NOTES AGAINST DIFFERENCE

in search of a functional practice in (re)cognition of evolving identity in culture(s)

L A I W A N
1992

I live in constant negotiations
trying to resolve
the border conflicts raging inside of me
...You see, I can't dream
of living in a place without borders
I've spent so much time
constructing barriers
I've learned so well
to use five different passports
that I don't think I could survive the shock [1]

Attempts to interpret "difference" theory into social practice by institutions has led to a liberal dilution of the meaning of the theory. "Difference" is used in this text to mean contemporary discourse in the humanities on cultural dissimilarities to dominant Western values, as philosophically and socially defined in North America and Europe today.

Multiculturalism in the Canadian construct, assumes to acknowledge "difference" in the social arena. In practice, the institutional and public acceptance of the terms *race* and *gender* demonstrates a selectivity within "difference" practice. Defined as categories of "difference" they are recognised within political, financial and critical arenas readily, even earnestly. Comparatively, the acceptability in practice of the contexts of *sexuality* and *class* in a heterosexual, capitalist structure is either marginalised when raised as an issue or is made invisible as a non-issue. As a consequence, the social construction, or *socialised reduction* of hierarchical groupings within "difference" that results from interpretations of legislated definitions has divided and continues to divide, potential alliances within discourses that challenge the status quo. Within these definitions, a commodification of "difference" identity within a capitalist hierarchy, and a confinement based on the (un)availability of resources, has bred competition and alienation.

For "difference" to exist there must be a "constant" from which to differ—a dominant context against which "difference" is measured. "Constant" is used here to describe *a definitor who freely defines what is and what is not without influence from external force or oppression*, whether this is an individual, group of individuals or a state-capitalist-communist-democracy, etc. The "constant" becomes the definitive of "difference." This poses the question *who is the definitive of the "constant"?* In symbolic terms, the recognition of "difference" as theory and in practice is an acknowledgement of the authority of this "constant." The recognition of "difference" acknowledges the validity of the power of the "constant" and its definitive.

"Difference" evolved out of the necessary work of identifying factors influencing oppressions and oppressors by those resisting their alienated positioning imposed by the "constant." However, oppressive strategy has been, and continues to be, to co-opt and isolate the identifying work and "alternative" voices through *tokenism* under an assumed practice of "difference." "Alternative" is used to describe the grouping of people whose work challenges the authority, values and definitions of white, male—and to an extent, female—professional and middle-classed, heterosexual, capitalist, overdeveloped societies. Tokenism is a practice of recognizing / assuming superficial identifiers for the "different-from-constant," rather than permitting the positioning of the "different-as-constant" which would alter the currently practiced construction of power relations in this western hegemony. The irony of the quincentennial "celebration" of Columbus' arrival to the Americas and the funding of alternative exhibitions and conferences in North America regarding the exploitations and manipulations of the last 500 years has not been lost. The consumption and commodification of ideas and culture at the expense of those of "difference" for the erasure of Western guilt, conveys the progression of coloniality and the transparency of tokenism. That North American Indigenous Nations and people of colour may only be given privileges and recognition quincentennially is the joke for 1992.

Because institutions consume, own and disseminate knowledge they are able to rapidly co-opt alternative voices. Therefore, these voices are in danger of being oppressed in a number of ways. Representation, within the narrow limits defined by the "constant," restricts the type and territory of voices. (For examples of working around some of these limits see Young, British & Black, a monograph on the work of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collectives, and How do I look? Queer Film and Video). The institutionalisation of such representations reinforce the narrow limits defined by the "constant" and become models of representative practices. The internalisation and fixation of issues within those limits by the "different" creates an implosive co-optation of territories. The complex relationship between co-optation and fixation comes into play when Julia Kristeva writes in About Chinese Women: "A *luck* (of being born woman) that will prove to have been *co-opted* if, after an initial phase—no doubt necessary—of searching for our identity, we lock ourselves up inside it; militant romantics of the final 'cause' to be thus revived, theologians of an inverted humanism rather than its iconoclasts."[2] (italics in original). About Chinese Women has proved itself to be more about the ideals and projections of Kristeva, the West and feminism than about Chinese women. Although the above quote holds truth, Kristeva fell trap on another level: a romanticization that co-opts the "other." The side-affects of a *reductive fundamentalism* imposed on personal and cultural identity of "difference" places that identity in a constant state of vulnerability in *being written and rewritten within the narrow limits* of the definitive of the "constant." By *reductive fundamentalism* I mean *the containment and closure of identity by a fixation on simplistic identifiers*.

 The vocabulary of the writing/describing of "difference" is an additional problem. "Displaced," "dispossessed," "dislocated," "alien," "alienated," "minority," "ethnic," "foreign," "invisible," "visible minority," "decentered cultures," "revitalisation/emergence of minority cultures," "disputed identities," "other," are a few commonly used words found to supposedly describe the environment of the "different." These words, in the context of postmodern theoretics, have placed the burden of their representation onto those considered of "other" or of "difference." As a result of this burden, social consc(ient)iousness and the responsibility towards philosophical and social activism for these issues has been shifted onto those identified as "different." This has created a psychological and mythological trap of placing personal identity and agenda within the restrictions of these words. Yet, to be represented as *working-class-first-world-lesbian-of-colour* or *middle-class-third-world-woman* is relative to the hemisphere you happen to be in.[3] *What consc(ient)iousness of its own representation is practiced by the "constant"?*

The problem of lexicologic and syntactical entrapment is analogous to that of the use of the term victim in AIDS information and reporting.[4] Within the perception of the "constant," describing and perceiving the "different" through the vocabulary of "difference" establishes an *objectified construction of a subjectivity out of context*. The internalisation of such language has diverted the work of the "different" from *a self-determined agenda pertaining to its own context*. Instead, work is prioritised to visibilising *the burden of representation* as defined by "difference" in the context of the "constant." This agenda establishes a catch-22: *I create work that needs and does identify "territory" but in doing so I reinforce the restrictions of such "territory" within the definitive of "difference."* In addition to the oppressiveness of this agenda, dominant discourse does not engage with these territories preferring to treat them tokenistically. Thus, even these restricted, alternative discourses are marginalised, contributing to the *insularity of hegemonic perception*. This is a structural strategy that keeps dialogue and authority controlled and unchallenged to the point where boredom and banality become themes of content in the art of the postmodern. *How many indigenous women or women of colour hold decision-making or tenured positions in art, philosophy or curatorial programs at major learning institutions?*

The term postmodern is used here in its broadest sense to describe the movement of philosophical and creative theory rooted in response or reaction to Modernism. A simple example is the Modernist construction of "the hero" as opposed to a postmodern self-conscious "anti-hero." That the "anti-heroic" stance is actually an "heroic" one, that is, merely the other side of the same coin, becomes transparent when an examination of power relations and resources of the "constant" reveal that a postmodern agenda is *only self-refexive in relation to its own context*. This erases the need for accountability of the "constant" in relation to the material realities of the "different."

An empowered, self-determined creative body can exist within its own perceptual boundaries of self. This body exists and thrives in a personal definitive often not in comparison or juxtaposition to a dominating "constant." It is based on a construct of optional models that is rooted in the availability of resources and investment.

When named by a reactionary public to be of "difference," this self is vulnerable to this public's interpretation of "difference." The relativity of interpretation writes the available choices and restrictions in practical terms for the "different." This in turn influences the writing of the definitive. The dangers of being written and rewritten by an alien public places this self into the dangers of disembodiment, alienation and the accompanying internalisations. *Who is this public and who has written them?*

Empowerment and *self-determination* are important in opposition to the probability of consciousness-lowering and essentialism masked as "cultural" awareness. I am Chinese so I celebrate Chineseness and exhibit in Asian anthologies exemplifies a reductive simplicity that is also shaped by the perception of funding structures. Here the maxim *once established, a structure writes us* is proven.[5]

Riddle: *Father traveled from China, to join Grandfather already in Southern Africa, to live for 50 years in British–colony–Rhodesia in the late 1920s—Mother arrived in the 1940s. Ran a store for indigenous Zimbabweans. Early 1960s I was born and raised in UDI–Rhodesia—We emigrated in the late 1970s from white-supremacist turmoil & war. I have Canadian late and post–secondary education, citizenship/passport, and, reside in Canada & Zimbabwe. English is my first language... How do you name me, and, what is your frame of reference?*

The signifiers of *race, gender, sexuality, class, linguistics* and *world location* are useful for the analysis and critique of meaning. They can be used to identify and transcend stereotypes. However, our identities are in danger of

being classified solely through the narrow socialised perceptions of these categories. They present a mirage of "communities" that are supposedly our "identifiers" but instead remind me that *established structure describes us*. The myth/facade of "communities" is also reductive and divisive. One cannot belong to one community nor can one belong to all communities. Many factors including race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. need consideration. Thus, as social and political activists identify and empathise with a cause that can form a sort of "communality," the ideal of a "community" existing in an abstraction as opposed to being based in a practical activism subjects us to a fundamentalist generalization of our complexities.

Without a conscientiousness to the social construction that has defined our "differentness," and without a practical, creative strategy that includes the symbiotic and ever changing circumstance within identity and culture, we are in danger of existing solely in the shadowy classifications within "otherness" governed by the "constant."

Rather than "difference" it is important that we embody experience and practice as *multiple constants within a location*. [6] to rebalance the signifiers of psychic, mythologic, individual and world economies.

Here, I do not imply the postmodern vocabulary of contextual "diversity," "multiplicity," "multicultural discourse," "pluralism," "decentering of the subject," and "self-reflexivity." These words point out the liberalism and evasiveness of dominant discourse. This lexicologic strategy dilutes the discourse which challenges by a generalising acceptance of "variety," which in turn, neutralises variation by generality. Such a choice of wording reveals the lack of responsibility by the status quo to disarm the hegemony of its institutions and existing power structures.

This strategy serves to divide and paralyse challenging alliances by promoting *contextual individualism*. By *contextual individualism* I mean *the process of isolating, and categorising as subjective, the condition and circumstance of an individual or group of individuals* so that any attempt at group mobilisation to challenge the status quo is marginalised and controllable by dominant discourse. It does this by presenting a social framework that is supposedly open-minded, "progressive" and equal in the representation of all sides of a picture in which we all supposedly have equal opportunity to participate. *Whose picture is it? whose design? and at whose expense?*

Riddle: *what is the discourse of the white house when it writes sanction policies against Haiti? if the white house practiced postmodern self-reflective discourse would it transcend the meaning of the location of architecture and the design of the organising of its personnel? can an imperial structure, political or cultural, include "multiple contexts" given the signifiers identifying it as accessory to oppressive practice? how many people—especially of the "third world," the economically trapped women and children—are privileged to enjoy the propositions of postmodern culture when the political, economic and emotional climate is based on imperial practices that are antagonistic to their well-being? Do democratic structure and strategy exist materially?*

Many institutions have, in the past and present, maintained their position of power by a social construction that is based on *presence*. This includes language and architecture. Postmodern philosophy, theory and practice by these institutions boast of using a broad-minded technique of critical discourse and self-reflexive conscientiousness. However this is a practice and position of privilege derived from political, economic and cultural dominance. *Possession of space is a political act.* [7]

By revolving around issues rooted in the limitations of the dominant perspective, current postmodern discourse

cannot hope to represent the experience of a majority of people affected by its choices until *it abandons its authority to define the agenda.* Attempts at inclusion are superficial because of the limited scope of the dominating social construction. This lack of inclusion shows a discourse that suffers from insularity and over-protection.

The trap of the postmodern, as with the postcolonial, is that neither environment materially exists. The gap between cerebral and visceral, or theory and practice, is too huge to heal by words that are merely self-reflective or conscious towards past and present exploitation or dismissal of many living experiences. Postmodern and postcolonial theories, syntax and vocabulary are being used against discourses that challenge the status quo in order to divert a real dismantling of Western hegemonic power. They serve to reinforce an authority that cannot consider the annulment of its imperial past/present mandate because that would mean a revolutionary act of *letting go.* The failure to establish a post-colonial condition in the former colonies today is the result of the inability of the imperial structure to completely abandon their agenda. Many countries that were colonies are now subject to predetermined economic and social conditions that undermine their empowerment. From the clause in the Lancaster House Agreement that disallowed land reform during the first ten years of Zimbabwe's independence (which effectively diluted the impetus rooted in the liberation struggle), to the arming and training of terror groups like RENAMO in Mozambique (which efficiently sabotaged the stability and economy of the country and its neighboring allies), the theoretical absurdity of a postmodern-postcolonial context is tragic in its consequence.

Multiple constants within a location is distinguishable from the postmodern definitive of "multiple contexts" by the understanding and function of *a constant.* From my definition of constant it is implicit *that an egalitarian structure must be in existence where each and every action is self-determined and empowered without the need to work a life of resistance to external definitives.* It would mean discourse without an agenda of/for authority, whether in terms of political or philosophical power. It would mean a learning of how to negotiate democratic process without predesigned or mandated options.

A conscientious recognition of *motive* and *desire* that unceasingly asks *what consequences at whose expense?* could make a world of *difference.*

NOTES
1 Excerpted from Judit, "Border Crossing," Compañeras: Latina Lesbians, ed. Juanita Ramos (New York: Latina Lesbian History Project, 1987), 218.
2 Julia Kristeva, About Chinese Women, tr. Anita Burrows (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1986), 14.
3 On the limits of naming, see Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning" in When the Moon Waxes Red Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1991), 47-48.
4 See Cindy Patton, Inventing AIDS (New York: Routledge, 1990) fn. 27, 140.
5 The limitations of the grammar of written English language is offered here as an analogy. Once writing is written, the choice of lexicology and grammar describes its meaning: "The relation between the meaning and the wording is not, however, an arbitrary one; the form of the grammar relates naturally to the meanings that are being encoded." M.A.K. Halliday, An Introduction to Functional Grammar (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), xvii.
6 To continue the analogy of footnote 5: Once written or recorded in words, speech, which is symbiotic with a changing environment, changes its form, and thus, meaning "...that spoken language responds continually to the small but subtle changes in the environment, both verbal and non-verbal, and in so doing exhibits a rich pattern of semantic, and hence also of grammatical, variation that does not get explored in writing. The context of spoken language is in a constant state of flux, and the language has to be equally mobile and alert...." Ibid, xxiv.
7 Anonymous. From a page on Brigitte's fridge, Harare.

This text was originally published in an artist's book that accompanied my exhibition **distance of distinct vision / point éloigné de vision claire** *at The Western Front Gallery in Vancouver in 1992. It was revised for publication in Parallélogramme magazine (Toronto, Summer 1993). The exhibition and artist's book were designed and produced in English and French to patronise the official bilingual policy of Canada.*

Studies for Notes Against Difference *were initiated while I was in Harare, 1989-1992. It was written there for the context of the contemporary arts in Canada and North America. This context can be referred to as "western" or "eurocentric" when in need of a general term to describe this positioning. My research outside of North America, particularly in Zimbabwe and Hong Kong / China, have alternative problems which are not necessarily dissimilar in issue but in degrees and context which include power relations in individual and world politics and economics. I see these degrees and contexts as related to the legacy of racism, cultural appropriation and imperialism that maintains the imbalance of world resources.*