

The Geneva Lesson

(Where will we go to hear these voices?)

Olivier Marboeuf

There is a world that is beginning to speak. Can you hear it? This early speech is noisy and a bit disorderly. It is called to order. Cuts are made into the particular matter of its saturated voice. Yes, it appears explosively from being held in check so long. People want to know what it is. The crack of a branch, the cry of a bird, the sighs of mushrooms? It counseled to remember the canons, the proper channels, the rules of a speech that is not its own. Chaos is amputated so that the world may have the right to sit at the same table as the most subtle philosophies. It is presented as a reasonable and brilliant spectacle. For what could a Black voice be if not a shiny object gleaming with the light of a thousands fires, necessarily amazing, an already known and elegant novelty, with no dirty face, no noise? No awkward words. And yet this din is a knowledge and a particular manner of knowing, a space where stories accumulate in disorder. This is the way some people know and this is how they speak. And it is in this confusion, in this commotion, that they learn what they already know, what they feel in another way that was silent for so long. But which is silent no longer.

**Excerpt from “Plea for an aesthetics of trouble”
Olivier Marboeuf, 2021.**

To the students of the CCC Master at HEAD in Geneva

Hello,

For quite some time now I've been asking myself the question of what it is possible to do and how to do it in order to change, even a bit, the conditions in which we live, work, imagine and speak. Participating in the context of HEAD is not easy for me and so I wanted to share with you the difficulties this creates for me and at the same time to look with you for ways not to move beyond the difficulties, but rather to experiment with these conditions in the perspective of reaching a *place-in-becoming*. Since I didn't know where to begin, I thought that using certain aspects of your text on the school of the future as a departure point might be a good way of entering into relations. In this text I consider certain ideas you raised while also trying to situate a place from which I could speak with you.

A politics of attention

Admitting that it is neither obvious nor easy for me to speak in this context doesn't give me any sort of particular right. That is not the objective of this introductory remark. Stating this is in itself part of this situation of collaboration, speech, and collective imagination that we are embarking on. Saying what is not easy, what inhibits, and what we end up feeling as inhibition for others. Since I am going to ask you to experiment with certain situations, it seemed necessary to me to share with you beforehand some things that will allow you to situate my speech, even imperfectly. Because we have to acknowledge that a movement toward a situated speech is never perfect and always partial. At a given moment, there are some things we think of and others that we forget. This oversight is not always to our advantage, but some forgetting is necessary in order to live and to learn, to share beyond wounds and feelings that sometimes overwhelm us and trap words at the back of our throats, in that secret place of anger. What seems important to me in the attempt to find a situated speech is therefore not systematically trying to find a legitimacy. The power of dominant fictions rests on their capacity to endlessly invent ways of reformulating their legitimacy and that of others, until they occupy positions of fragility and constitute themselves as a minority if that allows them to maintain power – this is what the new strategies of the populist right in the United States and all of Europe painfully teach us today. Situating is also affirming what is not there and those whom our words cannot replace. It is also making the effort to share what our own experience(s) have allowed us to understand and feel, in both positive and negative ways. Because we know and we feel with our individual, particular bodies, which respond to certain alerts rather than others. Paying attention to what is not there and to the particular nature of situations we have experienced is a way to create a place. And for me a place requires us to pay attention to everything that constitutes it and also to everything that the place is not. I want to insist on the fact that being able to say what a place is not – and perhaps what it cannot ever be – has nothing to do with renunciation or even cynicism. On the contrary, it is a veritable engagement in a sincere politics of attention and welcome for what could arrive and towards which we could go.

The attention we give to what the place is not is an important precaution we take so that we may avoid thinking of the possibility, the future of a place, from the perspective of its refinement, of the consolidation of its agility to become that it hasn't yet achieved, of its expansion – which are paradoxically ways of cannibalizing spaces, knowledge, and *other* lives. There is matter here for a new colonial display, that is refreshed, elegant and agile, which potentially takes form in this desire to change institutions. And we find ourselves confronted by a rather difficult question. As I wrote about another institution – the museum – in my *Brussels Lesson*, a de-colonial way of transforming institutions – here for instance a school – could well rest on focusing attention on an effort to re-populate the diversity of its surroundings, on the agency of what is not the school

– but could enhance it, *making a school (faire école et faire l'école)* from the outside, from what is not the school. But not with the perspective of creating a new material *for* the school – with a logic of artistic engineering of the social, for example – but rather to try to experiment, understand, and imagine the possible relations between different categories of knowledge – what I call *a gap in relation*. And trying as much as possible to participate in the autonomy of different spaces previously encountered rather than the augmentation of knowledge in a central place. Because what definitely changes places of extraction and accumulation of knowledge today is precisely that which has the means to refuse itself to them.

At the south of the North

This is the situation of circulation and capitalization of knowledge that is ours today and in which what is sometimes presented to us as a form of opening rests on the idea of a Western institution currently presenting and accumulating non-Western and minority forms and knowledge. If we understand that this is a response to Western blindness and navel-gazing that have gone on for too long and are no longer tenable in a multi-polar world grappling with a global crisis, we must also see that all this is insufficient and limited. The staging of acknowledgment – running the gambit from flattery to narcissistic capture – cannot replace a real gesture of reparation, which could notably take the form of an enhancement of capacities to intervene *from* the plurality of Souths in a more autonomous manner, less dependent on the generous staging of the North. Because today it still seems the knowledge of the Souths only has value if it reinforces the capacities of the Global North in a millionth mutation of its power, if it profits the North and educates it to be even more efficient than it previously was. To refer to the paragraph in your declaration for a school of the future concerning this question, I would say that it is not just a matter of offering more opportunities to students from the Souths – and attention should be focused on methods of recruitment in order not to replicate the logic of privilege at the heart of those intended to represent and perform the Souths in this context – but also to make sure that a North-South relation allows us to strengthen the Southern infrastructures, the schools, universities, and thus the centers for the creation of speech emanating for the Souths, which must maintain their own agenda, their own texture, their autonomy and vocabulary. What I call their noise. To allow the Souths the means to unlock themselves from the toxicity of practices of alliance and “collaboration” with the North is a way of curing the North of its own habitus and behaviors, of its fear of no longer being the center of things, of its propensity for the production of ownership. It is also a way to strengthen the possibility of a south of the North which creates hybrid epistemologies conceived of *for* and *towards* forms of habitable commons.

Our “professions”, whether we are an artist, curator, filmmaker, teacher, student, creative producer or an actor in art and culture, are situations of strong interdependence. Which could in itself be an interesting fact, if this interdependence led to an ecology of a commons. But this is not the case and we do not have the means to ignore it any longer, or to simulate or dissimulate it. It

is not comfortable to say this, but it is necessary if we want to steer ourselves towards a more fair and just place. The principles of domination in our field of practice lead to forms of fear of speaking out, to consent, to resignation. Speaking with the young professionals hailing from minorities that I decided to meet in this period of enforced sanitary isolation, anger, exhaustion, and sadness are ever present when faced with the inability to be able to speak from the place of their own experiences, to form places of trust and resist the feeling of being merely a new fungible matter that will be used up in the new performance of capitalism. Bodies, like words and knowledge, do not escape from the appetite of a machine that extracts to create attention and ownership. This vulnerability and the speed with which any form of imagination is absorbed and inverted back to its objectives are such that it literally ends up taking away our breath and our words. And so at each invitation, I have to admit that I spend days, sometimes weeks, asking myself what I could possibly say and how to say it. So I decided recently to share this situation in the form of letters addressed to those who invite me or who I am going to meet. I've come to realize that this angst about speaking was a form a knowledge that needed to be recognized, for vulnerable lives have a very limited capacity to produce minority archives and an even more limited capacity to be the narrators of them. It is more often lives spoken by others, for the benefit of others, lives that are exposed and depleted. We have thus decided to do this work with a few allies, to ensure that it exists publicly and that it becomes a material so that others can speak it and develop it from their own positions. As if we used this fear of speaking up, this fear of being captured or pillaged, to create the starting point for a new way of speaking and focusing attention on what cannot be said.

For my part, I've regrouped the situated letters I've written into an ensemble that I call "the lessons". There is no question of giving lessons; it is on the contrary a matter of conceding what a precise situation teaches us, in secret. Conceding the unmentionable, the unspoken, of a situation of speech and naturalized transmission – for one of the characteristics of colonial continuity is to continue to produce new natural situations, be they critical or even self-critical. Endlessly de-naturalizing them is often a thankless role, sometimes exhausting. Even if we must sometimes create discomfort while we would rather find a place to rest and catch our breath.

Curatorial practices and aesthetics of reception

We can reject the global critical approach of the field of arts and knowledge with a logic of pragmatism. Like the recognition of the climate crisis as a global crisis, this is not a simple exercise and it may seem discouraging. But if this approach is demanding, it also allows us to open ourselves up to very concrete practices and movements. This is what I wish to do. The de-colonial perspective clearly changes what the curatorial practice articulates by no longer limiting itself to works and aesthetics – images, texts, artifacts – nor to more or less fetishized figures – artists, authors, thinkers – or to displays – exhibitions, workshops, seminars, publications – that are more or less collaborative. It also poses the question of infrastructure, of the place of welcome, a space for reception of

knowledge – a space that can signify one or plural bodies, as I will develop. In other words, a body of knowledge is no more autonomous in its space of enunciation than it is in its space of reception – to what it engages and towards what place it leads us. What can the curatorial gesture and its forms of enunciation say about both the potentials of a place and the problematics of a place – without hiding the history of the place where a body of knowledge is pronounced, where a form is shown? The new critical epistemologies of the North must build themselves on the capacity to sensitize what limits the space of enunciation and towards which a body of knowledge could lead us, other than a mere practice of savant accumulation. I posit here the hypothesis that the epistemologies of the south of the North tend toward the idea of a commons and the living.

The academic Sara Ahmed introduced the expression “feminist killjoy”. We must sometimes accept that we also have to *kill the ambiance*, ruin the party by making an unexpected eruption into moments of ecstatic celebrations of minority thoughts, writings, bodies and sexualities. And this noise is not a provocation. It is an attempt to create a situation of a new, less comfortable reception. It is also a way of giving to words, struggles, and imaginations their potential for movement, so that they don’t merely stretch out to infinity the dominant epistemologies of the North, but rather that they permit us to hear the sound of other places of enunciation, other places-in-becoming.

I think that these decisions to speak out and this address that I offer you today are ways of finding a bit of rest in this mad rush to endlessly reinvent one’s life and words to avoid capture. It’s a way to share this inner responsibility by giving it an outer form in a space of commons. Because this long accumulation towards one’s own muscles and nerves becomes unbearable in the end. If we don’t want to go mad, we have to find a place where we can unburden ourselves of this horrible humus of hallucinations and tangled voices I speak of in *Ceux qui veillent les images nègres*. We must organize a wake, a museum of breath, one of those ephemeral places that are spoken into existence. And we must find partners with whom to create it. In this way we can continue to learn from the noise that I evoked in the introduction to this letter in the form of a *plea for an aesthetics of trouble*. A spoken theory of confusion that in a way wants to respond to the discourse on the clarity of ideas and expressions, on the rule of decorum and even of elegance which has become the *dress code* of critical thought.

Ntone Ejabe, the director of the South African review Chimurenga, recently said to me that we needed to image places for rest. Not as a project, a horizon, but just as stages on this frantic race towards a voice that could be called our own. But I believe that these spaces that will welcome and receive these place-less voices will not be completely restful. And I comment here again one of the propositions from your manifesto for a school of the future. The idea of the art school as a *safe place*. There are many ways to envision and to produce a space that is *safe* and the most stable of them leads to forms of pacification to fend off forms of violence that could exist in the darkest margins of silence and invisibility. A *safe* space is always a scene where a police is present at its borders, a police that controls what/who may enter and perturb the peace that has been

organized there. But as I mentioned earlier, some voices are necessarily sources of perturbation, they arrive in a clamor of noise, anger, and even furor, provoked by what has accumulated in the shadows of the peaceful scene. Knowing how to welcome them means accepting a certain degree of discomfort.

In this regard, I had the good fortune to share in a long conversation online last February as part of the Bard Microcollege at the Brooklyn Public Library, a special program supported by the Bard Prison Initiative in New York, which allows students of all ages, for the most part from minorities, to reembar on a course of study in higher education free of charge. In the context of the course “Curatorial practices as method of research”, Aily Nash, their professor, had proposed that they discuss the text *Decolonial Variations* which I wrote in dialogue with the academic and Belgian-Tunisian activist Joachim Ben Yacoub. In this text most of the participants had noted the idea of producing and sharing discomfort from a minority perspective. The idea disturbed them greatly. And I was happy that the space of confidence created by our conversation allowed them to consider this question on their own terms. In short, they were asking, “But how can we want discomfort, we who have lived so long in precarious circumstances?” It is an important question and the answer is not simple. It probably requires more than one answer and an establishing of practice in order to understand how to welcome dissonant, discordant voices in such a way that they do not become synonymous with conflict. Turning any instance of distancing, any difference or discord into a conflict is a power strategy for which the two known directions are hardly productive. The first sends us back to the narcissism of difference and the other to propositions of pacified and insipid alliances where we can neither breathe nor hear the noise of a rising surge of inner voices. This is why on many occasions I have underscored the importance of movement, from a place of negotiation that moves, that roams without resolving on things *here and now*. Making a school a *safe place* is not a desirable objective – no more than de-colonializing museums – if the *safe place* in question is not a place that moves and constantly re-arranges itself outside of the school while continuing to revisit it. This place is therefore not strictly institutional – in other words the result of rules – but established by speech and the attention afforded to voices that-are-not-yet-there (and that we cannot represent in an illusory way.) It is a very particular and new challenge: to transmit from generation to generation of students the possibility of this place – what documents it and has documented it, upset it, supported it, nourished it; in sum, its polyphonic story that must constantly be *respoken*. How can we become the actors and transmitters of this place? How to be its present and the past of its future? These questions become even more pressing in a time of pandemic, where meeting together, hearing each other breathe, and focusing attention on the noise of voices is difficult. How can we collect and translate forms of knowledge in the fire of the commons of this place? These are difficult questions, but they can serve as interesting departure points for first attempts.

A second remark that arose during the conversation with the Bard Microcollege students is also important and reveals another challenge. A young racialized woman asked me this: “How can we advance in perfecting our practice and our bodies of knowledge without losing contact, losing the intimate link that

joins us to our community?" This is a terrible question for me. The question of a life. How do we emerge from apprenticeship as a necessary removal from a certain milieu, from a minority world? How to maintain multiple forms of knowledge within oneself and how to return to different spaces? These are interrogations that gnaw at all those who recognize themselves in these figures that walk through walls, intermediaries between two social spaces who cannot resolve themselves to be merely thieves stealing from one world for another. How can our efforts to create a place be habitable and inhabited by others than us? How can we return towards the living?

I'll end here for today, so that the voices I've shared with you can be enriched by the adjunct of yours, both during our meeting and in the future.

Rennes, March 24, 2021

The series of "lessons" is composed of short texts from interventions – sometimes accompanied by a few note and reading suggestions. The principle is to observe a current and situated event from a de-colonial perspective. There is obviously no question of giving a lesson in the magisterial sense of the word, but rather to share what a situation teaches us, if we take the time to consider it beyond its appearances and diversions that certain authorized discourse and media hype produce. It is an exercise in attention for things that are barely audible or visible. When the smoke screen dissipates, motifs that will be useful in establishing new spaces for speech, life, and ideas slowly appear, other sources of wisdom, manners of feeling, representing, and transmitting. In sum, other aesthetics and political paths leading towards habitable places. This work also aspires to be as practical as possible and aims to engage in actions. Speaking of politics and actions today is a guarantee of a form of intellectual discredit in the name of scientificity. This is perhaps not the most serious thing, for engaging in actions with a political dimension means accepting one's own part of risk, which seems to me today to be the only antidote, the only possible issue to escape from the neo-liberal economy of knowledge, from the extraction and comfortable accumulation of knowledge concerning fragile and unlivable lives, until they are completely depleted. It is the gesture of a living being towards another living being.