

DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation

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How does one write the nation's modernity as the event of the everyday and the advent of the epochal?¹ The language of national belonging comes laden with atavistic apoloques, which has led Benedict Anderson to ask: 'But why do nations celebrate their hoariness, not their astonishing youth?'² The nation's claim to modernity, as an autonomous or sovereign form of political rationality, is particularly questionable if, with Partha Chatterjee, we adopt the post-colonial perspective:

Nationalism . . . seeks to represent itself in the image of the Enlightenment and fails to do so. For Enlightenment itself, to assert its sovereignty as the universal ideal, needs its Other; if it could ever actualise itself in the real world as the truly universal, it would in fact destroy itself.³

Such ideological ambivalence nicely supports Gellner's paradoxical point that the historical necessity of the idea of the nation conflicts with the contingent and arbitrary signs and symbols that signify the affective life of the national culture. The nation may exemplify modern social cohesion but

Nationalism is not what it seems, and *above all not what it seems to itself* . . . The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shred would have served as well. But in no way does it follow that the principle of nationalism . . . is itself in the least contingent and accidental.⁴
(My emphasis)

The problematic boundaries of modernity are enacted in these ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space. The language of culture and community is

poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past. Historians transfixed on the event and origins of the nation never ask, and political theorists possessed of the 'modern' totalities of the nation – 'homogeneity, literacy and anonymity are the key traits'⁵ – never pose, the essential question of the representation of the nation as a temporal process.

It is indeed only in the disjunctive time of the nation's modernity – as a knowledge caught between political rationality and its impasse, between the shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of a nationalist pedagogy – that questions of nation as narration come to be posed. How do we plot the narrative of the nation that must mediate between the teleology of progress tipping over into the 'timeless' discourse of irrationality? How do we understand that 'homogeneity' of modernity – the people – which, if pushed too far, may assume something resembling the archaic body of the despotic or totalitarian mass? In the midst of progress and modernity, the language of ambivalence reveals a politics 'without duration', as Althusser once provocatively wrote: 'Space without places, time without duration.'⁶ To write the story of the nation demands that we articulate that archaic ambivalence that informs the *time* of modernity. We may begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion – *the many as one* – shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class or race as social totalities that are expressive of unitary collective experiences.

Out of many one: nowhere has this founding dictum of the political society of the modern nation – its spatial expression of a unitary people – found a more intriguing *image* of itself than in those diverse languages of literary criticism that seek to portray the great power of the idea of the nation in the disclosures of its everyday life; in the telling details that emerge as metaphors for national life. I am reminded of Bakhtin's wonderful description of a national *vision of emergence* in Goethe's *Italian Journey*, which represents the triumph of the Realistic component over the Romantic. Goethe's realist narrative produces a national-historical time that makes visible a specifically Italian day in the detail of its passing time: 'The bells ring, the rosary is said, the maid enters the room with a lighted lamp and says: *Felicissima notte!* . . . *If one were to force a German clockhand on them, they would be at a loss.*'⁷ For Bakhtin, it is Goethe's vision of the microscopic, elementary, perhaps random, tolling of everyday life in Italy that reveals the profound history of its locality (*Lokalität*), the spatialization of historical time, 'a creative humanization of this locality, which transforms a part of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people'.⁸

The recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression. There is, however, always the distracting presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of the national present, as we saw in the national discourses with which I began. Despite Bakhtin's emphasis on the realist vision in the emergence of the nation in Goethe's work, he acknowledges that the origin of the nation's visual *presence* is the effect of a

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historical figures of a nation never fully exist – the nationalities of the nation – never pose, the temporal process. Its modernity – as a gap, between the necessities of a nationalist project. How do we see the teleology of nationality? How do we see – which, if pushed by the despotic orality, the language of the master once provoked. To write the story of the valence that informs the progressive metaphor of organic theories of the great gender, class or collective experiences. The political society of the people – found a more of literary criticism in the disclosures of metaphors for national life, a national *vision of* the triumph of the narrative produces a national day in the detail of the detail enters the room to force a German to Goethe's vision of everyday life in Italy, the spatialization of which transforms a people.⁸ of national identity, the power of its forms of collective presence of another national present, as we see Bakhtin's emphasis. In Goethe's work, he sees the effect of a

narrative struggle. From the beginning, Bakhtin writes, the Realist and Romantic conceptions of time coexist in Goethe's work, but the ghostly (*Gespenstermässiges*), the terrifying (*Unerfreuliches*), and the unaccountable (*Unzuberechnendes*) are consistently surmounted by the structuring process of the visualization of time: 'the necessity of the past and the necessity of its place in a line of continuous development . . . finally the aspect of the past being linked to the necessary future'.⁹ National time becomes concrete and visible in the chronotype of the local, particular, graphic, from beginning to end. The narrative structure of this *historical* surmounting of the 'ghostly' or the 'double' is seen in the intensification of narrative synchrony as a graphically visible position in space: 'to grasp the most elusive course of pure historical time and fix it through unmediated contemplation'.¹⁰ But what kind of 'present' is this if it is a consistent process of surmounting the ghostly time of repetition? Can this national time-space be as fixed or as immediately visible as Bakhtin claims?

If in Bakhtin's 'surmounting' we hear the echo of another use of that word by Freud in his essay on 'The "uncanny"', then we begin to get a sense of the complex time of the national narrative. Freud associates *surmounting* with the repressions of a 'cultural' unconscious; a liminal, uncertain state of cultural belief when the archaic emerges in the midst of margins of modernity as a result of some psychic ambivalence or intellectual uncertainty. The 'double' is the figure most frequently associated with this uncanny process of 'the doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self'.¹¹ Such 'double-time' cannot be so simply represented as visible or flexible in 'unmediated contemplation'; nor can we accept Bakhtin's repeated attempt to read the national space as achieved only in the *fullness of time*. Such an apprehension of the 'double and split' time of national representation, as I am proposing, leads us to question the homogeneous and horizontal view associated with the nation's imagined community. We are led to ask whether the *emergence* of a national perspective – of an elite or subaltern nature – within a culture of social contestation, can ever articulate its 'representative' authority in that fullness of narrative time and visual synchrony of the sign that Bakhtin proposes.

Two accounts of the emergence of national narratives seem to support my suggestion. They represent the diametrically opposed world views of master and slave which, between them, account for the major historical and philosophical dialectic of modern times. I am thinking of John Barrell's¹² splendid analysis of the rhetorical and perspectival status of the 'English gentleman' within the social diversity of the eighteenth-century novel; and of Houston Baker's innovative reading of the 'new *national* modes of sounding, interpreting and speaking the Negro in the Harlem Renaissance'.¹³

In his concluding essay Barrell demonstrates how the demand for a holistic, representative vision of society could only be represented in a discourse that was *at the same time* obsessively fixed upon, and uncertain of, the boundaries of society, and the margins of the text. For instance, the hypostatized 'common language' which was the language of the gentleman whether he be Observer, Spectator, Rambler, 'Common to all by virtue of the fact that it manifested the

peculiarities of none'¹⁴ – was primarily defined through a process of negation – of regionalism, occupation, faculty – so that this centred vision of 'the gentleman' is so to speak 'a condition of empty potential, one who is imagined as being able to comprehend everything, and yet who may give no evidence of having comprehended anything.'¹⁵

A different note of liminality is struck in Baker's description of the 'radical maroonage' that structured the emergence of an insurgent Afro-American expressive culture in its expansive, 'national' phase. Baker's sense that the 'discursive project' of the Harlem Renaissance is modernist is based less on a strictly literary understanding of the term, and more on the agonistic enunciative conditions within which the Harlem Renaissance shaped its cultural practice. The transgressive, invasive structure of the black 'national' text, which thrives on rhetorical strategies of hybridity, deformation, masking, and inversion, is developed through an extended analogy with the guerilla warfare that became a way of life for the maroon communities of runaway slaves and fugitives who lived dangerously, and insubordinately, 'on the frontiers or margins of *all* American promise, profit and modes of production'.¹⁶ From this liminal, minority position where, as Foucault would say, the relations of discourse are of the nature of warfare, the force of the people of an Afro-American nation emerge in the extended metaphor of maroonage. For 'warriors' read writers or even 'signs':

these highly adaptable and mobile warriors took maximum advantage of local environments, striking and withdrawing with great rapidity, making extensive use of bushes to catch their adversaries in cross-fire, fighting only when and where they chose, depending on reliable intelligence networks among non-maroons (both slave and white settlers) and often communicating by horns.¹⁷

Both gentleman and slave, with different cultural means and to very different historical ends, demonstrate that forces of social authority and subversion or subalternity may emerge in displaced, even decentred strategies of signification. This does not prevent these positions from being effective in a political sense, although it does suggest that positions of authority may themselves be part of a process of ambivalent identification. Indeed the exercise of power may be both politically effective and psychically *affective* because the discursive liminality through which it is signified may provide greater scope for strategic manoeuvre and negotiation.

It is precisely in reading between these borderlines of the nation-space that we can see how the concept of the 'people' emerges within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference: their claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation's people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the

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discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process.

The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*. [. . .]

Of Margins and Minorities

The difficulty of writing the history of the people as the insurmountable agonism of the living, the incommensurable experiences of struggle and survival in the construction of a national culture, is nowhere better seen than in Frantz Fanon's essay 'On national culture'.¹⁸ I start with it because it is a warning against the intellectual appropriation of the 'culture of the people' (whatever that may be) within a representationalist discourse that may become fixed and reified in the annals of history. Fanon writes against that form of nationalist historicism that assumes that there is a moment when the differential temporalities of cultural histories coalesce in an immediately readable present. For my purposes, he focuses on the time of cultural representation, instead of immediately historicizing the event. He explores the space of the nation without immediately identifying it with the historical institution of the State. As my concern here is not with the history of nationalist movements, but only with certain traditions of writing that have attempted to construct narratives of the social imaginary of the nation-people, I am indebted to Fanon for liberating a certain, uncertain time of the people.

The knowledge of the people depends on the discovery, Fanon says, 'of a much more fundamental substance which itself is continually being renewed', a structure of repetition that is not visible in the translucidity of the people's customs or the obvious objectivities which seem to characterize the people. 'Culture abhors simplification,' Fanon writes, as he tries to locate the people in a performative time: 'the fluctuating movement that the people are *just* giving shape to'. The present of the people's history, then, is a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture that attempt to hark back to a 'true' national past, which is often represented in the reified forms of realism and stereotype. Such pedagogical knowledges and continuist national narratives miss the 'zone of occult instability where the people dwell' (Fanon's phrase). It is from this *instability* of cultural signification that the national

culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities – modern, colonial, postcolonial, ‘native’ – that cannot be a knowledge that is stabilized in its enunciation: ‘it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation. It is the present act that on each of its occurrences marshalls in the ephemeral temporality inhabiting the space between the “I have heard” and “you will hear”’.¹⁹

Fanon’s critique of the fixed and stable forms of the nationalist narrative makes it imperative to question theories of the horizontal, homogeneous empty time of the nation’s narrative. Does the language of culture’s ‘occult instability’ have a relevance outside the situation of anticolonial struggle? Does the incommensurable act of living – so often dismissed as ethical or empirical – have its own ambivalent narrative, its own history of theory? Can it change the way we identify the symbolic structure of the western nation?

A similar exploration of political time has a salutary feminist history in ‘Women’s time’.²⁰ It has rarely been acknowledged that Kristeva’s celebrated essay of that title has its conjunctural, cultural history, not simply in psychoanalysis and semiotics, but in a powerful critique and redefinition of the nation as a space for the emergence of feminist political and psychic identifications. The nation as a symbolic denominator is, according to Kristeva, a powerful repository of cultural knowledge that erases the rationalist and progressivist logics of the ‘canonical’ nation. This symbolic history of the national culture is inscribed in the strange temporality of the future perfect, the effects of which are not dissimilar to Fanon’s occult instability.

The borders of the nation Kristeva claims, are constantly faced with a double temporality: the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation (the pedagogical); and the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification (the performative). The time and space of Kristeva’s construction of the nation’s finitude is analogous to my argument that the figure of the people emerges in the narrative ambivalence of disjunctive times and meanings. The concurrent circulation of linear, cursive and monumental time, in the same cultural space, constitutes a new historical temporality that Kristeva identifies with psychoanalytically informed, feminist strategies of political identification. What is remarkable is her insistence that the gendered sign can hold together such exorbitant historical times.

The political effects of Kristeva’s multiple women’s time leads to what she calls the ‘demassification of difference’. The cultural moment of Fanon’s ‘occult instability’ signifies the people in a fluctuating movement *which they are just giving shape to*, so that postcolonial time questions the teleological traditions of past and present, and the polarized historicist *sensibility* of the archaic and the modern. These are not simply attempts to invert the balance of power within an unchanged order of discourse. Fanon and Kristeva seek to redefine the symbolic process through which the social imaginary – nation, culture or community – becomes the subject of discourse, and the object of psychic identification. These feminist and postcolonial temporalities force us to rethink the sign of history *within* those languages, political or literary, which designate

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the people ‘as one’. They challenge us to think the question of community and communication *without* the moment of transcendence: how do we understand such forms of social contradiction?

Cultural identification is then poised on the brink of what Kristeva calls the ‘loss of identity’ or Fanon describes as a profound cultural ‘undecidability’. The people as a form of address emerge from the abyss of enunciation where the subject splits, the signifier ‘fades’, the pedagogical and the performative are agonistically articulated. The language of national collectivity and cohesiveness is now at stake. Neither can cultural homogeneity nor the nation’s horizontal space be authoritatively represented within the familiar territory of the *public sphere*: social causality cannot be adequately understood as a deterministic or overdetermined effect of a ‘statist’ centre; nor can the rationality of political choice be divided between the polar realms of the private and the public. The narrative of national cohesion can no longer be signified, in Anderson’s words, as a ‘sociological solidity’²¹ fixed in a ‘succession of plurals’ – hospitals, prisons, remote villages – where the social space is clearly bounded by such repeated objects that represent a naturalistic, national horizon.

Such a pluralism of the national sign, where difference returns as the same, is contested by the signifier’s ‘loss of identity’ that inscribes the narrative of the people in the ambivalent, ‘double’ writing of the performative and the pedagogical. The movement of meaning *between* the masterful image of the people and the movement of its sign interrupts the succession of plurals that produce the sociological solidity of the national narrative. The nation’s totality is confronted with, and crossed by, a supplementary movement of writing. The heterogeneous structure of Derridean supplementarity in *writing* closely follows the agonistic, ambivalent movement between the pedagogical and performative that informs the nation’s narrative address. A supplement, according to one meaning, ‘cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *techné* image, representation, convention, etc. come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function’²² (pedagogical). The *double entendre* of the supplement suggests, however, that

[It] intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of* . . . If it represents and makes an image it is by the *anterior* default of a presence . . . the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance . . . As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief . . . Somewhere, something can be filled up of *itself* . . . only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy.²³ (performative)

It is in this supplementary space of doubling – *not plurality* – where the image is presence and proxy, where the sign supplements and empties nature, that the disjunctive times of Fanon and Kristeva can be turned into the discourses of emergent cultural identities, within a non-pluralistic politics of difference.

This supplementary space of cultural signification that opens up – and holds together – the performative and the pedagogical, provides a narrative structure characteristic of modern political rationality: the marginal integration of

individuals in a repetitious movement between the antinomies of law and order. From the liminal movement of the culture of the nation – at once opened up and held together – minority discourse emerges. Its strategy of intervention is similar to what British parliamentary procedure recognizes as a supplementary question. It is a question that is supplementary to what is stated on the 'order paper' for the minister's response. Coming 'after' the original, or in 'addition to' it, gives the supplementary question the advantage of introducing a sense of 'secondariness' or belatedness into the structure of the original demand. The supplementary strategy suggests that adding 'to' need not 'add up' but may disturb the calculation. As Gasché has succinctly suggested, 'supplements . . . are pluses that compensate for a minus in the origin.'²⁴ The supplementary strategy interrupts the successive seriality of the narrative of plurals and pluralism by radically changing their mode of articulation. In the metaphor of the national community as the 'many as one', the *one* is now both the tendency to totalize the social in a homogenous empty time, and the repetition of that minus in the origin, the less-than-one that intervenes with a metonymic, iterative temporality.

Notes

- 1 In memory of Paul Moritz Strimpel (1914–87): Pforzheim–Paris–Zurich–Ahmedabad–Bombay–Milan–Lugano.
- 2 B. Anderson, 'Narrating the nation'. *The Times Literary Supplement*.
- 3 P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed, 1986), p. 17.
- 4 E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 56.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 6 L. Althusser, *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx* (London: Verso, 1972), p. 78.
- 7 M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, C. Emerson and M. Holquist (eds), trans. V. W. McGee (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 31.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–9.
- 11 S. Freud, 'The "uncanny"'. In *The Standard Edition*, vol. XVII, J. Strachey (ed.) (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974), p. 234. See also pp. 236, 247.
- 12 J. Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730–1780* (London: Hutchinson, 1983).
- 13 H. A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), esp. chs 8–9.
- 14 J. Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730–1780*, p. 78.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 16 H.A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 77.
- 17 R. Price, *Maroon Societies*, quoted in Baker, *ibid.*, p. 77.
- 18 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). My quotations and references come from pp. 17–90.
- 19 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 22.

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