

## CIVIC HUMANITIES AFTER THE DEMISE OF THE HUMANITIES: A CONVERSATION WITH DORIS SOMMER

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## NEW YORK CITY BEGINNINGS

FERNANDO GOMEZ HERRERO: What are some of the salient features of your personal life that you would like to share? (native New Yorker, you speak of “[your] refusenik adolescence, Yiddish speaker at home and Puerto Rican partners at play (*Bilingual Aesthetics*, 15), also of “my double consciousness of would-be American and European has been.”

DORIS SOMMER: I think I shared it and you perceived it very well. I would like to say as a footnote that growing up in New York meant that I grew up as a cosmopolitan. There is no typical New Yorker. There never was. There are many cosmopolitan cities today but even in my childhood it was impossible to think of one type that was a New Yorker. We would have competitions about identifying languages on the street. We could not possibly understand them all, but we were used to difference. We enjoyed the challenge, its taste for difference that I think is civic in its nature and I am dedicated to promote it.

FGH: Translating New York to the rest of the U.S. is not automatic or a given, would you agree with that?

DS: Of course I would. In fact one of the jokes that we told as kids was a riddle, “what is the best thing about New York? It is so close to the United States!” Now, people say that joke in Miami, Los Angeles, but at that time it was very much New York.

FGH: Are you still into Woody Allen? Is *Zelig* still your favourite film?

DS: I have seen more films since then but *Zelig* is the film that captures this experience of New York, always trying to fit in to a community that was not yours, and you were never sure who your community was, and that kind of flexibility, of feeling like an impostor, but not feeling that that was a liability, a way of being.

FGH: Do you still feel that way, Doris, because everyone looking at you will say, “well, you are establishment now”?

DS: I do feel like an impostor and that’s fun. I feel like I am inserting myself in a situation where I am not anticipated. I feel that way often and I enjoy that feeling. It’s edgy. It’s like being an artist, you wonder what you are doing here and what you are going to do with the situation.

## PUBLIC-SCHOOL PRODUCT AND INSPIRATION

FGH: Your professional trajectory starting from the Ph.D. Rutgers 1977. There is a previous connection with Jerusalem and Hispanic and English literature in the 1970s... What’s that about?

DS: I am a public-school product. I enjoy saying that. There aren’t many colleagues at Harvard who graduated from state universities, so Rutgers is a badge of honour for me and I am dedicated to public-school education. I don’t know if so much of my personal trajectory is that interesting, Fernando.

FGH: The follow-up question is how does the personal intersect with the professional if at all?

DS: I have already said something about my cosmopolitan New York background being a model for civics. So, I think it has everything to do with my professional background and the fact that I did not understand enough about higher education in the United States to know that graduate school was something one would apply to for grants. So I decided I would go to graduate school in a public university where it did

not cost a lot of money, but now I am very grateful that I went to a public university because I have great confidence in public education. I think we have to recover that productive space. State universities in the United States are no longer free. They are no longer supported by public funds, but by donations and private funds and higher and higher tuitions. So, one of the challenges we have is really to democratize education again. There is even something close to a political movement to abolish the student debt that most young people have in this country. Young people put themselves into personal mortgages before they graduate. Just imagine, in a medium-priced university, a college-education costs 200,000 dollars.

#### **GOOD THINGS HAPPENING AT HARVARD**

FGH: You have been at Harvard since 1991, 20 years, what good things have happened in your environment since Octavio Paz's work on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in the late 1980s?

DS: The Department of African and African-American Studies has grown substantially. Henry Louis Gates came into Harvard the same year I did. He made a real difference. I am proud to be in that department as well because my area, as you know, starts with Caribbean Spanish literature. I am an African-Americanist. That is a healthy development. I am not sure if I know about all of the developments in the University to tell you more. There is a great future in the concept of "one Harvard," that Drew [Gilpin] Faust, our former President, coined, because the professional schools and the faculty of Arts and Sciences, can be and should be more integrated. In fact, that is the line that I am trying to develop. This past semester for example I have taught a course in the School of Engineering with a very brilliant physicist and engineer. His name is Fawwaz Habbal. We taught a course on "aesthetics and smart design," subtitled, "Janus faces the future." Arts and Science, looking in different directions perhaps, but joining. His thing, and I think it is very important, is that engineers can build anything they put their minds to now. The question is, "what to make?" And that reflection, through imagination, speculation, social environment, ethics, is a responsibility for us humanists.

FGH: Is it fair to say that you put together humanist, humanitarian and humanities together, which in my experience those notions get jumbled up in the U.S., [and] people [tend to] mistake one for the other? You want to maintain those three [units in something like] an overlap, no?

DS: There is an overlap. You are right to say that the words are different and they allow us to operate in different verbal and practical regimes, but there is certainly an overlap. Look, this is part of my academic work, the humanities begin in the Renaissance when scholars leave the cloister to do practical things. And this is right after the bubonic plague. The doctors were already out of the cloisters because many of the doctors were Jews in Europe. People came out of the cloisters to be political leaders, architects, lawyers, doctors and businessmen, so the humanitarian approach of improving peoples' lives and stress [was already there.] The humanist is now a term for scholars who defend their freedom to ask academic questions, and not expand beyond the academy, this is really a misuse of the word "humanist" for me.

FGH: You already gave me the title of the interview, "Doris Sommer, Renaissance woman and proud [of it]."

DS: (Laughter). Thank you. It is a very generous title because Renaissance means that one can do more than one thing. And I can't really. But I do like to think of the humanities as people who have dedicated themselves to more than one thing, perhaps one more thing per person. One humanist may turn out to be an architect and another

a politician and another a businessman. But the humanities as such, when we talk about human-centred scholarship in the Renaissance, was about engagement in practical activity. That's what we need to regain.

FGH: Is it fair to say that you have moved, perhaps a long time ago, ten years or longer that that, from narrow-textualism to something else? You continue reading books. I can see books in the bookshelves behind you in this Zoom session, but it is as though this was no longer enough. It is not enough to read a book well, do different interpretations of the text, to go back and forth with it and at it... I do not know what to call it...

DS: Worth reading. You are right. It is not enough. It is necessary but it is not enough. And I say it is necessary because without submitting words to interpretation we don't generate conversations and debates, we don't speculate, we don't use our imagination, so I believe still sincerely and passionately in literary criticism but I believe in it for all the reasons that I have said. That it is fun and engaging enough to pursue and in the pursuit we make contact with one another and exercise our imagination.

#### AVATARS OF CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

FGH: Is *Foundational Fictions* the breakthrough of Doris Sommer in 1991?

DS: I wrote a book before then called *One Master for Another* about Dominican national novels and no one paid any attention to it. I wrote it in the late 1980s. Very little had been written about Dominican literature outside the Dominican Republic, even literary criticism inside the Dominican Republic was not all that active and since I was a Caribbeanist, and most of the criticism on Caribbean literature was about Cuba, a little bit about Puerto Rico, nothing on the Dominican Republic, I decided I could make a contribution and fill in a blind spot but since no one was interested in the Dominican literature, nobody paid any attention. So, that's when I wrote *Foundational Fictions*. No one is going to ignore this theme about novels creating nations if I write about Argentina, Mexico and countries that have some visibility in the academy. So, my dedication to the theme of narrative-making nations is long-standing, even longer than 1991.

FGH: The choice of the Dominican Republic must be New York City proximity, let us call it "minor nation" without meaning any disrespect, visible as a community in New York City, but less so in the greater expanse of the U.S. Is that why you went there in the first place, because it was somewhat close to you?

DS: As I said, it was the missing piece in the Spanish Caribbean. Everyone knows Cuba. Who does not know Cuban literature? If you read Spanish, you know Cuban literature. If you read some criticism, you read Carpentier's novels and his essays. You know Nancy Morejón, [Nicolás] Guillén. You know people. Puerto Rico was much more part of New York than even Cuba or the Dominican Republic. So people knew people who were involved in Puerto Rican studies, who knew about Puerto Rican literature, which was a field by then. No one was writing about Dominican literature. So, what are the interesting overlaps, the differences, the experience, the notion of self, what race means in the Dominican Republic... These are fascinating questions that complete the picture of the area in its differences and similarities. That's why I wrote about the Dominican Republic. It was a blind spot.

FGH: Hispanic cultures in the U.S. in 2021, what about them?

DS: It is a very general question, Fernando (laughter).

FGH: (Laughter). Imagine that you go to some of your colleagues at Harvard and other environments and they see you teaching in a department called "Romance Languages and Literatures," and around that they see labels such as "African and African-American Studies." In trying to make sense of those labels, how do we do it?

DS: Actually, thank you very much for this question because I can say a recent course I taught just last semester was about Afro-American literature in general. So, I called it "Libertades literarias: Afro-Latinoamérica escribe" because the idea that studies of Afro-descendants in Latin America has been much more social-scientific than literary inspired and required me to offer another contribution a blind spot because very often the Afro-descendant subject is understood as a victim of history or a subject of struggle, and some-times as a great artist, mostly visual art. But I wanted to underline the liberating capacity of good writing, writing is always contestatory. because paradigms are always the object of artists, [the idea of] of the breaking of paradigms come to me, so the idea of liberty being generated as a capability or a possibility through good writing, that is the spirit of this course. And it is a series of public interviews with great writers as well as conversations internally with students. And now I will be happy to send you the link to that series.

FGH: Your department runs a "Hispanic cultures" track in the Mahindra Center for the Humanities. So, I am wondering if this is the inevitable language to use in contemporary U.S.A. because it is an official nomenclature, it may be a misnomer, it may already be outdated. I am wondering how you feel about the generic label that one has to use institutionally.

DS: "Hispanic" sounds more like the flavor of the West Coast and "Latino" sounds more like the flavor of the East Coast. But, you see, it is an arbitrary name. They are both linked to a language. The Latino camp disengages itself from Spanish because it means Latin. So, there are both misnomers in a way because they take many different peoples into one category and Spain had a long-lasting campaign to celebrate the Hispanic, which was a way of reconquering half the world through the language that has just lost politically. So, some people do not like the word "Hispanic." Other people do not like the word "Latino." But they do the same damage. I just heard from an Argentinian friend that when he called the language "castellano," because that is what he learned in Argentina. His Guatemalan friends, they were offended by "castellano," and they wanted to call it "español." You know, pick your oppressor. It is the same oppressor, it has different labels.

### **ONE, TWO, THREE: THE CONCERN WITH THE HUMANITIES**

FGH: What are the main themes, issues, problems, etc. that still motivate you, provoke your thinking, curiosity or imagination? If you were to say one, two, three.

DS: One, two, three: humanities, humanities, humanities. Those are my three themes. And I tell you how they go today. We are in a terrible crisis in the United States and many other countries. Some European countries are not yet in this crisis of decimating the field, taking 90% of the support for the people in the humanities. The humanities used to be the center piece of modern universities. Modern universities started in 1810 with the Humboldt brothers in Berlin and language and literature were the center of universities because modern enlightened citizen leaders needed to know their own culture and other people's culture. They needed to read broadly so language and literature were the center pieces. Science and math were handmaids. Today whole

countries are cutting down the humanities from higher education. You have seen that. In the United States, humanist professors with tenure are losing their jobs.

In Harvard University there are departments in the humanities that have no admission of doctoral students, cut down from ten to zero, from fifteen to two and it will not go back. People do not know what the humanities are good for. And if you ask humanists, they just get offended. Try it.

FGH: Do they get offended by the question?

DS: Have you tried to ask a humanist?

FGH: (Laughter) If I should tell you, they simply do not [respond to emails].

DS: Because anyone who asks that question is a philistine and [the attitude is one that] "you don't need to talk to me." So, there are no answers and the sceptics continue to think that there is no reason to have the humanities. So, I am inviting people, I am inviting you and whoever read us, to think of good answers. And I will try one out here. The humanities develop a taste for doubt. There is no other field that enjoys doubt. We use doubt to make research and find an answer in any other field. That's logical. But tell me if you want an answer in the humanities. If you read something, you have an interpretation, do you want just stop there or hear somebody else's interpretation?

FGH: It is never one singular answer about anything...

DS: So, if you have that taste for more than one singular answer, you have a chance to be a democratic citizen. You have a position and you are interested in somebody else's position. And maybe you'll talk to them. And maybe there will be a third or a tenth position. But there will be a conversation. And there will be deliberation, exploration and social contact because the talk is interesting and it is pleasant even when it is hard. Tell me another field that does that role. It is preparatory for citizenship and democracy. So, losing our taste for the humanities, losing investments in the humanities, is part of our crisis in democracy.

#### **MINORITY, PARTICULARISM OR THE WEDGE INTO THE BIG PICTURE**

FGH: You have worked on minority writing, bilingualism, rhetoric of particularism or regionalism...

DS: No, particularism, no regionalism.

FGH: O.k. I suppose the insertion of the Caribbean, whether we like it or not, in Area Studies. You don't like that?

DS: Maybe, but the ignition there is probably less the region than the cultural, racial and linguistic difference.

FGH: Is it fair to say that you do not like big themes or big mountains and that you would go for something smaller? So, no big theories, no big universals, big multitudes... You like more, as you put it in one of your books, close contact, complicity among "small people," and we can add "non-white people..."

DS: Yes. I think that's fair. That's when the particularism comes. The particularism is a wedge into the big picture. You cannot see the big picture if you do not have a perspective. That's why a minority view is always more interesting than a majority view. A woman's writing is very often more interesting than a man's writing because she is irritated in new ways.

But I do deal with big themes, for example, the construction of nationalism [and] the nature of multilingualism. But the angle is always particular, that's why I still respect close reading. I haven't abandoned literary studies. If I were in another field, I might enter a question through a theme. I don't enter questions through themes. I enter them through a kind of disjointed grammar (chuckle), [or through] a metaphor that does not seem to fit, [or] through some literary liberty. It is the patience for close reading that will allow us to talk to one another. If I come in with a theme, I already set an agenda and I am not asking a question, but if I come in with a close reading and I say, "why is this grammar tense here when I would have expected another one?"

FGH: In relation to what you just said, and I think I have read it somewhere in your writings, is it fair to say, not in any trivial fashion, that your claim to a close reading would defend a neo-formalist approach?

DS: Yes. Formalism is good.

#### **DEFENDING FORMALISM NEAR SHKLOVSKY**

FGH: Why?

DS: Because it makes you attend to the operations of language. My favorite is still Viktor Shklovsky, Russian formalist. He wrote many things, but his little essay on "Art as Technique" or "Art as Artifice," in Spanish that is how it gets translated, it is a brilliant little essay and basically says that art is not about themes. If art were about themes, everything would be boring because you only have ten themes maximum, maybe six. You don't love Shakespeare because he deals in universal themes. The fact that is universal means that we all deal with them (chuckle). So, why is my conversation about love not the same as Shakespeare's? Because he can surprise with metaphors, a turn of phrase, some surprising reference to a classic text. It is in the technique, the formal difference, that we have art. And because of that surprising formal effect, that I notice it, because otherwise I think I know it. Anything that I think I know is boring.

#### **THE WORK OF ART IN THE POLITICAL SCENE: KANTIAN INSPIRATION**

FGH: You write that "Aesthetics is a significant political player precisely because it side-steps the politics of vested interests. It accomplishes free thinking, through judgments that override predetermined conclusions about values and concepts, personal gain, party lines, or moral argument." (*Work of Art*, p. 88): please explain. Art as some kind of suspension of my narrow interests...

DS: We are in agreement.

FGH: But how so?

DS: I was channeling Kant in my own language. Kant says, and there are two moments, one is getting the effect and the impact of art, which is just a surprise, I am quoting Shklovsky here, "I did not expect that, oh, I noticed it for the first time as if I had never seen or felt [such a thing] because art twisted something, put a different light on," so this is the first moment, the impact, and the other moment, the moment that follows, is when I think about that effect and I want to see if it worked, if that sentence was really beautiful, because I am in doubt, as I say, I enjoy doubt, as a humanist. I ask you what you think, we have a conversation, it's that moment of doubt, conversation and reflection that is the aesthetic moment.

For Kant, aesthetics is not the first impact, it is the reflective moment. And there we do not have any anchors of pre-existing interests. We are

talking about something that won't make us rich or famous, moral or smart. We are talking about an effect of art or beauty. And what is the political importance of that conversation? It has nothing to do with anything important. The important effect of that conversation is that you and I look at each other, we are interested in each other's opinion, we recognize each other as sentient human beings, and when we get into a real argument, about politics, about budgets, or whatever, we won't want to kill each other. I recognize you, you recognize me. We are going to have a real argument and we are not going to eliminate one another. So, aesthetics is important, the humanities in general is important, to prepare the social fabric for real debate.

FGH: Why art or aesthetics and not something else, say religion?

DS: Kant was less interested in art. He did write a little bit on it and I appreciate very much his reflections on art. But mostly he wrote about beauty in nature. So, he was less interested in art than in nature. But he was interested in beauty. Now, why not religion? As Kant was saying, as I was repeating him, these conversations have no anchors. I do not know where I want to fall. I do not know whether I want to agree with my opinion, yours, I am free. That does not happen with religion. If I am a believer, I know where I want to fall. If I have a doubt, I want to resolve the doubt in a predictable way. I am interested. I have investments. Investment is a good word for religion. Investiture: you are brought in and you are glued there. You are not going to shake yourself from beliefs. When we talk about beauty, what's at stake? That's why talking about beauty is the exercise for thinking freely. You cannot think about anything else freely. If you try to think about religion, you have an investment. You try to think about economics, intellectual advance, you [also] have an investment. Only about beauty, you can be really free because it does not make any difference. But it exercises your mind to identify that space where you are really available to listen and to speculate. It is very beautiful.

FGH: What would you say if I mentioned that Doris Sommer has worked on particular-ism and cultural differences and here she has been in this interview, and in other lectures in which I have seen you, going the Kantian-Schillerian-Habermasian road? Isn't this a bit of an incongruity or contradiction and perhaps you will say, "look, I am fine with that."

DS: I think it is a very good point. I think you are a good close-reader. Here is where I come in. I think that Shklovsky in the way he understands formalism is a bridge. He is a Kantian in the way many of us are. You need to be surprised to see the obvious. This is the point in the short essay I have mentioned ("Art as Technique"). If you know what is happening on the street, that a war is going on, that men are privileged over women, whites over blacks, you get used to it and you don't notice it. How can you continue to notice it if you see the war on the tv screen every night, you can't be as pained the tenth night as you were the first? So, what is it that wakes you up to the pain again? Maybe an interview with a survivor. Maybe the picture of a burnout building. Some detail or some quote that you did not expect. It gives color to the scene. So, you need the difference to see the big picture. You need the wedge to see the pie. That's why particularism is the key. It is not tribalism. It is not communitarianism. It is irritation. Niklas Luhmann wrote about systems theory. He has a book about art and systems. And he says very clearly that art is the irritant that allows thinking. So, particularism is a necessary irritant. You don't want to get rid of it. I once spoke at a big conference to a public of Latin Americans and North-American Latinos, as I was writing a book on bilingualism, and said "o.k. every-body knows that it is difficult to be Latino, bilingual, who wants to wake up normal to-morrow? Do you want to wake up normal, monolingual, blonde and blue-eyed?" Most people thought it was boring.

FGH (Laughter): That's nice. What did they say?

DS: Everyone laughed the way you did. Isn't it wonderful? Everyone was beating their breast and crying and complaining, "we were oppressed and we need to be liberated..." o.k. Who wants to wake up normal? Ask a group of women, do you want to wake up being man? Few will say yes. But most of them will be ironic and will say "psst" and pull a face. They [men] are too simple. When you are on the outside, you have to be layered. You know who has a great line on this, is Sander Gilman, he has a book on Jewish Self-Hatred, which I quote I think in *Foundational Fictions*, "I am writing about Jewish self-hatred, I could have written about African-American self-hatred, or female self-hatred, I happen to be Jewish so I am writing about Jewish self-hatred, but the minority subject occupies simultaneously and this is structural at least two positions, otherwise he/she will not be a minority subject." If you are a minority, it means that you are living inside a majority culture, otherwise you will just be a small culture. If you are living inside a majority culture, you have also imbibed and absorbed the majority culture. So, if you are a woman, you are sexist. If you are Black, you are also racist. If you are Jewish, you are also anti-semitic. There is no other way. But, the Jewish part of you resents the anti-Semites, the Black part of you, the racists, the female part of you, the sexists. So, you are always against yourself and that is complicated. But do you want to wake up "cured"?

#### SEDUCED BY SCHILLER AND AGAINST SIMPLE ACADEMIC POLITICS

FGH: Some will say yes, but I see your point. It is very well taken. You have been seduced by Schiller. You fell for him. It is not immediately obvious coming from a cultural-differentialist Latin-American-Caribbeanist to go to Enlightenment-transcendentalist-universalist, crassly speaking, dead White European males from Germany. I suppose what you like about Schiller is that freedom you talked about as some kind of suspension or that formal or formalist appreciation of an irritant detail that may open up something else...

DS: O.K. Good. There you are. If we are going to be serious, we are not going to discard the cultures that we have inherited. We are the product of the cultures that we have inherited. Like when people want to decolonize themselves in Spanish, English or French, it is a joke. We are part of those cultures. Now, how are we going to use those cultures against themselves? Kant was using his culture against the assumptions of reason. He was finding a tension in the moment and pulling in a new direction. So, what am I going to do? Get rid of Kant because he was white and male? That's irresponsible. That kind of politics is too simple and unproductive.

FGH: I think that's an excellent point. So, it is not a matter of getting rid of, or even distancing oneself from, but it is rather, if such [thinking] appeals to you, you try to do something with it.

DS: I am not trying to do anything different from Schiller. Look at the people I have mentioned, they have all identified a productive tension in the moment and in the culture they inhabit. They are not cheerleaders for what exists. And if we don't take their lead, we lose some of that productive tension. Kant was trying to push away from compact thinking, thinking in religious and rational-economic terms, so he brought us to aesthetics. He was not interested in aesthetics but that's where he found freedom. Schiller found a tension between reason and passion. He said, "you know what? you have another "pulsión" [in Spanish in the original, pull]. Everybody is creative. Go there." Shklovsky is saying "you know a lot of things, but it is all grey, find the break." So, all of these guys are excellent leads and teachers in finding productive tensions. When people discard old, white men, they are assuming their culture is compact. It is never compact.

**PROUD FEMINISM, THE WORK OF ART IN THE WORLD AND RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ**

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FGH: I am sure you will say you are a proud feminist, you declare so in the *Work of Art in the World*, I think, on a dance floor in a salsa situation. Is it true to say that in such book you are not really having dialogues with women? In fact, you are the only woman in there. Would that be a problem?

DS: You know, I think it is a very good point, Fernando. But the book that I did before that, *Proceed with Caution*, in literary criticism, I showed women leading me. This book is about to read against the grain. And Rigoberta Menchú is my mentor. She shows me how teasing the reader, telling the reader that she keeps secrets, is a way to show that people are not transparent and they control what information they want to give and not to give. Tony Morrison in *Beloved* teaches the same lesson by offering and withholding. They interrupt the relationship of ethnographer and informant and so I think they fuel in many ways the work of art in the new world, because you have to make decisions about what and when to intervene. But I think in general you are right that I am not engaging women there.

FGH: Isn't there, I say this tactfully and respectfully, also in the final essay that you sent me a bit of an anxiety of citation in your writing? You seem to be leaning a little bit too much on those Enlightenment figures.

DS: I want to revive them. I want to make them useful again. I don't want to justify myself with them. I want to make them tools. To talk about women, where I start in that essay on "Democracy and the Humanities," is in the salons. If it were not for women who were clever enough to hear promising and dangerous moments in a conversation, who were charming enough to invite heterogeneous groups of people to their salons, all of the clever ideas in the Enlightenment would not have made their product that they made. So, there is something about the intimate and the diminished space that women occupied in the Eighteenth Century that clever women knew how to take advantage of. I don't feel it is an anxiety of justification but a refreshing of a tool kit.

FGH: You are moving away from textuality, as was mentioned before, to "a range of cultures." Your quote: "those who have rejected the constraints of text-based interpretation to venture into the multifarious practices that make up culture, the range of cultures" (*Work of Art*, 89). Is "culture" in the plural form the unavoidable language (the cultural differences, the minority cultures). [This is] where we have been at least for the last two decades certainly in the Anglo world in the West. It is the "thing" to invoke, and not civilisations, religions. The humanist has to talk about "cultures" (laughter).

DS: I think it is unavoidable. What do you think?

**ABOUT RAYMOND WILLIAMS' TWO DIFFERENT NOTIONS OF CULTURE**

FGH: Why that inevitability in the linguistic repertoire? There we are all circling around trying to bring dynamism to "that thing" in a moment that is truly dramatic as you mentioned.

DS: Here I want to refresh another dead white man, Raymond Williams, who made a very important distinction that can serve us today. He made the distinction between two different and in fact opposing definitions of culture. Very clever. He said, after he came back from World War II, he spent four years in the British Air Force, he was a hero, came back from the war and here he is, a professor of English at Oxford, not a minor user of the English language and said "I do not understand English. Either the language has changed so much or I have

been away for so long that I see there are words I just don't understand." And he started to generate a book that was published in the early 1970s called "Keywords." You may know this work. If you re-read the introduction, he will say a little anecdote about the word he least understood, was "culture." And so, he thought about it, he talked to different people, he read more, and he decided he did not understand the word because it means two different things. If you are a social scientist, including anthropologists, including sociologist, economist, historian, what does culture mean?, it means a set of practices and beliefs and things. That's your culture. Somebody did something because of their culture. That's the way you use it. Now, go to the other side of the definition. If you are a humanist, certainly if you are an artist, what is culture? Culture is an attack on all those paradigms. You are not an artist if you are not throwing some bomb on some practice, a belief or a thing. You are re-signifying, reorganising, you are saying "yeah, but it does not really work, or let me show you." So, look at these two very different definitions and in that tension we have an opportunity to work because artists and humanists can imagine different definitions, practices, relationships, but if they don't land in shared practices you have not made a difference. And social scientists can understand that they have a compact world, but if they know it isn't working they are looking for artists and humanists to say how do we refresh this thing? But we are not talking together yet. That is the project that I am dedicated to. We have not talked about the initiative called "Cultural Agents," but that's the framework that my objective works through. "Cultural Agents" is my platform.

#### **DEMOCRACY AND LANGUAGES AND STANDARD MONOLINGUALISM IN AMERICAN SOCIETY**

FGH: Bilingualism, is the U.S. buying?

DS: No. This country continues to think that it is normal to speak one language per person.

FGH: There you are in a department of "Romance Languages" fighting for that space. If you look at documents produced by the American Academy, at this level, the landscape is not heartening. It is true, and I have that personal experience with Puerto Rican communities in New York City, that the language at a close distance with code switching can be playful, alive, mocking, obscene, incongruous, and there is life there.

DS: Ironic with the monolinguals.

FGH: At a close personal contact with friends, relatives, yes. But when you look at the different generations, the institutions, mass-media... The musical domain will be different. It is not happening. I suppose one has to recognize that difficulty, not to give up, not to retreat, no matter what.

DS: This is part of my general concern about the demise of the humanities because if the humanities were more resilient and better funded and better respected more people would be learning more languages. As I said, the Humboldt brothers were very clear, that the first move of the modern citizen was to learn languages and we are not doing that now.

FGH: You do not appear to be inspired by cinema, music that much or painting. Without faulting you, what domains in arts and aesthetics inspire you the most?

DS: I want to ask you a question, Fernando. What art form is least likely to occupy young people today? In other words, where do we need to shore up their curiosity and skills?

FGH: I would say literature is pretty low. Theatre also.

DS: Anything that is language-based.

FGH: Yes.

DS: That is my answer to your question. It is not a matter of personal preference. This is an interesting question because your very question assumes that an academic pursues his or her personal interests. And my response to you is that I pursue a public interest. That's the segue into "Cultural Agents." I have a responsibility as a teacher of literature to teach literature and not to go off and teach things that people like anyway. I think that is a cheap trick. Cultural Studies has become a way to avoid language arts and we still de-pend on language arts for communication, persuasion, real research. Let's be responsible as humanists, not just entertain ourselves.

### **CULTURAL AGENTS, RENAISSANCE NOW**

FGH: Do you want to tell me more about the initiative called "Cultural Agents," which you have directed since 2002?

DS: I want to say that on June 24th we are launching an initiative that you will get.

FGH: What are you launching? A big project with a big donor? (chuckles).

DS: I wish for a big donor. It is a project called "Renaissance Now" (<http://renaissancenow-cai.org/>). You can tell by the title that it is very much we are talk-ing about: the humanities, being the spirit that we need to regain as humanists, of going into the world and getting our fingers dirty. "Renaissance Now" is launching with a conference called: "Culture is the game changer for policy makers." [Those] who register will see the provisional schedule. It has mayors, an engineer, a business school, a teacher, a lawyer, and artists talking to each other about a whole tool kit for policy that has been ignored, not through any evil intention, but because social scientists who become policy makers understand culture as a compact inheritance and not as a field for change. Culture [for these social scientists] has not been an important item in policy and we want to change that. So, I think the best way to understand "Cultural Agents" (<https://www.culturalagents.org/>) is now through this kind of conference. It is a platform for community, academics, leaders, policy makers, artists to collaborate.

FGH: What happens with the "Darker Sides of the Renaissance"? (laughter).

DS: Well, you know, here's why we started "Cultural Agents," Fernando. I am glad you asked me. Twenty years ago, I said to myself, and to several colleagues, "the university has become a factory for pessimism." Do you remember being in class and hear very smart people say, "The world is terrible and there is nothing to be done about it!" Yes or no?

FGH: Yes, of course. That's fine (laughter).

DS: And we all sounded so smart! What's smarter than the *hoi polloi* outside the University!

FGH: I don't know about that but I take your point.

DS: Come on! We have become a factory for pessimism. How responsible is that? If you are a pessimist, what do you have to do?

FGH: [Perhaps] continue reading? (more laughter).

DS: But nothing more because if you do anything more you will just make things worse. We are all reading Foucault, Adorno. If you do anything, you'll make things worse. So, just keep reading. That was the culture of the universities. Still is. Except now we have these liberation pockets that are more or less organised around ethnic studies that are communitarian-based but not philosophically based around democracy in general. It is something. But it is limited. So, that's when "Cultural Agents" begins, when we said, but the humanities began with an exit from the cloister, not [with] a lockdown. So, here we are exiting. We are making a bridge to people who get their hands dirty, make mistakes, who try to do something.

#### **CULTURAL AGENTS, REFORMISM, HABERMAS OVER ADORNO**

FGH: It is very American though not to despair in public, to be optimistic, to be enterprising, to be civic oriented, to be utilitarian, or to make claims of doing those things. You will agree with me that there is a certain degree of an artistic enjoyment and or production in giving voice to despair and anguish, "dark passions" or heavy feelings or emotions. Your is not a punk gesture of radical protest or threat of total transformation. I am not disre-garding what you saying now, but you know, it is not [earth shattering, [w]e are [possibly] dealing with gradual transformation.

DS: First of all, "Cultural Agents" is not radical, it is reformist because we are working with people who are already on the ground. We are not saying "disappear so that we can do things right." That would be Adorno. I am more Habermasian than Adornian. My beef with Habermas is that he does not know how to have any fun in the present...

FGH: (Laughter).

DS: But still he is a reformist. But you tell me, we have already said this, does the American University share that mission of optimism in the humanities and the social sciences?

FGH: I don't think it does.

DS: O.k. then. And my point is that optimism is an ethical choice and an ethical responsibility. It is not an emotional state. I have to be an optimist to do anything in the world, otherwise there is no point in it. Otherwise I am just feeling good about myself because I just did something [for myself alone].

FGH: What you mentioned to colleagues, was it because you already sensed a sense of despair 20 years ago, pessimism, a sense of end of a road and you took a different fork in the road, the civic or public humanities?

DS: In the humanities it is very clear that it was not my sense, it is anybody's sense and you and I have not been talking until now, and you know the humanities were the cesspool of pessimism. I say "Renaissance," and you are already "On the Dark Side of the Renaissance"!

That looks familiar. I am not making it up. We were bred on this. We feel smart because we can critique the Enlightenment. Adorno was our introduction to the Enlightenment. We come to the Enlightenment by dismissing it before we read it. That's Habermas's cri-tique. We are beyond that. But we have not taken it on.

## “NOTHING TO BE DONE, TIME TO BRING OUT THE CLOWNS”

FGH: Point very well taken. So, the social sciences, foreign affairs and international relations want to become [state] policy and the humanities in your ideal world appeal to move hearts and minds towards civic society and the public domain to do what, to improve society ideally or not necessarily?

DS: Yes. I am saying it is reformist. I do not want to get rid of the democratic experiment. I want to develop it. That is why I said I am Habermasian.

FGH: Social democrat.

DS: I am not embarrassed. So, you want optimism and civility, irreverence, when there is “nothing to be done, time to bring out the clowns,” and you quote [Antanas] Mockus. I was at Harvard when you were working with him, I got to see him, clearly an exceptional individual, but again, is it fair to say that the emotional tonality is not that of the [recent film of] *The Joker*. It is not grotesque, excessive, I do not want to call it revolutionary gesture per se, you engage with symbolic production but not in a way that you want to blow it up to smithereens. You want to repair. You want to stitch things up.

DS: Of course. But the word that is missing in your list is enjoyment. That’s when Habermas falls short. If you don’t enjoy talking to people, you won’t do it. And the clown entertain people while they are being critical of public comportment. And they were not there to tear down traffic lights or erase the cross walks. They were there to make you notice them. There’s the reformist, gentle appeal of that comedy. They were not tearing anything down.

## SAMURAI INSPIRATION IN TOKYO, JAPAN

FGH: You like the notion of “cultural acupuncture.” You invoke indirection, playfulness. You are hopping, like a happy chapulina, from one timespace to another not committed to any one timespace in particular. The very figure of the mime, there is something archaic gentleness about him. When were they active, nineteenth century, early twentieth century? You appeal to, even in your own delivery, to a kind of Cinema Paradise charm. You want the humanities to provoke that.

DS: Yes. So, I want to show you something. Are you ready for this? Tokyo Japan, Samurai roaming the streets of Tokyo fighting for a global issue: ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRuHr\\_O6RyQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRuHr_O6RyQ)); (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EX49eS6aA74>). Isn’t this the most charming thing?

FGH: Yes. It is nice. It is like mime, pastiche, taking into account samurai meanings and [street performance around the theme of “garbage”].

DS: And every culture figures out its own resources, resonances. These are performance artists. These are dancers in the traditional arts. They don’t dress as samurai. They are dancers who decide to [do so to get a better audience] for a public mission (chuckles).

## ARTISTIC SURPRISE IN THE SERVICE OF CIVICS

FGH: There are many references in the *Work of Art*, the book that has grabbed me the most. There are incoherent worlds and many, many references. You put Antanas Mockus, Augusto Boal, Pedro Reyes and “Sarita” the *Cartonera*, side by side Hitler, Spanish conquerors, Catholicism, anti-fascistic Red Army, (p. 29). You bring the big German thinkers and the theoretical French (Schiller, Kant, Lyotard). FDR’s Art

Programmes, Larry Kramer's "Act up" in the Aids crisis... It is a bit like the Marx Brothers' famous Cabin Scene in Duck Soup in the sense that you are all over the place, Doris.

DS: O.K., but if you are looking for a theme or a history, I am not where to look. I am offering you a form. You see the difference?

FGH: And the form will be that of a multitude?

DS: Artistic surprise in the service of civics. That's it. But I am not pushing a theme. I am not pushing garbage picking. I am not pushing traffic jams. I am not pushing anything in particular. I am pushing what art can do when nothing else works. That's why I quote Mockus. What would an artist do? And he had this problem, and maybe somebody else had that problem. And the whole purpose of the book is to say "think outside of the box," because inside the box we are all stuck. So, that is why I say I am a formalist. Victor Shklovsky is one of my heroes. And he is a disciple of Kant. Anyone who knows anything about aesthetics is a disciple of Kant.

FGH: You are not proselytizing, though, because it seems to me that your gesture is one of "do-it-yourself."

DS: I am proselytizing. I am saying "do-it-yourself."

FGH: So, the civic gesture is, "I am presenting suggestions, inspirations, multiple references, many localities..."

DS: Yes. Invent something.

FGH: Whatever tickles you, do it yourself.

DS: Have I invented the samurai? Have I said that is your solution? Did I invent the *Cartoneras*? People know what their research is and what their needs are, and when they think like artists, something good happens.

FGH: So, tell me more [about the facilitation] when you said to me that you do not see yourself as a performer, in relation to a critique of Stanley Fish, but as a facilitator, I suppose, of others' performances?

DS: Yes, that's right.

FGH: So, what does it mean to be a facilitator? You are conduit, vehicle, mixer of the cock-tail, someone who brings multiple references...?

DS: Yes. I am bringing a challenge to them. I am not bringing you a solution. I am saying, "this is a challenge. What have you got?" That's to be a facilitator. It is to pull something out of you. It is to be midwife.

#### **STUDENTS IMAGINE CRAZY, WONDERFUL THINGS**

FGH: Does that build up to something else? Is the collective achieving something? It appears to be very individualistic, very subjectivist, no?

DS: I think it is dynamic. If we lived in that first [type of] social-science culture where people were agile, where people could think about solutions with the resources that they had, where people could imagine collaborations, solutions, refreshed systems, we would be better off. So, I am a teacher and I teach you how to think creatively. That's what I do. I am telling you what you should be thinking in particular. I have students who imagine crazy, wonderful things. Just imagine the garbage-collecting idea, making wired sculptures of famous statues with one opening, and you could see the sculpture if you folded it with

garbage. Instead of people throwing garbage in the bin, make the bin look like Rodin's *Thinker* or the *Venus of Milo*. Students imagine these things. We had pop-up art galleries in abandoned buildings in Detroit. People know what their situation is, they know who they know, what they can put together and they create some civic dynamic that did not exist before. If I give you a broad range of these examples, that's why I like the Samurais, I would have never thought of that, you would say, "oh, that's clever, what can I think of?"

FGH: So, what do your students have to do to get a good grade in your class? Present a project?

DS: Yes. They learn these other examples. They learn some theory. They learn some aesthetics and some formalist developments of aesthetics and then I say, "o.k. come up with something!" And we have art-to-the-rescue fairs. The final project is presented to each other in a kind of hall in which we can meet each other and we have different stations and one by one people present their projects and everybody circles around that station and then we go to another station and people present to each other. And it's fun.

FGH: What do you do with the ones who fail? Do you make them repeat the course?

DS: No. They don't fail. They did not come up with something clever but they got the theory. They know how to appreciate somebody else's good idea. And if they become mayor of the a city they won't come up with a good idea, but they will recognize one.

FGH: What would you say to a rigorous, pessimistic colleague who says, "that's lax culture, Doris! That's not serious!"?

DS: I would say, and you can't quote me, "f-you"!

### **THE THIRD-WORLD DIFFERENCE THAT ALLOWS TO SEE THE BIG PICTURE**

FGH: (Laughter). O.K. a serious question, how does the Third-World (or the Global South, or the minority dimensions) move or circulate about the First-World localities (or Global North, and we can perhaps still use this Cold War language that you use (*Work of Art*, p. 37). Here you are, bringing Colombia to an American audience, to an MIT audience (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJANn193KDD>), talking about Rigoberta Menchú with whom you build solidarity. Do we need a "theory" of how that works? Perhaps you are going to tell me you do not need one to bring these examples, I do not need a coherent frame, I go whenever, wherever I please, I rescue whatever tickles me, I present it to the audience and "good luck to you"!

DS: If I understand the question, I would go back to an earlier response, and it is the irritation, the wedge, the difference, the particularity, that allows us to see the big picture. So, Rigoberta [Menchú] is interesting not because she is going to be absorbed or entertained by the audience, but because she says something they do not expect, it makes people reflect on her and our position, on the expectation that she should be an informant. My favorite moment was when she said to the audience, somebody said, "Can you please translate your first words to this conference?," and she said, "no." She greeted everybody at length in Maya-Quiche and her first response was "no." There are expressions there that we use and you won't use, and then, after she gave us that little slap in the face, then she told us what those comments were about. But the first gesture of saying "I am not your informant, I don't live in your world, you don't live in mine," that was the message. As I say, I am a formalist, that little break was magic, so I would have more salons, more interaction, more room for art, and much more reflection

about art because art is not going to die, what is going to die is the humanist reflection about art, the difficult conversations about the things that look simple.

**BEEF WITH DERRIDA AND CLOSER TO HABERMAS WHO KNOWS NO FUN**

FGH: About your article, "Doubt: On Sparring and Sociability," what's the beef with Derrida? Is it because he is melancholy? Is it because he is a bit too self-legitimising? Is that what you accuse him of?

DS: No. I invite you to read that again. I accuse him of imagining that he is being original, that he is not part of a long line of debaters. And that's when Habermas gets in too. [Habermas] says, "look, I am not annoyed with you because you are pessimistic and irresponsible like Nietzsche, I could go after Nietzsche, but you [Derrida] don't even mention all the other thinkers who are in this line, so the irresponsibility there is not just twisting language, which in any way he wants, it is in thinking that he is the center of the stage." When you asked me what my role is, what did I say?, I am a facilitator, I am a midwife, I want you to be creative, I want to admire you. That's why I am a teacher. I don't want to be the peacock. Derrida wants to be the peacock. That's why Habermas went after him.

FGH: So, more humility?

DS: A little more humility, please, yes. Don't you think that would be a good advise for everyone?

FGH: I suppose (laughter).

DS: I see those samurais, those twenty-year-old kids from Tokyo, and I say, "Oh, my God, they are spectacular!" I admire them. I don't say to them, "if I were you, I would do it this way" (chuckle).

FGH: The end of the said article, "Doubt: On Sparring and Sociability," what is not clear to me is when you lay out the tool kit options, suggestions or provocations, images or irritants, how do we walk that line all the way to the notion of democracy that you invoke but it is no longer clear what democracy stands for in this truly dramatic moment for the U.S.?

DS: I say it in that essay that has not been published yet, it may change by the time anyone sees it. At the beginning and at the end, what I am promoting and defending are the humanities as preparation for democratic process, not in place of democratic process. There has to be an enjoyment of human contact and conversation. There has to be sociability for us to even imagine democratic process. So, I cannot speak for political theorists. But where political theorists have a blind spot, and that is why I picked Habermas as my example, is that they don't take pleasure seriously as preparation for process and pleasure in difficulty, and interpretation, understanding, research, sparring, is what we do as humanists. We develop difficult pleasures and then we appreciate one another.

**CONVERSATIONS WITH A FEW GOOD MEN BUT HUIZINGA WOULD NOT DO**

FGH: You appear to be conveying that we engage in language games and history in a series of conversation pieces...

DS: I think history develops around a platform of conversation pieces. As I say, these [language games that I am talking about] are contact sports. You don't want to eliminate people from the other team.

But you want to tackle them and then have them get up so that you can tackle them all over again.

FGH: I was surprised to read, I think it is at the end of *Work of Art*, that you follow the Habermasian critique of De Man against Schiller and against Huizinga. Your logical conclusion, the way I see it, would be to affirm Huizinga's *homo ludens* or *mulier ludens*, but this ludic, playful element, and your invocation of pleasure, that can go in many, strange directions. If you do psychoanalytic theory, if I smash something, I may get tremendous pleasure. And you know better than me, because you live closer than me, in the Trumpian moment, there is pleasure in the "Big Lie," the destruction of conviviality, the oppositionality.

DS: Yes, but look, my couple of paragraphs on D.D. Winnicott should shortcut that danger because if you develop through engaging the world in play, not in destruction, you have symbolic destruction to a play, that's what artists call "symbolic violence," and I don't prefer [Johan] Huizinga over Gregory Bateson, who is a much better theorist of play, because Huizinga does not bring the play into any productive developmental direction. It is [for him] more like wasting time and he gives Schiller very short shrift. Everybody knows Schiller and he is impatient with Schiller. It is like Schiller is his competition. And [Huizinga] uses [Schiller] as a strawman, one-paragraph dismissal. So, Huizinga is a like a cheap shot for me. Schiller's importance is in dealing with the raw political situation. Bateson is important. He understands how evolution goes, if you don't change, you don't survive. But Winnicott is about the development of the human condition. If you don't feel like you are in control, you will destroy things, you will be resentful to the world, but somebody who knows how to play is in control without destroying things.

That's why you have to be an artist to be a normal, happy and civic human being. You know you are an artist every time you decide, "I am going to wear this or that shirt, should I use this or that adjective?" The human condition is creative. There is no way you are not creative. And if you are not, if you are stuck in one shirt and one adjective, you are crazy.

#### THE REDUNDANCY OF ART THERAPY

FGH: Without going all the way down to the contemplation of symbolic destruction, it seems to me that at the end there is always something therapeutic about your presentation of aesthetics.

DS: I think so. And that is why lately I have been saying that the term "art therapy" is redundant because when you are an artist, when you do something quotidian, like getting dressed or writing a sentence, when you are normally an artist, you know you are making decisions, and when you recognize that you are making decisions, you know that you are an agent, you are not stuck, you are not in a box, but you have to reflect on that, that everything simple that I do, shows that I am doing something, so, yes, I am that aesthetics is about not only therapy but is about formation.

FGH: Do you find that you need to have what we might call a "philosophical anthropology" to give ground to your assertions? [I am saying this] because you are talking about "the human condition," so anyone who may have read you from the beginning and seen your trajectory, might say, "how could you talk about culture difference and at the same time invoke the human condition, Doris?" Do you feel you need a coherent anthropology of "what it means to be human," [if we are to use this type of language]?

DS: I think I do need it because I am an academic and people are

skeptical and I need to defend my position. But, think of any parent in a traditional setting. I don't know if you know anybody who still lives in villages. How do they teach their children anything? Through modelling, play, imagination, getting together, their cousins, etc. So much of what I say is so obvious and we did not talk about "Pre-Text" which is the project that I do. Where does Pre-Text come from? From popular practices. Anybody who is normal and happy understands this anthropology, that people learn by playing, that everything can be interpreted, because you want to talk to people, that your cousins are different so listen to this one and that one, and get along. There is nothing complicated to what I am saying but because I live in the academy I have to give it academic names. And there are friendly names, aesthetics is talking about beautiful things that don't matter. Spieltrieb is about play when nothing else works. Mockus: think like an artist. What am I saying that is complicated?

#### **(ALMOST) LIKE CHILDREN LEARNING THINGS**

FGH: So, you do not want to put things on a pedestal. You want to bring them close to everyone. Do it yourself. Do not get too complicated with this or that text. Do something with it.

DS: And if somebody asks me a hostile question with academic language, I know how to answer because I live in the academy but if I am just talking to normal people it is unnecessary. And this is where we started the conversation by saying that I feel fortunate to be a product of public schools. If we don't think like this, Fernando, does democracy have a chance? If we don't think that normal people can be normally sophisticated because we are human beings, and we are all creative and reflexive, does democracy have a chance? We just have to practice these skills. We teach children that if nothing works, "come up with a good idea. Talk to each other." If we don't teach children like this, we don't have a chance. But it does not have to have fancy names. It just have to have a protocol. That's what "Pre-Text" is. Ask questions. Make things up. Reflect on them. We just have to practice these skills. We teach children that if nothing works, "come up with a good idea. Talk to each other." If we don't teach children like this, we don't have a chance. But it does not have to have fancy names. It just have to have a protocol. That's what "Pre-Text" is. Ask questions. Make things up. Reflect on them.

FGH: I promise I am taking you as seriously and as literally as possible. Those children will become grown-ups and as you can see in the U.S. right now it is an unbelievably hostile and violent society, so it seems to me that you are advocating therapeutic gardens of creativity...

DS: A corrective, not even therapeutic. Here's a link: our culture today wants quick answers. You are on social media and you have thumbs up or down. You have your mind made up. You have your preferences and that is how you make your friends. That's a big error. There is no room for conversation. That is why I am promoting salons again. So, the corrective to the quick answer is the humanities because you do not want answers.

FGH: Because society is particularly impatient with that. If you do not deliver, they are not going to wait for five minutes not knowing.

DS: That's exactly right.

#### **WILL THE MINORITIES SAVE US?**

FGH: Will the minorities save "us"?

DS: The minorities are a good reminder that the general system is not working, but to just assume that the answers already exist is again jumping to an easy position. I think the minorities are super-important because it is only from the outside that you can see the errors. Black Lives Matter is a very interesting phenomenon because it is non-hierarchical. It started by a

women collective. I think there are very interesting leads in minority politics right now. The anti-prison movement is very interesting. I don't want to say that the answers already exist just because it takes a shortcut but there are interesting and important leads.

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