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LATIN AMERICAN SUBALTERN STUDIES REVISITED

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INTERVIEW
ABOUT THE SUBALTERN AND OTHER THINGS.
A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN BEVERLEY *

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**Making Sense of Gongora and Menchu Inside The
Global Postmodernist Matrix of Intelligibility or
Convergence.**

Fernando Gómez: I might be tempted to say that there are two historical moments you lean on, the Baroque moment (*Siglo de Oro*) and the twentieth century (modernism or avant-garde). In a sense, I see you walking on two legs, Spanish (Iberian) and Latin American literature, but also the Baroque moment of high culture (Góngora) and the “low” or abject popular dimension (Menchú or Subaltern Studies). Is this fair?

John Beverley: Yes, I think that’s fair. We have to take up here what postmodernism meant for me. When the postmodernist stuff started circulating I immediately took to it, almost instinctively. I felt very sympathetic to it all, totally uncritical [at first]: Tom Wolfe, Frank Gehry, *Blue Velvet*, Pee-wee Herman’s *Playhouse*, postmodern dance, minimalist music, Philip Glass—no problem at all. And I was brought up with a modernist aesthetic.

* [This interview took place at the University of Pittsburgh on May 8-12, 2002. What follows is a selection from the complete interview for the special issue of *Dispositio/n* on Subaltern Studies. The full version of the interview will be included in a forthcoming book of interviews with Latin Americanists titled *Foreign Sensibilities*]

But maybe postmodernism is in any case just a perversion of high modernism, in the way Lyotard argued. Jameson suggests that too. My window on postmodernism was, of course, Jameson. But Jameson's own relationship to postmodernism seems to me very vexed because I know he loves all that stuff he writes about, but he thinks it's bad because it is a symptom of late capitalism. But he likes it.

FG: But your generation is not Jameson's...

JB: I am one generation removed.

FG: That is basically how I see Jameson too. Trained in high modernism and then engaging with postmodernism...

JB: From a posture of distance and abjection...

FG: An Adornian kind of take.

JB: Yes.

FG: And you would be a more Marcusean take, maybe, since, at the sensibility level, you confessed to liking the stuff...

JB: As to Marcuse, yes and no. I loved it. And I immediately thought that postmodernism is how I would define myself. The ability to say that, the way these *Gestalts* sometimes happen... it is like a paradigm shift, you are floundering around and all these different, contradictory things are happening. But the moment you say "postmodernism" is like zooming into a new, completely different framework and I think that was what it did that for me. It allowed me to rethink my leftism in a new way. I still consider myself a Marxist in some ways, but I have a very different way of thinking about Marxism, the Left, and history than I did before. A better way, I hope, more democratic, less authoritarian, less voluntaristic. Above all, postmodernism allowed me to get hold of my own investment in popular culture. I felt split between having a new critical literary training and a Marxist political commitment; Jameson allowed me to put these two things together if only momentarily. But like everybody in my generation, I have a heavy investment in American culture. We are, after all, the first generation of human-kind raised by television; I watch a lot of television. The same thing could be said about American popular music, film, and so on. This was all part of my formation. The Frankfurt School take on popular culture was one that

we accepted in principle, but in reality it did not correspond at all with what we were living, which was that American popular culture was one of the enabling conditions for the emergence of the radicalism of the New Left, as opposed to something blocking it. Marcuse's vision was that the popular culture was consumerism that hegemonized the working class back into capitalist consensus. Whereas in our experience popular culture had this deep popular-democratic, desublimated dimension to it, and that was enabling. And postmodernism allowed me to get some of that.

FG: Did the Frankfurt School take on popular culture strike you as something more or less meaningful according to your California experience and those San Diego years? I am asking because this reading that you are now giving to me is like a new thing later in life or you always felt that way...

JB: No, I was split and part of the split was due to the Frankfurt School and modernist ideology that was hostile to popular culture; but at the same time I was a consumer of popular culture in an enthusiastic way. And, as I was saying, postmodernism allowed me to reconcile those two things. In *Subalternity and Representation* (Duke, 1999), I make a defense of the Popular Front (pp. 88-96). I say in effect that the Popular Front was the real basis for Cultural Studies, and that the Left has been able to reconnect with the Popular Front through Cultural Studies, whereas the Frankfurt School model, like the Soviet model or in general the modernist model, were models of top-down cultural antagonism. From a different position than that of the masses or the "people," "we" will produce the "correct" forms of culture, whereas the Popular Front position was to see in American popular culture a repository of virtues of class resistance, alternative forms of historicity, and notions of cultural heterogeneity and multiplicity. The U.S. is many cultures not just one whereas most avant-gardists would want to make it one! E pluribus unum; cubist collage instead of pastiche.

[Walter] Benjamin would be a [possible] hinge between modernism/postmodernism and the Baroque. You could say—I actually make this argument somewhere—that the logic of the Baroque is not all that different from the logic of modernism, so it is not accidental that modernism rehabilitates the Baroque as an aesthetic category after the anti-Baroque position of liberalism, which says that the Baroque is basically reactionary.

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FG: What can you do with the notion of the Baroque today in a U.S. context in the early twenty first century?

JB: One of the things that thinking about the Baroque allows you to do is to think in general about how a cultural formation—or cultural logic, as Jameson would say—is created and what its internal form is. It is a kind of a Hegelian question: what is the relation between a cultural form and its historical form? And certainly with the Baroque one kind of has a hold on that, with a given social formation, the cultural logic that corresponds to it, and that is not irrelevant for thinking the question of the present. If you can make the equation between the Baroque and modernism that used to be fashionable, then there is also an equivalent fashionable, or perhaps trivial, way of thinking about the Baroque and postmodernism. Even I have committed the sin of talking about a Postmodern Baroque, proliferation, pastiche, etcetera.

FG: This would be the Gruzinski take, and I use this name but many other people are doing this kind of thing.

JB: Exactly. But if that is true, then thinking the Baroque is another way of thinking about the present—in a way it always was, right? History is always in some sense about the present. The question of the present is for me U.S. culture. I would say that this is the unsolved element in my work: what is my relationship to U.S. culture? Because for a series of reasons—having spent most of my childhood in Latin America, Third World issues having a lot of prestige in the 1960s, going into Spanish literature instead of English or American literature—I have never really come to terms with U.S. culture. I can speak more comfortably and polemically about issues in Latin American culture, even Spanish culture, than I can about issues in American culture. And somehow that seems a problem.

FG: It also seems a bit odd.

JB: And that problem seems to be aggravated by the fact that, as you know, the criticism that I have been getting personally, or that the Subaltern Studies Group has been getting, is that we export metropolitan theory to the periphery. Of course, I argued against what I called the “neo-Arielism” of that critique. But at the same time I recognize an element of truth in it, which is, that if Subaltern Studies is going to have any effective power in Latin America, it has to be there. It has in one way or another to reorganize

the way historians, literary critics and cultural people in Latin America think of what they do in new kinds of ways and not just be something that is happening in five or six departments in the U.S. The U.S./Latin America binary, I realize, is not as rigid as it used to be. But one of the consequences of that criticism is to impel me to think more and more about shifting my attention away from Latin America and closer to the U.S. And I have tried to do so by teaching on and off U.S. Latino literature, without claiming to be an expert or even especially knowledgeable in the field. But this I understand as an intermediary position, and maybe I need to do something more dramatic than that. At the same time I find it hard to disconnect completely from Spanish and Latin American things.

Clarifying a Few Things About Subalternity and Latin American Studies.

FG: Let me ask you for a few clarifications in relation to your idea of Latin American Subaltern Studies. When you talk about the rhetorical figure of substitution and metalepsis in relation to subaltern studies, what do you mean by that in what sounds like a thinking strategy?

JB: That's a reference to Spivak's discussion of agency in “Deconstructing Historiography.” She says that there is a problem in the work of the Subaltern Studies historians. Ranajit Guha, for example, says that the aim of his work is against the whole historical tradition that denies political agency to peasant rebels and bandits. He is thinking for example of Eric Hobsbawm's characterization of peasant insurgencies as pre-political. Spivak says that this is a good goal, politically, but that it runs afoul of the other direction of Subaltern Studies, which is to deconstruct the discourses that constitute subjects as subaltern in the first place. In other words, there is a difference between claiming agency for subaltern subjects and deconstructing discourses of history, culture, power in terms of which the subaltern is denied agency. The metalepsis is the substitution of cause for effect or vice versa. I will try to invent a metalepsis for you: The subaltern is an effect of certain discourses, and hence the metaleptic gesture of the Subaltern Studies historians is to make something that is the effect of discursive construction of difference the cause of political action.

FG: Fine. But what does that mean? On the one hand the subaltern dimension is thought about in terms of what is and cannot be represented and put on display gracefully or invitingly at the official level, what you say cannot be put safely inside University circles. So, o.k., if this is how we think about it, what does it mean to make it a "cause"? In your essay in *The Latin American Studies Reader* ("The Im/possibility of Politics: Subalternity, Modernity, Hegemony," 47-63), you write about "a metalepsis ... that nevertheless inescapably characterizes [the subaltern subject], since its alterity is bound structurally to forms of subordination and exploitation that cannot be "unfixed" [sic] except by a radical change in social relations" (52).

JB: That was intended to critique Spivak's position. Deconstruction and subaltern studies seem to come together around certain issues. In some ways you can even imagine deconstruction as the theoretical correlative of subaltern studies. That is certainly Spivak's gesture and perhaps also Alberto Moreiras's. In my own articulation, however, there is a moment in which deconstruction and subaltern studies move away from each other. And this has to do with a recognition of the limits of critical thinking and the limits of intellectuals. I think one of the key issues that brought together initially the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group was a sense of the limitations of intellectuals as agents of history and hegemony. And that sense took the form of a self-criticism of our own sense of agency as literary intellectuals in relation to Latin American revolutionary movements in the 1970s and 1980s. So, since we were mainly literary intellectuals, it involved necessarily the critique of literature. The notion that a kind of progressive, modernist, democratic, left-oriented literature, such as the one produced by the Boom or people like Ernesto Cardenal, Roque Dalton, or Cuban writers of the Retamar type, and the Calibanesque role of the intellectual, came into crisis for us. I would say this was a strong animating idea: that somehow we should no longer see intellectuals as the main agents of hegemony, consciousness, history. That is why we decentered literature, the vanguardist assumptions of Boom literary ideology. It seemed to us, at least according to Rama's argument, that literature simply reinscribed colonial cultural stratifications in societies where literacy was not by any means generalized. And it was not clear it was ever going to be generalized.

FG: And that is what your students tell you at Pittsburgh: "we don't want literature. We don't need literature. Bye, bye, let us do something else." What figure would you propose instead of Caliban?

JB: That was the image we wanted to critique because we were the Calibans in one way or another. We still had the idea that the model for what we were doing in cultural theory, criticism and literature and the model was Retamar's Caliban, the post-colonial intellectual, Fanon or even someone like Edward Said. And that was what we wanted to critique. In other words, we started from a position that coincided with Retamar and Said, but then moved into a critique of the adequacy of the literary intellectual who wishes to rework the canon in the name of postcoloniality. We wanted to displace agency towards a broader subject. In that sense, Cultural Studies was implicated in our conception of Subaltern Studies, because Cultural Studies was already taking the step of saying that hermeneutic authority is no longer located in the place of the traditional intellectual, the *letrado*, the humanistic intellectual, but is now displaced to a multiform popular subject that is literally ungraspable because it is too large. It is millions, statistically speaking.

FG: If you let me insist, what would the new image be?

JB: The subaltern.

FG: In trying to imagine the subaltern I can only come up with something like a faceless multitude.

JB: That is one way of imagining it. There is both coincidence and discrepancy between the notion of the multitude, as it gets articulated by people like Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri, and the notion of the subaltern. But yes, the subaltern could be seen in this way. I suppose one difference would be that the subaltern is always concretely situated in cultural dynamics that constitute him or her as subaltern, whereas these have to do with class, race, gender, language, or the like. Whereas the multitude is a more amorphous concept. It designates a kind of excess or supplementarity that late capitalism supposedly produces in populations that are no longer bound to national frames, ethnic frames, or [orthodox] forms of identity, and so begin to spill over and radicalize in certain ways. Another way to put this—anticipating what might have been another discussion—is that one point of difference with Hardt and Negri is that I see them basically articulating a Menshevik argument—Wallerstein fits this too—in the sense that they say that the fruition of capitalism is a precondition for the creation of revolutionary, anti-capitalist subjects; and now capitalism is coming into full frui-

tion—the living situation is one that transcends the *interregnum* nation-state and forms of identity tied to the nation-state. So now we have diasporic semi-proletarian populations that seek to escape the frame of the nation and traditional forms of community, we have also the possibility of radical negation of capitalism. That's in any case how Virno and Negri see it.

Many Roads, One (Modern) Rome? Or Many Roads, Many Romes? Or About the Unfittingness of Indian (Subaltern) Testimonio Inside a Singularizing Modernizing Capitalist Frame.

FG: Do you see all these three authors, Hardt, Negri and Wallerstein, essentially saying that all roads lead to Rome, while you will say something like there are many roads and many Romes...

JB: Yes. I think *testimonio* is in some way implicated in this predilection for the displacement of agency. It suggests a different hermeneutic model. In the case of Rigoberta Menchú, what constitutes the subjectivity that Hardt and Negri want to call the subjectivity of the multitude, which I am sure they mean to include Menchú or people like her involved in struggles in Guatemala, Chiapas, Palestine, etcetera? This is in part a subjectivity defined by new, transnational forms of capitalism, but also by resistance to these new forms. The traditional debate about what was called the "Indian question" in Latin America was a debate about how Indians would become available to the Left as political subjects. And the orthodox Marxist answer was as Indians become proletarianized and acculturated, they would become available to the Left. So the Left should support policies of industrialization, agricultural modernization, cultural *mestizaje* that would bring Indians into the historical framework of modernity in which the discourse of Marxist or populist parties would become relevant to them. What we became aware of, in taking up the "Indian question" from a subalternist perspective, is that the radical potential of Indian movements in Latin America was precisely predicated on the resistance to becoming incorporated into capitalist frameworks. If the model you are proposing in Guatemala, for example, is the Communist Party model of drawing Indians into becoming a *ladino* or *mestizo* labor force and losing their identity as Indians, then Indians in general would not participate in or identify with the

Whereas what happens in Guatemala in the 1970s is precisely that the changes its perception of the "Indian question" away from a paradigm of modernization, in which the Left is going to create a modern society in which the Indians will be transformed into modern, Spanish-speaking subjects, in a supposedly democratic state that will represent them adequately, unlike the existing oligarchic regime that simply beats them over the head. In fact, economic modernity is seen as the pre-condition of acculturation of Indians. But Indian demands are radical to the extent that they constitute demands that cannot be met by the forces of capitalist modernization, because they involve forms of community, land tenure, education, and so on that do not fit into a modernizing model. And it is to that extent that Indians are potentially revolutionary subjects. What is driving agency, at least on the part of Indians, then, is a resistance to formal and real subsumption under capitalist relations of production: as global capitalism increasingly impacts on their lives, they also become increasingly aware of their destructive effects it has on their lives.

The historical dynamic of the Left in Latin America always seemed to be tied to a telos of modernization: the bourgeoisie was unable to create modern societies because of its contradictions, dependency theory told us. But the goal was still modernity, connected with the march of history moving forward into the creation of national identities that would also be modern and relatively homogeneous, whereas colonialism and dependent capitalism left us with these nations that are not really homogenous or sovereign. The Sandinistas had that modernizing vision for example in the desire of incorporating the Atlantic coast, because it had never been completely integrated into the rest of Nicaragua by the oligarchies. The Subalternist perspective was questioning that telos of modernization and opening up a sense that different sections of the population could have different goals that could not necessarily be summed up by some image of modernity that we inherited from European culture or classical Marxism. This has to do with the displacement of intellectuals we were talking about earlier, because the intellectuals are the engineers of the project of modernity. The Calibanesque intellectual who is a politician, an artist, a writer, an architect producing a form of modernity and transculturation that is adequate, or so s/he thinks, to creating a more modern, democratic, representative state and society in Latin America.

FG: You talk in your essay in *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* about the subaltern as “the subject that ‘interrupts’ [sic in quotation marks in the original] the modern narrative of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the rise of the nation-state....” You talk about the self-recognition on the part of intellectuals of their very limited and limiting power. You also locate the subaltern near the category of the “object” (51)...

JB: I think the way intellectuals think about the subaltern is that the subaltern is object. I don’t think the subaltern thinks of itself as object.

FG: It is always a bit difficult to “grasp” the subaltern. It is as though the subaltern, often in the neutral-gender, third-person singular abstract form, were some kind of star out there. I see you in this essay still clinging to the notion of the impossibility of representation. Why don’t you just throw away the notion of representation altogether, or would this be throwing out the baby with the bath water?

JB: I thought I had thrown it away actually. I thought Spivak paradoxically still clings to the notion of representation. If you read “Deconstructing Historiography,” in a way it is a response *avant la lettre* to the position the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group took, and that I myself took in my work on testimonio. My earliest *testimonio* essay first comes out in 1987 in *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* (25, pp. 7-17), and then in English in 1989 in a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* (39, pp. 11-28). Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” essay is published around that time, although it was produced much earlier in 1983 at the Illinois Conference that led to the collection in which it appeared (*Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988]). So there is a temporal difference. But you can read “Can the Subaltern Speak?” also as a critique of my *testimonio* essay. Because I seem to be saying there, in effect, that I agree with Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault et al., that there is no need to represent the poor or anything like that anymore. It is embarrassing for intellectuals to say they represent the poor. The poor can speak for themselves. Testimonio is an example of the poor or the subaltern speaking for themselves. The intellectual gets out of the way and gives up the function of “speaking for.” The intellectual is just the interlocutor through whom the testimonial narrative becomes available. Testimonio allows the entry of the subaltern voice into “culture.” And Spivak’s articulation, by contrast with all that, is very careful in trying to construct a notion of repre-

sentation and agency where the intellectual still has a necessary role. This is bound up with her definition of subalternity, because subalternity is that which is by definition not heard, not paid attention to, so the subaltern cannot speak and the claims for testimonial voice are fake claims: the intellectual still has the job of representing. It is only through the work of the intellectual that what is at stake in that silence, or silencing, of the subaltern can be made audible or visible.

FG: Don’t you think that the center is only too happy that you are bringing the margins to it? So when John Beverley keeps himself busy in the hope that a few things will have to change accordingly, if only in relation to frames of referentiality, intelligibility and all that, central managers will fake the funk and still find the strength to say that “Life is beautiful,” or that “nobody’s perfect.”

JB: Exactly. That is precisely Spivak’s point in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” to the extent that I agree with it. But I would say that I am ambiguous about that essay now, because it straddles two possible models of agency. There is the Lacanian/Derridean argument about representation that Spivak is basically endorsing. And there is the other Deleuzian, Spinozian model that Spivak is critiquing. And this second model would say, there is this force in the world, which is the multitude or the subaltern, and it presses forward and from its force it gives rise to other things. So the mediation of the intellectual is at best secondary. This force constructs things out of its own living essence, creating new forms of culture, consciousness, and community that displace the representational function of the intellectual.

FG: When I hear that, I fail to see the big revelation. Isn’t this the everyday cup of tea? But it seems to me that you are still perhaps fatally hooked on that loss of cultural capital. To me this is as normal as taking any quick walk any day on Main Street U.S.A.

JB: That’s probably right because my own intellectual heritage, like Spivak’s, is structuralism and post-structuralism. But I [still] think the position I arrive at—I’m not going to say it’s more radical than hers—but I would say that there is more skepticism in it about the role of intellectuals. I would say that deconstruction is still an ideology of intellectuals that is text-centered, still essentially framed by the legacy of European Humanism, in the sense of creating a way to read texts to educate an elite no longer ade-

quately educated in principles that derive from theology and scholasticism. Rhetoric and aesthetics then become central categories for the education of elites. This is not unrelated to the Baroque distinction A.A. Parker studied in Gracian between “*agudeza de artificio*” and “*agudeza de perspicacia*”, where the first pertains to the sort of wit or knowledge literature produces and the second to scientific or historical knowledge, truth, as in Kant’s distinction between aesthetic judgment and teleological judgment. There is a specific operativity in Renaissance Humanism for reading secular texts and talking about or even “deconstructing” them. I do not see deconstruction in essence moving out of that framework. So in effect deconstruction becomes for me the new ideology of the literary at a moment when the literary itself has come into crisis. Deconstruction offers itself as a way of saving the essential impulse in literary criticism and therefore redeeming the role of intellectuals.

The Academic Project of Subaltern Studies or the Production of a Radical Negativity Within Academic Disciplinarity.

FG: What would you say if the charges of text-centrism and solipsistic, nominalistic or even scholastic ways of thinking about social things, which can be heard in relation to deconstruction, were also thrown by some Devil’s advocate at *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* and at your essay in it? Isn’t it true that your text production essentially engages with other texts? Isn’t it also true that it is a bit difficult to pinpoint a notion such as referentiality? How differentially are things being done here?

JB: I think we reached an impasse in the Subaltern Studies Group. And this has to do with the conditions of knowledge production in the University, and again this takes us back to the question of the role of intellectuals. It is clear that Subaltern Studies is an academic project. Its only *raison d’être* is being in, on, of and around the academy.

FG: And there is no need to apologize in this regard. That is fine with me.

JB: Although many of the people involved in Subaltern Studies, in Latin America and elsewhere come to the academy from other forms of militancy.

FG: And that is good. Exactly.

JB: In the case of the South-Asians, many of them were identified with the Communist movement in India. The Naxalite rebellion, a kind of Maoist peasant insurgency in Bengal, was an important reference for some of them, as Sandinismo was for some of us. But [Latin American Subaltern Studies] is an academic project and therefore it has something to do with understanding the University and the notion of “studios” as a space for intervention. As with the earlier optimism about the political effects of Cultural Studies, the idea is that Subaltern Studies would, by reorienting the way people think about literature and literary criticism, history, cultural anthropology, etcetera, have a radicalizing effect on knowledge production. When our interventions were critical or even nihilistic, we thought that we were transferring to the academic sphere part of the agency of the subaltern. If, in Ranajit Guha’s account, the key characteristic of the subaltern is negation, then our work was essentially one of putting a radical negativity within academic disciplinarity.

FG: And that radical negativity would be what?

JB: Pointing out the limits of academic constructions of knowledge, but also how academic constructions of knowledge are in and of themselves implicated in creating relations of social inequality to the extent that the construction of the subaltern is a cultural construction, and not simply a matter of economic, political or legal disenfranchisement. We saw education itself as radically implicated in subalternity, and so there was always this tension in our work, which you have seen in the Reader, between creating new forms of knowledge that somehow bring the subaltern more into view, access it, and this other [important] thing which is to constitute a critique of academic knowledge as such, to show that academic knowledge is itself implicated in that which it pretends to study objectively or dispassionately. We were constituting a negativity in relation to academic knowledge, in essence by putting on the costume of the subaltern position and putting what we do in the academy under erasure. Take my own formula “against literature.” That is a gesture of simple negation, because I am not here speaking of dialectically sublating the literary into something richer in the sense of literature plus the non-literary fusing in some kind of higher synthesis. No, the “against literature” posture was rather a way of precipitating a crisis that was already latent in the field of literature and literary criticism.

FG: But how should one understand the proposition “against”? I think I can see what you are saying. When you tell me that University settings in this country are oppressive and intensely limiting, also not entirely thriving spaces for [the growth] of intellectual creativity, I would say, “sure, we kind of have known this all along.” I guess I am asking what follows from the gesture of erasure? A different kind of scholarship? A different kind of pedagogy?

JB: Yes, but go ahead.

FG: I guess I am also saying that I do not quite understand oppositionality, in the sense that the center will say, “sure, bring to the house of knowledge whatever you want to bring, be as outrageous as you can be, just make noise, keep this thing alive, the sky is the limit...”

JB: This would be quite close to Jameson’s anti-multicultural formula, which says that global difference is global capital.

FG: I am reminded of a recent performance-talk by Guillermo Gómez-Peña at Stanford University in which he was saying that when his performances were getting really outrageous, he would cautiously approach the television crew that was there filming to see if it was o.k.; he says he was surprised to get in response that the more outrageous and weird, the better. So I guess I am saying, what is oppositional in all this? Perhaps the students who are saying to a department of literature that they do not want literature.

JB: Well, yes; that’s right. If they do in fact say that —because, to tell the truth, most literature students don’t: they still “believe in” literature. And even if they do, they are not exactly expressing a subaltern position in that rejection. What they are expressing is a desire to achieve some kind of social entitlement that no longer passes through the traditional institutions of the humanities, including literature, because they are considered to be now obsolete in some way or another. The relation between the University and social mobility has changed too. And maybe the discourse about the University is more skeptical these days. I think it would be true to say that in all capitalist countries, and probably in the former socialist countries too, in the “long cycle” of economic growth that goes from the end of the Second World War through the early 1970s, the University was very closely tied to the welfare state and to the promise of social mobility for working class people, as in the Redbrick College system in England, or the National

University of Mexico. The notion is that an expanding University will create new forms of social mobility that are tied, in one way or another, to sustained economic growth. You were a farmer or a peasant, your kids will go to Moscow University and become nuclear engineers or literary critics or whatever. You were a steelworker, your kids will go to the University of Pittsburgh and become lawyers or doctors. I think that model is clearly over. In the neoliberal model, there is no longer that kind of sustained growth, or at least the rewards of growth are no longer distributed downwards. The University is now reproducing the way the society is constituted. It is no longer a form of social mobility. Quite the contrary, recent studies tend to show that University graduates as a whole will not attain a class status higher than that of their parents. They may actually in terms of salary fall below their parents. So it is easier to be skeptical about the University. But I think the skepticism we are talking about here is more radical than that kind of skepticism. It has to do with a kind of suspicion about what it is one does.

FG: Personally I feel the need to enrich the “against,” “counter-” or whatever you may want to call it. But I just don’t know if we are not falling into, almost using a musical metaphor, the parallel singing voice of the “counter-tenor,” which ultimately enriches the main melody or orthodoxy sung by the tenor. To harp on something said before: the center is silent, it has no argument, it is there by virtue of keeping things under control, but is not articulating any kind of coherent narrative itself. So the more knowledge you give to it, the more nourishment the center gets. Perhaps this is also happening with the notion of the subaltern. The invocation of the poor in the *Reader* reminds me a bit of secular Christianity in that the neglected stone will become the cornerstone in the new Cathedral of Learning, probably in the early years of the new twenty-first century. I see among people in your generation the need to still make the “against” move. And I am not claiming I have any answers.

JB: I know the moment things came into crisis for the Subaltern Studies group. This happened at a Duke University conference in 1998. And it is not incidental that it happened at Duke. Our own positions in the academy had been somewhat marginal. I mean none of us, at least in the original group, taught at the time in prestigious Ivy-League type institutions. We all had checkered histories that threatened our careers, we were too political or whatever. We did not have a lot of prestige. And that was good in a way. We

were a little bit at the margins and we were making an intervention from the margins. There were famous post-colonialists like Spivak, or Rolena Adorno and Walter Dignolo who circulated in Ivy-League places, but we were not part of that. And that was good because it allowed us to be *francotiradores* [snipers] in a sense. We had nothing to lose. We were a group of more or less twelve, like the Apostles. Nobody wanted to give us fellowships. We applied to the Rockefeller Foundation and nothing. Jean Franco did not like the idea. So we felt a bit embattled and that was good. And that position of our own manufactured relative subalternity in the profession energized, I think, the work of the initial group. Then we started to catch on. Dignolo and Alberto Moreiras joined. And Duke comes into the picture with its great resources, and there is this big conference. Lots of money. Big names. MLA-style. Whereas our previous meetings had been very informal, low-budget affairs. We would sit down for a weekend at someone's campus and talk like you and I are doing now. Nobody gave papers. Audiences were not invited to come or anything like that. So the Duke thing was much more dramatic and ambitious.

FG: Yes, I recall the setting, I attended as a graduate student.

JB: But we also had the aim of projecting ourselves into institutionality. And then your former Dean of Humanities, Cathy Davidson, says at the conference something like "Subaltern Studies will be the model for the Humanities at Duke University."

FG: Yes, you have written about it ("The Dilemma of Subaltern Studies at Duke," *Nepantla*, 2000, 1-1, pp. 33-44). This was the Dean's recognition that eagerly welcomed you to the house of knowledge. And then you get nervous, understandably so.

JB: We did not want to resist that, because in a sense we took seriously that Subaltern Studies wanted to hegemonize the field by providing a new paradigm. Because it was a political project. We did not want to be abject and humble.

FG: So when the Dean says, John, please bring me the subaltern, you say to yourself, hold on a second, what am I doing here? (laughter).

JB: Because there is a problem built into that. That is why the idea of Subaltern Studies is oxymoronic or catachretic in some ways.

FG: Could you talk a little bit about the notion of catachresis?

JB: The catachretic aspect of studying the subaltern, right?

FG: The dictionary definition speaks of the use of the wrong word for the context, or the use of a forced and paradoxical figure of speech, as in "blind mouth." To echo what you just said, you claim (in "Writing in Reverse: On the Project of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group," *Dispositio/n. Subaltern Studies in the Americas*, Vol. XIX, 46, 1994/1996; pp. 271-288) that "contradiction and catachresis [are] built into the very idea of "studying" the subaltern" (p. 277). Again, what does this mean, because I suppose you do not merely wish to linger there at the rhetorical level? I am wondering what these rhetorical moves (metalepsis, oxymoron, catachresis) entail for your thinking practice?

JB: I am not sure now if catachresis works well here, because it is a slippery word that people use differently. What I am saying is that Subaltern Studies is catachretic in the same kind of way "blind mouth" is, because you are applying something that belongs to one category of experience to something that is not only different but also in a way opposed to that. "Studies" is about the academy, Duke, privilege and power based on knowledge; the subaltern is the other side of that. Spivak once made the point that Cultural Studies was a bad name for the whole enterprise, because "cultural" already implies a kind of Arnoldian notion of "culture," with its embedded ideas about the primary role and place of culture. Maybe then it would be more correct to call it Anti-"Cultural" Studies.

FG: What follows after declaring something obsolete or wanting to move away from something? Something I see happening is that the notions of "subaltern," "culture," the multitude, etcetera become really diffuse and perhaps this is a strategy for intervention inside academic circles. There is one way of thinking about all these debates, and you have emphasized earlier the polemical nature of these debates, which I will put this crudely: a room of twelve people, using the movie analogy *12 Angry Men*, talking to each other *ad nauseam* about the devaluation of intellectual labor in the American academy. And I can see that and I can respect that. There is no need, as far as I am concerned, to apologize for academic work. But I am wondering what happens when this kind of knowledge goes out there in the streets. We are talking about figures of speech hopefully wanting rhetorical

precision. We are also talking about conceptual panoramas. Isn't that almost like nominalism and that's it? And in the meantime we make all those self-validating gestures, well, there is the poor, the Indian, I come from that foreign place, or I have visited that foreign place, or the like. I should say I see something of this happening.

JB: Well, subaltern studies is nominalism, plus Foucault, plus Marxism and feminism maybe, because there is the concern with power and inequality. That is the essential issue: how what we do in our own work is bound up with creating relations of power and inequality. That is the paradox of "studying the subaltern," because, again, studies refers to an academic field, mastery and hegemonic constructions of knowledge, and subalternity refers to that which is precisely denied agency, or authority, by virtue of that which is constructed as studies. So therefore the project is catachretic, oxymoronic, paradoxical or aporetic... I don't know what the right word is. You would have to imagine, for example that if subaltern studies is an accumulation of cultural capital to the advantage of the University and academic knowledge, and if in one way or another academic knowledge is implicated in the construction of forms of hierarchy, privilege and discrimination, then almost by definition, the concrete subaltern would have to "anti-Subaltern Studies." Because Subaltern Studies would be seen and resented as something antithetical to the interests of the concrete subaltern. Some of that is involved in the very tense and hostile Latin American reaction to Subaltern Studies I referred to earlier. There is a sense that here is a form of intellectual agency essentially connected to U.S. academy and U.S. hegemony. It is interesting that it is a reaction to the U.S. academy and not the European academy. Latin American intellectuals rarely complain about the intellectual imperialism of existentialism or structuralism. But the minute we start talking about multiculturalism and postcolonialism, they raise the charge of Anglo-American cultural imperialism.

FG: One could rehearse something of Moreiras' reading of some of your work against the looming shadow of González-Echevarría in the vicinity of the theme of the Baroque. And one could perhaps repeat your own reading of tacit class and racial affiliations in González-Echevarría's understanding of the Baroque in relation to the roster of people included in *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, published after all by Duke University Press. What do you think would come up with this kind of reading? Non-Ivy League? Sixties generation? I am not questioning the genuine commit-

ment of you all to progressive politics. But I do think there is a serious concern here. But there is also the academic game that comes to the fore sometimes when you ask people what they mean by a term, say "culture," in relation to their work, and some people behave like they are holding the secret password or some kind of secret key, almost like it were a shibboleth. I guess this might be more a strategy than anything else, almost like raising flags and signs and marking little territories inside which some people operate with a few allies. So, the academic landscape looks a bit like a little imaginary territory with a little logo side by side another little imaginary territory with a different logo and we have some dialogue with each other, but mainly to produce a book, foster some career inside an exceedingly small group of people in the U.S. academy and that is pretty much it. Latin American Subaltern Studies is mostly literary critics inside Spanish Departments, and most historians will not devote five minutes to this.

JB: True, but the historians, Florencia Mallon and others, also feel the need to have their own version of subaltern studies.

FG: There is no dialogue or bridges between this kind of work in Latin American contexts and, let us say, American Studies.

JB: Well, look, there is some connection.

FG: And maybe there is no need for it.

JB: Putting the subalternist argument inside a U.S. American frame is what I was trying to do at the end of *Subalternity and Representation*. Because the U.S. is also a postcolonial society. Subaltern Studies is not something that applies only "out there," in the Third World, Latin America... You asked me once whether I fall into the same trap Jameson falls into in essentializing testimonio as some kind of Third World abject that we bring home to scare people at Stanford or Pittsburgh for a little while until they get a little deconstruction and they can handle it. I would say that no, my position is that the U.S. is not outside the subaltern paradigm. The U.S. is very rich and powerful, but culturally it ain't all that different. I remember as a kid in Latin America—but [as] a kid with a U.S. identity—thinking, "well, things will be great when I finally get to live in the U.S." And coming to the U.S. in 1954-5, and driving through the South... For some reason, I don't remember exactly why, we had to drive from Florida to New York, where my dad had a job. I remember thinking as I looked out the window, this is

not all that different from where I just came from, which was concretely Colombia. So, what's the big deal? Where is it? And this was partly because I had imagined the U.S. as modernism, futuristic architecture, clean streets, different than those funny, Baroque, mixed Latin American cities that I had lived in like Bogota and Lima. Everything would be modern in the U.S. and of course it wasn't.

So, the notion that you should put Subaltern Studies in an U.S. frame is a good one. The point of subaltern studies is not to articulate some kind of radical otherness that then can be brought into in the classrooms in the manner of a scarecrow. A lot of my models for testimonial narrative came from Latin America. But people haven't noticed that some of these models, besides Menchú and guerrilla fighters, came from drug narratives. The drug narrative was a key genre of American Beat writing. William Burroughs has a famous first novel called *Junkie*, which I consider a model of a flat, uninflected, non-literary, unpretentious, neo-testimonial "I am just going to write about what it is to be a drug addict." And there are lots of books like it. John Rechy's early novel about homosexual cruising, *The City of Night*, for example, has a kind of testimonial dimension. So I thought that there was a U.S. element in *testimonio*. There are plenty of *testimonios* in U.S. literature, which have the same role that they do in Latin American literature, and it might have been more productive pedagogically if *testimonio* had come into the North American academy with a U.S. referent instead of a Rigoberta Menchú one, because then there would be less the question of radical otherness—ah Guatemala! Most North-Americans do not even know where Guatemala is, and the Indian woman in Guatemala, even more mysterious, right? But if it had been, say, Rigoberta Menchú, an Indian woman in El Paso, Texas or Minneapolis... But then it probably would not have been as interesting for the academy.

FG: In trying to enrich the notion of the "subaltern," I am getting increasingly nervous of the representational roles that foreigners are called upon to play inside the U.S. [It is a kind of] "yes, sure, you bring in here a little bit of your (foreign) culture, and tell me a little bit about that international dimension, but not for too long and not in a way that is going to disrupt what we already have here in place, right?"

JB: Exactly. That's the Stanford model. We live in an international world and globalization obliges us to pay attention to cultural difference. My Uni-

versity has an international culture requirement for undergraduates, three courses...

FG: Human reality splits into the domestic and the international dimensions, and the latter most often inside the foreign affairs model of engagement with the world.

JB: Here's an interesting footnote to that. We just had a debate at my university about curriculum requirements and it was generally conceded that there were too many. There was a group that wanted to introduce a "cultural diversity" requirement that would be U.S. centered in relation to how race, class and gender get talked about here. And in order to do that, without expanding the requirements, it was proposed to substitute that course for one international requirement. This, I think very good, idea was voted down by the faculty, however, because a lot of us, history, political science, the foreign languages, had a stake in that international culture requirement. And so at the University of Pittsburgh we do not have a requirement for "cultural diversity in the U.S.," but we do have a requirement for international cultural diversity courses.

About the Potential Politics of Multiculturalism.

FG: Do you want to add anything to what you say in your piece in the *Subaltern Studies Reader* in relation to multiculturalism? In this essay, and also at the end of *Subalternity and Representation*, you cling to multiculturalism and identity politics and you will not let these notions go. Another notion is diversity, which is "non-white," "non-mainstream," and that is the little house we have to go to, if only occasionally.

JB: Multiculturalism and diversity are the key concepts. Exactly. But remember that I am Gramscian, so what I mean by "identity politics" is also working class politics. I do not consider working class politics anything other than identity politics. Like Laclau, I am not a believer in the classical Marxian idea that what working class politics expresses transparently is the wage-labor/capital relationship. Obviously economic exploitation is the feature of the contradiction between labor and capital, but Lenin already said in 1905, that the contradiction between labor and capital expressed, for example, in the struggle and over the length of the working day that is at the

core of volume one of *Capital*, was not necessarily a radical contradiction in the sense that it was generally handled through trade union struggle. What is more contradictory, it seems to me, are the general claims that capitalism makes on classes, peoples, resources, populations, genders—in a word “identities—to bend themselves to its will. Lenin was already saying at the time of the First World War that with what he called Imperialism, the main contradiction in capitalism had shifted from capital-labor contradiction in individual countries such as France, England, or Japan, to the contradiction between dominating and dominated nations, so that now there was a dimension of “identity” in capitalist contradictions. Since capitalism in its monopoly phase required that certain nations are dominated, extinguished, reorganized or whatever, “national identity,” or better yet the struggle to affirm national identity, became operative as a form of revolutionary struggle. I am not sure that Marxism has absorbed the radicalism of Lenin’s argument about the national question. Zizek, who is skeptical about identity politics and multiculturalism in the same way you are, has no clue about this in his attempts to revive Lenin, for example. He goes on talking as though Lenin were some kind of enlightened Jacobin and he forgets to mention that Lenin’s main theoretical contribution to Marxism in his time was saying that the subject of the revolutionary activity was no longer the national working class but oppressed nations. The stuff about the vanguard Party and whether it should be democratic or centralist is not original to Lenin and in any case led, as we all know, to Stalinism, that is, to a dead end. Gramsci understood this very well. Zizek doesn’t because he sees the whole issue of nationalism and ethnic identity as bad and reactionary and like you, in any case assimilable to capitalism, “the ideal form of multinational capitalism,” to cite his own phrase. Capitalism would say, “oh yeah, diversity is great, give us more difference...”

FG: Contradictions are fine, bring your identity and go ethnic as much as you want, that’s fine.

JB: My wager, and there is a wager here, is that pressed to a limit, multicultural demands—and remember that I see working class demands as cultural demands in some way, not just demands for wages, but demands for different ways of living—involve something like what Lenin was saying about imperialism. If in imperialism the national contradiction becomes a primary contradiction, and wars of national liberation become the form in which revolutionary struggle takes place, then one could say that the question of

national identity is the repressed dimension of capitalist modernity. The question of multiculturalism may likewise perhaps express a radical limit of postmodernity or post-Fordism. Therefore, to press for the construction of multicultural societies, where multiculturalism is essentially fed from positions that have been subalternized in one way or another by the forms of capitalist modernity, is politically enabling and could potentially be the basis for new forms of popular hegemony.

FG: Correct me if I am wrong, but this is the apple in the eye of John Beverly. You want to join whatever potential for democratic impulse you may perceive to be out there, whatever that might be, inside academic circles and also outside.

JB: That is what I sense the point of Subaltern Studies to be: potential politics. I mean, if the “subaltern,” as Guha and Gramsci in inventing the concept say, expresses subordinations that are not only purely economic in nature, but that also have to do with cultural hierarchies that are related to economic hierarchies but aren’t limited to them, and if it also has to do with different historical teleologies, so that we are not condemned to the narrative of capital, so we can imagine that there might have been moments in which humans could have developed in different ways, then it seems to me there is clearly a potential politics here. It goes without saying that I think multiculturalism is very relevant to Latin America, but what I am thinking about now is the Rainbow Coalition, multiculturalism as a banner of the Left and liberal communities in the U.S., and how to radicalize it, whether it is possible for a political-cultural majority in the U.S. to rally around the issue of multiculturalism. My assumption is that multiculturalism expresses in one way or another the living situation of the majority of the population in the U.S.

FG: Which would be left out.

JB: Which is left out. Subalternity is always relative. I mean, any given person, you, I, anyone, will have dominant and subaltern elements in their make-up. I spoke before of the relative subalternity of our position in the U.S. academy as one of the enabling devices of the group. I think if we all had been at prestigious Ivy League institutions and had been getting grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, our work would not have the kind of consequences that it had. It would have been perceived as yet another high-

level academic project with little force behind it other than careerism. So you can say there was an element of subalternity operative in our own project. I am not trying to make any special claim to political correctness here. We were all college-educated, middle-class, etcetera. But there is relative subalternity and relative resentment. We say to ourselves "how come *they* are getting all the grants? O.k. Fuck them. We are going to do our thing, we are going to do it differently, collectively. We are not into academic ego-trips, nobody will present papers, we are going to be more like a sixties-style affinity group."

So that is what multiculturalism would do because multiculturalism would also flow from subalternity, right? If what multiculturalism expresses is a political will that is essentially founded on notions of cultural discrimination, then it can be radicalized because it is connected to structural inequality. And if our goal is, in one way or another, an egalitarian society, those cultural issues are the things we will have to work through. So, yes, there is a defense of identity politics in my work, not in the sense that I believe in identity as if identity were now in the place of religion or Marxism. I don't think identity politics expresses necessarily a belief in *an* identity, as if that had been decided on in advance of the struggle. It expresses instead a sense of being wounded, or hurt in some kind of way by the existing arrangement of things, and a desire for a different arrangement of things.

About Breaking With the Notion of History As Univocal Teleological Modernity (or "Shit"), and the Pleasure Potential In The Narrative of a De-Centered Subject.

FG: And this is the notion of history that I see articulated in the Subaltern Studies Group. The notion that history is just shit. We don't want to do this. We do not want it. Are we going to do something else? Or do we just want to shoot it down?

JB: Yes, I like that. We do want to shoot it down and in that way you are quite right about expressing an anxiety on the part of many critics of Subaltern Studies on the Left, that Subaltern Studies may be complicit with neoliberalism and reactionary fundamentalism, because we critique modernity,

and some could say, "oh well and so does Osama bin Laden and right-wing Hindu fundamentalism in India." But we also want to say that there is a productivity in breaking with that narrative and that productivity is allowing for the expression of all those voices, positions that were defeated, subalternized, marginalized by what usually gets called history. So there is a moment of negativity but this moment of negativity then has to pass into the construction... of what? It would have to be now a narrative of a subject that is de-centered and that finds pleasure in being de-centered. The way I express it in the title of a recent essay is: Can the nation be gay? ("Puede ser gay la nación: Subalternidad/ Modernidad/ Multiculturalismo," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, XXVII/53, pp. 153-163). Eve Sedgwick talks about "homosexual panic.:" people think "Oh, Jesus, what if I am gay," and then you discover you are gay, you know, and big deal, is it such a big deal that you or others are gay? Does this destabilize the order of things? In any case, people have been gay all through history. No big deal. But there are people around, both in relationship to their own or others' sexuality, for whom the notion of being gay is some sort of radical otherness that is going to deconstruct everything: themselves, the subject, the nation, culture, morality, the family, biological reproduction, all this will be put into crisis. But, as Freud showed, there is no clear dividing line in sexual object choice. And the anxiety about that is what is expressed by Sedgwick's idea of "homosexual panic." But once we get over the panic, it is pretty clear that we, and other people, can be gay or not and nothing is going to change all that much. So can the nation be gay too? In other words, can the nation be other than this totalizing mechanism? Can it have other identity than the identity it has now but somehow still have an identity as a nation? That is, I think, the question multiculturalism is posing. Can we live in a society which is organized around many different principles than the ones it is organized around now, including different economic principles, without things falling into anarchy, ethnic genocide, the clash of civilizations? And I would say yes: multicultural egalitarianism would be a fundamental form of that possibility. But I don't think that you can imagine an egalitarian society in the U.S. or anywhere else in which Duke and Stanford and the Ivy League continue to be what they are now. They will have to change in some way, or be changed. And if this is true, then you would have to say that the whole world of knowledge has to change too. I don't mean to say that literature, deconstruction, twelve-tone music or particle physics should go away. But the powerful hierarchization that accompanies

those things in terms of privilege, access to resources and cultural authority, yes, that should definitely be questioned, so my model would be, yes, literature, but literature as “one among the discourses,” as Wlad Godzich put it once.

About an Enduring Visceral Postmodernity.

FG: Let us move on to the postmodernism debate in Latin America. I have in mind the special issue of *Boundary 2* (20/3, Fall 1993), edited by you and José Oviedo, that I have used often in my teaching. And I do not know if you want to make any connections between the work done in that monographic volume and the very recent conference entitled “Fronteras de la Modernidad/Borders of Modernity” put together by Mabel Moraña and Hermann Herlinghaus in the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures at Pittsburgh in March, 2002. Why am I saying this? Because I sense a certain retreat from the very label of postmodernism and now, it seems, we are back into modernity with or without its limits and boundaries.... So, what do we do with that postmodernism debate? Still keep it alive? I sense a contraction but I may be wrong about it.

JB: As I said at the start, I like postmodernism. The “limits of modernity” people, it seems to me, are articulating something a bit different, which in Latin America is like this: They are saying “our modernity consists in being postmodern.” This is Brunner’s position. And I think Herlinghaus has essentially Brunner’s position; we need to complete our modernity in Latin America but since we are the kind of societies we are modernity looks like what you call postmodernity. This is not a Habermasian modernity but it is still modernity, the borders and edges of modernity, if you will. Some of the Subaltern Studies people, Dipesh Chakrabarty for example, think that way too. They are concerned with residual formations within modernity. Chakrabarty has a long essay in *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton UP, 2000) called “Adda” in which the notion of “adda” is something like a literary “tertulia.” I begin to lose connection with Chakrabarty at that point, because, as I was saying, in Latin American Subaltern Studies we had worked ourselves to a position that was radically critical about literature whereas here Chakrabarty has a kind of “Arielista” position, recycling the “tertulia” as a non-capitalist form of modernity. You know from your own work that there is a powerful discourse in Latin America about the Baroque

as an alternative to Protestant capitalist modernity. I am thinking of the Chilean critic Pedro Morandé. There are elements of this too in Lezama Lima, who if he were willing to visit us from the land of the dead, would articulate his position as something like: “we are modern, but we are modern in a different way from you Northern capitalist Protestant Europeans, we have our own Hispano-American form of modernity, which is actually a modernity more pregnant with the future than yours.” And I think this idea was already latent in the historical Baroque in ways we talked about. I do take seriously the idea of the Baroque as a non-capitalist, “Latin” form of modernity, over-determined by the rise of capitalism obviously, but a form of modernity nevertheless, an “obsolete modernity” if you will. Postmodernity, on the other hand, indicates to me something slightly different. When I said I identified viscerally with postmodernist art and the postmodernist posture, I thought I was identifying with something that represented a break with something, right? There was an element of break in it. Now that break could just be a misunderstanding or a perversion of modernism rather than a genuine *coupure* in the structuralist sense. Nevertheless I experienced the perversion and the break, which instituted a different sense of historical time, pleasure, hermeneutics, subjects, pedagogy, politics. The hypothesis of modernity is that development and equality go together. The question is whether we can have an egalitarian society. There is a funny paradox in Marxism in that regard: early or primitive forms of humanity are egalitarian, or at least some of them are, and this is the idea of primitive communism; but then how is it that we have to wait until the end of history to get back to the possibility of an egalitarian society again? Well, because the forces of production have to develop and new sensibilities have to be created, and so on and so forth. So somehow, capitalism is necessary to create the possibilities for equality. The postmodernist disposition in me would say, “well, why do we have to wait?” We are always postponing because we think we are trapped in some kind of march of history. And we are all marching and everything and everyone has a pre-assigned role.

FG: Like a train in the railroad tracks.

JB: Yes, postmodernism allowed me to get off the train, or the tracks. Postmodernism comes with the waning of the Cold War where both sides were essentially committed to a telos of modernity. What they were fighting about was who was better able to produce modernity, but they did not fight about modernity itself. About that, they were in complete agreement.

Modernity meant secular, scientific, technocratic, bureaucratized societies, acculturation of people in traditional or “backward” positions, industrialization, the destruction of peasant agriculture, *and so weiter*. The only question was whether free market or state-directed economies would do a better or faster job in producing modernity.

About Divorces Already In the Past and the Anticipation of the Next Marriage (But Not Quite Yet).

FG: Where do you see yourself going? I have so far seen you going to Cultural Studies and Subaltern Studies, and showing some disappointment later. What follows from there? You have called yourself non-systematic, and perhaps you would not hesitate to call yourself a polemicist, and I do not necessarily see this as a bad thing. You are also talking about the impasse in the humanities, perhaps the last twenty-years are not tremendously energetic moments. So, what follows the sniper strategy?

JB: I was telling you before the story about my friend who always had a woman lined up before he divorced the woman he was with, because his anxiety was being alone. He always had a next wife prepared and, in some cases, he had already been living with his wife-to-be before he divorced the wife he was with at the time. And this has been somewhat true of my work up to now. Before I could always see the germ of the next project, even if the next project was moving in a very different direction. I mean, how could I move from Góngora to Sandinismo? That’s a big jump, right? But there was something in the Góngora stuff that somehow had the seed of Sandinismo and testimonio in it, even though there was a divorce, a divorce from Hispanism in that case. But I don’t feel this to be the case now. I don’t have the seed of anything particularly new in me now.

FG: Do you think that is a good, productive feeling? I mean, are you looking at the abyss while saying to yourself, “yeah, I am going to take a good jump!, who cares?”

JB: No, I don’t think it’s good.

FG: You don’t see it as an intellectually productive moment?

JB: It might be.

FG: But not right now?

JB: No, I don’t feel it to be. Maybe it is still mourning or melancholy about the collapse of the Subaltern Studies project, although I understand that it had reached a limit. I am not nostalgic about it. I am sad about it, but I don’t want to go back to it. I think we hit a wall there. On the other hand, it was a tremendous project. Intellectually Subaltern Studies was the most exciting and powerful experience that I have ever had in the academy. Amazing.

FG: Now, everybody is doing it...

JB: Or at least thinking about it. So, it is a kind of like “wow, we were part of creating that!” And that is exciting. But at the same time, like with Cultural Studies in the nineties, I was moving on to other things when other folks were just moving in. I found then I had to be careful with what I said because I did not want to discourage people: I thought there was a radical impulse in Cultural Studies and that it was good to move towards it. But at the same time I was moving beyond it. I guess I would say the same thing about subaltern studies now.