Citizenship, Language, and Modernity

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To challenge the regimes of representation that govern a society is to conceive of how a politics can transform reality rather than merely ideologize it.
—Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*

THE PASSAGE FROM FEUDAL SUBJECT TO MODERN CITIZEN, articulated in the social pact of (democratic) rights and institutional obligations, apparently girds the formation of the modern nation-state and its evocation of "we, the nation." In a series of dialogic distinctions between private interests and public obligations, civil and political society, individual autonomy and collective identification, the abstract silhouette of citizenship is elaborated. The media, in their fictive and nonfictive moments, aid and abet this narrative, weaving together the apparent distinctions between public and private, individuality and communality, into the commonweal that establishes a commonsensical understanding of who and where we are. This narrative, like all narratives, is open to interpretation and retelling. Today it is probably open to more versions than it has traditionally liked to house. Most obvious is the question, How should citizenship and its accompanying political and cultural agency be conceptualized in the present-day context of transnational economies and other global framings? Out beyond the pleas for solidarity, for ecological responsibility, and for the recognition of a global multicultural heritage, the world is severed by local wars and planetary poverty. The brutal historical discrepancy between a rich, overdeveloped minority and a poor, underprivileged, and underrepresented majority persists.

I commence from this cruel benchmark. For neither a profound structural redistribution nor an ethical sea change able to challenge a narrow-

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ing horizon of expectations seems imminent. People will not give up what they have. How then does one speak of citizenship, with its associated individual freedom for future action and freedom from immediate want, in a world where for most the concept crumbles into rhetorical dust before the implacable insistence of simply surviving? What is more disconcerting, the demand for civic freedom and justice from the fields of the rural poor and from the sweat shops of the urban dispossessed may exceed the classic sense of citizenship, peculiar to the property and propriety of urban modernity, that we are accustomed to use.

The world, as Edward Said notes, is full of "undocumented people," in the bureaucratic and historical senses. They are the noncosmopolitan mass, he continues, that exists beyond art, subjectivity, and political and cultural representation. They represent the reverse side, the dark side, of Benedict Anderson's noted insistence on the anonymous state of nationhood. Such peoples are exiled in many ways; they are not only, and most obviously, dislocated physically and materially but also excluded economically, politically, and culturally from the agenda that dictates global development and progress. But if the overdeveloped world requires the rest of the planet for economic and material resources, not to speak of an abject alterity that cruelly mirrors and measures the identity of the privileged, the poor majority also manufactures a dramatic counterspace from where that identity is necessarily critically reassessed. Powerlessness has a potential critical power. Of course, nothing is encountered or lived in such stark, black-and-white terms. Worldly configurations and locations are more complex and hybrid in their formation and articulation. No one simply occupies a single category, destined to respect its premises forever. Yet this is surely a time, characterized simultaneously by globalization and crises, when it is necessary to return to the sobering structures in which political change and cultural transformation occur. It is important for us to recognize in the increasingly creolized conditions of metropolitan life not only the enrichment of the First World but also the charged demands of other worlds that continue to exist well beyond the superficial grasp of a beneficial domestication.

History as Language

[I]t has never been a matter of choosing one or the other, tribe or city, tradition or modernity, but of sustaining a livable interaction as part of an ongoing struggle for power.

—James Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations"

Reading Beatrice Hanssen's riveting study of Walter Benjamin recently, I was struck by the idea of "history conceived as the progressive movement of translation" (32). This phrase is followed two pages later, in a discussion of Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," by the equally striking mention of a shift "from the history of the work per se to the history of language and to history as language" (34). These two perspectives might seem to offer a flimsy guide with which to unravel the complex conundrum of citizenship and the media in the present world. Yet considering the history of language and history as language takes us immediately to the core of the interdependency of citizenship and the media. For language—as representation, configuration, and communication, as a potential ethics and aesthetics—secures and propagates such a relation. And the media—as photograph, film, printed archive, daily newspaper, and computerized recall—have become the collectors and custodians of individual and collective memory for those able to access them. If citizenship depends on individual and collective recollection to be articulated, then the media, in becoming memory, are central to the performance of an imagined collectivity, whether it is local, ethnic, or national. If languages are what render the world a world, a recognizable place, a home, then they also permit the reconstruction of the history and reasons of such a state.

After the brutal evidence of the mounting financial concentration, institutional powers, and

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dwindling accountability of the media has been registered, the deployment, direction, and subsequent transformation of history as language continue to exist. This cultural supplement transports inquiry far beyond the sociological conclusions of audience research and market forecasting. For if the present-day media increasingly make the world seem shared, framed in the urgent languages of the newsworthy and its grammar of immediacy, the media also bear a transitory trace of whatever remains irreducible to their logic. This is to invert the formula of considering the media as providing a window on the world and to think rather in terms of what the media are unable to see or hear. It is to consider what their seemingly transparent syntax structurally obscures and negates.

This window on the world is a technological updated version of the perspective persistently sought by occidental humanism. Despite the five intervening centuries, the canvas and the digital television screen, which reduce time, space, and distance to a flat surface, share the epistemological desire to translate the external world into a unified field of vision. Searching to fill the emptiness, the silence, subjects fill space with their presence, their concerns, their fears, their desires. However, this space, despite its historical domination by a unilateral vision designed to benefit observing subjects, constantly confirming them at the center of the picture, is deeply ambiguous. For it also inaugurates the space of translation. What come to be located, identified, and explained in the subjective field of vision are the signs and symptoms of something that potentially lies beyond the subject; translation introduces the possibility of alterity. Not only do subjects translate to domesticate the objects of the world, to render them theirs, but also subjects are in turn translated when objects turn out to be historical subjects in their own right.

Translation, as we know, is never merely a linguistic or technical transformation; it is, above all, a historical modality of cultural transformation. The translation is not about transparency in which two languages come to reflect each other in a shared semantic mirror. Not only is the translated text rendered otherwise, but also the language of translation is, as Benjamin argued in his noted essay on the question, modified, made vulnerable to change and transformation in the encounter. This suggests that translation moves in more than one direction: between the language, literature, and culture translated and the language, literature, and culture that translates, between an "original" and a "copy" in another language. Further, what is "lost" in translation, in linguistic meaning, in semantic anchorage, may open up a sense, a direction, leading elsewhere. If the measure of the translation lies in the culture that translates, what is translated, when it ventures beyond a merely literal operation, can disseminate a linguistic, literary, and cultural disturbance irreducible to technical clarity. Benjamin implied this disturbance when he wrote that "translations do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it" ("Task" 72). The limits of the language and culture seeking a perfect or transparent medium are registered. Rey Chow proposes the perspective, even if often structurally unequal, of "reciprocal translation" (194), where there emerges a cultural and historical space in which both translated and translator are modified, reconfigured, leading toward what Homi Bhabha famously refers to as a "third space" (36).

Benjamin's rich—for some, mystical—understanding of translation opens out onto a higher language. For the German critic the initial text and its subsequent translation were fragments fired in "the perpetual renewal of language" (74). As he goes on to note, "[A]ll translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (75). This observation has a deeper, and often unsuspected, implication. Translation not only involves an encounter with a foreign tongue but also allows one's own "language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (81; Rudolf Pannwitz

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qtd.). In "all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed, something that cannot be communicated [. . .]." The interruption represented by what is not communicated and assimilated renders a language provisional and susceptible to renewal. The "language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go" (79). In this sense "even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal" (73).

This constant renewal invites me to consider the translation of languages, cultures, and histories as an operation more open-ended and intriguing than the mere transmission of media-induced information from one historical and cultural context to another. Despite appearances, invariably promoted by the present-day hegemonic orchestration of occidental cultural processes and powers, cultural translation is not unilateral. It is not simply about the elsewhere becoming the domesticated here and now of the West.

In Language, out of Place, yet in Time

Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it.

—Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*

It is seemingly impossible to free ourselves from a past that has brought us to how we inhabit today. A citizenship, a democracy, historically formed in and through the structural inequalities that configured modernity is not an abstract moral category but a historical process realized in regimes of power. Here, for example, lies the centrality, pronounced by C. L. R. James and more recently reiterated by Paul Gilroy, of slavery to the making of Atlantic democracies. Commercial expansion and self-government are intertwined and directly inscribed in the stipulation of the Constitution of the United States by a slave-owning plantocracy. On the other side of the Atlantic, the exploitation of the New World directly fueled the political demands of the rising European bourgeoisie and its apotheosis in the French Revolution, not to speak of the subsequent and paradoxical inspiration such demands were to supply to the slave rebellion in France's richest colony: Saint Domingue, later Haiti.

Such an undecided and heterogeneous understanding of modernity, composed of a series of always incomplete projects, reminds us of paths not taken, of possibilities blocked in blood and repression, of processes and procedures that, even if they have disappeared, recall the irreducible quality of the world and of its multiple kind. The archaic and the unruly lace modernity, forcing it to register its transformation, its transit, its accidental quality, and its potential loss of control, no matter how powerful the appeal to the homogeneous prospect of progress. In this there lies a freedom, frequently unrealized but waiting, in which we too are invited to participate.

To insist on the historically contingent is also to insist on the travel and elaboration of identity, subjectivity, and citizenship in language, where history encounters a reply that exceeds its grammar. It is where the prosaic and the poetical exceed and interrogate inherited political identifications. It is where the I moves through the translated and translating space of the world, becoming a subject for whom knowledge, sense, and truth cannot be reduced to a unique world picture. Such a subject exists besides and beyond occidental humanism. Opposed to the abstract, patriarchal universalism that humanism once proposed, this subject registers the diversification of centers and yet paradoxically is more human in recognizing its own specific limits and location. This sense of self proposes a less assured and more unguarded appropriation of where we come from (tradition, memory, nostalgia), as well as of the historical, political, and cultural structures and institutions in which we come to identify our passage through the world.

The social, cultural, and political import of this reconfiguration of here and there perennially

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echoes in the necessary and disquieting alterity of art: the aesthetics (and ethics) of disturbance that reveals a gap, an interval in the world, that signals a limit and establishes a transit, a passage elsewhere. In this space, which we could name with such a term as *the sublime* or *the uncanny*, the pedagogical languages of institutional identity, busily seeking to legitimate the narration of nation, citizenship, and cultural subjectivity, are interrupted by what refuses to make sense or speak in that prescribed way. According to the "postmodern primitive" Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham, art is "looking for connections that cannot, maybe should not, be made." This understanding of art holds out the promise of punctuating the homogenous, historical time of progress that the West considers itself to represent. The art of the interruption, art as interruption, brings to light our prescribed state—its limits in time and space—while also opening the possibility of revisiting, reciting (in the sense of reworking), and resiting (in the sense of transporting) languages elsewhere. The prescribed is overtaken by the inscription, by the event, artistic and ontological, that exceeds the grammar of expectancy and the semantics of institutional verdicts.

To return to the media with this more fractured perspective is to meet the broken narratives of an elsewhere. The scraps and flashes that arrive in moments of drama and tension from the otherwise invisible corners of the globe are temporary interruptions that refuse to fit into the unfolding of our lives. Any narrative, any accounting of the world, willing to receive and offer hospitality to a disturbance that uproots the *domus* and that invites us not to feel at home at home (Adorno) renders the universal story many of us think we are living more localized, particular. In the poetical power of language to reconfigure space in a diverse understanding of location and identity, home is made a more open-ended and vulnerable habitat. It provides less the comfort and consolation of an eventual homecoming and more a perpetual point of departure for a journey destined to render uninhabitable previous understandings. As the links among language, literature, and land are stretched to the breaking point, it becomes possible to envisage a diverse worlding of the media that represent us and in which we represent ourselves.

If the world is made less provincial, it is actually a West, so used to self-confirmation in every corner of the planet, that is deprovincialized. The observation carries us toward Dipesh Chakrabarty's important announcement of "provincializing Europe." Or, more paradoxically, given that the habit of provincialism is to consider itself always the center, we are brought to deprovincialize Europe. In this context a certain failure or weakening of thought and theory, proposed by the contemporary philosopher Gianni Vattimo, leads from the conclusion of the universal singularity of the occidental view (*teoria*) of the world to an opening up provoked by the journey of theoretical syntax beyond previous confines. In breaching the borders of the local and the familiar to travel in a space authorized by language, the ethical and the aesthetic are radically reconfigured. In the shift of language into a posthumanist landscape where no single subject, history, or culture is able to authorize narration, interpretation, there occurs a marked displacement from questions of property, origin, and identity to diversified and heterogeneous ways of being in the world. In this shift from the unilateral optics of representation (invariably concentrated in the subject-centered pragmatics of realism) to the less guaranteed reception of poetic disturbance and revelation, there in the sounds, signals, and silence of language lie the graphic traces of a potential, of a politics, that exceeds instrumental rationality and institutional arrest.

Once again Benjamin's work suggests a richer understanding of such a potential. His *Arcades Project* includes the idea of collecting the refuse of the city—the fragments of the histories and languages of modernity that are found, as it were, casually in the streets—to create an unexpected critical mix. Like a DJ revisiting and elaborating existing rhythms and riffs, by

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this operation we move toward a new horizon of sense. Using the inherited languages and quotidian details in which we are enveloped to articulate a reply is to invest the prescribed with the inscribed, pedagogical syntax with performative instance. Thus, language is carried into another, often unsuspected, configuration. In the mix the borrowed, recycled, and spontaneous but necessary practices of translation and bricolage provide a decisive critical metaphor for a more extensive understanding of contemporary cultural speech. As Karen Transberg Hansen insists in *Salaula*, her study of the secondhand Western clothing that dresses Zambia, everything acquires a second life, a further meaning.

Such a prospect offers the possibility of considering the mass media—music, cinema, television, fashion, and advertising—as potential sites of contemporary knowledge. Electronic archives and audiovisual memories disturb, threaten, and upset previous modalities of cultural authority and existing forms of intellectual, political, and aesthetic hegemony. They permit, in the spaces between the fragments, in the gaps provided by transitory joints and shifting mixes, other voices, other senses, other accents, other worlds to be heard and registered. Here is proposed a diverse aesthetic, where cultural values lose their timeless, metaphysical attributes and are encountered, live, and die in the course of worldly movement and mutation.

Open to histories, memories, and possibilities from elsewhere, identities cannot be lived in a state of understanding that is already fully established. They become points of departure, openings onto the continual elaboration of becoming. This is to dispute the logic, which Nietzsche noted, that modernity attains the peak of nihilism in reducing the multiplicity of life to the metaphysical singularity represented by the presumed sovereignty of the individual. Rather, the rationalist productivity of modernity, striving to harness and homogenize the world, is continually interrupted by its own languages—the languages of the media, of technology, of the city—which transport modernity elsewhere. The state, the logic of capital, the languages of hegemony are frequently blocked, deviated, and subverted when, for example, contingent identities pass through the modem and down the phone line, as the latest musical mix is transmitted from Kingston to London and then on to New York for further elaboration, before returning to the Caribbean and the dance hall in a few days. From DJ to DJ, a technologically sustained black metropolitan language that carries the name "Jamaica" is transmitted across frontiers. This journey in sound refuses to recognize cultural customs or to be reduced to the requirements of any single locality.

Such languages permit us to be, provide access to what is happening. In their radical historicity we encounter the grammar of our being. They speak of the powers and potential of a specific cultural place where the inscription of memory and the prescriptions of the past come to be recited and resited. In this place what we refer to as our historical, cultural, and individual identities are not only formed but also performed; here, in the event, we encounter the promiscuous prose of the world.

Whose Time, Whose World?

African film makers do not need to preserve their freedom, they need to find it: there are multiple cultural identities in Africa, and everyone needs to research and speak of one's own.
—Dany Kouyatè, a film director from Burkina Faso

In this reassessment of the homogeneous by the heterogeneous, of the center by the periphery, of the stable by the errant, of space by place, emerges a further shift from the anchorage of language to land in our understanding of the coordinates of our being. If it is language rather than the localized familiarities of a circumscribed territory that provides us with a home (an extremely tentative if, given all the active countervailing examples), then a sense of abode, of being at home, occurs in a more transitory

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but also more resilient structure than that proposed in the inherited genealogies of blood and soil. Language travels; its dense destiny lies in the promise of metaphor, in the supplement that transforms the inherited into the unexpected. If language provides us with a home, it simultaneously precedes and exceeds us; it sends us on our way. And if language is our home, it is also a home for others. This thought opens up an unstable perspective. To query a sense of being in the world secured in the accumulated sentiments and sediments of a physical place is not only to seek an exit from the murderous lexicon of ethnic purity, inherited bigotry, and a deadly provincialism of European provenance, it is also to propose a critical uncertainty before the contemporary language of indigenous and aboriginal peoples in their rightful reply to conquest, colonization, and extermination.

The impossibility of maintaining a sense of home dependent on the continuity of bloodlines, song lines, and plow lines ethically invests us all. Through and beyond the obvious hierarchy of powers, of the economic, political, and cultural capital that permits some of us to speak while promoting an extensive reign of silence, the impossibility of returning to an ancient homeland cuts directly across the knots of diverse histories and cultural formations everywhere, from the Highlands of Scotland to New Caledonia. The seeming separation of the rooted and the uprooted and the categorization of their histories are here overwritten in a spiraling development in which roots and routes become impossible to untangle fully.

When we reconfigure the future so that denied histories, cultures, languages, and rights are recognized, we necessarily also reconfigure the past to release a promise that exceeds the local impositions of a mutilated and lost home. This process requires a step beyond the self-assured denunciation of structural inequalities, economic deprivation, and peripheral victimization, a step into a world worlded by powers—hegemonic and subaltern—that exceed understandings of unilateral domination and the subsequent taxonomies of the dominator and the dominated. To insist, against the odds, that language is our home and at the same time a translated space, a site of transit and difference, is to suggest that a diverse sense of identity might begin to be acknowledged here. Land and locality—one's roots, as it were—are not canceled; rather, they are reworked in the translating medium of language. Roots are forms of narration, literary and cultural constructs, mediated formations, providing routes through the world. The texture of language—of translation and the transit it provides and provokes—acquires an unsuspected complexity and thickness; its poetics supplement and subvert sociological and political transparency.

All these observations may in their abstractness seem marginal to the everyday business of contesting the powers of the occidental media that transform the world into its domestic space, yet I suggest that they can interrogate, even displace, the paradigm of knowledge and power that creates the current state of affairs. Philosophy, its language and intent, is ultimately about representation. To query how the world is represented today is inevitably to interrogate the hegemonic humanist paradigm and its historicist understanding of the present. Progress and a linear understanding of historical time provide insufficient explanation. Not only is modernity multiple, it is also translatable: it reveals many ways of being in time. Historical time is not empty but rather overflows single rationalizations and formal schemata. Modernity is not a container but an ongoing collage of differentiated histories, cultures, and trajectories that are coeval but do not necessarily add up to a single or coherent picture.

The contemporary black British artist Keith Piper speaks of "relocating the remains," those of a hegemonic past and those of its subaltern formations, on a map that no longer projects and confirms the concerns of a humanist subject at the center of the picture, of the world. To consider the question of citizenship and the media on this emerging cartography is to reconfigure the lan-

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guage of truth and representation, interrogating previous modalities of realism and documentary styles of representation. It is to shift an understanding of the power and reach of the media from the producers into a more ambiguous and contested zone of interpretation. Where language becomes the factor of truth, unilateral desires and powers are deviated in a dissemination in which no one place can claim to own the language in which truth appears and speaks. This is to insist on a limited world that is susceptible to translation but cannot be transcended. The godhead of reason, science, and progress is secularized and brought to earth so that the realities of the human are registered. The almost cosmic reach of the unique and homogeneous understanding of technology and the economy (today the globe, tomorrow . . .) is arrested in an ongoing elaboration of rights and responsibilities: at a minimum, the responsibilities that those who can exercise their rights have toward those who cannot.

Note

This article is dedicated to the memory of Ian Connell, who thought and wrote at length on citizenship and the media.

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