Negro problem in America can be even discussed coherently without bearing in mind its context; its context being the history, traditions, customs, the moral assumptions and preoccupations of the country; in short, the general social fabric. . . Mr. Ellison, by the way, is the first Negro novelist I have ever read to utilize in language, and brilliantly, some of the ambiguity and irony of Negro life.

Regarding Baldwin's praise, Ellison might attribute his success to his *exploiting the cultural material of black life*. In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison declares that black writers must "...achieve a vision of life commensurate with the complexity of their actual situation. Too often they fear to leave the uneasy sanctuary of race to take their chances in the world of art." Whether the genre is prose or poetry, Ellison's critique serves as advice to his fellow writers to dig in their own proverbial backyards to create a true and deep artistic representative of their intricate lives.

Though Bolden would argue that Ellison and Baldwin aren't speaking about poets per se, I contend that their perspectives lend themselves well to the notion that black writers would benefit greatly from tapping into their cultural wellspring for ideas regarding form and technique. Their sentiments seem to echo Bolden's point that "writers must create a literature that most closely resembles [African Americans'] expressive forms." *Being committed* to defining and creating black poetry by using folk traditions (a foundation that has already been established, which Bolden later demonstrates) is certainly a way to renovate both creative and critical strategies from an Afrocentric cultural point of view.

Among the following five chapters of *Afro-Blue*, the second chapter, "Meditations: Black Arts Criticism and Cultural Nationalist Aesthetics," is the least effective. This section reads as if Bolden is having a conversation with either himself or with an audience who has an inside track. Initially, it begins well with the following remark:

Since Black Arts poets experimented with new forms, many critics discovered that conventional approaches to criticism were no longer

functional; new models were needed to illustrate the immense potential within Afro-vernacular culture, the wellspring for much of Black Arts poetry. The avant-garde pianist, Cecil Taylor could have spoken for poets and critics alike when he said, "Right away when they talk about music they talk in terms of what music is to them. They never subject themselves to, like, what are Louis Armstrong's criteria for beauty, and until they do, then I'm not interested in what they say.

And a subsequent question is quite salient to the book's discussion, creating anticipation of a spirited enterprise: *Who constructs the parameters in which black art is conceptualized? And why are some models privileged over others in society?*

Yet, the ensuing discussion often contains incoherent paragraphs that do not appear to address the above remark or question, as seen in these examples:

But if nationalism fueled the fire of Black Arts criticism, it also helped pour the ice water to cool it. Angela Davis and Elaine Brown, who were both active in the Black Panther party, have pointed out the patriarchal nature of the Black Power movement. Moreover, Marx notwithstanding, readers familiar with W. E. B.'s Dubois' *Black Reconstruction* would have known that in America race functions as a black/brown mask that conceals the international problem of class. Consequently, many Black Arts critics display great vision regarding racism and the centrality of vernacular culture to the new black poetry but demonstrate less insight in their strategies to address the underlying economic basis of racism.

\* \* \*

Of course, vernacular cultures are always dialogic relative to dominant cultures, so they are never static but rather always in flux. Thus, writers who appropriate the vernacular must confront the constant risk of erasure. [Carolyn] Rodgers' use of the term "spaced" in her theorizing of Amiri Baraka's poem "No Matter, No Matter, the World is the World" provides a test case:

"A broke dead genius  
moved on to dust  
will touch you one night . . .  
. . . and the stacked dust of a gone brother will hunch you  
some father you needed who left you..."

Though "spaced" is a word that is no longer privileged in vernacular discourse, it is nonetheless useful as a critical tool. As Zora Neale Hurston suggests in her classic essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," the black hole of Afro-vernacular culture privileges action words. Thus, nouns are often transformed into verbs. I believe a similar dynamic can be observed in Rodger's employment of the word "spaced." According to her, a spaced poem involves positive and negative vibrations that return African Americans to "our Egyptian/African forefathers."

On the one hand, in the first example, the paragraph could easily gain lucidity with transitional phrases and some elaboration to better link one point to the next; yet, the allusion to sexism in the movement appear to pop out of the blue; merely alluding to or glossing over this complex experience (which Bolden does again in chapter 3) isn't meaningful, as it requires an incisive analysis separate from race and class; incidentally, both race and class deserve separate analyses as well. On the other hand, in the second example, the content of the paragraph is altogether confusing, for I cannot begin to follow the train of thought. In my estimation, confusion continues to prevail throughout the second chapter.

Later, when referring to Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Bolden writes,

Henderson points out that "white critics of Black folk song call these expressions [repetitions of particular words, such as 'jook' and 'jelly'] clichés"; however, he "know[s] that they are mistaken." At issue here is the problem of cultural authority. For Henderson, the major obstacle confronting white critics is race. As "outsider[s]" they cannot understand that contemporary black linguistic practices extend back to slavery. Yet it is precisely Henderson's historicism that betrays the breakdown in his nationalist logic. While he rightly objects to misreadings of black art, it is both parochial and self-defeating to assert that only black people can fully understand black poetry... In other words, it is not race per se but rather the historical forces that construct the mythology of race and thereby mask class exploitation that are responsible for critical myopia; any critic who is willing to question white suzerainty and study black culture (formally or informally) can produce insightful observations about black art.

Although I agree that white critics can question white dominance and "study" black culture, formally or informally, resulting in their ability to produce informed observations about black art, I contend that they cannot "fully" [fully being the operative word] understand *the spirit* of black vernacular poetry, which I'd venture to say that Henderson is alluding to when he mentions its connection to slavery. *Studying* a culture is not the same as *living* it; whether the critic is black or white, if he/she has not actually lived the life that produces black vernacular culture, he/she will not be able to *fully* experience the culture that produces such expression. Ironically, while Bolden disagrees with Henderson, Bolden seems to agree with Larry Neal, who is quoted subsequently: "According to Neal, any claim to a black aesthetic would have to be bolstered by a *genuine* understanding of vernacular art" (italics mine). In the final analysis, *Afro-Blue* would be a stronger text without the disjointed discussion of chapter two.

Chapter three, "Elaborations: A Blues Theory of African American Poetics," sets the book back on track with Bolden's cogent explanation of his using blues music as "a metaphor for a critical model of African American poetry ..." Bolden lucidly argues that the Black Arts poetry of the '60s, while approximating the sounds of the preacher and/or blues musician, attempted to rouse audiences to defy the intersection of social, economic, and political

oppressions in their lives. He describes the poets who use vernacular forms in this resistive manner as secular priests, their poetry as “incarnations of secular priesthood.” Poets using the emotional force of voice/instrument techniques to kindle their audiences present a major challenge to literary conventions that acknowledge print-centered poetics. Secular priests engaged in cultural production to restore their people’s culture and history are not deterred by a colonized literary tradition that speaks to the elite or by the literary criticism associated with such a tradition. Therefore, their work demands new methods of criticism, an Afrocentric approach, that considers the function of sound in performance. As Bolden asserts:

...critics of the blues poetry...should envision themselves as informed members of the writer’s audience. While it is important to attend live poetry readings, I am referring to a mode of analysis wherein critics attempt to examine the range and effectiveness with which poets employ oral/aural techniques. What are the specific qualities, critics might ask, that make the poetry appealing?

In using the black oral tradition in poetry, the energies of the audience and the writer became intertwined in such a way that a critique of the work must also include the writer’s ability to “please the crowd,” so-to-speak. The call and response that occurs between the preacher and the congregation in church is akin to the interaction between the poet and his/her audience if the poet strikes a chord that produces a form of testifyin’.

In the last chapter, “Taking the Blues Back Home: The Incarnation of Secular Priesthood in the Poetry of Jayne Cortez,” Bolden points out that the call and response feature of sermons is a distinctive element in Cortez’s forceful work. In this chapter, Bolden offers the reader a treat; one rarely gets the opportunity to see her poetry receive its critical due; moreover, to consider Cortez a secular priest among the more popular male poets, who dominated the Black Arts Movement, is radical. As Bolden declares: “...Jayne Cortez has achieved success in a male-dominated art form... Cortez was undaunted. Like the activists Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, and the Black Panther leader Elaine Brown, she was determined to disrupt traditional assumptions about gender in political movements, and she forged her poetry in the flames of struggle.” Furthermore, departing from the usual nationalistic discourse of both her male and female peers, Cortez often framed her activism in an international context, viewing capitalism as the root of the racial conflict that oppressed people encounter across the globe. For instance, in “For Brave Young Students in Soweto,” Cortez interweaves her voice with the music of her band to engage her audience and bring their attention to the political interconnections among colonized people:

Soweto  
When i hear your name  
I think about you  
like the fifth ward in Houston Texas[.]

When i look at this ugliness  
and think about the Native Americans pushed

into the famine of tribal reserves

think about the concentration camps full of sad Palestinians[.]

Her poetry not only reveals the interconnections and the common enemy, but also the strife that colonization creates among the colonized, pitting them against each other while the (neo) colonizers live privileged lives at the expense of the marginalized groups.

In his analysis of the third stanza of “I Am New York City,” Bolden explains how Cortez incarnates blues singers:

...[She] alter[nates] the pitch of her voice to replicate the antiphony of blues music. After delivering the first two lines in an even-toned pitch [I am new york city of blood/police and fried pies], Cortez begins to stimulate the call and response. She raises the pitch in the third line of the stanza [i rub my docks red with grenadine] and lowers it in the next line [and jelly madness in a flow of tokay] and lowers it in the next line until the final word, “tokay,” which is chanted with a raised pitch. The call and response pattern is repeated [in the next lines] wherein Cortez maintains a raised pitch level.

Throughout chapter six, Bolden substantiates how Cortez’s blues poetry resists conventional literary conventions, demanding the pressing need for a relevant method of criticism that would incorporate a complex knowledge of vernacular culture, musicology, modern poetics, critical theory, linguistics, postcolonial theory, among other things. Such a level of criticism presents a daunting challenge, indeed! Yet, the work of blues poets, like Cortez, Langston Hughes (analyzed in chapter five), and Sterling Brown (examined in chapter four) deserve critical attention that goes beyond the traditional analysis of print-centered poetics.

In his conclusion, Bolden aptly closes his text by stating, “Since black audiences often treat poets as secular priests who address the unique concerns of their community, critics should approach style as a method of waging resistance through art.” Bolden realizes that *Afro-Blue* is only a beginning in creating a meaningful critical discourse for blues poetry, and it offers a good and necessary foundation.

**Pamela R. Fletcher**

## IN THE BREAK: THE AESTHETICS OF THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION

Fred Moten

University of Minnesota Press, 2003

The measure of Fred Moten's ambition in undertaking this study of certain philosophical aspects of African-American performance may be gauged by the book's subtitle, which promises nothing less than *the* (unique?) aesthetics of *the* (singular?) Black radical tradition. That this goal is not, ultimately, achieved (and indeed, given the multiple levels of the Black diasporic changing same/forever, how could and why should it be?) in no way detracts from the numerous bold and valuable insights Moten states and improvises upon. In fact, it is precisely the audacity of his claim that invites readerly counterstatement, in the spirit of the jazz tradition in which he is so deeply versed. No easy task this, for Moten's work is closely argued and densely allusive, often intractable and even downright obscure, at once soliciting and eluding direct critical engagement. For Moten intends to elicit a total involvement akin to that incited by Louis Armstrong according to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* – where instead of remaining a passive recipient of the sound, the reader/listener must slip into the break and look around. Here, however, the musical model is less Armstrong than Cecil Taylor, whom Moten calls "Duke Ellington's most radically devoted follower," and the galvanic music less a solo break, however stop-time, than a sonic rendition of what Houston A. Baker, Jr. would call a black (w)hole and which, if I read him correctly, Moten calls an "ensemble," a ferment of tones from which emerge lines, solos, cries, meditations, invocations and prayers.

Sound, indeed, is the driving epistemological force of the book, a performative challenge to and deformation of established structures of thinking, feeling, reading, and listening. In the lead-in to his opening theme – a bold juxtaposition of two important overtures/openings in 19<sup>th</sup>-century texts: Karl Marx's crucial counterfactual premise in *Capital*, "if commodities could speak," and Frederick Douglass's recounting, in his *Narrative*, of the traumatic moment in which he espied his master's beating of his Aunt Hester – Moten characterizes black performances as denoting "a reevaluation or reconstruction of value, one disruptive of the oppositions of speech and writing, and spirit and matter. It moves by way of the (phono-photo-porno-)graphic disruption the shriek carries out. This movement cuts and augments the primal." The apparently contrasting though for Moten intimately linked actions of "cutting and augmenting" need themselves to be understood in musical or phonographic terms: augmenting a chord (flattening fifths) or cutting an LP record (back in the 1970s Anthony Braxton termed his recorded compositions "cuts"), not to mention cutting contests between rival musicians. The erotic implications of "cut," previously improvised on by Nathaniel

Mackey (whom Moten acknowledges as an inspiration), are fully explored in Moten's analysis; of particular note is his insistence on "invagination" (a concept taken from Jacques Derrida) as central to his project: "This book is meant to contribute both to the aesthetic genealogy of [the black radical tradition] and to the invagination of the ontological totality whose preservation, according to [Cedric] Robinson, inspires a tradition whose birth is characterized by an ancient pre-maturity."

*In the Break* is framed by two "resistances of the object," two Black female "performances" separated by nearly two centuries but constitutive of an ensemble: Aunt Hester's wordless, sounded "passionate utterance" and Adrian Piper's silently vocal subversions (complemented by her own revisioning of Kant) of official art-world spectatorship and exclusions. As Moten puts it, "Aunt Hester...is that which Piper reenacts and/or calls for: ...the invaginated totality or gathering – the locus and logos – of a division of labor, the (audiovisual) rematerialization of value... This is what objection is, what performance is – an internal complication of the object that is, at the same time, her withdrawal into the external world. Such withdrawal makes possible communication between seemingly unbridgeable spaces, times, and persons." By pointing out the various modes of this interlinked internal complication and external withdrawal of the "object" (which I take to be a form of immersion into a field or cut – recall Robert Duncan's "opening of the field" and think of how, and with what, such a field may be opened – of ensemblic subjectivity), Moten himself enacts, through the (broken, cut, augmented, reconstituted) circle of analytical key sequences through which this book moves, the kind of communicative bridging he discerns between Hester's shriek and Piper's elegantly (and eloquently) silent scream. Throughout the book, he mixes a number of provocative ideogram(ophone)s, bringing together Antonin Artaud, Billy Strayhorn, and Beauford Delaney in a Parisian summit meeting, juxtaposing Heidegger and his reader Baraka in order to turn the volume up on the echoes of German philosophy emanating from certain poems in *The Dead Lecturer*, sharply and humorously seeking out revealing and unusual quotes from Derrida (on improvisation) and Lacan (who in a lecture uses the figure of a horn in terms of a phallic amulet in order to repress sound and reinforce what Moten calls his ocularcentrism).

The charts of *In the Break* include an exploration of Cecil Taylor (always welcome, as there is too little written about this most synaesthetic of all outsider musicians – a poet who dances and musicks and writes and sings and who, as Moten reminds us, considers the label of "professional musician" to be an epithet denoting some kind of defeat), a densely layered analysis of one of Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets along with Baraka's prose poem "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets" and a live concert recording by that poem's muse, Billie Holiday, and a celebration of James Baldwin that admirably brings the music of his writing to the fore. In fact, Moten is at his best when he is writing about music as a way of knowing, a task that tends to thwart many otherwise gifted writers whose thoughts

may be haunted by a too-literal reading of Ornette Coleman's often-quoted "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture" – but isn't dancing about architecture too? It all depends on what kind of architecture and what kind of writing...

When Moten – himself a poet – writes: "In the end I want to talk about music, not as that which cannot be talked about but as that which is transferred and reproduced in literature as a function of the enabling disability of the literary representation of aurality. I want to linger in the cut between word and sound, between meaning and content, build me a willow cabin, so to speak, improvise..." who would not applaud such fervency, such daring, even as one recognizes that "wanting" to meet the challenge is a prelude to more than a kiss? And in those passages when Moten throws in a Monkian curve or stylistic Legba-limp, a down-home colloquialism in the midst of high-flown theoretical disquisitions, or a sly unexplained allusion to or *détournement* of a line of poetry, a song or musical composition, the performative quality of this text so deeply imbricated in performance theory comes alive. Most of all, in a passage like the following, there is a movement towards a deeper kind of apprehension; on the sonic-literary level, it's reminiscent of Nathaniel Mackey (whose insistent lyricism, incidentally, always reminds me of Don Cherry's probing trumpet lines), but there is also a kind of Rahsaan Roland Kirk multi-instrumental simultaneity in all the registers Moten is using: "Maybe hope is always overblown, but the overblown produces unprecedented sound, overtones of the heretofore unheard (of), laughter outside the house, "unhoused vacuity"; nevertheless, hope is not quite on the bridge. The rickety bridge collapsed under the weight of its own unsustainable oscillation, vibrations that are too demanding. Hope is in the beckoning of descent..."

And yet, there remains something in the text that still tries to keep that bridge intact, that fights against the descent into the sonic/spiritual profundities. It is interesting that Moten should devote so much of his critical attention to an extended discussion of Baraka's review essay "The Burton Greene Affair," even to the point of making this analysis a paradigmatic moment of the book (if the back-cover description is any indication). Not that Baraka's essay is unimportant or does not broach complex matters, or that Moten doesn't make some acute comments on it. Rather, Baraka's account of a white avant-garde pianist desperately trying to get himself into the "beautiful black sound" space occupied by saxophonists Marion Brown and Pharaoh Sanders, only to be reduced to embarrassing impotence, becomes, in the end, a trope for Moten's own anxieties (which he tries, not wholly unjustly, to displace onto Baraka from a suitable critical distance, with all the "correct" anti-essentialist gestures). If Baraka uses a Heidegger-inflected rhetoric of "being" and "soul" to berate Greene's Euro-avant-gardist musical idiom (while taking a passing swipe at Cecil Taylor's alleged influences from that direction), such a conceptual bind or antinomy is surely worth pointing out. But Moten overdetermines his criticism, weighing it down with the kind of heavy philosophical artillery that doesn't bring the readers any closer to

where – say – Brown and Sanders’s sound might in fact be. For example: “Finally the impossibility of accurately pinpointing the name of the author and the moment of authorship renders obsolete the temporal arrangements structured around the opposition of the idea of process and the idea of a determinate moment of production in their relation to any possible discernment of the phenomena of text and author, of the experience of transformation, of our access to that experience or to the individual artifacts we might say are artificially thrown off in that process.” At obstructive moments like this – all too frequent in the text, unfortunately – a possible paraphrase of a late Artaud performance comes to mind: “To Have Done with the Judgments of Post-Structuralists.”

Given Moten’s proclaimed intention of developing an aesthetic of the Black radical tradition, it is surprising that so much of his work should depend on European “high theory.” Admittedly, he discusses it with the kind of formidable erudition proper to the “deformation of mastery” (to borrow Houston Baker’s term) that has always been an integral part of radical Black intellectual work, but often that erudition becomes impenetrable, a rhetorical version of those “heads on the wall” that Baraka was careful to distinguish from hunting, and the prose crabbed and unreadable – “academic” in the negative sense. Occasionally, the need for a stronger editorial hand becomes manifest: a powerful sequence on the sonic qualities radiating from the famous photograph (unreproduced in the book for reasons Moten is careful to explain) of Emmett Till’s lynched body in his coffin, exposed by his mother to the eyes of the world – a situation where less analysis would truly be more – is vitiated by an excessively lengthy consideration of Roland Barthes’s theories on photography, a comparison that, for me at least, results in the kind of aestheticizing of politics against which Walter Benjamin warned.

Moten selects a quote from Mackey as one of the epigraphs to the book, “...an insistent previousness invading each and every natal occasion,” but in large part history – a vital element of such “previousness” into which one is born – is conspicuously absent from his theoretical purview. Except for a few points of contention with Baraka, he passes over, in a peculiar act of occultation, the 1960s and 1970s debates around the “Black Aesthetic,” which however (as is clear from examination of the work of Addison Gayle, Stephen Henderson, and Larry Neal) were far from negligible or “untheoretical” in their compass. No more than Black radicalism in Cedric Robinson’s formulation (which Moten also includes as an epigraph) can *In the Break* be “understood within the particular context of its genesis” – Moten’s work owes much to these radical predecessors, for all their current neglect in the postmodern academy, and at least some acknowledgement of and critical engagement with their achievements would have been a bracing contrast to polemicizing at length with established art historians like Michael Fried. (On the other hand, Moten’s jabs at the omissions, distortions, and misreadings of Black creativity perpetrated by such established authorities as Sally

Banes, Andrew Ross, Richard Schechner, and Fredric Jameson land deftly on their targets.)

But perhaps the most serious flaw of Moten's work is its perpetuation of a syndrome that, in these days of "Fortress America," dies hard (though it's long overdue for burial): American exceptionalism. The "Black radical tradition," at least in these pages, appears to be a Made-in-USA phenomenon. When reggae is mentioned, it is in a quote from Nathaniel Mackey (who, it might be added, has always been attuned to the whole universe of African and Afro-diasporic sound), but except for that, the Caribbean, Latin America, and most egregiously, Africa herself, are invisible and inaudible. Cecil Taylor's poem "Chinampa" is discussed and quoted at length, with all due reference being made to the "floating gardens" the Aztec word denotes, but Taylor's own interest in Pre-Columbian cultures (evident in the titles of several of his compositions) remains outside Moten's purview, and the quoted allusion to Vodou in the poem (another animating source of Taylor's work) also passes unremarked. In fact, with the exception of gospel music, diasporic spirituality is absent as well, though Black radicalism in the Americas can hardly be conceived of without it (why, for instance, is it precisely Damballah who is the "lost god" Baraka invokes to such powerful effect at the end of "Black Dada Nihilismus," and does bringing Heidegger into the picture entirely suffice as an interpretation of this move?).

Regardless of these criticisms, *In the Break* does in fact go where the title says it needs and wants to go, and stays there more often than not. In many respects, the sheer brilliance of many of Moten's ideas and readings cast the flaws into greater relief than would be the case with a less far-reaching, more conservative and restrained work. It's a work that rewards careful study and repeated consultation, and invites extension, development, debate, and sustained intellectual improvisation on its protean themes.

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