# THE GRAMSCI MONUMENT-NEWSPAPER

N°72

www.gramsci-monument.com

**September 10th, 2013 - Forest Houses, Bronx, NY**

The Gramsci Monument-Newspaper is part of the "Gramsci Monument", an artwork by Thomas Hirschhorn, produced by Dia Art Foundation in co-operation with Erik Farmer and the Residents of Forest Houses

# HOMI K. BHABHA
# WE MISS YOU

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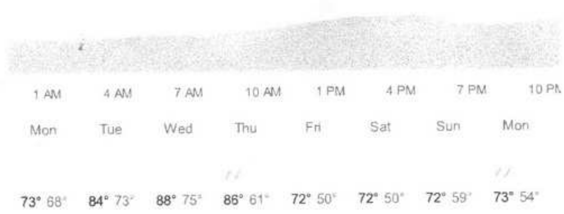


HOMI K. BHABHA "FREEDOM'S BASIS IN THE INDETERMINATE"
OCTOBER, VOL. 61 (SUMMER 1992): 46-57

# Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate*

HOMI K. BHABHA

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial or anticolonialist testimonies of Third World countries and from the testimony of minorities within the geopolitical division of East/West, North/South. These perspectives intervene in the ideological discourses of modernity that have attempted to give a hegemonic "normality" to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, and peoples. Their critical revisions are formulated around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the "rationalizations" of modernity. To assimilate Habermas to our purposes, we could also argue that the postcolonial project, at its most general theoretical level, seeks to explore those social pathologies—"loss of meaning, conditions of anomie"—that no longer simply "cluster around class antagonism, [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies."[1]

These contingencies often provide the grounds of historical necessity for the elaboration of strategies of emancipation, for the staging of other social antagonisms. Reconstituting the discourse of cultural difference demands more than a simple change of cultural contents and symbols, for a replacement within the same representational time frame is never adequate. This reconstitution requires a radical revision of the social *temporality* in which emergent histories may be written: the rearticulation of the "sign" in which cultural identities may be inscribed. And contingency as the *signifying time* of counterhegemonic strategies is not a celebration of "lack" or "excess" or a self-perpetuating series of negative ontologies. Such "indeterminism" is the mark of the conflictual yet

* Short sections of this talk have been published elsewhere.
1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), p. 348.





productive space in which the arbitrariness of the sign of cultural signification emerges within the regulated boundaries of social discourse.

It is in this salutary sense that various contemporary critical theories suggest that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement. There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality—as it emerges in noncanonical cultural forms—transforms our critical strategies. It forces us to confront the concept of culture outside *objets d'art* or beyond the canonization of the "Idea" of aesthetics, and thus to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, and produced in the act of social survival. Culture reaches out to create a symbolic textuality, to give the alienating everyday an "aura" of selfhood, a promise of pleasure. The transmission of "cultures of survival" does not occur in the ordered *musée ordinaire* of national cultures—with their claims to the continuity of an authentic past and a living present—regardless of whether this scale of value is preserved in the organicist national traditions of romanticism or within the more universal proportions of classicism.

Culture as a strategy of survival is both *transnational* and *translational*. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement: in the "middle passage" of slavery and indenture; in the "voyage out" of the colonialist civilizing mission; in the fraught accommodation of postwar "third world" migration to the West; or in the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. It is translational because such spatial histories of displacement—now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of global media technologies—make the question of *how* culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, rather complex issues. It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the *symbols* across diverse cultural experiences—literature, art, music, ritual, life, death—and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as it circulates *as a sign* within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation—migration, diaspora, displacement, relocations—turns the specifying or localizing process of cultural translation into a complex process of signification. For the natural(ized), unifying discourse of "nation," "peoples," "folk" tradition—these embedded myths of culture's particularity—cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes one increasingly aware of the construction of culture, the invention of tradition, the retroactive nature of social affiliation and psychic identification.

The postcolonial perspective departs from the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or the "dependency" theory. As a mode of analysis it attempts to revise those nationalist or "nativist" pedagogies that set up the relation of Third and First Worlds in a binary structure of opposition. The

postcolonial perspective resists attempts to provide a holistic social explanation, forcing a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres.

It is from this hybrid location of cultural value—the transnational *as* the translational—that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project. It has been my growing conviction that the encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values within the governmental discourses and cultural practices that make up "colonial" textuality have enacted, *avant la lettre*, many of the problematics of signification and judgment that have become current in contemporary theory: aporia, ambivalence, indeterminacy, the question of discursive closure, the threat to agency, the status of intentionality, the challenge to "totalizing" concepts, to name but a few.

To put it in general terms, there is a "colonial" countermodernity at work in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century matrices of Western modernity that, if acknowledged, would question the historicism that, in a linear narrative, analogically links late capitalism to the fragmentary, simulacral, pastiche-like symptoms of postmodernity. This is done without taking into account the historical traditions of cultural contingency and textual indeterminacy that were generated in the attempt to produce an "enlightened" colonial subject—in both the foreign and native varieties—and that transformed, in the process, both antagonistic sites of cultural agency.

Postcolonial critical discourses require forms of dialectical thinking that do not disavow or sublate the otherness (alterity) that constitutes the symbolic domain of psychic and social identifications. The incommensurability of cultural values and priorities that the postcolonial critic represents cannot be accommodated within a relativism that assumes a public and symmetrical world. And the cultural potential of such differential histories has led Fredric Jameson to recognize the "internationalization of the national situations" in the postcolonial criticism of Roberto Retamar. Far from functioning as an absorption of the particular by the general, the very act of articulating cultural differences "calls us into question fully as much as it acknowledges the Other . . . neither reduc[ing] the Third World to some homogeneous Other of the West, nor . . . vacuously celebrat[ing] the astonishing pluralism of human cultures."[2]

The historical grounds of such an intellectual tradition are to be found in the revisionary impulse that informs many postcolonial thinkers. C. L. R. James once remarked that the postcolonial prerogative consisted in reinterpreting and rewriting the forms and effects of an "older" colonial consciousness from the later experience of the cultural displacement that marks the more recent, postwar histories of the Western metropolis. A similar process of cultural translation,



and transvaluation, is evident in Edward Said's assessment of the response from disparate postcolonial regions as a "tremendously energetic attempt to engage with the metropolitan world in a common effort at reinscribing, reinterpreting, and expanding the sites of intensity and the terrain contested with Europe."[3]

How does the deconstruction of the sign, the emphasis on indeterminism in cultural and political judgment, transform our sense of the subject of culture and the historical agent of change? If we contest the grand, continuist narratives, then what alternative temporalities do we create to articulate the contrapuntal (Said) or interruptive (Spivak) formations of race, gender, class, and nation within a transnational world culture?

Such problematic questions are activated within the terms and traditions of postcolonial critique as it reinscribes the cultural relations between spheres of social antagonism. Current debates in postmodernism question the cunning of modernity—its historical ironies, its disjunctive temporalities, the paradoxical nature of progress. It would profoundly affect the values and judgments of such interrogations if they were open to the argument that metropolitan histories of *civitas* cannot be conceived without evoking the colonial antecedents of the ideals of civility. The postcolonial translation of modernity does not simply revalue the contents of a cultural tradition or transpose values across cultures through the transcendent spirit of a "common humanity."

*

Cultural translation transforms the value of culture-as-sign: as the time-signature of the historical "present" that is struggling to find its mode of narration. The sign of cultural difference does not celebrate the great continuities of a past tradition, the seamless narratives of progress, the vanity of humanist wishes. Culture-as-sign articulates that in-between moment when the rule of language as semiotic system—linguistic difference, the arbitrariness of the sign—turns into a struggle for the historical and ethical *right to signify*. The rule of language as signifying system—the possibility of speaking at all—becomes the misrule of discourse: the right for only some to speak diachronically and differentially and for "others"—women, migrants, Third World peoples, Jews, Palestinians, for instance—to speak only symptomatically or marginally. How do we transform the formal value of linguistic difference into an analytic of cultural difference? How do we turn the "arbitrariness" of the sign into the critical practices of social authority? In what sense is this an interruption within the discourses of modernity?

This is not simply a demand for a postcolonial semiology. From the

postcolonial perspective, it is an intervention in the way discourses of modernity structure their objects of knowledge. The right to signify—to make a name for oneself—emerges from the moment of undecidability—a claim made by Jacques Derrida in "Des Tours de Babel," his essay on "figurative translation." Let us not forget that he sees translation as the trope for the process of displacement through which language names its object. But even more suggestive, for our postcolonial purposes, is the Babel metaphor that Derrida uses to describe the cultural, communal process of "making a name for oneself": "The Semites want to bring the world to reason and this reason can signify simultaneously a colonial violence . . . and a peaceful transparency of the human condition."[4]

This is emphatically not, as Terry Eagleton has recently described it, "the trace or aporia or ineffable flicker of difference which eludes all formalization, that giddy moment of failure, slippage, or jouissance."[5] The undecidability of discourse is not to be read as the "excess" of the signifier, as an aestheticization of the formal arbitrariness of the sign. Rather, it represents, as Habermas suggests, the central ambivalence of the knowledge structure of modernity; "unconditionality" is the Janus-faced process at work in the modern moment of cultural judgment, where validity claims seek justification for their propositions in terms of the specificity of the "everyday." Undecidability or unconditionality "is built into the factual processes of mutual understanding. . . . Validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, but the claim must always be raised here and now, in specific contexts."[6]

*Pace* Eagleton, this is no giddy moment of failure; it is instead precisely the act of representation as a mode of regulating the limits or liminality of cultural knowledges. Habermas illuminates the undecidable or "unconditional" as the epistemological basis of cultural specificity, and thus, in the discourse of modernity, the claim to knowledge shifts from the "universal" to the domain of context-bound everyday practice. However, Habermas's notion of communicative reason presumes intersubjective understanding and reciprocal recognition. This renders his sense of cultural particularity essentially consensual and essentialist. What of those colonial cultures caught in the drama of the dialectic of the master and the enslaved or indentured?

This concept of the right to signify is, in the context of contemporary postcolonial poetry, nowhere more profoundly evoked than in Derek Walcott's poem on the colonization of the Caribbean through the possession of a space by means of the power of naming. In Walcott's "Names," ordinary language develops an auratic authority, an imperial persona; but in a specifically post-

4. Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 174.
5. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 370.
6. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 323.



colonial performance of repetition, the focus shifts from the nominalism of linguistic imperialism to the emergence of another history of the sign. It is another destiny of culture as a site—one based not simply on subversion and transgression, but on the prefiguration of a kind of solidarity between ethnicities that meet in the tryst of colonial history. Walcott explores that space of cultural translation between the double meanings of culture: culture as the noun for naming the social imaginary, and culture as the act for grafting the voices of the indentured, the displaced, the nameless, onto an agency of utterance.

> My race began as the sea began,
> with no nouns, and with no horizon,
> with pebbles under my tongue,
> with a different fix on the stars. . . .
>
> Have we melted into a mirror,
> leaving our souls behind?
> The goldsmith from Benares,
> the stonecutter from Canton,
> the bronzesmith from Benin.
>
> A sea-eagle screams from the rock,
> and my race began like the osprey
> with that cry,
> that terrible vowel,
> that I!
>
> . . . this stick
> to trace our names on the sand
> which the sea erased again, to our indifference.
>
> And when they named these bays
> bays,
> was it nostalgia or irony? . . .
>
> Where were the courts of Castile?
> Versailles' colonnades
> supplanted by cabbage palms
> with Corinthian crests,
> belittling diminutives,
> then, little Versailles
> meant plans for the pigsty,
> names for the sour apples
> and green grapes
> of their exile. . . .



> Being men, they could not live
> except they first presumed
> the right of everything to be a noun.
> The African acquiesced,
> repeated, and changed them.
>
> Listen, my children, say:
> *moubain:* the hogplum,
> *cerise:* the wild cherry,
> *baie-la:* the bay,
> with the fresh green voices
> they were once themselves
> in the way the wind bends
> our natural inflections.
>
> These palms are greater than Versailles,
> for no man made them,
> their fallen columns greater than Castile,
> no man unmade them
> except the worm, who has no helmet,
> but was always the emperor,
>
> and children, look at these stars
> over Valencia's forest!
>
> Not Orion,
> Not Betelgeuse,
> tell me, what do they look like?
> Answer you damned little Arabs!
> Sir, fireflies caught in molasses.[7]

In this poem, there are two myths of history, each related to opposing versions of the place of language in the process of cultural knowledge. There is the pedagogical process of imperialist naming:

> Being men, they could not live
> except they first presumed
> the right of everything to be a noun.

7. Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948–1984* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), pp. 305–8.



Opposed to this is the African acquiescence, which, in repeating the lessons of the masters, changes their inflections:

> *moubain:* the hogplum
> *cerise:* the wild cherry
> *baie-la:* the bay
> with the fresh green voices
> they were once themselves . . .

Walcott's purpose is not to oppose the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native voice; he proposes instead to go beyond such binaries of power in order to reorganize our sense of the process of language in the negotiations of cultural politics. He stages the slaves' right to signify not simply by denying the imperialist "right for everything to be a noun" but by questioning the masculinist, authoritative subjectivity produced in the colonizing process. What is "man" as an effect of, as subjected to, the sign—the noun—of a colonizing discourse? To this end, Walcott poses the problem of beginning outside the question of origins, beyond that perspectival field of vision which constitutes human consciousness in the "mirror of nature" (as Richard Rorty has famously described the project of positivism). According to this ideology, language is always a form of visual epistemology, the miming of a pre-given reality; knowing is implicated in the confrontational polarity of subject and object, Self and Other.

Within this mode of representation, naming (or nouning) the world is a mimetic act. It is founded on an idealism of the iconic sign, which assumes that repetition in language is the symptom of an inauthentic act, of nostalgia or mockery. In the context of imperialist naming, this can only lead to ethnocentric disdain or cultural despair:

> Where were the courts of Castile?
> Versailles' colonnades
> supplanted by cabbage palms
> with Corinthian crests,
> belittling diminutives . . .

Thus Walcott's history begins elsewhere: in that temporality of the negation of essences to which Fanon led us; in that moment of undecidability or unconditionality that constitutes the ambivalence of modernity as it executes its critical judgments or seeks justification for its social facts. Against the possessive, coercive "right" of the Western noun, Walcott places a different mode of speech, a different historical time envisaged in the discourse of the enslaved or the indentured—the goldsmith from Benares, the stonecutter from Canton, the bronzesmith from Benin.

> My race began as the sea began,
> with no nouns, and with no horizon . . .

I began with no memory,
I began with no future . . .

I have never found that moment
When the mind was halved by a horizon . . .

And my race began like the osprey
with that cry,
that terrible vowel,
that I!

Is there a historical timelessness at the heart of slavery? By erasing the sovereign subject of the Western mind, of the mind "halved by the horizon," Walcott erases the mode of historicism that predicates the colonial civilizing mission on the question of the origin of races. "My race began . . . with no nouns." With this Walcott destroys the Eurocentric narrative of nouns, the attempt to objectify the New World, to enclose it in the teleology of the noun, in the fetish of naming. In destroying the teleology of the subject of naming, Walcott refuses to totalize differences, to make of culture a holistic, organic system. What is more, he emphatically stills that future-drive of the (imperialist) discourse of modernization or progress that conceals the disjunctive, fragmented moment of the colonial "present" by overlaying it with grand narratives and grandiose names or nouns: Castile, Versailles. Walcott reveals the space and time in which the struggle for the proper name of the postcolonial poet ensues.

Walcott's timeless moment, that undecidability from which he builds his narrative, opens up his poem to the historical present that Walter Benjamin, in his description of the historian, characterizes as a "present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history."[8] Yet what is the history that is being rewritten in this present? Where does the postcolonial subject lie?

With "that terrible vowel, that I," Walcott opens up the disjunctive present of the poem's writing of its history. The "I" as vowel, as the arbitrariness of the signifier, is the sign of iteration or repetition; it is nothing in itself, only ever its difference. The "I" as pronomial, as the avowal of the enslaved colonial subject-position, is contested by the repetition of the "I" as vocal or vowel "sign," as the agency of history, tracing its name on the shifting sands, constituting a post-colonial, migrant community-in-difference: Hindu, Chinese, African. With this

8. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 262.



disjunctive, double "I," Walcott writes a history of cultural difference that envisages the production of difference as the political and social definition of the historical present. Cultural differences must be understood as they constitute identities—contingently, indeterminately—between the repetition of the vowel *i* (which can always be reinscribed, relocated) and the restitution of the subject "I." Read like this, between the I-as-symbol and the I-as-sign, the articulations of difference—race, history, gender—are never singular, binary, or totalizable. These cultural differentials are most productively read as existing in-between each other. If they make claims to their radical singularity or separatism, they do so at the peril of their historical destiny to change, transform, solidarize. Claims to identity must never be nominative or normative. They are never nouns when they are productive; like the vowel, they must be capable of turning up in and as an other's difference and of turning the "right" to signify into an act of cultural translation.

*

The postcolonial revision of modernity I am arguing for has a political place in the writings of Raymond Williams. Williams makes an important distinction between emergent and residual practices of oppositionality, which require what he describes as a "non-metaphysical and non-subjectivist" historical position. He does not elaborate on this complex idea, but I hope that my description of agency as it emerges in the disjunctive temporality of the "present" in the postcolonial text may be one important instance of it. This concept has a contemporary relevance for those burgeoning forces of the left who are attempting to formulate a "politics of difference" that avoids both essentialism and cultural "nationalism"; Williams suggests that in certain historical moments—ours certainly among them—the profound deformation of the dominant culture will prevent it from recognizing "political practices and cultural meanings that are not reached for."[9]

Such a notion of the emergence of a cultural "minority" has a vivid realization in the work of many black American women writers—writers who emphasize, according to Houston Baker, "the processual quality of meaning . . . not material instantiation at any given moment but the efficacy of passage."[10] Such a passage of time-as-meaning emerges with a sudden ferocity in the work of the African-American poet Sonia Sanchez:

life is obscene with crowds
of black on white

9. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 43.
10. Houston Baker, "Our Lady: Sonia Sanchez and the Writing of a Black Renaissance," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Meridian, 1990).



death is my pulse.
what might have been
is not for him/or me
but what could have been
floods the womb until i drown.[11]

You can hear it in the ambiguity between "what might have been" and "what could have been"—again, in that undecidability through which Sanchez attempts to write her history of the present. You read it in that considerable shift in historical time between an obscene racist past—the "might have been" —and the emergence of a new birth that is visible in the writing itself—the "could have been." You see it suggested in the almost imperceptible displacement in tense and syntax—might, could—that makes all the difference between the pulse of death and the flooded womb of birth. And it is this repetition—the repetition of the could-in-the-might—that expresses the right to signify.

The postcolonial passage through modernity produces a form of retroaction: the past as projective. It is not a cyclical form of repetition that circulates around a lack. The time *lag* of postcolonial modernity moves *forward*, erasing that compliant past tethered to the myth of progress, ordered in the binarisms of its cultural logic: past/present, inside/outside. This forward is neither teleological nor is it an endless slippage. It is the function of the lag to slow down the linear, progressive time of modernity to reveal its gesture, its *tempi*—"the pauses and stresses of the whole performance." This can only be achieved—as Walter Benjamin remarked of Brecht's epic theater—by damming the stream of life, by bringing the flow to a standstill in a reflux of astonishment.

When the dialectic of modernity is brought to a standstill, then the temporal action of modernity—its progressive future drive—is *staged*, revealing "everything that is involved in the act of staging per se."[12] This slowing down, or lagging, impels the past, projects it, gives its "dead" symbols the circulatory life of the "sign" of the present, of passage, of the quickening of the quotidian. Where these temporalities touch contingently, their spatial boundaries overlap; at that moment their margins are sutured in the articulation of the "disjunctive" present. And this time-lag keeps alive the making and remaking of the past. As it negotiates the levels and liminalities of that spatial time that I have tried to unearth in the postcolonial archaeology of modernity, you might think that it "lacks" time or history. But don't be fooled!

11. Sonia Sanchez, quoted in Baker, "Our Lady: Sonia Sanchez," pp. 329–30.
12. Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Stanley Mitchell (London: New Left Books, 1973), pp. 11–13. I have freely adapted some of Benjamin's phrases and interpolated the problem of modernity into the midst of his argument on Epic theater. I do not think that I have misrepresented his argument.



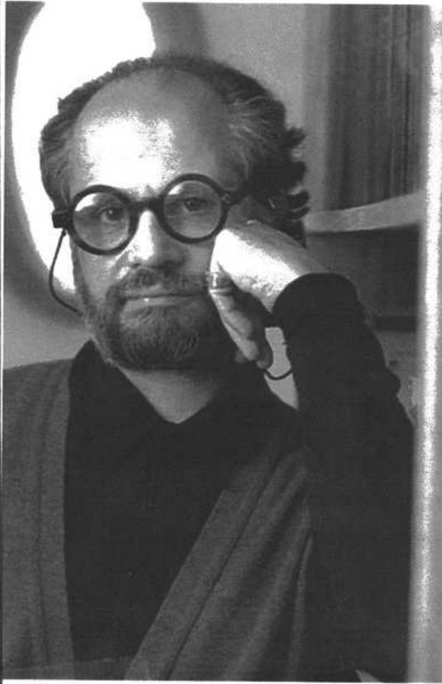
It appears "timeless" only in that sense in which, for Toni Morrison, African-American art is "astonished" by the belated figure of the ancestor . . . "the timelessness is there, this person who represented this ancestor."[13] And when the ancestor rises from the dead in the guise of the murdered slave daughter, Beloved, then we see the furious emergence of the projective past. Beloved is not the ancestor, the elder, whom Morrison describes as benevolent, instructive, and protective. Her presence, as *revenant*, is profoundly time-lagged and moves forward while continually encircling the moment of the "not there" that Morrison sees as the stressed, dislocatory absence that is crucial for the reconstruction of the narrative of slavery. Ella, a member of the chorus, standing at that very distance from the "event" from which modernity produces its historical sign, now describes the projective past:

> The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind you might have to stomp it out. . . . As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place . . . Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but his was an invasion.[14]

The emergence of the "projective past" introduces into the narratives of identity and community a necessary split between the time of utterance and the space of memory. This "lagged" temporality is not some endless slippage; it is a mode of breaking the complicity of past and present in order to open up a space of revision and initiation. It is, in other words, the articulation between the pronomial "I" and verbal/vocal *i* that Walcott stages in the process of creating a postcolonial, Caribbean voice that is heard in the *interstitial* experience of diaspora and migration, somewhere between the "national" origins of the Benin bronzesmith, the Cantonese stonecutter, and the goldsmith from Benares.

The histories of slavery and colonialism that create the discursive conditions for the projective past and its split narratives are tragic and painful in the extreme, but it is their agony that makes them exemplary texts for our moment. They represent an idea of action and agency more complex than either the nihilism of despair or the utopia of progress. They speak of the reality of survival and negotiation that constitutes the lived moment of resistance, its sorrow and its salvation—the moment that is rarely spoken in the stories of heroism that are enshrined in the histories we choose to remember and recount.

13. Toni Morrison, "The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers*, ed. Mari Evans (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 343.
14. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), pp. 256–57.



# BIOGRAPHY OF HOMI K. BHABHA

**Homi K. Bhabha** is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities and the director of the Humanities Center at Harvard University, where he also serves as the senior advisor on the humanities to Harvard's president and provost. Bhabha is the author or editor of numerous books including *Cosmopolitanism* (Duke University Press, 2002); *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994); and *Nation and Narration* (Routledge, 1990). He serves as chair of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Human Rights and is on the advisory boards of the Graduate School of North American Studies and the International Research Center "Interweaving Performance Cultures" at Freie Universität Berlin. His forthcoming books include *A Global Measure* (Harvard University Press) and *The Right to Narrate* (Columbia University Press).

## 9.8.2013 GRAMSCI SEMINAR: NADIA URBINATI

# 9.8.2013 GRAMSCI SEMINAR: NADIA URBINATI

# A DAILY LECTURE FROM MARCUS STEINWEG

***72nd Lecture at the Gramsci Monument, The Bronx, NYC: 10th September 2013***
**LOVE AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE**
***Marcus Steinweg***

1. How to think love in the horizon of immanence, under the conditions of a world without a beyond and a thought which condemns both a physical esotericism and fatalism, only to situate them beyond realism and idealism?[1]

2. Love allows to think a truth which proves this alternative to be a pseudo-alternative.

3. Neither the romantic narrative, nor its disenchantment in the postromantic sequence of a love identifying as a phantasm hit its aporetic core, which identifies them as lived difference.

4. With Alain Badiou, love can be thought as „encounter and thinking", as „asymmetric egalitarian becoming" or „procedure for a truth of difference". A difference which points to the aporias of love, to problems without solution, to constitutive antinomies. Instead of being „mystical fusion" or „astral connection", love is a „dualistic adventure of body and mind".[2]

5. Evidently, there is a relation between truth and love referring to the concept of philosophy: philosophy is the love of truth, as long as truth determines the aporetic core of reality.

6. The philosophical love of truth aims at the inconsistency of the space of consistency which is the universe of established familiarities.

7. The affirmation of what remains untouchable or „off" belongs to philosophy as much as it belongs to love, if we follow Roland Barthes' dictum according to which „truth" is what's „off", beyond the reach of the knowable and meaning.[3]

8. The truth of love is experienced rather than known: „It is in the deepest part of the lure that the sensation of truth comes to rest."[4]

9. Love exists solely as a deviation towards something new, for which finding a name remains the practice of lived love.

10. Apparently, every love demands an adequate nomenclature.

11. If, in love, there is a moment of criticism of ideology, it lies in the necessity to open the rhetoric addressing the other, which is controlled by stereotypes towards a space of a language yet to be invented, which expects as little convention as possible of the singularities of love.

12. As if every love demanded the suspension of the vocabulary used to describe it, like the reinvention of language along this singular constellation of subjects marveling at and communicating their own improbability.

13. As if it were about honoring the miracle of love with the means of a new lexis.

14. As if a creative force belonged to it, which laments the injustice of language to constitute itself as resistance against all possible conventions.

15. As if the union of lovers was an act of resistance.

16. As if, with the decision for this union with this subject, all categories were at stake, which define intersubjectivity, community, collectivity.

17. As if the lovers had to insist on the incommunicability and improbability of their experience.

18. As if the exceptional character belonged to love just like this improbability and incommunicability.

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[1] Elisabeth Bronfen describes the function of „relief" of the „narrative of the fatal love" which, instead of appearing as a product of a decision, appears as an „inescapable necessity". See Bronfen, Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema, New York: Columbia University Press 2004, pp. 187.

[2] Vgl. Alain Badiou, The Century, trans. Alberto Toscano, London: Polity Press, 2007. For the distinction of true, reactive and obscure subject, f.e. love, see: Second manifeste pour la philosophie, Paris 2009.

[3] Alexander Kluge points out that every "chance for narration" which aims at a (amorous, political, social, etc.) truth, which delimits meaning, "lies beyond the fact" or beyond reality (which means: within reality as something other than reality). Cf. Rainer Stollmann, Die Entstehung des Schönheitssinns aus dem Eis. Gespräche über Geschichten mit Alexander Kluge, Berlin 2005, p. 15.

[4] Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse. Fragments, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1978, p. 230

# FEEDBACK

DAILYSERVING

AN INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART



## #Hashtags: On the Political in Art

- August 26, 2013 Written by Anuradha Vikram

Thomas Hirshhorn. Gramsci Monument, 2013. Construction: Day 37: team photo with Antonio Gramsci mural. Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Courtesy of Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Romain Lopez

Hirshhorn's *Gramsci Monument* at the Forest Houses takes an approach that is as far from the style and the setting of Powhida and Townsend's work as one could imagine within the limits of contemporary art and New York City. Working abstractly within a socially activated installation, Hirshhorn makes the research the substance of his intervention into the architectural and interpersonal structures of this South Bronx public housing complex. Writing in the *New York Times*, Ken Johnson described leaving the *Gramsci Monument* "feeling irritable and depressed." I could not have had a more different response.

My initial skepticism at the effectiveness of this project had two main aspects. First, I wondered what a community that has seen more than its share of deprivation would make of an artwork that employed an "anti-aesthetic." After all, bell hooks has written of the experiences of poor people of color growing up "in an ugly house. No one there considered the function of beauty or pondered the use of space. Surrounded by dead things, whose spirits had long ago vanished since they were no longer needed, that house contained a great engulfing emptiness." [1] Second, I questioned the value created by an elite contemporary art institution (Dia Art Foundation) sponsoring a famous European artist to "intervene" in the lives of a poor community of color in the United States. Would the academic philosophy of early twentieth-century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci be accessible to the Forest Houses's residents? Would Gramsci's mission of empowering the working class be realized or parodied by this highly conceptual effort? Would the community that labored to build the monument feel connected to its work or simply be exploited in a gentler fashion than usual? In short, would this be a monument to or against Gramscian hegemony? Both the effectiveness of *Question Bridge*'s black-male-driven

exchanges and the recent furor over South Bronx poverty tourism by Europeans played heavily on my mind.

Thomas Hirschhorn. Gramsci Monument, 2013. Gramsci Bar.
Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Romain Lopez

I arrived at the Forest Houses in the midst of a deluge of rain. Though the skies were gloomy, I was soon glad to have come at such an unfavorable time because aside from myself there were no art tourists present. I was able to see the *Gramsci Monument* as it exists for the residents of Forest Houses (of which Hirshhorn is one, for the duration of the installation's run). Even in the rain, a small group of residents gathered around the monument's "Gramsci Bar" were beaming with joy, cracking jokes with one another, and sharing in the warmth of the makeshift kitchen. Children worked intently on art projects in the adjacent workshop space. The Internet corner was similarly buzzing with teens and adults, while the library and exhibition space that houses Gramsci artifacts and related texts on Marxist politics was empty save for Hirshhorn's own lean figure.

Though assembled of scrap materials including wooden pallets, irregular two-by-fours, blue plastic tarps, and packing tape, the structures did not let a drop of the heavy rain through (which is more than I can say for the New Park Mall, where I made a brief pit stop later in the day). The attitude of the Gramsci Bar's cook, Stanley "White Cloud" Scott (a.k.a. Stan the Man) was no less indomitable. Scott was effusive in his praise for the project, which he described as generating positivity to counteract negative self-image and low expectations within his community. He indicated that some of the monument's resources, such as the Internet corner and art workshops, had already been available at a nearby community center but that the monument had prompted people to make better use of them. I asked about the monument's aesthetics, which he said had opened his eyes to the appearance of art in everyday things. He spoke of the adjacent garden, which had existed in a state of neglect prior to Hirshhorn's arrival. He hoped it would be maintained after the artist had led its renovation and revival. It's tempting to read said garden as an allegory for the experiences of Forest Houses residents, particularly the children whom Scott suggested had received the monument's greatest benefit.

Hirshhorn, speaking from the office of the "Gramsci Monument Newspaper" as a young woman worked on layouts for the day's issue, described how the absence of a classical aesthetic encouraged residents to make full use of the artwork rather than view it as something precious or outside their scope. He similarly indicated that the work's temporary duration encouraged skeptics to overcome their misgivings about its purpose. He spoke of "porosity," of allowing for multiple uses and interpretations that expand beyond the artist's initial vision. He also described the monument as a literal platform for action, be it lectures by philosophers and artists programmed throughout each day, children's play, or adults' friendly ribbing. Indeed, the community's friendliness and openness to a work that they freely admitted they did not initially understand was repeatedly emphasized by both artist and residents.

Are there downsides to this intervention? Certainly—the academic content of the work does not seem to have found a consistent audience, demonstrating that such messages are more effectively expressed to the uninitiated through the monument's form and function. Does underwriting this work provide political cover to an economic and social elite responsible for widespread exploitation? Possibly, but this is the definition of our current model of philanthropy, and it seems unfair to charge an artist with changing that single-handedly. If Dia's investment in the project suggests that the voices of the marginalized are being co-opted into the grand scheme of Bloomberg's new New York, the *Gramsci Monument* differs from other "aesthetic politics" interventions in that its structure actually elevates participants' perspectives above those of the artist or the underwriting institution.

The cost of the work's execution included wages paid for construction and staffing performed by Forest Houses residents. Those jobs will disappear at summer's end, with no replacement income on the horizon. Scott is hopeful that the monument's precedent will demonstrate that the Forest Houses are a good investment, inhabited by a community that can make productive use of an additional influx of resources. However, no such investors appear to be lining up. Hard times may be ahead for the Forest Houses, as they have been in the past. However, the self-esteem and capacity for autonomy that the *Gramsci Monument* has enabled are unlikely to fade away anytime soon. Ultimately, Hirshhorn's project combines the criticality and specialist knowledge of Powhida and Townsend's work with the framework for self-expression offered by *Question Bridge* to create an atmosphere of respect and empowerment in a place where there has often been too little of either.

1. bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional." *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry*, Vol. 1 (1995).

*Hank Willis Thomas* and *Question Bridge: Black Males* were on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, in Manhattan, from July 11 to August 23, 2013. *Question Bridge* is also on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum through September 8, 2013, and at the Exploratorium, in San Francisco, through April 2014. *The Decline and Fall of the Art World Part I: The One Percenters* is on view at Freight + Volume, in Manhattan, through September 7, 2013. *Gramsci Monument* is installed at the Forest Houses, in the South Bronx, through September 15, 2013.

*#Hashtags is a series exploring the intersection of art, social issues, and global politics.*

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