

The Antinomies and Possibilities of 'Radical' Historical Consciousness: The Case of Three South African Playtexts in English

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In an appropriately titled essay, 'Dreams of Home: Colonialism and Postmodernism', Ian Baucom theorises the phenomenon of *identity* as dependent on its repeatability. Rejecting the myth of 'unitary origin' expressed in colonial discourse of English-ness, he constructs the English identity as 'dis-unified',

gesturing rather desperately, towards a myth of unitary origin. An origin that in colonial space can only define itself as a lack, as a defining absence. Reaching back across the sea, the petit-european's identity is split as it returns its gaze to an image of home. An image that ... can neither be original by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it, nor identical—by virtue of the difference that it defines. Consequently the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative, and its articulation as repetition and difference (Baucom 1991:7).

An incident takes place in Credo Mutwa's *UNosilimela*, which reminds us that the act of reconstructing 'homely' identities is at once an act of manufacturing evidence to compensate for the 'loss' of home to the world—a condition that feeds to sustain a feeling of 'unhomeliness' in one's 'home'. There is an almost pervasive insistence, in this text, on a notion of difference that does not differentiate, on a racial hierarchy that is not racist. Reading *UNosilimela*, one is constantly struck by a sense in which the terrain the text maps, deploys and ultimately claims as the final order of (racial) cosmologies

and geographies, reminds us that the subject of the dream is in fact the dreamer. The African geography and subject that in the text is supposed to re-emerge from the rubble of self-destructive European technology is, it seems to me, effectively a manufactured product of sexual and quasi-ideo(bio)logical labour. We see Nosilimela, the protagonist, guided through the textual landscape by an 'erect phallus', that is at the same time meant to remind her of her 'roots', her African-ness.

In the text, Nosilimela leaves what the text constructs as the warmth of her home in the land of the AmaQhashi for the city, because she could not, as she says, stand the 'tribal stuffiness' of country life. She becomes involved with the Roman Catholic Church as a 'highly qualified school teacher'. After serving in this church, we are told, 'she became dangerously ill, partly due to a *feeling of guilt and confusion that boiled from the depths of her soul*' (e.a.), and was admitted at Baragwanath Hospital for treatment. She was subsequently thrown out of the hospital because she refused to be treated by doctors whom she overheard discussing, 'for all the world to know', the symptoms of her illness, 'as if they were discussing the symptoms of a sick and mindless animal' (Mutwa 1985:14).

There is a very specific case about *identity* (and, more especially, an African identity) the text is implicitly making here, which is that it can be fixed eternally on the 'tablet' of an imagined biological peculiarity of an African subject, despite forces which disrupt its homogeneity and immobility. It is my assumption that Nosilimela, after her contact with the Roman Catholic Church, remains undeniably African. To me, however, this is a subject position more than it is an essence, because the significance of the contact is that it makes a return to a pristine, historical African identity a fanciful wish. In fact, more than it (the contact) enables a questioning of the possibility of a return to this unified African identity, it actually puts into question the very notion of a pre-colonial African identity: sexless, classless, ageless, contextless. In Freudian terms, this wish is often expressed and fulfilled in the image of the mirror, which foregrounds reflection and repeatability. Language, which offers itself as a substitute for the mirror, is seen to be able not only to represent but, also, to re-present.

What justifies this assumption of a repeatable 'native' identity in *UNosilimela*, is the space within which it is to be repeated, which remains visibly (but not conceptually) African. Theorising a similar spatial dependence of identity, Kwame Appiah (1993:15) considers the case of the ancient Greeks and Greece in the following terms:

Thus Hippocrates in the fifth century BC in Greece seeking to explain the (supposed) superiority of his own people to the peoples of (Western) Asia by arguing that the barren soils of Greece had forced the Greeks to become tougher

and more independent. Such a view attributes the characteristics of a people to their environment, leaving open the possibility that their descendants could change, if they moved to new conditions.

The amaQhashi in *UNosilimela* are, by comparison, portrayed as a superior people. Their superiority derives from the same notion of adaptability in an environment protected by the ancient gods. This adaptability in the play is given a socio-historical dimension, so that the environment, as in the case of the Greeks, is historicised. But the text's spatial and conceptual matrices are closed to the possibilities of future 'migration', in that the conceptual is in the text determined by the original African space. The play, it should be recalled, bestrides two conceptual and spatial epochs in the history of South Africa. A recognition of this seemingly unimportant factor, enables a reading of the perceptual field in which the African 'native' identity is constructed, as thoroughly lacking, if not accompanied by, its conceptual pole. The text could, outside this equation, be read as an essentialisation of space as determining the nature of African identity. Put differently, the emergence of a contending geography in what was thought to be a unified geo-political landscape, challenges the 'exilic' trope (with its rhetoric of loss) that in the text accompanies a reading of the protagonist.

If the *postcolonial* is theorised as that condition which obtains immediately once contact is made with what was termed 'foreign'—foreign culture, identity, landscape—then an act of proclaiming, or even of suggesting, one's African-ness is an act of displacement. It is, moreover, a defensive nationalism, for 'loss' (as is 'exile') is an increasingly unhelpful term in conceptualising the postcolonial African identity. *Nosilimela*'s wanderings in the city are couched in terms of this sense of loss: loss of identity, of (traditional) morals. As it has been already pointed out, the implications of the male gaze (which guides the movements of *Nosilimela* almost throughout), for what could finally be characterised as African are too vast and complex to be underestimated. If this gaze functions both as agent and antagonist through which this sense of loss is given expression throughout the text, then how can one avoid seeing this Africanity as primarily gendered, despite the textual desire to remain neutral? Firstly, *Nosilimela* meets Alpheus Mafuza who marries her and leaves her for a 'rich man's daughter' in Johannesburg. Next she finds herself before the court of a Xhosa headman, accused of being a 'Tshaka' (a Zulu). On denying her identity, she is accused of 'being oversexed', and is ordered into the headman's bed. She escapes into an initiate's hut, and is dragged before Njendala, 'the Phondo *inkosi* (chief), who finally rapes her, on the advice of his wives, to cure his sexual impotence. Returning, for a brief spell, to the land of the Zulus, she is cursed eternally by old Zulu women who

symbolically turn their backs on her (it should be remembered that in traditional [patriarchal] Zulu culture, old women are given the status often reserved for men, as they are no longer capable of becoming mothers). She migrates to northern Natal and becomes a 'highly qualified school teacher' in the Roman Catholic Church, and finally falls ill with an inexplicable disease, except that she says to an old woman:

my ancestral spirits are angry with me for having forsaken them and become a Christian Each Sunday I have to undergo a ritual in church, the ritual of symbolically eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the son of the whiteman's God. Each time I do this, I *feel* a traitor to my people and I *feel* as though every one of my ancestors has turned his back on me (e.a.) (Mutwa 1985:34).

It is this *feeling* which finally lands her in Baragwanath hospital, having fallen 'dangerously ill, partly due to the *feeling* of guilt and confusion that boiled from the depths of her soul' (Mutwa 1985:35). What accompanies the text's construction of Nosilimela's 'true' African identity here, is what David van Schalkwyk (1990:45) terms a 'Pathetic Cartesianism' (I feel, therefore I am). However, the point I made earlier about the male gaze that partly constructs this identity needs to be elaborated. It is because there is enough evidence to support a contention that this identity is less justified by African imperatives than it is by those male African values which define femininity as a 'lack' or 'lag' along the continuum of gender power relations. That Nosilimela is utilised by the text as antagonist against which a 'true' African identity could be distilled from its western 'other', especially where the phallic symbolism is *erected* as redeemer and reinforcer of true (masculine) Africanity, extends the terms of debate to include gender and power. Nosilimela is not a sexless African. She is as much a woman as she is an African. This might not have been so obvious if the text had employed agents other than those exclusively male and clearly machoistic to advance its desire to Africanise the African landscape, for this landscape transcends the unifying rhetoric of masculine Africanity.

It seems appropriate at this stage to turn to a more detailed analysis of the text, as typical of Black Consciousness (BC) discourses on colonialism with its attempt to dispose of the African space. Let us, however, recall once more that discourses of BC in South Africa in the seventies—and this includes literary discourses—spoke in many and diverse voices, so that *UNosilimela* remains typical of some but not representative of all. Robert Kavanagh (1985:xx), who collected and introduced four plays in a book in which this play appears, observes that

though Mutwa's reverence for the African past and its values is part of what contemporary Black Consciousness is about, Mutwa's rejection of the modern

city, its technology and its children in favour of a mystical paradise presided over by a religious hierarchy, stamps him both as a romantic visionary and a conservative.

Similarly, Piniel Shava observes that the play endorses a 'backward-looking and utopian' social vision. He further argues that at the time the play was written

contemporary black society [had] become so proletarianized and urbanized that a return to the past that Mutwa postulates is impracticable and defeatist (Shava 1989:131).

These two observations, apart from the fact that they may too simply encourage an essentially historicist view of pre-colonial reconstruction, in the Enlightenment sense of history as progress, find 'modernity' decisively immediate to be dispensed with *carte blanche*. For Kavanagh, it is this very act of dispensing with modern reality that renders the playtext, contrary to its contemporary BC conception of the African colonial space, romantic and conservative. Kavanagh here implies Biko's argument that a 'pre-Van Riebeeck' conception of African culture is limited and limiting. Biko (1987:41) continues to argue that

Obviously the African culture has had to sustain severe blows and may have been battered out of shape by the belligerent cultures it collided with, yet in essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African. Hence in taking a look at African culture I am going to refer as well to what I have termed the modern African culture.

But anti-colonial discourses, whether in the shape of *UNosilimela* (professing a return to an unmediated pre-coloniality) or 'Some African Cultural Concepts' (Biko) and *Return To The Source* (Cabral) (promoting a nationalisation of 'progressive' cultures), have been overtaken by the notion of *hybridity*. Here, nostalgia, whether for the past or for the present, is suspect, precisely because it produces immobility and a false, if not rigidly mobile binarism. In Mutwa's case, the past is historicised as a resource for a general conception of social change, which means a literal going back to the past. In Biko's and Cabral's notions of the past, pre-colonial and colonial identities are frozen within their respective historical spaces, with the express hope that both can stand or fall depending on how each contributes to a single, incorporated African national identity. Hence the mention of 'pure African culture in the present day' in Biko.

In his essay, 'The Fall of the Legislator' Zygmunt Bauman, rejects the rational Enlightenment idea of history which pits the West as eventful and

Africa and the once-colonised world as historyless (even that which pits the Western elite against its 'uneducated' and 'unenlightened' counterparts). In an elaborated critique of the (il)logic of Enlightenment modernity, he observes that

As if following Marx's methodological precept about using the anatomy of man as the key to the anatomy of ape, the educated elite used its own mode of life, or the mode of life of that part of the world over which it presided (or thought it presided), as the benchmark against which to measure and classify other forms of life—past or present—as retarded, underdeveloped, immature, incomplete or deformed, maimed, distorted and otherwise inferior stages or versions of itself. Its own form of life, ever more often called 'modernity', came to denote the restless, constantly moving pointer of history; from its vantage point, all other known or guessed forms appeared as past stages, side-shoots or cul-de-sac. The many competing conceptualisations of modernity, invariably associated with a theory of history, agreed on one point: they all took the form of life developed in parts of the Western world as a 'given', 'unmarked' unit of the binary opposition which relativized the rest of the world and the rest of historical times as the problematic, 'marked' side, understandable only in terms of its distinction from the Western pattern of development, taken as normal. The distinction was seen first and foremost as a set of absences—as a lack of the attributes deemed indispensable for the identity of most advanced age.

One such conceptualization of history as the unstoppable march of *les Lumières*; a difficult, but eventually victorious struggle of Reason against emotions or animal instincts, science against religion and magic, truth against prejudice, correct knowledge against superstition, reflection against uncritical existence, rationality against affectivity and the rule of custom. Within such a conceptualization, the modern age defined itself as, above all, the kingdom of Reason and rationality; the other forms of life were seen, accordingly, as wanting in both respects (Bauman 1993:128f).

Thus the project of the play, *UNosilimela*, is primarily to challenge this version of modernity, and serves as a corrective to what became a justification of colonialism in Africa and the rest of the colonised and once-colonised world, mainly by Britain. As Biodun Jeyifo (1993:xxix) observes of Wole Soyinka's use of myth and ritual in many of his plays and theoretical essays, similarly, *UNosilimela's*

artistic ... immersion in myth and ritual [is not] a demonstration of what Max Lerner and Edwin Mims identify as the need of literature to constantly seek renewal in 'rebarbarization'. [This is] perhaps more reflective of the perspective of a one-sided Western bourgeois 'high culture' concept of literature than the motivations of an artist whose cultural and historical circumstance and whose artistic sensibility have not been burdened with such dichotomous concepts of the 'developed' and the 'barbaric'. (And let us recall Walter Benjamin's dictum that every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism.)

It is, therefore, not so much *UNosilimela's* 're-enchantment' of the African space, to use Bauman's term, as it is *the way in which* it re-enchants it, that, to me, is the point of contention. Indeed, the way in which the text 're-enchants' the African space does need unpacking. Elaborating on his critique of Max Lerner's and Edwin Mim's critique of that literature which utilises myth to reconstruct the pre-colonial (and indeed postcolonial) African world, Jeyifo (1993:xxix) observes that

nothing gives the lie to *this* reading of Soyinka's mythopoesis, Soyinka's elaborate deployment of tropes and figurations from the myths, ritual paradigms and cultural artefacts of Africa, than the fact that what we have in his essays is not one voice, one univocal point of view but many voices, many articulations, a plurivocal, polysemic and—why not?—often contradictory discourse. Various traditionalist and modernist, pan-Africanist and liberal-humanist, individualistic and communalistic, gnostic and sceptical, unapologetically idealist and yet on occasion discreetly materialist ... [his essays] demonstrate the complexities, tensions and ambiguities of modern African literature and the discourse(s) to which it has given rise one of the greatest points of interest of these essays is that they very decisively refute what Hountondji has described as the 'artificial choice' between 'Westernization', or 'Europeanization', the 'teleology' decreed by so many African and foreign critics of modern African literature, especially those written in European languages, and its reactionary, manichean product—a naïve, simplistic, romantic 'Africanization', 'Africanity', 'Negritude', 'authenticity' or many of the appellations by which it is promoted as cultural nationalism.

How, then, does *UNosilimela* use myth as its organising structural and ideological principle against a clearly concerted ideological effort of Enlightenment modernity parading as 'progress'? Does the text, in a similar way to Soyinka's artistic and theoretical positions, demonstrate this 'plurivocality' and 'polysemicity' in its articulation of the 'being and *becoming*' of modern African identities? Or does it define its resistance within the 'given' and 'marked' Enlightenment dichotomous discourse of 'civilization' and 'barbarity', by merely reversing the terms of the opposition? How is our understanding of the construction of the past in modern history still to be disentangled from the 'reactional, manichean product—a naïve, simplistic, romantic 'Africanization', 'Africanity', 'Negritude', 'authenticity' or many of the appellations by which it is promoted as cultural nationalism?' (Jeyifo 1993:xxix). These questions demand a thorough reading of a text whose author has on various occasions claimed to be marrying, in his creative and theoretical positions, those 'upward paths of [the oppressed's] culture with 'positive contributions from the oppressors' culture' (Cabral). The text, it must be remembered, remains traversed by a number of other discourses over which the author exercises no control.

The text deploys a number of dialogues and monologues to pursue its argument for a pre-historic African world-view. This world-view, as will be evident in its confrontation with a 'different' one, must be maintained. Failure to do so is to invite the wrath of ancestral spirits, with all forms of abominations visited on dissenters. The Storyteller's opening words immediately set out a *teleology*, on the basis of which events unfold, are negotiated by and finally returned to for fulfilment. They thus serve as a basic framework within which an African identity can be distilled from its Western 'other'.

STORYTELLER: ... Man not only wondered about his mysterious origins but also about his still more mysterious end, and around this he also wove legends, one of which says that one day a woman shall grow pregnant and give birth to a mighty flame which will consume all but a very few sorry remnants of Mankind and that a girl will be born in the land of the Zulus who will be known as a child of the gods and she will take these few survivors and hide them in a great hole in the Drakensberg, which an iron giant created by a witch shall dig, until such a time as the gods decree that Man is fitted to possess the earth once more

From this cyclical cosmic structure of pre-historical Africa, emerges a 'Western' colonial cosmos, which attempts, as the text argues, to drive an ideological wedge between the legend and its fulfilment in the progress of African mankind. The following dialogue takes place on the premises of the Roman Catholic Church in northern Natal between Nosilimela and an African convert:

UNOSILIMELA: I'm looking at this book, sister. I so wish I could read and write.

SISTER: Yes, Nosilimela, that's nice. But you must be baptized first.

UNOSILIMELA: Baptized? But why should I be baptized, Sister Veronica?

SISTER: To be cleansed of Original Sin and become a Christian. If you are not baptized, when you die you will go to hell.

UNOSILIMELA: Esihogweni: [Hell?] But that cannot be true. Do you mean that all my ancestors, all the great chiefs of the past who died before the coming of Christianity, died and went to hell?

SISTER: You ask too many strange questions that I cannot answer.

From this setting they proceed to the mission chapel, where Sister Veronica shows Nosilimela pictures of Adam and Eve. Nosilimela is also attracted to the picture of the *black* devil.

SISTER: Look at this picture here. This is Adam and Eve, the first people on earth.

UNOSILIMELA: But Sister Veronica, they're white! If the first people on earth were white, where did we the black people originate? [*Sister Veronica is silent*]

Answer me, Sister Veronica, answer me as one woman answering another.

SISTER: I cannot answer. We must believe what the bible says.

UNOSILIMELA: [*still looking at the picture*]: So that's Adam and Eve. [*with sudden enthusiasm*] Sister Veronica, who's this handsome man here? But wait—why has he horns and tail? Or was his mother a cow by any chance?

SISTER: Nosilimela! That's Satan, God's worst enemy!

UNOSILIMELA: He's black! [*praising*] ... [Your parents have enough children in having you!]

He's so handsome I could fall in love with him. And you know what, Sister Veronica? He even reminds me of my dead lover [*uNosilimela dances and sings*]

SISTER [*horrified*] ... don't dance like that in the church—and don't talk to me about love!

[...]

UNOSILIMELA: I'm going to be baptized and become a Christian—for one reason only. So I can learn to read and write.

[....]

STORYTELLER: In this way did Nosilimela ka Magadlemzini of the amaQhashi become Magdalene Nosilimela Mqhashi, a member of the Roman Catholic church and thus were the doors of learning, of reading and writing, widely opened to her—at a price! And within the space of a few short years she became a highly qualified school teacher. There came a time, however, when uNosilimela became dangerously ill, partly due to the feeling of guilt and confusion that boiled from the depths of her soul. So ill in fact was she that she had to be urgently transferred to the great Baragwanath hospital in Johannesburg. She was soon thrown out of this hospital, however, because she refused to be operated on after having overheard two doctors discussing her symptoms, as some modern doctors often do, for all the world as if they were discussing the symptoms of a sick and mindless animal.

The dialogue between Sister Veronica and Nosilimela is reminiscent of a dialogue between Anund Messeh, 'one of the earliest Indian catechists', and the Indian natives in Delhi, explored by Homi Bhabha (1994:102) in his essay 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817'. Messeh

found about 500 people, men, women and children, seated under the shade of the trees, and employed, as had been related to him, in reading and conversation. He went up to an elderly looking man, and accosted him, and the following conversation passed.

Pray who are all these people? and whence come they?' 'We are poor and lowly, and we read and love this book'.—'What is that book?' 'The book of God!'—'Let me look at it, if you please'. Anund, on opening the book, perceived it to be the Gospel of our Lord, translated into Hindoostanee Tongue, many copies of which seemed to be in the possession of the party: some were PRINTED, others

WRITTEN by themselves from the printed ones. Anund pointed to the name of Jesus, and asked, 'Who is that?' 'That is God! He gave us this book'.—'Where did you obtain it?' 'An angel from heaven gave it to us, at Hurdwar fair'.—'An Angel?' 'Yes, to us he was God's Angel: but he was a man, a learned Pundit'. 'The written copies we write ourselves, having no means of obtaining more of this blessed word'.—'These books', said Anund, 'teach the religion of the European Sahibs. It is THEIR book; and they printed it in our language, for our use'. 'Ah! no', replied the stranger, 'that cannot be, for they eat flesh'.—'Jesus Christ', said Anund, 'teaches that it does not signify what a man eats or drinks. EATING is nothing before God. *Not that which entereth into a man's mouth defileth him, but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man: for vile things come forth from the heart. Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts; and these are the things that defile*'.

'That is true; but how can it be the European Book, when we believe that it is God's gift to us? He sent it to us at Hurdwar'. 'God gave it long ago to the Sahibs, and THEY sent it to us ...'.

Anund observed, 'You ought to be BAPTIZED, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Come to Meerut: there is a Christian Padre there; and he will shew (sic) you what you ought to do'. They answered, 'Now we must go home to the harvest; but as we mean to meet once a year, perhaps next year we may come to Meerut' I explained to them the nature of the Sacrament and of Baptism; in answer to which, they replied, 'We are willing to be baptized, but we will never take the Sacrament. To all the other customs of Christians we are willing to conform, but not to the Sacrament, because the Europeans eat cow's flesh, and this will never do for us'. To this I answered, 'This word is of God, and not of men; and when HE makes your hearts understand, then you will PROPERLY comprehend it'. They replied, 'If all our country will receive this Sacrament, then will we'. I then observed, 'The time is at hand, when all the countries will receive this WORD!' They replied, 'True!' (Bhabha 1994:102f).

I have decided to quote at length this dialogue, since it illustrates, with powerful subtlety, the ethnocentrism with which Enlightenment discourse addresses and authorises its imaginary native cultural space. In its desire to create, authorise and to maintain the Occident/Orient dichotomy, it is haunted by the ambivalence of its authority and of native cultural difference. Bhabha (1994:119) observes in this dialogue that

The natives' stipulation that only mass conversion would persuade them to take the sacrament touches on a tension between missionary zeal and the East India Company Statutes for 1814 which strongly advised against such proselytizing. When they make these intercultural, hybrid demands, the natives are both challenging the boundaries of discourse and subtly changing its terms by setting up another specifically colonial space of authority They change their conditions of recognition while maintaining their visibility; they introduce a lack that is then represented as a doubling of mimicry In estranging the word of God from the English medium, the natives' questions contest the logical order of the discourse of authority The natives expel the copula, or middle term, of the Evangelical

'power = knowledge' equation, which then disarticulates the structure of the God—Englishman equivalence. Such a crisis in the positionality and propositionality of colonialist authority destabilizes the sign of authority. The Bible is now ready for a specific colonial appropriation. On the one hand, its paradigmatic presence as the word of God is assiduously preserved: it is only to the direct quotations from the Bible that the natives give their unquestioning approval—'True!' The expulsion of the copula, however, empties the presence of its syntagmatic supports—codes, connotations and cultural associations that give it contiguity and continuity—that make its presence culturally and politically authoritative.

It is at this level of cultural difference that Nosilimela's conscious repudiation of mediated colonial cultural authority, in the form of the 'white' word of God, can be seen to belong to a broad spectrum of anti-colonial discourses. However, the political unconscious that animates the interplay between authority and ambivalence in the dialogue between Messeh and the Indian natives, is replaced by a deliberate political consciousness in Nosilimela's enthusiastic identification with the *black* figure of the devil. This identification represents the Black Consciousness reaffirmation of blackness as a political identity, however, at a superficial and essentialist level. What the figure of the devil represents in the context of missionary discourse is, in this identification, not repudiated, as primacy is given to the colour it bears. But the colonial stereotype of the 'other' who is unlike 'us', is in both situations disturbed, but never entirely dismissed. For it is in this disturbance that the conditionality of both absolute colonial authority and native fixity become evident in the 'hybrid demands' of Nosilimela to be baptized for 'one reason only' and the Indian natives' refusal to partake of the sacrament as long as 'all our country [does not] receive this Sacrament'.

Another specifically colonial space of authority and native presence is established, in which the 'copulae'—the English presence, the 'dark' native or 'simian' Asiatic—can only misrecognise themselves as authoritative. It is in the mutual estrangement—the Bible no longer the Englishman's book, and fixity no longer the natives' insignia—that this colonial space emerges uncertainly. If with the discovery of the (non-European) God's Book (as the narrative injunction in Messeh's encounter with the natives stipulates), 'an indifference to the distinctions of Caste soon manifested itself; and the interference and tyrannical authority of the Brahmins became more offensive and contemptible' (Bhabha 1994:103), then the Book, for Nosilimela, represents this possible space outside the authority of inherited (romantic, masculine) Africanity and of its similar colonial opposite. It is, however, not the now-popular *syncretic* platform of multiculturalism and/or interculturalism, in which all the cultures maintain their assumed internal unicity, which are then pooled into one spectrum of 'one nation, many cultures'. If the cultural *hybrid* is theorised as a postcolonial condition in which 'the

actual semblance of the authoritative symbol' is retained, then it is equally a condition in which the presence of this authoritative symbol is revalued 'by resisting it as the signifier of *Enststellung*—after the intervention of difference' (Bhabha 1994:115).

It is the power of this strange metonymy of presence so to disturb the systematic (and systemic) construction of discriminatory knowledges that the cultural, once recognized as the medium of authority, becomes virtually unrecognizable. Culture, as a colonial space of intervention and agonism, as the trace of the displacement of symbol to sign, can be transformed by the unpredictable and partial desire of hybridity. Deprived of their full presence, the knowledges of cultural authority may be articulated with the forms of 'native' knowledges or faced with those discriminated subjects that they must rule but can no longer represent. This may lead ... to questions of authority that the authorities cannot answer. Such a process is not the deconstruction of a cultural system from the margins of its own aporia nor ... the mime that haunts mimesis. The display of hybridity—its peculiar 'replication'—terrorizes authority with the *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery (Bhabha 1994:115).

'Do you mean that all my ancestors, ... who died before the coming of Christianity, died and went to hell?' (Nosilimela); 'but how can it be a European Book, when we believe that it is God's gift to us?' (Indian natives); 'If the first people on earth were white, where did we the black people originate?' (Nosilimela). Faced with these disturbing questions, which 'authority—the Bible included—cannot answer', the signifier of authority is forced to remain agonistic, and its desire to remain powerful and antagonistic is suspended. Read thus, the

hybridity of colonial authority profoundly unsettles the demand that figures at the centre of the originary myth of colonialist power. It is the demand that the space it occupies be unbounded, its reality *coincident* with the emergence of an imperialist narrative and history, its discourse *non-dialogic*, its enunciation *unitary*, unmarked by the trace of difference The paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside. In the productivity of power, the boundaries of authority—its reality effects—are always besieged by 'the other scene' of fixations and phantoms (Bhabha 1994:116).

Evidence of an antagonistic signifier of authority is not only the desire of colonial authority. It is also found in *UNosilimela*, in the text's tendency to want to explain away the colonial space. Returning to a point I hinted at earlier, the *black* figure of the devil is claimed by Nosilimela for the colour it bears, rather than for what it symbolises in the racist discourse of colonial Christianity. Here, the authority of 'blackness' as an oppositional essence, implies its colonial opposite, the authority of 'whiteness' as an authoritative

essence. Homi Bhabha observes in relation to the Indian natives' rejection of the sacrament, that 'The Word, no less theocratic than logocentric, would have certainly borne absolute witness to the gospel of Hurdwar had it not been for the rather tasteless fact that most Hindus were vegetarian!' For a similar reason, Nosilimela is reluctant to receive baptism, since 'according to our custom one does not throw water over one who is still alive'. However, beyond this, Nosilimela's position is both consciously (black) nationalist and individualist. It is this position that defines the text's romantic historical will to an unmediated past, where the discourse of history becomes reflective. Commenting on Hayden White's assertion that 'the only meaning that history can have is the kind that a narrative imagination gives to it', the *American Historical Review* (1987) goes on to observe that

The secret of the process by which consciousness invests history with meaning resides in the 'content of the form', in the way our narrative capacities transform the present into a fulfillment of a past from which we would wish to have descended.

It is, therefore, fair to argue that the forced innocence in Nosilimela's identification with the devil typifies this *conscious* displacement of colonial-missionary inscriptions of black identity as symbolic of evil, 'darkness' and of belatedness. Consciously investing the devil with a significance it might otherwise not have been afforded, were it not black, constitutes a construction of a specifically black African genealogy and renaissance. It is not, as it seeks to be read, an *unconscious* and non-absolutist, because agonistic, disturbance of the colonial absolutist pole. If Adam and Eve represent a 'white' genealogy, then the black devil (whose mother might have been a cow), must metaphorically represent a 'black' genealogy. As the text continues to demonstrate, its reconstruction of the pre-historic and pre-colonial African past is closed and non-negotiable. I have no intention here of constructing a strict division between a *conscious* and an *unconscious* interrogation of colonial authority. As Jacques Lacan points out,

You will also understand that, if I have spoken ... of the unconscious as something that opens and closes, it is because its essence is to mark that time by which, from the fact of being born with the signifier, the subject is born divided. The subject is this emergence which, just before, as subject, was nothing, but which, having scarcely appeared, solidifies into a signifier (in Davis 1983:860).

A traditional conception of consciousness (political, racial, class, gender, etc.), often closes this passage from the conscious to the unconscious (and vice versa), so that the conscious subject is seen to pre-exist ideology. Political agency is therefore seen to involve a restoration of the original

class, racial or gender status, expressed within the old relations of man/woman, black/white, African/Western oppositions. Where subjectivity and resistance have to be defined within a colonial space, as is the case in *UNosilimela*, agency needs to be re-theorised. It is no longer a 'paralytic, debilitating moment of the colonial practice', for a colonial to be 'caught in a kind of mimesis', a mimicking of 'western' cultures. In fact,

in the repetition [is] not only the transmission of the coloniser's values, but a restaging of those values that actually introduce[s] a moment of slippage, contradiction and displacement of the coloniser's position too

It is

that very process of what was often read as inferiorisation, hierarchy, that the lack which the colonial subject had to experience in relation to the metropolis, could be turned into a space of subversion, liberation and agency (Bhabha 1993:103).

Conceptualising agency thus is not 'bourgeois voluntarism', nor is it unjustified idealism. It is a conception of agency that is specific to the construction, negotiation and displacement of, (1) postcolonial subjectivity, (2) the edges of colonial and native discourses, and (3) authoritative colonial and native cultural poles, respectively. It is becoming increasingly unconvincing to insist on remaining 'Western' or 'African, for these ('racial') labels

disable us because [they] propose as a basis for common action the illusion that black (and white and yellow) people are fundamentally allied by nature and, thus, without effort, it leaves us unprepared, therefore, to handle the 'intra-racial' conflicts that arise from the very different situations of black (and white and yellow) people in different parts of the economy and of the world' (Appiah 1992:285).

If the 'international/universal/global' is conceived not as necessarily the 'pseudo-international/universal/global', it is clear, therefore, that my conception of agency does not exclude the 'discursive division between the First World and the Third World, the North and the South', in relation to which Bhabha (1994:20) observes that

Despite the claims to a spurious rhetoric of 'internationalism' on the part of the established multinationals and the networks of the new communications technology industries, such circulations of signs and commodities as there are, are caught in the vicious circuits of surplus value that link First World capital to Third World labour markets through the chains of the international division of labour, and national comprador classes in the language of international diplomacy, there is a sharp growth in a new Anglo-American nationalism which increasingly

articulates its economic and military power in political acts that express a neo-imperialist disregard for the independence and autonomy of peoples and places in the Third World. I am further convinced that such economic and political domination has a profound hegemonic influence on the information orders of the Western world, its popular media and its specialized institutions and academics What does demand further discussion is whether the 'new' languages of theoretical critique (semiotic, poststructuralist, deconstructionist and the rest) simply reflect those geopolitical divisions and their spheres of influence. Are the interests of 'Western' theory necessarily collusive with the hegemonic role of the West as a power bloc? Is the language of theory merely another power ploy of the culturally privileged Western elite to produce a discourse of the Other that reinforces its own power-knowledge equation?

For the text, it seems that a naive counter African or black nationalism, that promotes African values of sharing as opposed to capitalist greed and consumption, the closely-knit family structure as opposed to its dispersed version under a capitalist economic order, is a possible strategic politico-economic response to this 'Anglo-American nationalism'. Nationalisms, however, are notorious for their tendency to reduce difference to an oppressive *Sameness*, especially when they are as intolerant of difference as is *UNosilimela*. It is partly due to this reason that *UNosilimela*'s attempt to deploy this strategy, produces a kind of defensive nationalism that not only makes its objective impossible but, also, counter-productive. Gayatri Spivak (1987:166f) (and other post-Marxian theorists) observes that it is

in the interest of capital to preserve the comprador theatre in a state of relatively primitive labour legislation and environmental regulation.

If the AmaQhashi in *UNosilimela* represent this pre-colonial (or 'primitive') social and economic organisation, then capitalism stands to benefit from each one of them, in the form of migrant labour. Indeed Magadaphansi and Skigi (and a host of domestic workers in Johannesburg) in the text are not, as the text wishes us to read them, outcasts from the 'warmth and unity' of country life. In fact, as in all situations where the rural is maintained, literally, as a breeding site for cheap labour, these two subjects left their wives in the country. Now and then, in between their contracts, they visit them, make babies, who one day, like Nosilimela and others who have decided to stay in Johannesburg, will migrate to the sites of big capital as cheap labour. And if Magadaphansi, himself illiterate, could have his friend write him a letter to his wife, it means that the rural as a site of national difference, is no longer so. It is part of the global communication system often typical of the city. It also means that the identities of, and boundaries around, both the rural and the urban have to be rethought and redrawn in a perennial process of displacement.

If, at the end, the text introduces a nuclear holocaust, in which inexplicable bombs and explosions wipe out every living organism, save the AmaQhashi, who are saved from oblivion by the prophesy, then the 'new Africa' that is born out of the rubble is in fact the old, pre-historic, pre-colonial Africa. The accompanying anti-war symbolism with which the text closes, seems to me an attempt to construct a utopian resolution, a resolution for which the overall development of the text has not prepared the reader.

Such a utopian resolution is of course not strange to nostalgic nationalism. In fact, it is what constructs its boundaries, so that colonial incursions and the concomitant material reality they bring about, together with uncontainable internal tensions (of gender, class, age, ethnicity etc.), are lumped together as constitutive of the disruptive periphery. Realising the impossibility of maintaining this division, however, nationalism either wishes for the destruction of, or, if possible, destroys polysemicism. In *UNosilimela* it is the city of Johannesburg that is destroyed in the holocaust, while the rural community, the AmaQhashi, survive it. It is possible to argue that this incident and indeed the entire text, is part of an extended fable (with elements of 'science fiction') that has nothing to do with contemporary politics of historical representation. However, this reading would be ignoring various textual pointers to the fact that this text emerged not as a fortuitous event in black South African writing. It emerged from, and was influenced by the struggle imperatives of the same context as Maishe Maponya's *The Hungry Earth*. Neither is it an historical play in the conventional sense of the documentation of events. They both will the past's vindication, on a scale and in a manner described by Johan van Wyk in his analysis of the role of the father(land) in the construction of national identity in Afrikaans nationalist literature. In his analysis of two plays by J.F.W. Grosskopf, Van Wyk (1989:28) observes that

Through the use of psycho-analysis I have come to the conclusion that nationalism constitutes a melancholy-related guilt reaction to the death of the father. Synonymous with the death of the father is the experience of the apocalyptic downfall of the fatherland as a result of capitalist expansion and the concomitant materialism. Underlying this experience is the inability to form a libidinal relationship with the world (as object). The nationalist feels threatened by the materialist world-picture which implies an object-relationship with the world.

Faced with this (un)reality of capitalist expansion, in the form of the mining industry, Matlhoko, in Maponya's *The Hungry Earth*, agonises over the loss of the 'fore-fathers' 'land to the *umlungu*' (white man):

MATLHOKO: When this land started giving birth to ugly days, things started going wrong from the moment of dawning and peace went into exile, to become a

thing of the wilderness. Yes, we experienced the saddest days of our lives when umlungu first came to these shores called Africa, a total stranger from Europe. We received him kindly. We gave him food. We gave him shelter. We adopted his ideas and his teachings. Then he told of a god and all Black faces were full of smiles. When he said love your neighbour we clapped and cheered *for we had a natural love*. Suddenly we drifted back suspiciously when he said you must always turn the other cheek when you are slapped. He continued to say love those who misuse you. We grumbled inwardly, smiled and listened hard as he was quoting from the Holy Book, little knowing that we would end up as puppets on a string; unable to control our own lives. And whilst we were still smiling, he set up laws, organized an army, and started digging up the gold and diamonds; and by the time our poor fore-fathers opened their eyes, umlungu was no more—he had moved to Europe. He has only left his army behind to ‘take care of the unruly elements that may provoke a revolution’ (e.a.) (Maponya 1983:153).

In an essay entitled ‘Popular Memory and the Voortrekker Films’, Keyan Tomaselli argues that if we accept the presence of an indivisible reality outside our ideological constructions of it, then there must be another way of conceptualising our representations, than that they are faulty. He argues that it is what these representations permit that needs to be teased out. I have, I believe, so far argued that the past which *Unosilimela* recalls, has always been contested. Discourses of anti-colonialism, whether Black Consciousness or pan-Africanist-orientated, often construct an African golden age, as a strategy of discursive displacement of colonialist myths. Talk of Africans as having had ‘a natural love’ in *The Hungry Earth*, and of Europeans as having betrayed this ‘natural love’ in their deceptive double-talk, is typical of the manicheanism of most early Black Consciousness (B.C.) literature. More than it being a misleading binarism, in its construction of a monolithic European identity, it gives truth to the lie that there ever was a single colonial ethnicity, that could allocate for other ethnicities convenient differences. It perpetuates what Stuart Hall identifies as ‘Thatcherism’: a renewed English nationalism, that seeks to transcend multinational capitalism and global network systems.

Subsequently, as in most early B.C. literature, *The Hungry Earth* seeks authentication of the enslaved African subject in violence against the European master. In the text, Beshwana finally resolves that

Umlungu deserves to die. Let us set out to catch him and when we catch him we will hang him from the nearest tree. His servants must also be killed: they betrayed us. Let us kill the whole lot (Maponya 1983:153).

In his essay, ‘Hegel, *The Black Atlantic* and Mphahlele’, Percy More identifies this violent resolution in the struggle for recognition between the master and the slave in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, a

reconstruction of Hegel's 'Lordship and Bondage' dialectic. In this struggle, the slave knows 'freedom' outside of the subjective colonial reality. One of these freedoms is articulable in pre-colonial history which, as Fanon observes in another of his critical works, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 'by some strange logic', has been destroyed by the master in his quest for total control of the slave. What Beshwana resolves, therefore, derives from a theoretical option which, as More observes in Mphahlele's short stories, is replaced by the Enlightenment discourse of education and negotiation.

The temptation invited by these two South African subjects, Maponya and Mphahlele, is to interpret their resolutions by drawing attention to their positionality within the material conditions in which they operate: Mphahlele as part of the elite class, on the one hand and, on the other, Maponya as a radical political activist. However, this reading of what their texts finally resolve is simplistic. It constructs a rigid dichotomy between theory and 'concrete' political action, without recognising the theoreticity of practice. The question is not so much whether violence or negotiation are 'correct' resolutions to the dilemma. It is how theoretically one arrives at one or the other, that opens the impasse to a more complex reading of how we construct subjectivity through mimesis. Maponya, who is seen to represent a more 'uncompromising' radical consciousness, becomes the epitome of the 'angry young men' of British alternative theatre (Kershaw), whereas Mphahlele, encumbered with Western academic qualifications cannot but compromise the African revolution. In this equation, the African revolution, which is seen to mirror a homogeneous African golden age, is one-dimensional, aimed at getting rid of the 'foreigner' and *decadent* foreign culture.

But these resolutions are becoming increasingly unhelpful in their self-contained complacency. Abdulrazak Gurnah observes in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* the simplistic premise on which they both seek validation. *Matigari*, the protagonist in Ngugi's novel by that title, symbolises Kenyan resistance, the nature and direction of which is Mau Mau nationalism. All those who either refuse or simply fail to see the 'simple' divide between those who 'sow and those who reap what they did not sow', are collusive with international capitalism. If they are not, the text can only be convinced if they resume the armed struggle, which is the proud Mau Mau legacy. Other forms of resistance—resistance against the oppressive nationalistic *Sameness* (despite significant differences)—are disallowed. Also, Simon Gikandi observes in the English translation the centrism of collective heroism symbolised in the title, which he sees as typical of Hollywood cinema, where the hero embodies the conscience of an often taken-for-granted nation. Even if one were to privilege the original Gikuyu version, *Matigari ma Njiruungi* (those [Mau Mau] who remained in the

forest), the Mau Mau nationalist bias still remains as the ordering trope. It is perhaps for this reason that Ngugi's texts are comfortable with historical gender stereotypes, for in his historicisation of the past, he hardly questions its undesirability where gender power relations are concerned.

The option taken by *The Fantastical History of a Useless Man*, in its closing 'the most I can do is to be the least obstruction' (Purkey 1978:51), has been criticised as typical of liberal resignation and paralysis. However, critics of *this* position need to engage with *this* particular text, as it seems to me more acutely aware of its own assumptions than any automatic liberal claim to dubious, arrogant morality. What the text does, in fact, is to parody the traditional liberal position and its egocentric permissiveness. It inserts its parody within those moments of slippage in the monologue of nationalist egoism—where the discourse of (Anglo-centric) nationalism is failed by an unintended 'slip of the tongue': 'Azania' instead of 'Azalea' (Purkey 1978:35), or the handkerchief bearing the African National Congress ('A.N.C.') acronym, literally 'flying in the face' of controlled nationalist symbolism (Purkey 1978:32). These are textual reminders of the impossibility of a continuous and seamless colonial history. *The Fantastical History of a Useless Man* is probably one of the few texts written during this period which locates its episteme in the realm of an imagined future. It is a play not exercised by the myth of origins, nor is its location in the future of the past a promotion of a *teleology*, in which the past bears almost directly on the present, and in which the present only serves as the myth of 'the middle years' (Bhabha 1994:1). It is the Compere who introduces us to this complex (but never frivolous) relationship between the past and the future:

COMPERE: Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, what we are about to enact for you is the fantastical history of the Useless Man. Our fantasy and history is designed to throw light on our Useless Man's predicament as we probe his past to predict his future. For if we are truly to understand the complexity of the future, we must understand the stupidity and greed that constitutes our past.

History is a strange affair! ... but the distortions that constitute its account are even stranger ... it's time to leave for the moment, and let the play unfold itself.

The Compere establishes for the play and its interpretation of the past its *textuality*. One is immediately tempted to compare the text's representational strategy to those of writers like Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*), John Fowles (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*), Carlos Fuentes (*Christopher Unborn*), Dambudzo Marechera (*Black Sunlight*), Louis Borges, and many other postmodernist writers, whose representations of the future of the past are predicated on their distance from both. As Borges observes in a footnote to one of his stories, their constructions are no more than *present* memories

and *present* hopes. The present is itself not the Present. Rather, it is conceptualised as a shifting parody of the Present. Rushdie's quip, in the wake of Islamic fundamentalist threats on his life, that next time he will call the Buddha a poop, testifies to what Bhabha theorises as 'living on the borderlines of the "present"'. Here there is no possibility of nostalgia, whether for the past or for the present.

The Fantastical History of a Useless Man is not a dramatisation of one 'narrative' of South African 'history'. It is instead, a complex pastiche of history's manifestations: in commentary, in revisionist discourses that contest validation in their re-narrativisation of colonialist history, in sometimes partisan ideologism and in frank idealism and homophobia. In short, it imitates, and perhaps unconsciously endorses, all and more of these 'sources'. The text is unmistakably conscious of the (sometimes overstated) polarised context of the seventies, in which 'white' liberalism and 'black consciousness' nationalism invested history with principally contradictory futures. However, it is also careful not to overstate the nature of this contradiction, for liberalism in black consciousness theory was not merely dismissed but, redirected. When Biko (1987:26) argued that 'white' liberalism in South Africa 'must serve as a lubricating material to help change gears in trying to find a better direction for South Africa', he was aware that black consciousness was itself a form of 'liberalism', and not a Garveyan racial hierarchy, in that it sought a non-racial future. As David Hemson (1995:190) observes in a review of *I Write What I Like*, Biko might have rejected liberals 'within the fold of black strategy' but, he saw 'them as part of the potential superstructure of managed political change'.

But does this mean one has to polarise in order to theorise? What does one ignore in polarising within a convenient category of, say, race and/or gender, even if that polarisation is seen to be *only* strategic? Can it ever be *only* strategic? Perhaps we need to move away from this dichotomous mode of thinking about theory and practice, in order to be able to consider both as, to use Terry Threadgold's construction, 'semiotics of the (same) Lie' that we call representation. *The Fantastical History of a Useless Man*, it seems to me, attempts to make this point about the fiction of racial difference and other forms of difference. However, like Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, whose complex and virtually obsessive repudiation of male 'Negro' narcissism borders on homophobia, the text's representation of Cecil Rhodes constructs too close a relationship between his imperial and his sexual identities. Here, his sexual orientation becomes literally and metaphorically a glaring 'impotence' contradicting colonial 'penetration' of the frontier. This is overkill, if one considers that the relationship between imperialism/colonialism and sexuality was often (if not always) laden with masculine value systems and 'regimes of representation' (Mercer 1991:192). Here, the

representation of Rhodes' subjectivity is inevitably called into question, precisely because the reading of Rhodes in the text presupposes a natural passage from the imperial to its (by implication, deficient) homosexual agent.

The text subtly disturbs the coalition between Afrikaner and English subjects, in its juxtaposition of the desire to blur ideological and cultural differences with suggestive hints of the opposite. The Afrikaner Voortrekker's contemptuous 'Keep your Cape', is answered in the English Lord Carnarvon's 'reasonable' naturalisation of the 'trek': 'Itinerant bunch, aren't they?' (Purkey 1978:20). This undercuts, before it could even be articulated later in the text, the myth of English and Afrikaner unity. This willed solidarity is captured later in the '1970s version of a prominent Nationalist' speech:

You ask what this new act *we* are passing is about. This 1913 Land Act. It is designed to provide an adequate supply of labour for the mines upon which *our* economy is so dependent. And an adequate supply of labour for *our* farms, which have been for the last two hundred years, the foundation of the South African way of life. By passing this act *we* hope to prove to the outside world that those animosities which led to the outbreak of the second war of liberation have indeed been covered up, and that both Afrikaner and Englishman can live happily side by side and indeed have a community of interest in getting an adequate and secure supply of labour. It is not that *we* want to force the native to work for *us* by means of law or by coercion. It is rather that this act is designed to ensure that the native will work for *us* by force of circumstance (e.a.) (Purkey 1978:33).

Despite the ideological reasonableness and the self-effacing manner in which the mild 'othering' of the 'natives' serves to enhance the unity of the Afrikaner and Englishman, the 'second war of liberation' remains a salient contradiction in terms. But this rift extends to the arena of culture. Born of English parents, the Useless man intervenes ideologically, in a series of questions, in that space constructed for him (that is also supposed to be his heritage), between 'home' and the world:

USELESS MAN: We've been taught all our lives that our home and our culture lie somewhere else. There's been a conspiracy, a tacit agreement that we must never look around us And our culture lies somewhere else If this was the case, the truth, what the hell were all these people doing here? Pining for their lost lives, somewhere else If the truth and the life and the art is 6000 miles away, what are we doing here? ... They kept their minds in Europe. They went on mindfucks in museums, browsed around bookshops and luxuriated in theatres and averted their eyes And what I want to know of all you visitors to Pettycoat Lane, why don't you look at Diagonal Street? (Purkey 1978:41f)

If this points to a cultural difference between English and Afrikaner, in that the Afrikaner sought independence from his 'origins' while the English

desired to re-enact them, it is also a displacement of cultural difference conceptualised in the old equations of English=civilisation/enlightenment versus native (and Afrikaner) barbarism. But it is also to repudiate the myth of an English nation away from England. To recall, by way of extending the point made by Ian Baucom (1991:7) above:

The colonist is, however, trapped in this futile, but rather desperate, gesture toward an absent origin. He or she is caught within a perpetual allegorization of a cultural 'centre', driven by a terrible desire to coincide. It is in this agonistic space that ... the European book assumes such talismanic significance.

In 'Signs Taken for Wonders' Bhabha describes this colonialist gesture toward the displaced presence of 'home' as the perpetual production of a 'metonymy of presence' (157): an inscription, within the colonial space, of fragmentary signs of the absent culture against which the colonist can invent himself or herself. The signs are, however, caught within the same double bind which disrupts the identity of the colonist desperately scrawling them onto the African or Indian terrain. They are written within the space of Derrida's double inscription: both marks of presence and, as metonyms, are re-inscriptions, marks of the erasure of presence, its disappearance (150). They exist, to cite Bhabha citing Derrida citing Mallarme, 'under the false appearance of a present'. Underwritten by an agonistic poetics of nostalgia, they represent but cannot represent.

It is this ambivalence of the English identity fixed eternally in the pages of the colonial book, that the Useless man traces in the Anglo-centric school syllabus. 'My teacher says we've got nothing. No literature, no drama, no culture, no home ... (Purkey 1978:41). Indeed, the convenient substitute is a copy of Kenneth Clark's *Civilization*, with which he is presented by his parents as a 'going overseas gift'. Kenneth Clark is here an English talisman. The 'talismanic significance' of his *Civilization* typifies what Ngugi (1981: 31) calls 'England from England'. Baucom quotes him from *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, where he 'describes one such colonial inscription: the murals on the walls of the Lord Delamere bar in Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi':

On one wall are depicted scenes drawn from the English countryside: fourteen different postures for the proper deportment of an English gentleman; fox hunting with gentlemen and ladies on horseback surrounded on all sides by well fed hounds panting and wagging tails in anticipation of the kill to come; and of course the different pubs, from the White Hart to the Royal Oak, waiting to quench the thirst of ladies and gentlemen after their blood sports. Kenya is England from England (Wa Thiong'o 1981:31).

But (as the Useless man observes in this futile inscription of a distant home onto the African terrain) Baucom (1991:8) is quite quick to point out that 'Kenya cannot be England':

England can be fetishized on the walls of the bar, but the fetish signals its own displacement, its supplementariness. It is ... the reinscription of a figure of ruin, an allegory that in its posteriority and exteriority can double but cannot redeem the absent original. The fetish is an attempt to re-inscribe in the external space of the colony the cultural space of England.

The motive force which drives this metonymic production of presence in the colony is less a crisis of representation that demands a resolution, or an angst-ridden longing for the culture on the far side of the colony—although it is both of these—than it is a problem of power.

This fetishisation of home, in the ritualisation of culture, is indeed more to do with the lubrication of an otherwise blocked passage from 'trauma to transcendence', that must serve as the basis for colonial authority. Addressing the Azalea Show, the Useless man's mother wills this power of the colonist over an imitative 'other':

MOTHER: Having a native boy to work in your garden is much like getting a sort of labour-saving machine to perform the different gardening tasks he does not prevent you setting your mark on the garden and giving it the stamp of your own individuality For the native garden boy, unlike jobbing gardeners in other countries, seldom intrudes his ideas, or takes things to himself the natives, like the Athenians, love any 'new thing'. *They are the most imitative race on earth ...* (c.a.) (Purkey 1978:35f).

This power is willed and wielded on the assumption that if repeated, the subjectivity of the native can be defined in relation to that of the colonist, which must in turn serve as the norm. As Fanon observes in relation to the framing of the Negro male in colonialist psycho-sexual anthropology ('one is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis: the Negro is eclipsed. He is a penis'), the Useless man's mother is only aware of the native as a 'labour-saving machine'. Without effort, 'if you show them how to do any simple gardening task they are able to do it with little practice, no matter how unfamiliar it may be' (Purkey 1978:36). This stereotype is meant to serve as an allegory, perpetuating the fiction of the European norm and its repeatability, its mimesis. But Lacan argues that

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare (in Bhabha 1994:85).

Thus, even if the native gardener is seen to harmonise with the European background, what is revealed is not 'an itself', but a 'mottled' disruption of this desire for a singular, timeless, contextless, sexless, classless European

self. The Useless man's mother is already defined within a masculine European subjectivity, as constituting the undervalued 'patch' in this generalised European background. Even if she is allowed to speak a racially 'inferior' native, she is herself spoken within the narrow boundaries of a masculine colonialist political framework. *Civilization*, as text and project is, according to Rory Ryan (1990:3) (in a similar context), saturated with 'the humanist-colonial-patriarchal agenda'. If the Useless man's mother speaks the language of conquest, of the triumph of European individualism, she is unaware of her implication in this agenda of a sexually conquering civilization.

But *The Fantastical History of a Useless Man* is concerned with the staking out of positions: political (racial, class) and historical, in contemporary South African discourses of historical and political contestation. Its stated project is to parody (liberal) humanism and its articulation in the politics of the Progressive Party, within the subversive discourse of the fantastic. 'The Song of the Fantastical History', with which the text opens, testifies to this project:

For the colonial structure/Is just about to rupture/And it ain't going to suit yer/If you're white and got your loot here—/But I couldn't face mere anarchy/So I went and joined the Prog Party./But it came to the crunch/When my servants came to lunch/And they soon confirmed my hunch/That they're *not* a well-bred bunch.

I think it's very nice in principle/To be so good and liberal/But go and give the vote to *all*?/Ag no! Not to a cannibal! (Purkey 1978:10).

Rory Ryan's widely researched article on what he terms 'Literary-Intellectual Behaviour in South Africa', provides the complex history behind discourses of humanism. In this article, he places the dialogue between contemporary theories of representation and the discourses of humanism where it belongs—in the international space. He quotes Paul Bove, to substantiate his claim that, as Bove argues,

This humanistic project is politically and intellectually inappropriate. Its political liberalism is divisive, disciplinary, often oppressive and imperialistic; intellectually, it is self-contradictory, at best tragically belated, at most comically self-betraying. What is significant about it is its *power* (Ryan 1990:4).

He concludes his paper by quoting Paul Bove again, that

one must promote, and continue to promote, a 'radically active scepticism' as an alternative to the habitual practices of 'culturally comfortable critics' (Ryan 1990:19).

It is this 'radically active scepticism' that is at the root of *The Fantastical*

History of A Useless Man, which, as I have already tried to illustrate in my argument, is traceable in the song of the Useless man and, with some few exceptions, throughout the text.

If, as Abiola Irele observes in 'The African Scholar', '[i]t was inevitable that the most significant developments [in African scholarship] should have taken place within the discipline of history', because

[t]his was the most convenient terrain for taking on the colonizer, so to speak: for repudiating the colonial thesis that Africa had no history before the coming of the white man, that nowhere had the black race displayed an initiative for creating a framework of life and expression with any real human value or significance,

then very few dramatic discourses on colonial-apartheid history in South Africa have acknowledged the fact that whereas '[t]he self-serving character of the colonial thesis was patent, ... its refutation required a strenuous effort of scholarship', that did not merely reverse its dichotomous mode of carving up the postcolonial condition.

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