

Resisting Resistance Theory: “Strong Poetry,” Inversion, and Autonomy in Gregory N. Bourassa

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We must resist, it seems, particularly in moments when resistance is inconceivable. Only then, according to Gregory N. Bourassa, can we talk about “revolutionary subjectivity.” But when resisting, Bourassa needs to be reminded, we are condemned to improvise. We are even condemned to improvise the purpose of life and which direction to take in it. In his wonderful discussion with Sophie, the protagonist, Alberto, in Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World*, reminds the 14-year-old Sophie that, as humans, “We are condemned to improvise. We are like actors dragged onto the stage without having learned our lines, with no script and no prompter to whisper stage directions to us. We must decide for ourselves how to live.”¹ If this is so, then we as educators, philosophers, and simply human beings are left with these questions: when do we resist, why do we resist, and how do we conceptualize the idea of resistance?

In resisting resistance, Bourassa proposes new verses, a “strong poetry,” an inversion of the theory of resistance. “In fact,” he writes, the “prevailing conceptions of resistance theory may actually obscure much of the productive forces and revolutionary potential that are the generative basis for transformation.” By “focusing on the struggles that follow acts of domination,” our present conceptualization of resistance theory loses sight “of the latent and creative potentialities that actually call domination into existence.” That is to say, so far, resistance is seen as a “response” to “provocation.” The new verse that Bourassa is proposing is to think otherwise. The “power that characterizes domination is actually the exception,” he argues, and “the constituent, creative, and generative capacities of students are primary.” The former, for him, is a “constituted power,” which is territorializing and indeed reactive, while the latter is deterritorializing, “strongly poetic,” infinitely more productive and potentially revolutionary.

The “strong poets,” Richard Rorty observes, do not simply write verses.² They are eloquent enough to envision otherwise, so that the immediate and the known become unfamiliar and unknown. What they write is “strong poetry,” which is always looking for the “blind impresses,” the gaps, and the blind spots of thoughts, ideas, and practices. I am tempted to say there is a strong verse, a strong poetry in Bourassa’s essay, and to better understand this verse, I want to tell the story of the “Dark Man.” It is my story. It is my way of talking with and talking back to Bourassa, to say that we do resist differently depending on our *bodily experience*, that is to say, how our bodies are hailed in the eyes of power and domination.³ It is also about the choices we make in those hailing moments. Finally, it is a “personal testimony” and as such, bell hooks contends, it “is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory [praxis] because it [the personal] usually forms the base of our [knowledge and] theory making.”⁴

THE "DARK MAN" SPEAKING: HOW DO WE RESIST?⁵

Today was the last day of my time in Toronto after a five-month absence from Ottawa. I had, to say the least, a wonderful time during my stay in Toronto. It was 1:10 p.m. and I was more in the mood for poetry than for prose; and bicycling on St. George Street had never been as light. However it is frightening how lightness can so easily whirl into an unbearable heaviness, and how heaviness can cause so much pain. It all began when I had just crossed the yellow light of Bloor Street West. I saw a white car curving into the bicycle lane and I heard hereafter a siren coming from it. When it was fully halted before my bicycle, I realized it was a police car. From it came veering a rangy White man with full gear along with a clean and handsome gun. My immediate thought was that it must be the bicycle helmet, since I was not wearing one, so I whispered to myself "oh God, this is the first ticket of my life." I was deadly mistaken.

He approached my bicycle and said, "Have you ever been in trouble with the law before?" "No!" "Can I know why am I asked the question?" I added. "You fit the description of a man we are looking for, who just snatched a bag from Yorkville; and I just saw you around the Yorkville area," he said. In his walkie-talkie conversation he said, "I am talking to him right now," so I realized it was a continuation to a previous dialogue. Panopticism, somehow, keeps surfacing in my mind now. "Can I know why I was stopped?" "I told YOU Sir that you fit the description of a man we are looking for." "And what is that description?" I wondered. "We are looking for a dark man with a dark bag." I will leave up to you to imagine who are "we," but it occurred to me at that point that my bag was actually light blue with one very small black ("dark") stripe at the edge. "A DARK man?" I asked. Self-consciously, he exclaimed "A Black man with a dark bag!" He insisted on my bag being "dark"; now I was significantly metamorphosed from "dark" into "black." "Do you live around here, Sir?" he asked. "I don't," I responded.

"Where do you live, Sir?" "Ottawa." "What are you doing in Toronto?" What are you doing in Toronto? What, indeed, are you doing in Toronto? I repeated to myself. Some questions, I guess, are meant to be repeated for their banality, if not stupidity. I told him none of these; "I am visiting friends." With an unconvinced face he murmured, "Ohha!"

During this conversation, I saw another police car stopping behind the first; and from it came another White policeman. I was then asked for a piece of identification. I gave the first policeman my citizenship card. Before doing so, he asked me to lay down my (dark?) bag, which I did. With his order, I opened my bag for anyone in the street to see. Since it was a tourist area, with the well-attended Bata Shoe Museum, everyone was looking into my bag. Some, I observed, pitied my plight and one White woman was smiling. It was getting closer to 2 p.m. by then and my ride for Ottawa was to leave at 3 p.m. I decided to use my University of Ottawa professor identification. After writing down my name and date of birth, he then announced to the dispatcher: "All is OK now." With no apologies, I was told: "You are free to go now."

This story is told neither to seek sympathy — I need none here — nor to victimize myself. I am thinking with Bourassa and in many ways, arguing with him that, even in this moment of total territorialization, I was/am a full subject, with full agency, desire, and “autonomous” gaze, who is capable of becoming fully human. I have no idea what I could have resisted in my encounter with the police or even what I could have done differently. Bourassa’s arguments resonated with me in that, the “primacy” of my subjectivity was always present before and after the incident; in that my indignation, though scarred, can never be taken away; in that what is “readily visible and easily understood” has infinite possibilities of imagination; in that my “constituent power is the more inexhaustible form of power that actually calls into existence constituted power”; in that, finally, “there will always remain an indiscernible and immeasurable excess — a surplus that cannot be subsumed by repressive forces.”

However, where my verse departs from that of Bourassa is — problematic for me — how he jumped from those arguments to calling for “the refusal of work” and “exodus.” First, I am not totally convinced by those conclusions. I think Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of territorialization/deterritorialization might work better.⁶ The worst thing I could have done is to *refuse* to respond to the police or to run away (*exodus*). I made the choice of maneuvering the space I was given, to deterritorialize it creatively. My *resistance* here is my refusal to be/become another Black man in prison.

1. Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie’s World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy* (New York: Berkley Books, 1996), 457.

2. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

3. On the notion of “hailing,” see Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

4. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 168.

5. A version of this story was published in Awad Ibrahim, “One Is Not Born Black: Becoming and the Phenomenon(ology) of Race,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 35 (2004), 81–83.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).