

Cities Without Citizens
Editors: Eduardo Cadava &
Aaron Levy

Slought Book, Philadelphia &
Rosenbach Museum & Library
Theory Series, No. 1 2003

HARLEM
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

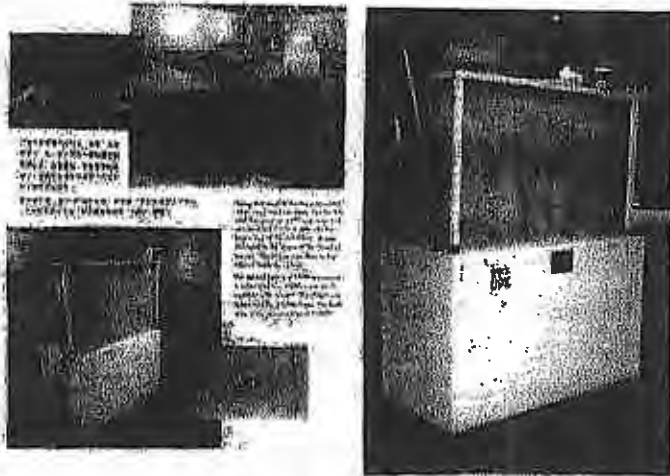
Alice Attie showed me her photographs of Harlem. The images haunted me and interpellated me as a New Yorker. A month before this, twenty-one photographs at the base of the eleventh century Brihadiswara temple in Thanjavur, taken in 1858 by a Captain in the British Army, had beckoned. What was that interpellation? I have not come to grips with that one yet, but it launched me for a while on the question of photographs and evidence of identity. Harlem moved on to a big map.

In Dublin I could juxtapose the Harlem images with allochthonic Europe. What is it to be a Dubliner? Romanian, Somali, Algerian, Bosnian Dubliners? What is it to be a hi-tech Asian Dubliner, recipient of the 40% of official work permits? Diversity is class-differentiated. How does the anti-immigration platform—"Return Ireland to the Irish"—relate to the ferocious dominant-sector culturalism that is reconstituting Harlem today? A class-argument subsumed under this culturalism, pronouncing received anti-globalization or pro-working class platitudes, will nicely displace the question. This became part of my argument.

In Brazil's Bahia, I learned what the *movimento negro* owed to African America in the United States.¹

In Hong Kong in 2001, I saw that the word "identity," attached to

the name of a place such as Hong Kong, indicated yet another species of collectivity: postcolonial. Between Great Britain and China, the Hong Kong cultural worker staged a loss of identity. If the quick sketch of Dublin foregrounds the class-division in diversity, the staging of Hong Kong makes visible the fault-lines within what is called "decolonization."²



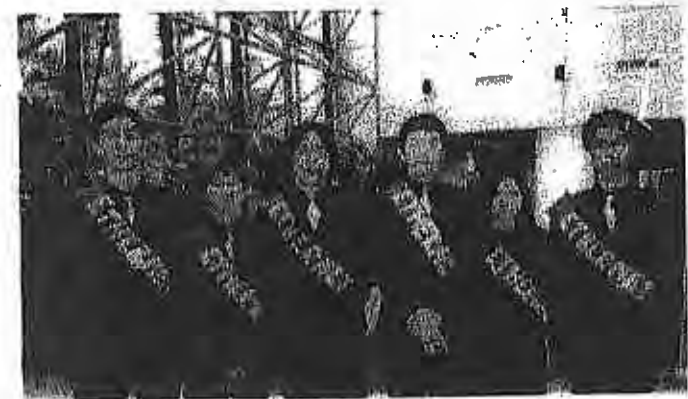
This is, "Map," by the Taiwanese artist Tsong Pu.

In 1996, the artist thought of this work as marking a contradiction between "old Chinese names and maps, and [the] ambiguous concept[s] of China and [its] names," questioning precise identities, as set down by names and maps.³ He was, perhaps, inserting Hong Kong, via repatriation, into the confusion of the question of two Chinas, of one country two systems. 1997 was the official repatriation, the promise of a release. The artist could be conceptualizing this as a frozen series of bilateralities—no more than two chairs, a small rectangular table, rather emphatically not round. Hong Kong and the PRC, Hong Kong and Britain, UK and PRC: bilateralities. The rough concrete block, commemorating the promised release, in fact imprisons the two unequal partners. (Only one chair back has something like headphones

attached.) Rough concrete blocks weigh down bodies that must drown without trace. The chairs are empty, no bodies warm them, they cannot be used. The figure "1997" is engraved on one side of the block and embossed on the other. To what concept might this refer? To the strength of the piercing of that date into the history of the city-state as it displaces itself? To the fact of piercing out, but not through? The power of conceptual art is that, as the visual pushes toward the verbal, questions like these cannot be definitively answered.

Culture as the site of explanations is always shifting. The cultural worker's conceptualization of identity becomes part of the historical record that restrains the speed of that run. It feeds the souls of those in charge of cultural explanations, who visit museums and exhibitions. The British critic Raymond Williams would call this restraining effect the "residual" pulling back the cultural process.

I spent five months in Hong Kong. I never saw anyone looking at "Map." Culture had run away elsewhere.



This is a dynamic mark of identity, sharing in the instantaneous timing of virtual reality. The "Ethernet" band can be put away tomorrow, but is always available round the corner. Conceptuality moves on a clear path

here—from the slow cultural confines of postcoloniality as repatriation into the quick fix of the culture of global finance. What is the relationship between the innocence and charm of these young people and the occlusion of class interests?

Who sends the collective messages of identity? Who receives them? It is surely clear that the artist Tsong Pu may not have been the real sender of the many messages that his piece can project. And of course I, a female Indian academic teaching English in the United States for over two-thirds of her life, may not be its felicitous receiver.

I want to keep the question of the sender and the receiver in mind as I move myself from Port Shelter, China, to Harlem, U.S.A. Who sends, and who receives, when messages assuming collectivities are inscribed? What are identities in mega-cities like Hong Kong and New York where floating populations rise and fall?

Harlem is a famous place, "a famous neighborhood rich in culture," says PBS. If the intellectual and the artist stage Hong Kong as emptied of cultural identity, the general dominant in New York is now interested in pronouncing Harlem as metonymic of African-America in general.

In 1668 Peter Stuyvesant, Dutch governor of New Netherland, established the settlement of Nieuw Haarlem, named after Haarlem in the Netherlands. Throughout the eighteenth century, Harlem was "an isolated, poor, rural village."⁴ In the nineteenth century, it became a fashionable residential district. Following the panic of 1893, property owners rented to Blacks, and by World War I much of Harlem was firmly established as a black residential and commercial area, although race and class crosshatching was considerable.⁵ From then till the 1990s, Harlem has been the scene of fierce deprivation and fierce energy. The chief artery of black Harlem is 125th Street. Columbia University, a major property owner in the area, spreads unevenly up to the edge of 125th. Since the 1990s, Harlem has been the focus of major economic "development," and the property ownership graph is

changing. Part of the "development" package seems to be an invocation of a seamless community and culture marking the neighborhood, on left and right, finally working in the same interest, the American dream. The US thinks of itself as "global" or "local" interchangeably. At this point, nothing in the USA, including Harlem, is merely counter-global.

This essay is not part of the voluminous social history of Harlem, now coming forth to code development as freedom in the name of culture. I have not the skill. Robin Kelley's introduction to Alice Attie's *Harlem on the Verge* integrates the photographs into that particular stream.⁶ I only raise questions. That is my connection to Aaron Levy's *Cities Without Citizens*.⁷ Like Lévy, I question archivization, which attempts not only to restrain, but also to arrest the speed of the vanishing present, alive and dying. I question the evidentiary power of photography. The question changes, of course. Here in the Upper West Side of New York, the question becomes: In the face of class-divided racial diversity, who fetishizes culture and community? The only negative gesture that I have ever received from a black person in New York has been from a near-comatose drunken brother in the 96th Street subway station who told me to "take my green card and go home." That is not culture turned racism, but a recognition of the class-division in so-called diversity. At the end of the day, my critical position (though, as he noticed, not my class position or my class-interest) is the same as his.

DuBois describes the African American at the end of the last century as "two souls...in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."⁸ In the development and gentrified "integration" of Harlem today, the hyphen between these two souls (African and American, African-American) is being negotiated. Therefore Alice Attie and I attempt *teleportesis*, a reaching toward the distant other by the patient power of the imagination, a curious kind of identity-politics, where one crosses identity, as a result of migration or exile.⁹ Keats tries it with the Grecian Urn, Joyce with the *Odyssey* and the Wandering Jew. We beg the question of collectivity, on behalf of our discontinuous pasts, her mother in

Damascus; I in India, as New Yorkers. If the ghost dance accesses something like a "past" and grafts it to the "perhaps" of the future anterior, *teleopolesis* wishes to touch a past that is historically not "one's own" (assuming that such a curious fiction has anything more than a calculative verifiability, for patricians of various kinds). We must ask, again and again, how many are we? who are they? as Harlem disappears into a present that demands a cultural essence. These are the questions of collectivity, asked as culture runs on. We work in the hope of a resonance with unknown philosophers of the future, friends in advance.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* says "Harlem as a neighborhood has no fixed boundaries." Of course the *Encyclopedia* means this in the narrow sense. For Alice Attie, a photographer with a Euro-US father and a mother from Damascus, and for me, Resident Allen of Indian origin, these words have come to have a broader meaning. It has prompted us to ask: what it is to be a New Yorker? We are New Yorkers, Alice and I. Our collaboration is somewhat peculiar in that I emphasize our differences rather than our similarities. In the summer of 2000, I said, "Alice, you're not to mind the things I say about you. One thing is for sure. The photos are brilliant." She came up to me from behind, gave me a hug and kissed me on my neck. You decide if these words are a record of betrayal.

"For the past thirty years," Alice wrote in her field notes, "I have lived on 105th Street and West End Avenue, a fifteen minute walk from the heart of Harlem in New York City. Only recently, in April of 2000, did I venture into this forbidden territory and experience a community of warmth, generosity, openness and beauty. The dispelling of some deeply embedded stereotypes has been a small part of the extraordinary experience I have had walking the streets and conversing with the residents of Harlem."¹⁰

I have lived in the United States for forty-two years and in Manhattan for twelve. I went to Harlem the first week of arrival, because my post office is in Harlem. Someone in the office warned me that it might be dangerous. In the middle of the day I have been comfortable in Harlem

since that first day, perhaps because Harlem gives me the feel of, although it does not resemble, certain sections of Kolkata. But write about Harlem? Identitarianism scares me. That is my identity investment in this. It is in the interest of the catharsis of that fear that I have tried this experiment and asked: how do we memorialize the event? As "culture" runs on, how do we catch its vanishing track, its trace? How does it affect me as a New Yorker? Has the dominant made it impossible to touch the fragility of that edge?

*Eine differente Beziehung.*¹¹ This is a Hegelian phrase, which describes the cutting edge of the vanishing present. The present as event is a differencing relationship. I could add a modest rider to that. By choosing the word *Beziehung* rather than *Verhältnis* for relationship, Hegel was unmooring the present from definitive structural truth-claims, for he invariably uses the latter word to indicate the structurally correct placement of an item of history or subject. I must repeat my question: how does one figure the edge of the differencing as "past" as something we call the "present" unrolls?

I myself have been making the argument for some time now that, on the ethical register, pre-capitalist cultural formations should not be regarded in an evolutionist way; with capital as the telos.¹² I have suggested that culturally inscribed dominant mindsets that are *defective* for capitalism should be nurtured for grafting into our dominant. This is a task for which all preparation can only be remote and indirect. It does, however, operate a baseline critique of the social Darwinism implicit in all our ideas of "development" in the economic sense and "hospitality" in the narrow sense. I am a New Yorker. As Harlem is being "developed" into mainstream Manhattan, how do we catch the cultural inscription of de-lexicalized cultural collectivities?

(To lexicalize is to separate a linguistic item from its appropriate grammatical system into the conventions of another grammar. Thus a new economic and cultural lexicalization, as in the development of Harlem, demands a de-lexicalization as well.) Identitarianism is a denial of the

Imagination. The Imagination is our inbuilt instrument of othering, of thinking things that are not in the here and now, of wanting to become others. I was delighted to see, in a recent issue of the Sunday *New York Times* devoted to the problem of race, that Errol McDonald, a Caribbean-American editor at Pantheon Books, thinks that "at the heart of reading is an open engagement with another, often across centuries and cultural moments."¹³ In the academy, the myth of identity goes something like this: the dominant self has an identity, and the subordinate other has an identity. Mirror images, the self othering the other, indefinitely. I call this, in academic vocabulary, an abyssal specular alterity.¹⁴ In order to look for the outlines of a subject that is not a mirror-image of the dominant we have to acknowledge, as does Errol McDonald, that any object of investigation—even the basis of a collective identity that we want to appropriate—is other than the investigator. We must investigate and imaginatively constitute our "own" unclaimed history with the same *telepoietic* delicacy that we strive for in the case of the apparently distant. The most proximate is the most distant, as you will see if you try to grab it exactly, in words, or, better yet to make someone else grab it. If we ignore this, we take as demonstrated the grounds of an alternative identity—that which we set out to establish. This may be useful for combative politics but not so for the re-invention of our discipline.¹⁵ Yet the combat cannot be forgotten.

I asked Attie to give me pictures that had inscriptions, no live figures. The humanism of human faces, especially in a time of mandatory culturalism, guarantees evidentiary memories, allows us to identify the everyday with the voice of recorded and organized public protest. "Of a necessity the vast majority of [the Negroes in Harlem] are ordinary, hard-working people, who spend their time in just about the same way that other ordinary, hard-working people do."¹⁶ These inscriptions, each assuming a collectivity, are a bit exorbitant to both public protest and the mundane round. The inscriptions are now mostly gone. New building has replaced them. Already when they were photographed, there was no longer sender or

receiver for these collectivities, in a sense that is different from the way this may be true of all messages, although the messages could still be read. This is the eerie moment of de-lexicalization, congealing into a "past," even as I speak. Inscriptions are lexicalized into the textuality of the listener, and it is the unexpected that instructs us. Therefore I asked for shots that inscribe collectivities and mark the moment of change.

We are both parts of the text—"New Yorker" is a collective term. How many are we? We are residents of Morningside Heights. How much of us is Harlem? How is *synoktamos* possible?¹⁷



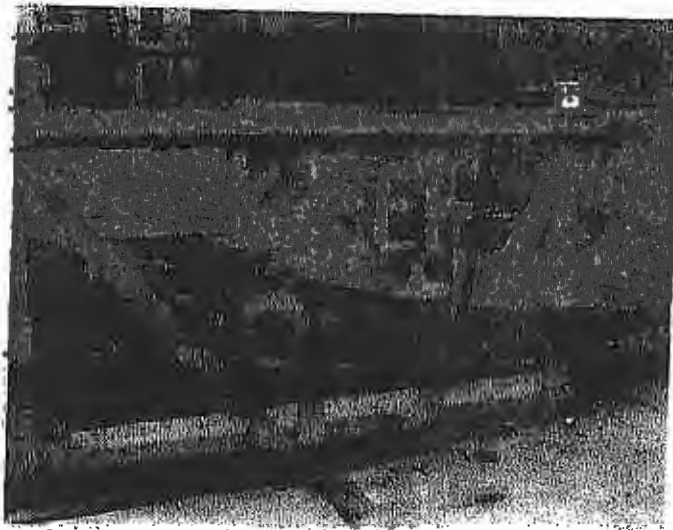
This is on the wall of a landmark warehouse on 123d Street. Today, knowing that the building is standing skeletal and gutted, after passing through consideration by Columbia, Robert De Niro and a community-group that would have turned it into a cultural center, it seems more interesting that the message was on a warehouse. My fellow-critic is still the Brother in the subway station. No amount of pious diversity talk will bridge the constant subalternization that manages the crisis of upward class-mobility masquerading as the politics of classlessness. Who is this Black Man and to what would he have awakened? Who wrote on the warehouse wall? Was it a felicitous writing surface? Questions that have now disappeared.

I come from an inscribed city, Kolkata, whose inscriptions are in the mode of disappearance as the state of West Bengal moves into economic restructuring. The inscriptions of Kolkata, in Bengali, are never read by international commentary, left and right.¹⁸ As I write, I have a vision of writing a companion piece for my hometown. How will it relate to the early imperial photographs, imprints taken by egg-white smoothed on waxed paper, of the temple inscriptions that set me to read photographs? Questions that must be asked before the Kolkata street inscriptions disappear.

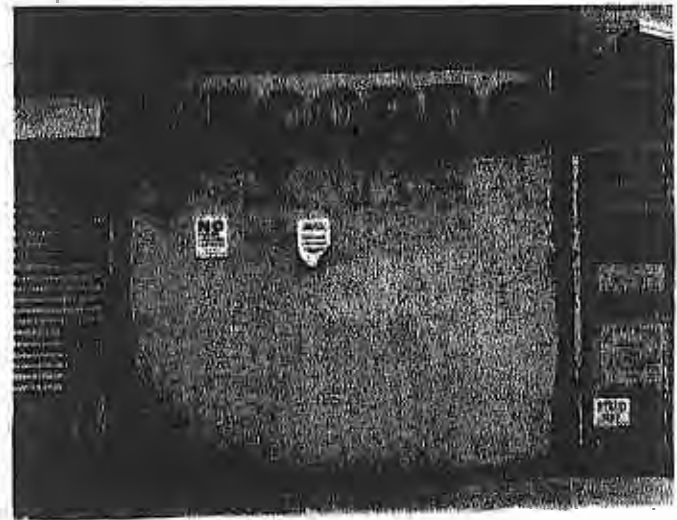
I am not suggesting that there is any kind of located meaning to this inscribed collectivity as the movement is taking place. That too is a hard lesson to learn. On the other side is the convenience of facts. Attie and I have resolutely kept to rumors, with the same boring "authenticity" as all poorly-edited oral history. Selected facts confound the ordinary with the resistant, thus fashioning identity and culturalism. Our sources do not comment on the inscriptions, but rather on the built space. The gutted warehouse is an architectural moment in the spectrum between spatial practice (here inscription) and ruin (not allowed by developers), as the disappearing movement is taking place, the differentiating moment as the present becomes past, indefinitely.



Let us create a pattern. Here is "Wake k people," on an old Harlem storefront, which grandly and inadvertently provides an allegory of reading "MOVING." Discontinuous inscriptions, the old economy a space for inscribing, both under erasure, both gone, united in Harlem's current seamless culturalism. You can tell the lost word is "Black" simply by that "k," "up" is assumed, "male female, young old," once tied to my allegory of reading, is at the time of photography, anchorless. Indeed, what Harlem has and others use is now covered over. The object is not just lost by the covering-over. It is the lost object in the future of the new Harlem.



Let us read this as an effective allegory of the anonymity. No one is sure as to who has asked whom to keep out of this lot. Here there is no built space yet to distract the inhabitants' attention. The inscription commands reading, yet is meaningless. It is now gone. The small rubble-strewn empty lot surrounded by barbed wire has been flattened. No one knows what will come up there. We could know if we made it a new political science (I am on the editorial board of a journal of that name) research project, with predictable results. I am keeping the convenient conclusions at bay, they can have the predictable pluses and minuses depending on the investigators, but the inhabitants are not there.



This is a store front on 116th Street, which has been filled with concrete. The current inhabitants of the tenement above are relative newcomers, Haitians, who are suspended between the history of the store and the imminent future. The small notice is in French because it acknowledges this floating present. For the English speaking, a more austere notice: "NO/sitting/standing/loitering. Thank you. Owner." The amiable Haitians, in suit and tie of a Wednesday evening, may have put this up. I didn't ask. One thing is sure. The only name scribbled on the soft concrete—"Allen"—is not the signatory of the message, and not only because of the absent patronymic. The archaeologist would undo the implausible text: Owner Allen.

An allegory again? I am a reader of words, not a drawer of foregone conclusions from images read as if evidentiary. Therefore inscriptions.



the case of Yoruba, collectively naming, for convenience, the de-localized collectivities of Òyó, Ègbá, Ègbádò, Ijèsà, Ijèbú, Èkítì, Nàgò into a single colonial name.³³

Where does originary hybridity begin? What, indeed, is it to be a New Yorker? We must push back on the trace of race in identity rather than insist on exclusive culture in order to ask that question. This is not to forget

that the other side oppresses in the name of race, but its opposite: not to legitimize it by reversal.

The naming of the "Lenape" loosens us from location, as does the convenience of "Yoruba." Music mixes it up, jazz is hybrid at the origin.

The "originary" is a move—like the clutch disengaging to get a stick-shift car moving. The originary is precisely not an origin. Thus the most recent arrival engages that originary move as well. Alice and I are caught in it. In the fierceness of divisive identitarianism and/or benign diversitarianism, how many such New Yorkers are we? What are the implications of the corporate promotion of culture as a tax shelter in today's Harlem? New York is also the foremost financial center in the United States, perhaps in the world. Was there ever a felicitous sender and receiver of those inscriptions that Alice photographed?

But it is the negotiability of senders and receivers that allows *teleopoesis*, touching the distant other with imaginative effort. The question of negotiability, like all necessary impossibilities, must be forever begged, assumed as possible before proof. Space is caught in it, as is the calculus of the political, the economic, and everything that writes our time. I ask you to negotiate between the rock of social history and the hard place of a seamless culture, to honor what we cannot ever grasp.