

Aphorisms / Aporias / Appropriations Derrida and Architecture (Case Study Canada)

Karpinski, Daniel, PhD, OAA

Ryerson University

Toronto, Canada

Abstract

*In my text I explore a notion of “impossibility of architecture” in a post-colonial country, using Jacques Derrida’s concept of four aporias and Canada as a case study. The architecture, as part of indigenous culture – was supposed to be replaced by an (impossible) **Gift** of colonizers’ culture. This Gift through (impossible) **Hospitality** turned into genocide, which still awaiting (impossible) **Forgiveness** and **Mourning**. All culture is originally colonial. Post-colonial architecture is a part of postcultural world, where the post-colonial architecture is in constant process of over-layering new influences to blur even the potential interpretation of its origin (origin of a local or imported architecture). As a medium of politics and economy Canadian architecture nowadays translates cultural issues into propaganda, dematerializing its own work (products). Architecture as a temporal commodity is reduced to economic value and technical solution, to impossible architecture.*

Keywords: Derrida, Aporias, Post-Colonial, Architecture, Canada, impossibility, indigenous, culture

1. Introduction

In 2010, at the 2nd Derrida Today Conference in London England, I had an opportunity to talk about architecture as the “other language” or “the other of language”¹². I was showing how an old sketch (which has been influenced by Derrida’s writings) can keep for years some ideas expressed in a different form, almost in a different, other language. Trace of certain philosophical thoughts in a trace of thinking, in a form of a conceptual sketch. The sketch about a temporary structure, suspended like a decision of “what is it” or “what it is about”. A concept suspended in the air. Something that is and not is an object of architecture, a project, because a sketch is a projection of a thought into a future. Something impossible? Architecture as aporia.

Developing this idea, in my text for Dark Matter³ I was trying to relate four Derrida’s aporias to architecture in post colonial countries like Canada. I was looking at the four aporias as at continuity within a process of contact with indigenous culture or colonization. I started with a notion that (impossible) **gift** of colonizers / settlers’ culture, which was received in the form of (impossible) **hospitality**, in many cases made possible genocide, and it still awaits (impossible) **mourning** and (impossible) **forgiveness**. This continuum of aporias is possible to see in places where the process of colonization / settlement was similar to Canada. However, there are some other countries where contact with and the domination of the other culture had a different scenario. A good example could be Hawaii, which has never been a colony, and has a very complex situation of internal and external “masters”, who were importing alien culture while at the same time suppressing the indigenous one. However, in both cases (Canada and Hawaii) a potential of the “other of language” (an interpretation of architecture) was/is controlled by the masters’ economy, and as such it is becoming nether visible, nor possible.

I draw a conclusion that post-colonial architecture being a part of post-cultural world, is in constant process of over-layering new influences to blur even the potential interpretation or just a fear, of its origin (origin of a local or imported architecture).

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and the Other*, in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 123-124)

² This “other of language” is close to what [Anglophone Philosophy](#) calls the [Reference](#) of a word. There is a *deferment* of meaning with each act of re-reading. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diff%C3%A9rence#cite_note-12)

³ <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/author/daniel-k/>

As a medium of politics and the economy, Canadian architecture nowadays translates cultural issues into propaganda, dematerializing its own work (products) architecture as a temporal commodity is reduced to economic value and technical solution, to the impossibility of architecture"⁴. Today I would like to look for an opening in the impossible, rejecting impossible as a form of resignation, capitulation.

I will start with four aphorisms, which J. Hillis Miller selected from Derrida's various texts.⁵ I changed the order of the four of them, believing that in the new order they are pointing towards Derrida's four aporias and even further, that they can make possible a connection with Luce Irigaray's reading Martin Heidegger's fourfold of sky and earth, mortals and divinities⁶ which, I hope, that is leading in the direction of dwelling, habitation and appropriation, is leading towards Derrida finding an "opening" in Heidegger's thoughts. I would like to compare Derrida's and Irigaray's interpretation of Heidegger's "opening" and on the basis of them to look for an alternative of the impossibility in architecture, a potential component, an element or idea which is already there, in the word "im-possible". I am looking for the other of language that can bring back a potential of architecture, of what was not.

2.0. Aphorisms and Aporias

The name "aphorism", which came from Greek *apo* (away, from) and *horizon* (separate), was understood by Miller as "from the horizon", somehow echoing Heidegger. Here are the four aphorisms:

- 1 (2) *Tout autre est tout autre.* (a gift)
- 2 (4) The other calls (something) to come, and that does not happen except in many voices. (a hospitality)
- 3 (3) The other is already there, irreducibly. (forgiveness)
- 4 (1) The *alter ego* cannot present itself, cannot become an ordinary presence for the *ego*. (mourning)

2. 1 . gift

A genuine gift must happen outside of the realm of giving and taking, outside of the space of trading. It should be outside of self-interest or calculative reasoning⁷. A gift is also something that cannot appear as such, as it is destroyed by anything that proposes equivalence or recompense, by anything that even proposes to know of, or acknowledge it⁸. Anything which acknowledges the existence of a gift and also encourages some form of equivalence with that gift, can be seen to annul the initial gift⁹.

Tout autre est tout autre, and in this sense, the impossibility of the gift is not related to the giver and receiver but to the impossible character of the act.

There are two "gifts". The first is colonisation. The gift of a new culture and ways of living dominates the locals, by imposing on them new rules in the name of helping, "civilizing" the "savage". At the same time, another, second gift was created. Indigenous people and their idea of possession, property, role of nature, by sharing the land with the colonists, shifted themselves from the others to self. In a sense, two gifts were given to two groups of "others" to each other.

The indigenous others disappear in to Indian Reserves, another "other" was created, the "master" was associated with the Crown, the metropolitan center, while the colonist with the other on the periphery of Europe.

2.2. Hospitality

Its whole idea depends upon an altruistic concept as to contemplate giving up everything that we seek to possess and call our own. The notion of hospitality, however, requires one to be the 'master' of the house, country or nation (one must have the power to host). In this sense hospitality is related to property ownership or ownership in general, as well as a form of self-identity. Moreover, the host must have some kind of control over the people who are being hosted.

⁴ (<http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/author/daniel-k/>)

⁵ J.H.Miller, *Others*, Princeton, 2001

⁶ *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, University of Texas Press, 1999

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: i. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Kamuf, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (p. 30).

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 (1991) (p. 29).

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. Lindsay, Culler, Cadava, & Kamuf, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989 (p. 149).

If the guests take over the house through force, then the host is no longer in control of the situation. In Canada, the colonizers taking control of the land became masters and had removed the possibility of hosting anyone or even contemplating such a possibility. Indigenous peoples were subjected to the system of state founded Residential Schools for aboriginal children. In the schools the health conditions were criminal, bordering on genocidal.¹⁰ In 1907 the average death rate in the schools was 40% while in 1919 it rose to 75%. On top of that, in 1928 the Sexual Sterilization Act was passed in Alberta, allowing any inmate of a native residential school to be sterilized upon the approval of the school principal. At least 3,500 Indian women were sterilized under this law. In 1933 an identical Sexual Sterilization Act was passed in British Columbia. *The other calls (something) to come, and that does not happen except in many voices.*

2.3. forgiveness

The genuine forgiving must involve the impossible, an ‘unforgivable’ transgression.¹¹ The forgiveness must position itself outside of the political and juridical rationality. The ‘forgiveness’ prevents the necessity of an apology or repentance by the guilty side. However, in conditional forgiveness some apologies are actually demanded. But even in such a situation, forgiving can never be finished, but it stays open, like a wound that cannot heal. *The other is already there, irreducibly*

2.4. Mourning

The mourning of the deceased other fails because the other becomes a part of us, and in this interiorisation their genuine alterity is no longer respected. On the other hand, a failure to mourn the other’s death paradoxically appears to succeed, because the presence of the other person in their exteriority is prolonged.¹² As Derrida suggests, there is a sense in which “an aborted interiorisation is at the same time a respect for the other as other”.¹³ *The alter ego cannot present itself, cannot become an originary presence for the ego.*

3. Possibilities and Associations

The aporias are appearing in Irigaray’s text about Heidegger¹⁴, she writes: “She gives first. She gives the possibility of that beginning from which the whole of man will be constituted. This **gift** is received with no possibility of a return” (Irigaray, p 28). “This place of first gift [*du premier don*] (...) folded up in unthinkable beginning of Being. (...) The Beginning of man will be constituted on the basis of a forgetting: of the **gift** of this from which of which he is” (Irigaray, p 29, 30). Here a gift is possible. It is possible in a different economy, space and place. A place where “Nothing (...) can happened there without passing through the assimilation of **mourning**. No (female) living thing can reach it without first being “inclined before”, “collected”, and “sheltered” in a place of noble commemoration (Irigaray, p 24). So the gift is possible if the other is the sexual other, in the economy of genders, in the assimilation of mourning. The gift also associates itself with a place which can shelter and in this sense showing a direction towards potential interpretation of architecture.

In this space there is not just one **mourning**, but two types of them: an infinite mourning and an ecstatic one, b are somewhere between assimilation and production (Irigaray, p 55), between assimilation and participation, in **appropriation** (Irigaray, p 81). Appropriation of “...a single language, the one that he has already appropriated, and that he reappropriates for himself endlessly” (Irigaray, p 37). The language – the one in which man dwells, “in a language as the framing for a home of and for man” (Irigaray, p 67). What is the shape of that framing? The four: mortals, earth, sky, divinities. (*Erde und Himmel, die Göttlichen und die Sterblichen*).

“Why four? Is it because, given three-dimensional nature of this dwelling place, it is important to leave room for the unexpected? For the ever possible return of the gods? Or, is it, on the contrary, because the fourfold constitutes a more stable dwelling? Both at the same time.” (Irigaray, p 69). While she is making the gift and mourning possible he is dwelling in language which frame is the fourfold. A part of the fourfold is logos in the Greek sense, as a *ground* not only as an *opinion*.

¹⁰ <http://canadiangenocide.nativeweb.org/intro2.html>

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, London: Routledge, 2001 (p. 32)

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. Lindsay, Culler, Cadava, & Kamuf, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989 (p. 6)

¹³ *Ibid* (p. 35)

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, University of Texas Press, 1999

But also the Jungian logos and eros as masculine and feminine consciousness? If yes, the Heideggerian fourfold with Lacan's four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis (Unconscious, repetition, transference and drive). Especially with the drive, which Lacan refers to Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave, like Alan Schrift writes in *Logic of the Gift*¹⁵:

"...the Hegelian dialectic of self and other is a desire for appropriation, one confronts the other as different and unequal and one seeks to make the other one's own".

The appropriation, or "making the other one's own" for Derrida is also an "opening" of Heidegger teaching in the last section of his *Time and Being* when Heidegger submits the question of "proper-ty", or in German *eigen*, *eigenen*, *ereignen* and most importantly *Ereignis* (own, owning, making one's own)¹⁶. The appropriation of land and sources in colonizing process? The dis-appropriation of indigenous culture and language? There are the other understandings of appropriation and they may be discovered in a different economy.

4. Looking for a conclusion

There is a constant shift of meaning between an appropriation of a raped land where impossible forgiveness and impossible mourning make the architecture equally impossible, between appropriation of a sexual other that creates a shelter, between appropriation of assimilation and participation. Analyzing the "opening" in Heidegger's writings, Derrida and Irigaray are pointing towards two perpendicular axes. While Derrida introduces a notion of "proper-ty", she believes that air is the whole of our habitation as mortals. Through the "other of language" the two of them make possible architecture, where the architecture was impossible. One can only speculate about what a form, shape, a character this architecture of opening could have. But to satisfy the issue of property and air one can imagine an object which is dis-attached from ground (dis-attached from logos), something that touches earth only by its shadow, a structure which connects together an architectural concept with its own ruins, an object which only was announced by its concept, a structure which could be, but not necessary will be or was.¹⁷

¹⁵ Routledge, 1997, p 103

¹⁶ James Winchester, *Nietzsche's Aesthetic Turn: Reading Nietzsche After Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida*, State University of New York Press, 1994, p 99

¹⁷ Karpinski, Daniel. La cathedrale de la Revolution, in: *Paris Architecture et utopie. Projets d'urbanisme pour l'entree dans le 21^e siecle*. Ernst & Sohn. 1989,90-93.