

In the Event of History: Reading the Mime of Memory in the Present of Public History

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The transformation of “archivistic” activity is the point of departure and the condition for a new history.

[De Certeau, 75]

A will to power is invested in its form.

[De Certeau, 217]

The two fundamental notions of history as it is practiced today are no longer time and the past but change and the event.

[Foucault , 423]

I

The sub-disciplinary field of public history sets itself apart from social history by assigning various texts of memory to the general analysis of systems of representation (*darstellung*).¹ By this move, it sanctions a certain hermeneutical analysis of memory in which the dialogicity of past and present is rendered visible, even as it explicitly makes the present the authorising ground of its practice. Public history severs itself from an unmediated notion of memory – associated with the recuperative project of social history - by dint of the notion of the memory function and through the enabling phrase of the production of history. Unfortunately, what it neglects is a realisation that establishing distance does not always produce the desired difference. Stated differently, we could say that the postcolonial desire for finding an opening in the present - which, as Spivak reminds us, may be of interest for many marginalised cultural systems as a development from within the aftermath of the Kantian Enlightenment² – will not necessarily issue from an essentialist concept of memory nor by insulating memory in the hermeneutics of representation. It will also require, in my view, an interruption of the unending decipherment of sign-chains with the problematisation of the temporal category we call “the present”.

¹ A seminal text that sets out to define the field of public history is David William Cohen, *The Combing of History* (Chicago, 1994). *The Production of history*-a frame of reference that is intended here to augment the conventional senses of meaning of history and historiography-refers to the processing of the past in societies and historical settings all over the world and the struggles for control over voices and texts in innumerable settings which animate this processing of the past. p.244. My argument in brief is that the “unending decipherment of sign-chains” is wholly inadequate in the critique of colonialism.

²² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, (Harvard University Press, 1999) p.429.

In this paper, I offer a reading of nationalist narratives of Hintsa, the nineteenth century Xhosa king who was killed at the hands of British soldiers in 1835, within a shared commitment for a new history while simultaneously tracking the conceptual elaboration and subsequent problematisation of the present as integral to history. The aim is to connect the twin processes of reading and tracking to the possibility of enabling a new archivist activity – an activity that incidentally seeks to work with rather than against public history. The paper therefore proceeds by running two operations - that of public history and nationalist texts of memory - together so as to define a crisis for the discipline of history; a crisis where critical history may set about doing its work.

If social history mines memory for the retrieval of consciousness, then public history substitutes this mining activity with an analysis of the miming or performative reinscription of memory. In the case of public history the analysis is expressly directed towards the present. For someone who takes public history and postcolonial theory seriously, this intervention which calls into being the tasks of decipherment of memory does not seem to adequately address the investment of desire that attends to memory. **I have in mind the following formulation by Derrida of the relationship of memory to desire:**

Memory is not just the opposite of forgetting. And therefore the anamnesis of the anamneses will never be able to lift an origin out of oblivion. That is not at all its movement. To think memory or to think anamnesis, is to think things as paradoxical as the memory of a past that has not been present, the memory of the future-the movement of memory as tied to the future and not only to the past, memory turned toward the promise, toward what is coming, what is arriving, what is happening tomorrow. It is not just a matter of remembering but also of something altogether other.

The “something altogether other” that attends to thinking memory demands a different work; a work that is more than decipherment. In this paper I wish to posit the strategic possibilities entailed in a politics of reading as supplement to decipherment. I offer a reading of nationalist texts of memory as a discourse of desire. It is a reading that strategically brings the question of postcolonial desire to bear on the field of public history.

I will therefore treat memory not as residual but as a displaced sign – that is in terms other than as a pathway to the essence of events or their retrospective appearances.³ Both colonial and nationalist narratives operated within the sphere of the displaced sign – the former by ensuring that the event is quarantined (cf. Amin) and isolated in the epistemic apparatus of objectivity; the latter by

³ Jacques Derrida *Points: Interviews, 1974-1994* Elisabeth Weber (ed.) transl. Peggy Kamuf (stanford University Press, 1995) p.383.

way of projection of the past into a present. Like Jacques Le Goff, I too wish to argue that memory has a genealogy that is irreducible given that its workings are usually unconscious.⁴

I begin with a short comment on the politics of reading and the ways in which the project of reading history has been reconceptualised in the arena of public history and around the question of the production of history. The reason for beginning here is to acknowledge a debt as well as to suggest possible ways of extending the study of the production of history. I then proceed to explore the shape of recurring pasts as it articulates in the framework of the mime of memory. The ambition here is to drag the supposedly ontological object we call event and the epistemological constellation we call history through the mime of memory so that each can retrace its steps in the mire of complicity. Neither a study of the past in terms of the present nor of the present in terms of the past, mine is an attempt to explore how the trope of the present (or what Mitchell Dean calls *presentism*) became indispensable to an argument about the past.⁵ This is a question that I take to be largely absent in the recent emergence of the study of the production of history or that which has come to be known as public history.

II

An innovative response to what is widely referred to as the crisis of History in the South African academy has come from scholars engaged in the field of Public history. In their refusal to be burdened by the supposed decline in the general interest in history in schools and academic institutions – a condition that was widely discussed at the 1999 South African Historical Association Conference – and dissuaded by the presumed problems posed by the ascendancy of heritage as the dominant site through which the past is mediated, public historians have recognised in the present the enormous possibilities for the reconstitution of History in South Africa. Ciraj Rassool, an historian based at the University of the Western Cape, has argued, for example, that academic history is not simply superior by virtue of the archive and peer review, neither of which are guarantees that academic history is good history⁶. Contrary to views expressed by scholars such as Jane Carruthers, Rassool insists that “heritage” in South Africa is not simply some lesser zone. Rather, he suggests, it can be seen as an assemblage of arenas and activities of history-making that is as disputatious as the

⁴ Jacques LeGoff *History and Memory* trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (Columbia University Press, New York) 1992.

⁵ I am familiar with the claim that historiography can only be thought of as present since it marks the place of the historian’s practice. To reduce the conceptual weight of the present to authorial function is however, to miss an opportunity of reading history as a discourse. For a useful discussion of Foucault’s formulation of a history of the present see Mitchell Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault’s Methods and Historical Sociology*, (Routledge, 1994) pp.28-36.

claims made about the character of academic history. The reconstitution of history requires, according to Rassool, a sociology of historical production in the academy as well as the public domain and an enquiry into the categories, codes and conventions of history-making in each location and in all its variability.

A crucial component of the argument put forward by Rassool rests with a consideration of what is referred to as the production of history. The conception of the production of history or, more broadly, knowledge, does not merely imply a sequence of commentaries - a project that reminds us of the ways in which intellectual histories are realised - but entails an emphasis on the conferral of meaning. Leslie Witz's study of the van Riebeeck tercentenary celebrations of 1952 is a useful example of the study of the production of history within the public space of commemorations.⁷ Working against a notion of carnival and commemoration as spontaneous and drawing on a literature which posits the discursivities that make possible commemorations in South Africa, Witz concludes that commemorations are not intrinsically hapazard but are rather produced as such. In masking the discursive, the commemoration, gives the impression of spontaneity. For Witz, however, commemorations are constituted as an assemblage of tactics, all of which are constrained by the contemporary conditions under which they are scripted and performed. By highlighting the discursive, he is able to show how the past is produced in direct relation to conditions in the present.

The task of discerning the systems through or by which meaning is conferred is of course opposed to an earlier historiographical practice of uncovering meaning. In the latter instance - which Foucault once described as a legacy of the exegetical tradition - that which is said is always suspected of something else being said.⁸ By contrast the project of locating the conferral of meaning sets out to work on the unacknowledged traces of the past as they continue to exist in the present of various receptive constituencies. Here the emphasis is on a linkage between past and present and, literally speaking, on subordinating the past to the present. As it prompts history in this new direction, scholars exploring the production of history inaugurate a practice of interpretation in the present.

Public history emphasises the ways in which meaning is generated by the past in the present of the public space. The effect is one of multiplying the sites within which histories are produced and

⁶ Ciraj Rassool, "Heritage and the Reconstitution of South African History," *Kronos*, [forthcoming], p.5

⁷ Leslie Witz, "The 1952 van Riebeeck Tercentenary Commemorations," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cape Town.

⁸ Foucault "On the Ways of Writing History" James Faubion (ed.) *Aestheticis, Method, and Epistemology* Volume 2, (New York Press, 1998) p.286.

by extension to increase the range of histories within which the past is contested. The democratic impulse in this move is hard to miss. Unlike social history, which propounded a concept of representative histories strictly within the conventions of academic practices, the elevation of a concept of production relinquishes the qualificatory formalisations of history as a discipline. In so doing it paves the way for a consideration of the place of generic meaning in the space of the public - a space that is incidentally marked as present.

By emphasising how histories are lived in the present - or what Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Stephen Kemper respectively call the presence of the past - scholars of public history fundamentally rescue history from the conventional pursuit of authenticity. Trouillot describes the predicament as follows:

The traditions of the guild, reinforced by positivist philosophy of history, forbid academic historians to position themselves regarding the present. A fetishism of facts, premised on an antiquated model of the natural sciences, still dominates history and the other social sciences. It reinforces the view that any conscious positioning should be rejected as ideological. Thus, the historians position is officially unmarked: it is that of the non-historical observer.⁹

Carolyn Hamilton's more recent study of the legend of Shaka deploys the unstated tension between the demands of a study of the production of history and the politics of reading the archive to trace the unfolding legend as a consequence of a mix of interpretive, representational, popular and political menus.¹⁰ The text is a noteworthy example of the radical reworking of disciplinary history as practiced in South Africa. For Hamilton, the story of Shaka emerges not solely out of inventiveness but as a consequence of mutually constraining and overlapping narrations produced and conditioned by the configuration of power relations within historically defined contexts. History, as in Foucault's formulation, is produced under conditions of constraint. In Hamilton's study, similarly, the production of history proceeds under conditions of constraint.

For the purposes of our discussion, two critical moves centered on the operation of constraint are discernable in Hamilton's study. The first relates to narrative constraint while the second alludes to constraint imposed by the spatial frames within which histories are articulated or performed. Narrative constraint, firstly, is approached by way of the making of the archive. The archive is then read back onto itself in a way that undermines its claims to speak in the exclusive vernacular of power. The archive, it is suggested, is produced not only by virtue of authority - that which Keletso Atkins has described as the tendency of those in power to speak incessantly - but also

⁹ Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1995)p.151

under conditions of constraint. A second move entails understanding how this archive, produced under conditions of mutual constraint, is disseminated, re-interpreted and recast in the present through the medium of film, nationalist rhetoric, exhibitions and theme parks. In this regard, the narrative function is viewed as constrained by the spaces in which it is elaborated.

The force of her argument is expressed in the following quotation in which the contours of the argument are outlined:

Appeals to the historical legacy of Shaka were not confined to Zulu nationalists. Similar invocations characterised a range of resistance texts over the following decades in forms as diverse as short profiles in *The African Communist* and that massive Black nationalist tract, Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*. Significantly, however, the texts of the advocates of racial domination as well as those of their opponents seldom presented Shaka as either wholly villain or hero. Even the latter-day Inkatha organisation, reconstituted in 1975, offers a profoundly ambiguous Shaka, both succorer of visitors and unrelenting towards foes.¹¹

Neither a product exclusively of colonial invention or nationalist re-invention, Hamilton claims that the image of Shaka was a consequence of a "complex mix of ingredients, negative and positive, in slightly different proportions according to various menus."¹² The novelty of this approach to Shaka is that it radically challenges the claims to authenticity through which the coloniser/colonised binary is constituted. As in the recent work of Karin Barber and Isabel Hofmeyr, Hamilton simultaneously challenges the neat utopian opposition that is set up between orality and the written record on the one hand and domination and resistance on the other. Constraints, in this argument, are productive and circumscribing, enabling and limiting.¹³

What gives epistemological coherence to the study of the production of history in the work of scholars such as Witz and Hamilton is the field of representation. Elevated to a conceptual category, representation allows scholars to traverse different temporalities and categories, especially those that are foundational to conventional practices of history. Representation, moreover, is crucial in thinking about discursivities - authorial, visual, institutional and performative - and deployments in the commemorative text, the unfolding of a popular legend or in the spheres of heritage.

By focussing on the mediative aspects of histories, however, studies into the production of history consistently negotiates the immanent danger of treating the ideological operation of

¹⁰ Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty* (David Philip, Johannesburg, 1998).

¹¹ Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, (1998) p.170.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid p.207

mediation as a separable agency. That danger, it seems, is averted by a two-fold strategy. Firstly, we find an implicit acknowledgement that all production of meaning is premised on an event that took place - the forever-remnant trace, in de Certeau's phrasing, of a beginning that is as impossible to recover as to forget.¹⁴ Secondly, history as representation apprehends the genealogy of the system of transmission through which the past, as object, emerged in the practice of the present, primarily by isolating the proliferation of meaning in institutions such as museums, in technologies of visibility, and in the performances around memory. In an important tactical move, public history, for example, transcends a concept of the historical event as something that happened by introducing the dynamic of representation as integral to its definition. This translates, in this instance, as the linkage of the semiotic field to a multiplicity of intervening institutional and epistemic regulators. According to James Young, it is a shift in focus from "what happened" to how "what happened" is remembered.¹⁵

Postcolonial theory is arguably a recognisable, *albeit* vague, commitment in the study of the production of history, both in relation to its emphasis on representation and the present.¹⁶ However, the specificity of the South African debate, which treats the present as an epistemological site, seems to be at odds with postcolonial theory's conceptualisation of the present as a predicament that needs to be subjected to the tasks of strategic criticism. David Scott offers us a valuable qualification of this postcolonial position when he argues that histories of the present ought to be attentive not only to the shifting contours of the pasts they interrogate, but to the shifting contours of the presents they inhabit and from which they are being written.¹⁷

¹⁴ Michel De Certeau *The Writing of History*, transl. Tom Conley (Columbia University Press, New York, 1988) p.47.

¹⁵ James Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p.7.

¹⁶ One should not underestimate the baffling antagonism on the part of some scholars of Africa towards the work of certain postcolonial theorists. Hamilton, for example critiques Spivak and Bhabha for not entertaining "indigenous representations and agendas." This of course is similar to the argument made by Benita Parry in respect of Spivak's essay. Surely the same criticism does not apply to Marx's claim in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that the "peasants cannot represent themselves, they must be represented." Spivak's essay, I would argue, is better read in terms of a theory of mediation and not as a simplistic argument about the sociology of speech. Similarly, Hamilton, points to the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ashis Nandy, arguing that they desire to continue to work with the knowledge protocols of academic history. Yet, Frederick Cooper, has followed Diouf in suggesting that Nandy is a scholar who has rejected "history". Elsewhere, Cooper criticises Chakrabarty for putting the west back onto a timeless pedestal, despite his hopes at provincialising Europe. The confusion, it seems, is that scholars of Africa fail to distinguish between postcolonial theory as a conceptual argument and their very own sociological concerns and entrapments. See Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty* (1998) pp.226-227 (ft. 96,122); and Frederick Cooper, "Africa's pasts and Africa's Historians" *African Sociological Review*, 3, 2(1999) pp.1 and 3.

¹⁷ David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, (Princeton University Press, 1999) p.15.

The search for new sites for research – public (museums, festivals, television) and present – and the desire to engage and constitute diverse practitioners of historical production, while crucial in countering the convention-bound propositions of an older historiographical orthodoxy, tends to downplay the important task, as David Scott has argued, of dehistoricising history as such.¹⁸ Such a move, as I understand Scott to be saying, is not aimed at disabling history. Rather, it seeks to enable a more thoroughgoing historicity of the spatio-temporal signifier that public history, amongst a range of historiographical tendencies, calls the present. While tracking the mobilisation of the idea of ‘the present’ in memory and nationalist narrative, this paper simultaneously attends to the problematisation of the temporal referent that we call “the present”. The paper is therefore not merely intended as a study of systems of representations. Rather it is an attempt to apply a genealogical analysis of the concept of the present, to consider its problematisations, and to provisionally explore the strategic possibilities of the politics of reading for the discipline of history.

According to Scott, [H]istory has played a constitutive role in the formation of communities - both chauvinist and in more recent arguments made by scholars such as Stuart Hall, for communities without guarantees. If there is a lesson to be learnt here, it is that history, articulated through its form, is intrinsically bound up with the will to power. Thus, in the attempt to remove history from its metaphysical determination and to disentangle its function as a complicit discourse, we must begin, as Jean Luc Nancy suggests, not with presupposing history.

By apprehending the forms of colonialist and nationalist historiography I seek, along lines similar to those suggested by Scott, to dehistoricise the truth claims that sustain and support stories of Hintsā, through a practice and politics of reading that refuses to take history for granted even as it explores its dissemination in a politics of the present. one aspect of this task would entail effectively removing claims to truth from the realms of justification and sequence and deliberately placing them within forms of domination and nationalist desire where they first found expression.

Even if we share with Witz and Hamilton a politics of history that does not simply replace old faces with new one’s but that significantly contests dominant disciplinary approaches to the archives from which the figure of history arises, we may yet have to address the ways in which nationalism – as a political force identifiable by its argument – aspired to the possibility of a discursive displacement and why, more importantly, it failed at this ambition. The site of that displacement in the case of nationalist narration, I wish to argue, is supplementarity - the realm of

¹⁸ David Scott, “Dehistoricising History” Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail *Unmaking the Nation* (Sri Lanka) p.10.

excess that accompanies the project of reading and argumentation. If nationalist texts, to follow the argument of Hamilton, are produced under conditions of constraint - no less by the constraints posed by the colonial archive - how does nationalism express its will to power within the complex of the will to knowledge? How does nationalism proceed to formulate its argument and articulate its logic? To address these questions we must accept the proposition at the outset that nationalism, as Chatterjee so eloquently argues, cannot be reduced simply to a derivative discourse. It also places before us the difficult task of reading the nationalist text in the light of Heidegger's suggestion that every exposition must not only draw upon the substance of the text; it must also, without presuming, imperceptibly give to the text something out of its own substance.¹⁹ To limit a new history to the question of the conferral of meaning is to privilege the present over the past and to mark the former as the site for the production of history. To explore the ways in which the past is angled towards the present is to inaugurate a politics of reading - in the most serious sense of the word - in which the operation of a text's surplus meaning - what I have called supplementary excess following Bill Ashcroft - is figured. This paper proposes strategic counter-posing of the concept of excess to the idea of the limit adumbrated in Hamilton's *Terrific Majesty*. At the same time, it counter-poses a history of representation with a history of problematics.

III

In a longer version of the present paper I have explored the secularisation of memory in colonial accounts of the killing of Hintsá, by considering a diary, a travel account, and an autobiography produced by participants in the war of 1835 and detailing respectively the circumstances surrounding Hintsá's death. Memory here participated in constituting the event of history in terms of a re-working of concepts of space (which guided colonial advance and accommodated immanent dangers), time (which demarcated the fields of comparison and forged a notion of the repeat of history), and the figure of history as the towering hagiographic illusion through which the progress of history was guaranteed. In so doing, the colonial mime of memory, as a displaced sign, relocated the event of history in the secular logic of a colonial present. The mime of colonial memory, more importantly, was one among several sites where the normative historical concepts of time, space and historical figure were being re-worked, secularised, hierarchised and subsequently universalised.

If, as I have argued, memory works as a displaced sign, then we can also say that what it displaces is a conception of the past by insulating it in the framework of objectivity. The emergence

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger *The Question Concerning Technology*, p.58

of event-history, as I have named this containment, depends on the authenticating and justificatory techniques of witnessing. Through the memories of events like those that resulted in the killing of Hintsá, mediated through the technologies of travelogues, diaries and autobiographies, the past of the event emerged as the site where history's entry into the realm of the secular was negotiated. Stated differently, we may say that the story of history as progress, of the birth of secular history, was forged in relation to the bodies that lay scattered across colonial landscapes.

One example, drawn from Harry Smith's autobiography of 1903, must suffice to highlight the reading of the usurpation of memory into a secular logic. Let us join Smith's story at the point at which he provides justification for his mission to the Kei River to retrieve what he calls "colonial cattle." Crossing the bed of the Tsomo, Smith describes his "most precipitate march on Hintsá's kraal." Not finding him there, Smith set about burning the kraal. This provocation, it is claimed, brought Hintsá into the British camp in an "undaunted manner." It is at this point in the narrative that Smith places before us the weight of secularity, mobilising it against the inveterate weakness of desire:

(The poor savage always buries the past in oblivion, and regards the present only. He has not the most distant idea of right or wrong as regards his line of conduct. Self-interest is his controlling impulse, and desire stands for law and rectitude).

Locked away in parentheses and followed by a description of the grievances against Hintsá, recorded on paper by Governor D'Urban, the statement by Smith works to separate the historical from the presumably ahistorical subject, where the former is a subject whose character enables just actions. But Smith's narrative is not only an account of the triumph of the hagiographic figure of history – it is also a narrative of the triumph of History. In fact, History, in this account, belongs to victory in much the same way as it guarantees victory.

IV

In nationalist recollections of conquest and colonisation, the difficulty of how to remember those who died at the hands of the colonising power often presents itself both as a site of inauguration and as a point of controversy. The paradox for nationalist commentary seems to be the following: to describe those who died as a result of conquest and colonisation as victims would refute their agency and confer supremacy on those who committed acts of violence, while claiming them as heroic would substantially minimise the possibility of mobilising their fates as a measure of colonial violence and brutality. Yet, it would seem that both heroism and victimhood - like modernity and the traditional - were indispensable props of nationalist narration, even when these attributes were

applied to any single figure, event of history or commemoration. To read the historiography of nationalism in southern Africa, especially that produced by scholars such as Terrence Ranger and Shula Marks, is to experience the unravelling of the complex and convoluted assemblage of statements and practices that defines nationalisms outward appearance. Very often the conclusion drawn by these historians is that nationalisms indecision weighs heavily on the practice and politics of anti-colonial resistance. Contrary to the historiographical tendency to privilege the modern as the destiny of all history, nationalism as a discourse, mobilises concepts of the modern and the traditional as a way of indexing its claims to sameness and difference as constitutive levels in its body of knowledge. As Partha Chatterjee has so brilliantly demonstrated in the example of India, nationalism approaches the supposedly ambiguous as a resource, rather than as a terminal illness. Similarly, David Lloyd has argued that those accounts of nationalism which are currently hegemonic in the West are locked into a singular narrative of modernity which is able neither to do historical justice to the complex articulation of nationalist struggles with other social movements nor, consequently, to envisage the progressive moment in nationalism.²⁰ Nationalism, it would seem from the examples of India and Ireland, refuses to surrender the domain of history to the teleological story of a colonising power. Instead, it constantly seeks to recast history by countering colonial displacement of the traditional - albeit an invented tradition - and by offering an alternative story of the compatibility between the modern and the traditional.

On 22 August 1999, in the newly constructed boxing arena in the sprawling Cape township of Khayelitsha - between site B and site C to be more precise - the past collided with the present in a spectacle of commemoration and celebration. S.E.K.Mqhayi Day, as it was popularly referred to in both recital and song, was celebrated to honour the great nineteenth and early twentieth century Xhosa writer and poet. Incidentally, Mqhayi had written two major literary works – *Ityala Lamawele* and *Umhluhuzi Uhintsa* – in which the proper name Hintsu figures prominently. In the shadows of what is conventionally thought of as heritage in democratic South Africa, speaker after speaker, in school item and in *iimbongi* praise, metonymically invoked the name of S.E.K.Mqhayi as a bearer of a new beginning, a preserver of language, symbol of the struggle against colonial domination and spirit behind resistance to apartheid. It was a unique staging partly because it was not packaged for the tourist gaze nor performed in anticipation of ethnographic interception. The commemoration, in sharp contrast to the cathartic objectives of monumentalisation, is specifically directed at claiming the past for a politics, identity or

²⁰ David Lloyd “Nationalisms Against the State: Towards a Critique of Anti-Nationalist Prejudice, p.257

community in the present so as to limit the possibility of other claims being made on that past – even this one.

22 August, then, confounded the field of history by placing the past in the present where it chafed against the priorities of a contemporary predicament rather than being caught up in the exegesis of memory. Within the framework of commemoration, the past in the figure of S.E.K. Mqhayi, revealed both the novelty and also the burden of its form. Mqhayi was recuperated in the name of culture and in the efforts of the nation (*emigudwini yeSizwe*). The conflation of nation and culture raised its own problems in the space of the commemoration. The resolution, it may be argued, was far from satisfactory in that culture became reducible to identity. In failing to sufficiently problematise the distinction between culture and nation, Mqhayi emerged as a metaphor for national identity – part of a lineage of popular figures from Hintsá down to the present inserted into a politics of cultural preservation.

The recuperation of Mqhayi in August 1999, I wish to argue, differed considerably from the recuperation of Hintsá in the writing of Samuel Mqhayi, that went under the heading *Ityala Lamawele*, in September 1914. In his brief introduction to the trial of the twins, Mqhayi too expressed concern for the marginalisation of Xhosa culture in the face of ‘enlightenment’ from the west. For Mqhayi, it is everyone’s responsibility to ensure that Xhosa culture does not vanish. Simultaneously, however, it is claimed that *Ityala Lamawele* is an attempt to prove that Xhosa law is not different to the law of the ‘enlightened countries’. In the play of difference and sameness, the question that confronts us is whether there is a way in which we may read the literary text of Mqhayi as a work of criticism. There is no indication that Mqhayi was responding directly to official colonial narrations of Hintsá nor that *Ityala Lamawele* strives specifically to be a work of history. In fact *Ityala Lamawele* draws its central plot from a biblical story contained in Genesis, a point perhaps attributable to its author’s missionary training. The only hint we have that Mqhayi may have been critical of South African history is the following biographical detail from A.C. Jordan, who notes:

...during the few years Mqhayi’s views on South African history and how it should be taught had undergone such modification that he found himself compelled either to be false to his own convictions and teach history as the authorities would have him teach it, or to give up teaching altogether. He decided on the latter. (1973,106)

From this brief insight it may be possible to treat Mqhayi’s forays into the arena’s of culture as attempts to contest dominant historical narratives. The form of that contestation, bearing the traces of the ‘psychic impact of domination’ [Lloyd 259], and its subsequent

appropriation in a more recent politics of opposition is perhaps what best marks Mqhayi's writings as belonging to the category of insurgent nationalism. It is this tension between form and appropriation that I wish to exploit and that I hope to work back into a sense of nationalist history in what follows.

Clifford Dikeni treats *Ityala Lamawele* as an extended metaphor.²¹ He argues that its allegorical mode may be read as a refutation and rejection of the misconceptions that missionaries and colonialists had about Black people. Thus, while *Ityala Lamawele* seems to be dealing with a legal squabble between twins, Wele and Babini, about who the rightful heir to Vuyisele may be, Dikeni argues that the story contains the subterranean hints of a deeper critique of colonisation. One indication of this is narrative style, which as Dikeni suggests defies western narrative conventions in that characters are merely incidental to the plot. Unfortunately, what is neglected in the proposed reading by Dikeni – marred as it is by a certain functionalist attitude – is that the idea of a subterranean critique of colonisation and the recuperation of a semblance of culture embody two discrepant operations – a practice of criticism on the one hand and a claim to identity on the other. It is unlikely that the two operations of reading can proceed simultaneously without reducing the texts critical potential to a bland statement of opposition. The difficulty it seems is that there is a tension between what David Lloyd calls Oedipalisation (the necessary condition for the critique of colonisation) and the establishment of difference necessary for the construction of an identity of a nation (the conditions of what Said, amongst others, calls filiation). The former, it seems, best corresponds to Lloyd's notion of a progressive moment of nationalism, although he develops this point by joining Fanon's distinction between people and elite. Importantly, though, Lloyd invites us to reconsider nationalism's inscription into modernity as a process that is both complex and entangled in the forms of its self-representation.

Much has been said in favour of reading Mqhayi's work within the general framework of a politics of filiation. Whether in the commemorative text of August 1999, or in the work of Dikeni or in the proclamation of Mqhayi as the *imbongi* of the nation by A.C. Jordan in the 1960s, Mqhayi's writings are often seen in the terms of rescuing and sustaining a concept of nation that is linguistically and ritually defined. And while *Ityala* is generally read as an oppositional text to colonisation, very little attention, if any, is given to the form of nationalism's progressive moment – the moment, in other words, of criticism. In reading the text as a work of criticism – which by extension is to participate in its critical practice – we may encounter the

²¹ Clifford Dikeni, "An Examination of the Socio-Political Undercurrents in Mqhayi's Novel

forms through which colonial historiography was problematised and the ways in which Hintsá was inserted into a contrasting framework of memory.

Let us begin, as is customary practice in literary analysis, with a brief synopsis of the plot. The story relates the struggle between two brothers, Wele and Babini, each seeking to lay claim to being the heir of their deceased father, Vuyisele. The point of irresolution leads to the case being transferred to an imbizo, constituted under the auspices of the king, Hintsá. At first the case seems to be a simple one of establishing who is the older of the twins, and therefore the rightful (read customary) heir. However, as the deliberations progress, we are introduced to a level of intense difficulty. Wele, who is alleged to be the younger of the two, given that he was delivered after Babini, claims to be the heir on the grounds of: a) receiving *inquithi* (a ritual cutting of a finger of a first born), b) exchanging an *inkwili* (bird) for the heirship when the twins were younger, c) being circumcised before Babini and d) for looking after his father's house and everything in it. Babini's counter-claim is that he is the heir because he was the first to be delivered from his mother's womb.

Hintsá summons several witnesses to testify on the matter, including the midwives who delivered the twins, the headman of the clan, elderly experts on questions of custom and so forth. Each, in turn, acknowledges the complexity and uniqueness of the case. Throughout, Hintsá offers an attentive ear (recall the mutilation of the ear by Smith's forces), listening carefully and seldom intervening in the unfolding case. Having heard all the arguments and advice, claims and counter-claims, Hintsá offers his verdict. He points out that the conflict is not one that can be resolved in favour of one of the claimants and that the brothers should seek reconciliation and work together in ensuring the upkeep of Vuyisile's legacy.

Writing in 1914, in the immediate aftermath of the formation of the South African National Native Congress, the *aporia* that gives rise to a reconciliatory – if not patriarchal – closure of the story could be seen as an argument for an identitarian unity that extended beyond the definitions of Xhosaness. It is indeed surprising, if not unfortunate, that such conclusions have been omitted in contemporary interpretations of the text. On the contrary, most commentators have seen in this reconciliation the genesis of precisely the identity of a 'Xhosa nation'. However, while nationalism sets out to reclaim history as a crucial element to its claim to identity, it simultaneously sets out to join the game of defining a modernist destiny. One difference of course is that nationalism casts the grey space between origins and destinies as a difficulty that is in part

generated by the interruption of colonial domination – an interruption that calls into being the process of Oedapalisation.

If, therefore, we shift registers – and by extension reading strategies – in the direction of a productive reading of the text (what Althusser might call a symptomatic reading), we may arrive at a very different analysis of the reconciliatory conclusion provided for by Mqhayi. At one level, Mqhayi rescues Hintsá from colonial productions of event-history and strategically relocates him in the story of origins. Since colonial memory and its secularisation increasingly came to be associated with notions of the event, and since it monopolised the story of progress, any attempt to reconstitute history had to take account of lost origins – the sign of the nameless womb that spawned Babini and Wele in this instance. It is a familiar and recurring theme in the work of Mqhayi and Tiyo Soga – the latter who had devoted considerable attention to the life of Sarhili, Hintsá's son. In some respects the return to origins must be treated as a response to the insufficiency of colonial history by invoking the category of the idyllic pre-colonial. Historians have often critiqued this view for its overt romanticism – a critique that says very little of Europe's originary romances – or for its historicist implications. To claim the return to origins for critiques of romanticisation and historicism, is, in my view, to neglect the ways in which origins are crucial for a story of identity and necessary for pointing to the insufficiency of the temporal plot of colonial rule. The notion of origin is freed from history as progress and re-deployed in the affirmation of difference.

Edward Said identifies similar tendencies in the poetics of Yeats under the label of 'nativism'. Although Said critiques this nativist tendency for its pursuit of a pre-colonial essence, he nevertheless argues that it:

re-inforces the distinction (between ruler and ruled) by revaluating the weaker or subservient partner. And it has often led to compelling but often demagogic assertions about a native past, history, or actuality that seems to stand free not only of the coloniser but of worldly time itself.²²

An important qualification in Said's approach to the question of nativism is that he finds, in the articulation of essence, an interruption and an unsettling of what is referred to as worldly (read secular) time. Read against the backdrop of *Ityala*, we may go on to say, with Said, that while Babini's claim highlights the insufficiency of the coloniser's story of progress, it simultaneously, approaches the search for origins as not wholly adequate through invoking the

²² Edward Said, "Yeats and Decolonisation" *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* p.82

figures of Wele and Hintsá. It is in the latter that we find the enabling conditions for transcending the nativist impasse and the inauguration of the process of Oedapalisation.

Babini's claim, which allows for the conditions of existence, in other words, proves insufficient in providing for the enabling conditions of resistance. The metaphor of the womb must therefore, be suspended temporarily in Mqhayi's writing to deal with the interruption that colonisation represents. At the same time it emerges in Mqhayi's writings as an enabling desire. Stated otherwise, desire must operate as an excess that enables the transcendental quest.

The controversy between Wele and Babini, then, might be the sign that marks the inadequacy of history in enabling a politics of the future. This is possibly why Babini's claim to be the first to be delivered from the womb is not jettisoned but placed alongside the patriarchal responsibility that issues from the character of Wele. The competitive spirit of firsts – displayed in the ambitions of Alexander, Andrews and Smith discussed earlier – is rendered insufficient in Mqhayi's writings. Instead, it is the combination of this competitive spirit with the demand for responsibility (Wele) that produces the ethical subject of history. In the end Ityala Lamawele may be read as a text which rescues justice from the monopoly of truth and relocates it in the realm of ethics. Ityala Lamawele displaces the work of memory, which produced the categories of real dangers and the figure of history in colonial narratives, and recasts the subject of history as the subject of ethics rather than that subject described in the familiar terms of hero and villain.

The silent and measured figure of Hintsá is symptomatic of the quest between Wele and Babini. To Hintsá is given the task of a just resolution to the conflict and it is to justice that the attributes of listening and reconciliation are assigned. The figure of Hintsá issues wisdom that reconciles the origin of essences to a politics of the future. As a consequence, the temporal and figural referents of colonial narratives are thereby provisionally reconstituted in the writing of Mqhayi. In the process of re-writing, a certain displacement occurs in which the secular project of history is confronted with a transcendental desire.

That desire is precisely what enabled a reconstitution of positions of engagement, often extending beyond the parameters of a national debate to engage trans-Atlantic diasporic intellectual projects. Three years after the publication of Ityala Lamawele, S.M. Molema, a contemporary of Mqhayi, offered a presidential address to the African Races Association of Glasgow and Edinburgh in 1917 titled "Possibilities and Impossibilities". Published in 1920 as part of a larger collection of essays under the title *Bantu Past and Present*, the paper is a vehement critique of the appropriation of a philosophical concept of progress by racial science

and anthropology. Without resorting to polemic, Molema painfully highlights the pitfalls of racial science, that was engrossed in establishing the reasons for what it termed Black inferiority as a product of biological disposition or environmental and historic reasons. For Molema, the debate denied the possibility of what he terms the improvement of the black man. The tactic he deploys is to claim a space in the story of progress without surrendering to the terms of debate proffered by racial science. Molema rescues the idea of progress from racial science and relocates it in the realms of “philosophic history”. Two points are crucial here. Firstly, we have the general argument, in Molema’s articulation, that the Black man is capable of progress. Secondly, progress is defined by variable movements in history away from the past and towards a present and a future [“it is by a sufficient acquaintance with the past, and also with the present, that the future can be, in a measure, foreshadowed”]. It was therefore necessary to reclaim progress as a possibility for nationalist writers like Molema. In his conclusion to his public address, Molema identifies the key distinction in the deployment of the trope of progress, which will prove consequential for the subsequent narrative of decolonisation:

It is a law of all scientific investigations to presume a uniformity and orderly sequence in phenomena that are being observed, whether these be physical, chemical or biological. It is a basic, fundamental principle, an axiom and a law of philosophical history – in its inquiry into the social, moral, or intellectual evolution of man-to presuppose human progress and human perfectibility, throughout humanity, even though the visible progress may be haphazard, irregular, desultory, and zigzag; even though it may be full of failings and falterings. The underlying principle is – what one man can do, another can generally do also; what one nation can achieve, another nation can also achieve.²³

The failure to attend to the structural logic of History, and its complicity in various systems of domination, meant that nationalism was limited to the thematic of Europe’s story of progress. It was left with little option but to play the game of catch-up. But before surrendering to the depressing conclusion of nationalisms entrapment in the logic of colonialism, we must draw attention to the openings that nationalism established within its concept of the present.

V

The present is perhaps, in part, an unspecifiable referential category because it is always the site of excess. Excess in turn hinges on the ways in which memory or transcendental desire impinge on the category of the present. The present, to license tautology, is always also absent. In this framing, we must reformulate Benedetto Croce’s claim that all history is contemporary

²³ SM Molema, *Bantu Past and Present*, p. 335.

history and that history is the knowledge of the eternal present.²⁴ Rather, as postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak suggests, history may also be the subject of a vanishing present.

Within colonial secularisation of memory and the anticoloniality of nationalism, incursions into the regions of history were explicitly marked by an embattled concept of the present. However, it is in the frameworks of nationalism that we encounter the aporia marked out by the competing claims of memory and transcendental desire. If colonial memory is marked by the projection of the present into the past, nationalist memory is distinguished by the projection, to paraphrase Heidegger, of the most imaginary part of the present into the past.²⁵

Contrary to both the psychoanalytic reading of Octavio Mannoni (performed in relation to the Malagasy revolt of 1947, which held that people are colonised because they suffer from an unresolved dependence complex) and the condition that South African psychoanalyst, Wulf Sachs, names Hamletism, the psychoanalytic resolution to the unresolved Oedipal complex, attributed to colonial domination, is unsettled by the projection of the imaginary part of the present into past. In both Mannoni and Sachs's, we are returned to the determinations of memory as the only game for nationalism to play. However, when read in relation to Heidegger's intervention, we may argue that nationalism substitutes memory with the imaginary invention (memorial), not fundamentally of the community but of the figure of history.

Mqhayi's poem U-Umhlekhazi Uhintsa prepared in 1936 and published in 1937 by Lovedale Press to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the killing of Hintsa, however, will rejoin all those familiar themes that once defined the mime of colonial memory: the time of history and the figure of history. It is here that nationalism's transcendental desire reveals itself as a catachrestic repetition of categories central to the colonial story we have come to call Eurocentrism.

Mqhayi's poem consists of a thirty-five line introduction, followed by seven sections ranging in length from twenty one to sixty-five lines addressed to the British, the Ngwane, the Thembu, the Bomvana, the Zulu, the Mfengu and the royal Xhosa house.²⁶ The appeal is to remembrance of Hintsa as the centenary of Hintsa's death approaches in 1935.

²⁴ Le Goff, *History and Memory*, p.107.

²⁵ Le Goff, *History and Memory*, p.111

²⁶ Jeff Opland *Xhosa Oral Poetry*, p.256. [The translation that follows is drawn from Opland. Thanks to Siyabonga Ndebe for checking the translation against the original version].

The days have come! The days have come!
 The days of the remembrance of Hintsá have come.
 This Hintsá belongs to the Khawuta of Gcaleka
 This Gcaleka belongs to Phalo of Tshiwo,
 This Tshiwo belongs to Ngonde of Togu
 One hundred years have passed since he died,
 But he is still saying great things to the nations of the world

.....
 The days of The Grumbling of Nobutho have come;
 The Treader of the land till it becomes a floor.
 The Welcomer of different nations,
 The Home of different races,

The Father of different homeless wanderers.
 Praise Hintsá, nations of the world!
 You British, why are you so silent?
 What is it, you Mfengu?
 Bomvana, I hope you are not forgetting,
 Even you Sotho of Qhudeni,
 Can you be so silent on Hintsá's day?
 When we are talking about his prime?

.....
 [An address to the Ngwane]

Ross's son says you should build a Memorial.
 I say Ross's son Bringer of Reform!
 Leopard's Face was saying it himself,-
 The white chief of Gcalekaland.
 They said Mfengu and Xhosa unite!
 And organise Hintsá's Memorial Service.
 And organise a great ceremonial feast,
 So that he should never be forgotten in Xhosaland,
 So that his good name should remain forever,
 Which is also inscribed in European books.
 Peace, European gentlemen!
 You are trying to incite us though we are old men,
 Old Xhosa men who need to be cooled down.
 Peace, nations, for, mentioning you!
 It's not spite but glorification.
 Khawuta's son should have his own day,-
 He should be acknowledged by the whole of Africa,
 Because they have learned about the white man from him,-
 The nations benefitted, he was blunted.

Without reducing Mqhayi's poem to the status of a manifesto nor to claim undue expertise in the field of literary theory, I wish to call attention to certain features crucial to exploring the outcomes of the reconciliatory dynamics of Ityala Lamawele. The first of these is drawn from Jeff Opland's analysis, which calls attention to the uses of eulogy and narrative in the poem. In the case of eulogy, Opland contests Jordan's earlier analysis, which holds that the poem

is lacking in unity, thereby failing in its epic aspirations. Opland, however, suggests that the unity be read in relation to the praise for Hintsá and the obligation of each of the constituencies addressed to preserve the memory of the king. He then contrasts this aspect of the poem with the narrative dimensions addressed to the Ngwane and Mfengu for example, in which the need to memorialise Hintsá is mobilised as a metonym for unity in the present.

The figure of history is firmly in place here – a throwback to the popular nineteenth century didactic mode of history as biography. But the subtle contrast of memory and memorial that Opland alludes to is suggestive of a reconciliation that is not only internally contrasted in the poem. Read in relation to the earlier Ityala Lamawele, we could say that the reconciliation between Babini and Wele is transposed into the later twentieth century as providing the contours of the idea of an inclusive (read representative) nation while proclaiming the present as a site of escaping the divisive past. More appropriately, though, the demands of eulogy and narrative impose competing claims on the reading of the poem. If eulogy builds on the theme of unity [Praise Hintsá, nations of the world/], the narrative components of the poem pave the way for an entry into the story that goes by the name of Europe [he should be acknowledged by the whole of Africa/ Because they have learned about the white man from him/ The nations benefited, he was blunted/].

What, we may ask, has been learnt about the white man from the demise of Hintsá? Which nations benefited when “he was blunted”? Should these lines be read as a negation or an affirmation of the trajectory charted by the West? The repetition – that of the filial relationship - contained in the eulogy leads me to conclude that Mqhayi’s tribute to Hintsá is an attempt to confirm the general contours of a present defined in terms of an inclusive nation, one “Which is also inscribed in European books”. The sense of the pessimism that I attribute to the narrative components of the poem is of course difficult to explain. I must temporarily defer historical explanation until further research. However, it could be provisionally argued from my reading of the poem that memorialisation did not only resurrect the central tenets of secular history, it also marshalled the story of nationalism towards the obvious conclusions established in the wake of Europe’s colonial dominance. The commemoration of Hintsá in 1935 was the site of Europe’s re-inscription as the destiny of all of humanity. It is, in short, the triumph of recurrency, the inescapable cunning of reason. If as Partha Chatterjee argues, nationalism proves inadequate for the cunning of reason, then we could say that that failure is idiomatically expressed in the work of

memorialisation couched in historicist terms.²⁷ Sande Cohen suggests that historicism attempts to achieve a cultural ‘timeless time’, an image which holds together categories such as origin and result.²⁸ Historicism, she argues further, renders an image of an unavoidable presentation handed down by ‘history’ which braids past, present, and future in the here and the now.

Once sanctioned, historicism would allow for an endless refashioning of the figure of history, even lending itself to the most reactionary and dangerous forms of nationalist articulation. Five years after the publication of Umhlekezi U-Hintsa, the king would be mobilised once more against the British, but this time, worked into the inaugural story of Afrikaner nationalism: the Great Trek. In 1943, on the eve of the ascendancy of Afrikaner nationalism, Professor C.J. Uys published a series of articles in the popular Afrikaans magazine, *Huisgenoot*, proposing a revision of the standard historiography of the killing of Hintsa. Uys claimed that with the discovery of new sources, such as Shepstone’s diary and previously undisclosed letters by D’Urban, it was possible to glean the consequences of the war of 1835 in prompting the Great Trek and to disclose the huge British cover up that followed the killing.

Presented as an alternative account of the event of the killing of Hintsa to that produced by Theal and Cory, Uys proceeds to tell his version of events in four parts under the headings: “Die Moord Op Hintsa”, “Die Inval in Gcalekaland”, “In Die Britse Lokval”, “Die Tragedie Loop Ten Einde”. Much of the story that Uys presents, turns on the prejudice of British soldiers towards their Afrikaner counterparts and on proving that the British were liars. The basic thesis is that the Sixth Frontier War dramatically transformed the Great Trek from a scattered sentiment to a politically cohesive action.

The colonial and nationalist texts of memory generally share a commitment to historicism, even though an insurgent nationalism purports otherwise. In turn, historicism reduces the debate on the past and the present to the lexicon of truths and lies. Reading in a framework of historicism - in terms, that is, of a linear view – is to envisage a past incessantly re-worked to sustain a political claim in the present. Thus, we would have to acknowledge that Hintsa is re-inscribed into a nineteenth century present in the language of secularisation, into a twentieth century insurgent nationalism as a founding figure of a re-imagined nation and as an inaugural figure of Afrikaner nationalism. Read within the general frameworks of a history of problematics,

²⁷ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986) p.17.

²⁸ Katherine Kearns *Psychoanalysis, Historiography and Feminist Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.119.

we are confronted with the constitution of the present as the site of an escape from the past, which in the case of nationalist narration, is disappointingly reconciled in a historicist story in which Europe, once more, served as the primary referent.

VI

Public History sets itself the general task of establishing a break with nationalist and colonial texts of memory by setting to work on systems of representation. In so doing, it relegates the usurpation of memory in the fields of historicism to a secondary effect. Public History distances itself from one version of historicism – characterised by a linear view of time susceptible to an essential section into a present at any moment – by establishing distance through an emphasis on the mediations that intercede between the historian and totality.

Throughout this paper I have attempted to shift the work of public history towards the general task of problematics. I have proceeded by dehistoricising the colonial and nationalist texts of memory by asking it to account for its articulation of the concept of the present. I have attempted to interrupt the ‘timeless time’ of historicisms “present” by alluding to what Ian Hacking calls the historicism of ‘taking a look’ (an idea he connects to Foucault’s notion of history of the present) without sacrificing the historicism of undoing (of which Hacking unfortunately remains suspicious).²⁹ In this respect Althusser’s concept of the problematic has proved most important:

the problematic is not a world-view. It is not the essence of the thought of an individual or epoch which can be deduced from a body of texts by an empirical, generalising reading; it is centered on the absence of problems and concepts within the problematic as much as their presence; it can therefore only be reached by a symptomatic reading on the model of the Freudian analyst’s reading of his patients utterances.³⁰

In the case of public history, that absent problem is the very one of “the present”. By passing through the texts of colonial and nationalist memory, I have attempted to show that nationalism’s failure rests not with establishing distance but rather issues from its failure to pursue the project of a discursive displacement of the project of historicism. It is in this context that I have recalled postcolonial theory’s demand for a politics of strategic criticism. Partha Chatterjee specifies the tasks that go under this heading by claiming that whereas Kant, speaking

²⁹ Ian Hacking “Two Kinds of New Historicisms for Philosophers” Ralph Cohen and Michael Roth (eds) *History and...Histories Within the Human Sciences* (University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1995) pp.296-330.

³⁰ Louis Althusser *Reading Capital* transl. Ben Brewster (Verso, 1997) p.316

at the founding moment of western modernity, looks at the present as the site of one's escape from the past, for the postcolonial subject it is precisely the present from which we feel we must escape.³¹ A politics of reading – a work [in] progress in other words - it seems is indispensable to establishing routes of such an escape; not from the past but from the present. Representation alone is insufficient in the critique of colonialism. In order to establish difference with the historicist outcomes of nationalist discourse, public history may have to mark the present not as a secure ground but as an imperfect tense. This calls for a history *of* the present and not, as nationalism ended up, a history *in* the present.

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³¹ Partha Chatterjee, "Our Modernity" Sefhis-Codesria Lecture 1, 1997.