

Out of Line



**Erasure and vulnerability
as sites of subversion**

By Marie-Louise Richards

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Threads

“To study to become an architect is, for the vast majority, an opportunity that is not only earned but inherited.”

As a Black person within the field of architecture, Marie-Louise Richards find herself experiencing a recurring sense of erasure, of disruption and disorientation; moments when she does not recognise herself in what is mirrored back. It prompted her to begin to trace the lines of her own body and the threads of narratives that have been omitted or erased. She asks: what does it mean to place the materialities of the body at the centre of the discourse in architecture? What knowledge can emerge if the erasure of some bodies, and the absence of certain voices, were put at the centre of how we think about and do architecture? In being out of line with the boundaries of the discipline, she has found new avenues for a possible reimagining of architectural practice and shows how past histories can project other possible futures.

“The politics of location.

Even to begin with my body I have to say that from the outset that body had more than one identity.”

Adrienne Rich¹

The emergence of university departments devoted to Women’s Studies and Black Studies in the United States was born out of student and faculty activism. It is from here that certain lines stem: perspectives that have been omitted from history. Whereas we may take these for granted today, it has been critical for me to remember how they were rooted in the social mass movements of the late 1960s, happening not only in the US but all across the world. As colonised countries fought for independence from imperial colonialism, native or minority groups of

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1 Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location.” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985*. New York: Norton, 1986.

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Reflections (2009).
Image: Marie-Louise Richards

class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality were fighting for civil rights, social justice, sexual liberation, and equal rights. During those extraordinary times, universities became battlegrounds for these fields of study.

In 1968, students of San Francisco State College went on strike for five months – the longest strike by students at an academic institution in the United States. Protesting the perpetual eurocentric lens on their education, their demands included the establishment of an autonomous department for Black Studies, more faculty members of colour, and more representation of students of colour on campus. The struggle was violent and many were arrested. In the end, however, their persistence in their beliefs led to the creation of the first department of Black Studies in the country, a precedent followed shortly after by Berkeley.² Two years after the protests at San Francisco State College, the first Women’s Studies programme in the United States was established at San Diego State College.³ Before the establishment of this programme, “departments” for Women’s Studies, or funding for those who wanted to teach women’s studies classes, did not exist – most were held by word of mouth and free of charge.

These struggles, and others, were founded on the need for academic fields that moved in new directions; a need for other imaginations and, therefore, other possible futures that draw upon methods across disciplines, blurring lines never before crossed by placing lived and embodied experience at the centre of study. This shift became especially important when examining the constructs of social and cultural identity, systems of privilege, domination and oppression, and the relationships of power. These new fields called for the centring of multiple viewpoints as a means to reconfigure knowledge systems

² Grigsby Gates, Karen and Meraj, Shereen Marisol Meraji, “The Student Strike That Changed Higher Ed Forever”, in *Code Switch*, NPR, March 21, 2019.

³ Roberta Salper, “San Diego State 1970: The Initial Year of the Nation’s First Women’s Studies Program.” *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (2011): 656-82. [jstor.org/stable/23069927](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23069927) (accessed June 20, 2020).

while, at the same time, challenging the boundaries of received conceptual frames of reference and perspectives. This made it possible for knowledge to develop in a plurality of directions. (I cannot imagine my own intellectual trajectory without tracing the paths paved by scholars such as Angela Davis, Audre Lorde or bell hooks, for instance.) These struggles sought to acknowledge that the systemic disparity of social location, between the ones who speak and those who are spoken for, has a powerful effect on the content of what is said and, by extension, its meaning. “The unspoken premise here”, as Linda Alcoff succinctly put it, “is simply that a speaker’s location is epistemically salient”.⁴

To not only conceive of knowledge in terms of who it is for and by *whom* it is created, but also from *where*, was a radical approach in knowledge production at the time. In many ways, it still is. Not only do we need to ask why, but we also need to ask what it means if the question of voice and lived, embodied experience is put at the core of how we think about the discipline, the practice and the history of architecture.

In an article in the Swedish architects’ union journal *Arkitekten* from October 2016, the results of a survey were published that focused on the social imbalance within architecture education.⁵ It showed that of all first-year students at the schools of architecture in Sweden, 87 percent were from families where the parents had an academic background of more than three years of studies. In other words, nine students out of every ten. By way of comparison, of all first-year students in Swedish universities, 38 percent had parents with academic credentials. This makes schools of architecture one of the most socio-economically homogenous educations that

4 Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991): pp. 5-32. jstor.org/stable/1354221 (accessed June 15, 2020).

“The systemic disparity between the ones who speak and those who are spoken for has a powerful effect on the content of what is said and, by extension, its meaning.”

5 Rebecka Gordan, “9 av 10 har högutbildade föräldrar” in *Arkitekten*, published by Sveriges Arkitekter (the union representing architects in Sweden), October 2016.

leads to a professional degree in the country, surpassing even medicine or law.

I would argue that these statistics suggest something quite simple to acknowledge, albeit challenging to fully comprehend. To study to become an architect is, for the vast majority, an opportunity that is not only earned but inherited. There are exceptions, of course, but even though architectural education is showing more diversity (broadening recruitment became a government requirement for all schools of higher learning in Sweden in 2000), very few of the students that do not come from the same middle-class background as their peers complete their studies and graduate. Even fewer stay and excel within the profession. The studies that have followed up on this crucial fact are scarce, so we are left only to speculate on the reasons.

What should we make of this? I would like to consider architecture as a culture, an approach that the architect and theorist Dana Cuff discusses in the chapter “The Making of an Architect” in her ethnography *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (1991).⁶ Focusing on the everyday lives of architects in the US – their situated actions, as well as what architects say and the meanings they construct – she demonstrates that this “culture of practice” does not only originate in knowledge acquired in and through education, but also in routine actions based on experience through the various stages of an architect’s education and career. By looking closely at what architects do, she offers insight into what appears normal or self-evident to architects. She reveals what it means to transform from a non-architect into an architect. Reflecting upon strategies of legitimation – on how practices are justified even though some of them produce and reproduce conditions that could be

6 “Cuff, Dana, “The Making of an Architect”, in *Architecture: The Story of Practice*, MIT Press, 1991.

questionable to the field of architecture itself – Cuff invites us to consider how becoming an architect is, beyond gaining expert knowledge, also a matter of values and beliefs. The ways in which architects legitimise their work and actions, and how this system of meaning is translated into the formation of networks that range internationally, is also related to language and other cultural codes that are passed down within education itself.

Seven years after graduating from architecture school, I returned to university as a student in an interdisciplinary course on architecture and art in Stockholm. I had been away from the traditional environment of architecture education for all those years, although I had been teaching since leaving school. My teaching engagements had focused predominantly on critical studies in architecture alongside interdisciplinary, experimental approaches and contexts.⁷ I was faced again with the judgment of material pinned to a wall: the pin-up crit. A well-known and widely published professor from an esteemed graduate school in the US was invited to critique us on the work we had produced. I had not been in the presence of the kind of authority our guest embodied since the days of my own architectural training. I did not think anything of it at first; this was a familiar situation for me. After all, the education of architects is structured around this mode of learning: the work being produced in the studio and then being judged, often quite harshly, by practitioners and professors from around the world.

In this crit, I became aware of something. I began to access language and movements that I had forgotten I knew how to do; attitudes that I had forgotten how to express. It was an out-of-body experience. The way I sat in my chair, the way I would raise my body and move over to

7 I was in the first graduating class of the first Critical Design Studio in Sweden, initiated by the feminist research group FATALE at KTH School of Architecture: "Maktstruktur på schemat", by Nina Gunne in *Arkitekten*, published by Sveriges Arkitekter, February 2011.

the material pinned to the wall, study it, and sit back down in my seat. The words I spoke, and the way that I spoke them. The ways in which the space of the pin-up and the situation created by the architectural critique (re) activated a dormant script in me, a script that I began to unconsciously access and then proceed to embody. I was following some form of direction that I had learned previously – and I realised that if I was to make myself heard and be taken seriously, I had to perform. A more important realisation was in knowing exactly *how* to perform; how to be granted validation.

In approaching the practices of knowledge production and legitimation in architecture from a cultural perspective, and by recalling my own coming of awareness through this out-of-body experience, I have come to recognise that what architecture education really teaches you is this performance. I confronted it by staying close to my own body. The language, the codes of conduct, and ways of expressing a set of values were the lessons that I would have to learn. This was the skill I had to master in order to pass through the education, and to earn the degree.

In *Notes towards a Politics of Location*, the poet and scholar Adrienne Rich recognises locations as maps upon or within which she had been created and where she creates. She also sees these places as histories. She asks the reader to examine where they themselves were created. Critically, she asks them not to begin with a continent, a country, or a house, but to start with the geography closest to themselves: their own body. She challenges the reader to locate the ground from which they speak. Being with the material of her own body, she confronts herself with the particularities of the facts of her race and her gender, not her gender and her race, recalling that her body first

entered the world in a segregated hospital. She recognises that she was defined by race before she was defined as female, and that this was to be a lifelong fact.

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The politics of location begins with her own body, but also begins with understanding that her own body has more than one identity: living a life being viewed and treated on account of her race first and foremost, and secondly by her gender. She was located by colour and gender, but the implications of both appear mystified. The assumptions of racial and gender-based divisions are based on the notion that such divisions are neutral or natural, and not on the presumptions that there is one group that is the centre of the universe while others are not. To locate herself in her own body means more than understanding what it means to be a woman; it also is about understanding and recognising the places that her skin has taken her and the places that it has not.

Coming to an awareness of how I came to embody what I believed was expected of me in order to be validated and heard, I learned to acquire the architectural modes

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presented to me through architectural education. In the process of learning them, however, had I erased others? In being a “good student”, who strived to achieve the cultural prestige of architectural being, thinking and doing, had I come to reject other modes I had carried with me into education? If so, would I even be able to identify what those were? How different was my education from all other aspects of my life, what scripts have I been directed to perform, and of what had I come to reject and erase?

Probing the issue of erasure can make space for a broader discussion on value; of what is validated and what is ignored. It calls into question the principles that sustain current dominant bands of knowledge, as well as understandings and expectations of what society should be like, how social subjects should behave, and what bodies they should inhabit. But it is also a question of what knowledge is for and who benefits from it, what kinds of knowledge and understandings are encouraged, and which are devalued, silenced or simply not supported.

If we follow Adrienne Rich’s approach to “begin with the material”, not only of bodies but also their voices, then we need to consider bodies as geographies, shaped by histories of colonialism. We can think of these histories not only as something that we pass through and leave behind, but as lines that connect us to our present. Sarah Ahmed writes: “To follow lines is to follow direction.”⁸ I think of these as narratives, passed down over time, as inheritance which affects all, but that are returned differently depending on how these narratives press upon our bodies and give them shape.

Our present is affected by a moment when the meaning of the cry and the statement “I can’t breathe” refers both to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the eternal struggle for

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⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

black lives to matter.⁹ The vulnerabilities are palpable. This gasp for breath is a struggle that we face collectively, but if we pay close enough attention we can understand that we do not face it equally. Our daily experiences are affected by colonial legacies, but the ways in which we situate ourselves within them makes some more vulnerable than others.

To care for vulnerabilities is work. This is a fact that has obscured the ways in which care is one of the most exploited and invisible forms of labour, historically performed by women or marginalised minorities. In this way, labours of care have been thought of as inherently natural and, therefore, taken for granted as means to support performances that are rewarded in the economy our societies are organised around. Paying close attention to our vulnerabilities, their complexities and unequal distribution, allows us to consider the affective labour in the care that is required to reimagine future practices.

What does it mean to place the materialities of the body at the centre of architecture education? Being with the material of my own body also perhaps means being “out of line” with the lines that demarcate the boundaries of discipline, and therefore presents a risk not only personally and professionally, both also socially and politically. To start with the body takes vulnerability as a point of departure, devoting special attention to the devalued; that which has been forgotten, ignored, unnoticed, or unseen. What if we were to reimagine these as critical positions of subversion and empowerment?

Women’s Studies and Black Studies formed new fields of inquiry and reflection since questions of identity and power fell outside the bounds of disciplines. They forged entirely new subject matters that sought to develop a

⁹ “I can’t breathe” is a political slogan associated with the deaths of Eric Garner, and George Floyd at the hands of police, as well as broader issues of police brutality and racial inequity challenged by the movement #BlackLivesMatter created by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza.

reflective critical consciousness not only with the goal to inform, but also to transform what one knows and how one knows it. It is the kind of transformation that requires both a personal and structural approach and offers the potential of reconstruction as a means to heal erasure – to heal what has been previously rejected so that it can hold new significance and possibility. It also brings to the fore the creation and shaping of a history and discipline in which “the body” has often been referred to in the abstract and as universal. Far from all bodies that pass through the field necessarily fits the discipline’s own frame of reference. Understanding can help us acknowledge that narrow frames of reference leave architects, and architecture, with an even narrower perspective.

This is the location from which I speak. ■

