

INTERVIEW

The Archaeology of Black Memory: An Interview with Robert A. Hill

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Tonight, Jah
rears in a hundred tenements.
Missed by my maps,
still compassed by reason,
my ship sails, coolly, between
Africa and heaven.
— Anthony McNeill, “Straight Seeking”

PREFACE

Memory, community and criticism are undoubtedly linked. Properly practised, one might argue, criticism is a community's mode of *remembering*. It is a form of putting back together (re-membering) aspects of our common life in ways that make visible what has been obscured, what has been forgotten, what has disappeared from view. Criticism, you might say, seeks to make contact with forms of ourselves we no longer inhabit so that new ways of apprehending or redescribing the past might enable new



Robert A. Hill speaking at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, during Black History Month, February 1999

ways of grasping or of re-imagining the present. In this sense of it criticism is concerned above all with generating and sustaining a *public culture* of memory. This is perhaps something we in the Caribbean have paid insufficient attention to; we have been careless with memory, and thus have been impatient with criticism.

If you understand the connections among criticism, community and memory in this way, then practising criticism adequately will depend upon certain kinds of recovery: the recovery of the sources that make memory possible, that keep alive the events and figures, the sensibilities and mentalities, the knowledges and rationalities, that have been part of the shaping and reshaping of the traditions of who we are. This recovery, in turn, depends upon and is sustained by something else, namely the recovery/description of an archive, and therefore the work of an archaeologist.

The archive, Michel Foucault has suggested in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, is a very distinctive kind of formation. It is not, he argues, reducible to “the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity”; nor is it reducible to “the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation”. An archive is not merely a collection; rather, it is a *generative* system. It is the generative system that governs the production and appearance of statements. It is that “system of discursivity” that governs the formation and transformation of objects and statements of knowledge, and the pattern and regularity of enunciative possibilities and impossibilities. More straightforwardly, an archive governs what can and cannot be said.¹ An archive, in other words, is an implicit but *constitutive* part of the epistemic background of statements, part of a statement’s sources. It is the dense network of knowledges (allusions, images, concepts, figures, events, stories) that live just below the surface of statements, animating them, giving them depth, resonance. To this extent, an archive has a *temporal* dimension; it is always a *historical* formation. It contains layers, or strata, of statements, one below the other, all the way down. To this extent an archive is a public form — the discursive institution — of *memory*.

It follows that to properly understand a statement (a document, a narrative) one has to acquaint oneself not only with the register of the statement itself, but with the archive in which it is located. Since this archive is not in any simple way already *there*, waiting to be read, it has at once to be *recovered* and *described* in order to be put to critical use. This is the work of an archaeologist. The archaeologist recovers/describes an archive. And in doing so the archaeologist participates in the construction of what might be called an *institution of memory*, and an *idiom of remembering*.

One person who has devoted a scholarly lifetime to constructing/reconstructing the conditions of possibility for a public culture of black memory is Robert Hill. It is hard to think of anyone who embodies better the mind of an archivist. Robert Hill is, consummately, an archaeologist — an archaeologist of black memory. His Marcus Garvey and United Negro Improvement Association Papers Project is one instance of an archive of black memory, and one instance of the role such an archive can play in connecting memory, community and criticism. As everyone knows, the Garvey movement was a vast transatlantic enterprise, connecting the USA, the Caribbean, Central America, and the African continent. It shaped and reshaped the lives of

1 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 128-29.

generations of Africans in these spaces. The importance of the recovery/description of a Garvey archive, therefore, is that it establishes a condition of possibility for, among other things, new ways of remembering Garvey and the movement he inspired; new ways of connecting Garvey to his contemporaries (W.E.B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People [NAACP]/*Crisis*; the incipient Pan-African movement, Cyril Briggs and the African Blood Brotherhood, Rastafari and Ethiopianism, anticolonial nationalisms in Africa and the Caribbean, and so on); new ways of connecting it genealogically to our moral and political present; and, in consequence, new ways of critically describing who we are, how we got here, and what we might do with what we have made of ourselves.

Robert Hill is not the author of books. He is not, primarily, what has come in our modernity to be known as an *author*. The idea (and the ideal) of an author is the idea (and the ideal) of a single and singular signature, the identity of which supposedly guarantees the authenticity and stability of a text. In our densely individualistic public culture, the author-function (authoriality) has come to assume a distinctive privilege. Perhaps it is a much overrated one. In consequence the place of the archive and the function of the archaeologist have been little understood, and have been even less appreciated. Robert Hill's *métier* is the 'introduction'. Over the course of his scholarly career, he has written introductions to the several collections he has edited. The practice of writing introductions, it has to be understood, is not a transparently self-evident one. It depends, rather, upon the establishment of a certain kind of relation to the (social, historical, cultural, political) text in question. This is not specifically a relation of 'interpretation' (though of course it serves to set the text in a particular light). Nor is it specifically a relation of 'expertise' (though there are forms of positive knowledge that are indispensable to its functioning).

The practice of writing introductions is one that establishes what one might call a relation of 'framing' and of 'placement'. An introduction, you might say, *frames* a text by *placing* it in relation to its conditions of enunciability, and in relation to the system of discursivity that governs the production and organization of its statements. An introduction shows how a text occupies a certain space of problems, a particular context of questions, a distinctive domain of arguments. In short, it shows what the relations are to that background of knowledge — the archive — that sustains it. The practice of framing and placing is crucial, therefore, to the construction of the discursive map through which the shape of a black intellectual tradition can come into being.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, in October 1943, Robert Hill is professor of history and editor-in-chief of the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement

Association Papers Project at the University of California, Los Angeles. He previously held appointments at Dartmouth College (1970–72), the Institute of the Black World, Atlanta (1970–72), and Northwestern University, Evanston (1972–77). The *Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* began publication through the University of California Press in 1983. So far (March 1999), eight volumes have been published (the Main Series [volumes 1–7], covering largely Garvey's years in the USA, and one volume of the African Series [volume 9]). Two additional volumes of the African Series, volumes 8 and 10, are currently in press, and the four projected volumes of the Caribbean Series are in various stages of production. In 1977 he compiled and edited *The Black Man*, which was brought out by Kraus Reprint Co. in New York. A centennial volume, *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, edited by Robert Hill and Barbara Bair, appeared in 1987, through the University of California Press. In 1987 also he brought together and published (through Garland Publishing in New York) a complete edition of *The Crusader*, Cyril A. Briggs's radical magazine. In 1990 Africa World Press published his edition of *Walter Rodney Speaks*, and in 1995 Northeastern University Press published *The FBI's RACON: Racial Conditions in the United States during World War II*, compiled and edited by Hill. His *The Rastafari Bible* is to be published shortly by HarperCollins of San Francisco. In addition, Hill is the literary executor of the estate of the late C.L.R. James.

Since 1994, Robert Hill has also been a (Southern California Psychoanalytic Institute trained) practising psychoanalyst.