

Review of Prof. Debarati Biswas' Talk:  
"The Perpetually Unsettled and the Aesthetics of Elsewheres in  
Black American Art and Literature"  
Fall 2025 *Works in the Works* Series, Humanities Department

On September 30, 2025, Professor Debarati Biswas delivered a Works in the Works presentation exploring the Black literary and artistic representations of the "rehearsals for living" enacted every day among those displaced, dispossessed, and dehumanized by colonial racial capitalism.

"Abolition is life in rehearsal because freedom is a place," writes Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a geographer, prison abolitionist, CUNY professor, and founder of the Critical Resistance Project. Prof. Biswas used this quote as a starting point to explore the meanings of three key ideas: abolition, everyday life as rehearsal, and freedom as a place.

Biswas described abolition as a "dynamic process" through which "unbearable places are transformed into bearable worlds." This transformation requires a restructuring of our current social relations, Biswas explained in her talk, to replace "organized abandonment" with an abundance of care, mutuality, and interdependence. Because we have not yet reached this abolitionist place, our current reality can be considered "life in rehearsal," as it is a preparation for a greater world we can only imagine—can only rehearse for—right now. And because place-making is normal human activity, Prof. Biswas said, it is natural for us to ground our intangible envisionment of an abolitionist world in the more tangible idea of a physical place.

Prof. Biswas analyzed the work of three Black writers and artists from three different decades; the works of all three explore the understanding of freedom as a place and present-day life as a rehearsal for an abolitionist future. First, Biswas shared a painting by Jacob Lawrence from 1941 depicting the first wave of the great migration of African Americans from the rural south to the urban north. The subjects depicted by Lawrence are in the middle of the frame, and neither their destination nor their origin is shown; though they are clearly en route, what abolition as a physical place would look like is not clear. What is clear, however, is the physical and emotional weight carried by the subjects. Their bodies are in a downward facing triangle, each carrying heavy belongings, representing the unbearable heaviness of their being and their belongings. The bodies hold each other up, flesh against flesh, connected by their shared trauma, Biswas argued, all of them rehearsing for a better future. Above them, a group of birds takes flight toward freedom, their black feathers contrasting with a piercing blue sky.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian Walker's photography attempted to understand "how one kneads the unbearable trauma of dispossession and displacement into poignant and profound moments of both Black love and belonging," Biswas shared. Walker's 1985 book, *The Theater Project*, documented his experiences and observations as a Black gay man at The Pilgrim in Boston, a deteriorating theater that had become a respite from the homophobia of the outside world. Biswas explained the contradiction of The Pilgrim as both a fully realized place of freedom and nothing more than a rehearsal for an undiscovered future: though The Pilgrim contributed "freedom, solace, and beauty" to the queer community, Biswas said, Walker still found the place to be melancholy, as it "crystallized" the "pervasive aloneness of the outside world."

More recently, in 2018, Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-American author, published a short story titled “Without Inspection” in the *New Yorker*. Biswas says the story takes place in the in-between: its protagonist, Arnold, is actively falling to his death, five hundred feet, after slipping off a scaffold. But, Biswas notes, “Rather than focus on the unbearable realities of his life or his death, instead [the author] chooses to focus on the expansive possibilities of love and desire that Arnold experiences.” Through the detailed descriptions of the protagonist’s love for his family and his joy, concurrent with his existence “in a place structured by unfreedom,” readers “experience the expansive possibilities of an abolitionist geography, a place where Arnold’s life matters and where Black life and love thrive and grow,” Biswas poignantly highlighted.

Prof. Biswas’ talk was ultimately an examination of the in-between, of the “perpetually unsettled” who are “forever in transit,” she described, quoting scholar Stuart Hall. En route to a physical place of abolition, the subjects of Black art and literature represent everyday life as a rehearsal for a life of freedom. These artists and their subjects have been displaced, dispossessed, and dehumanized by colonial racial capitalism, yet we still see depictions of joy and love, of intimacy and relationships—both in spite of and because of the pauperization of their communities. Prof. Biswas’ talk was an enlightening and moving presentation of the themes shared by many Black artists and writers throughout the last century.

Review by Jaclyn Griffith