

Between Amnesia and Anamnesis: Re-Membering the Fractures of Colonial History

Anne Donadey
University of Iowa

The Greek word “anamnesis,” a term used by several contributors to this section, means “remembrance,” or going back (in time) through memory. According to the *Petit Larousse illustré*, the word is currently used in two contexts: medical and religious. Medically, it refers to the information gathered by a doctor about a patient through dialogue with the patient and his or her entourage. In the Catholic religion, it refers to the part of Mass after the consecration in which the faithful repeat together a brief summary of the religion’s time line, their belief in Jesus’ incarnation, death, resurrection, and future return at the end of times (see also Lionnet 223). A third context, not mentioned in the dictionary, is the academic and literary one.

In the first case, anamnesis is the piecing together of a case history by a professional with the help and expertise of a group of people who have experienced the illness in question. In the second case, it is a collective ritual repetition of fundamental beliefs about certain foundational religious events. In both contexts, the term connotes a common reconstitution effected according to preordained rules, involving one central person’s life history, and opening up onto future healing consequences.

In her 1989 book, *Autobiographical Voices*, Lionnet extends the concept of anamnesis to the colonial context. Anamnesis becomes a particular way of “resisting amnesia” (Rich 136) on the part of colonized or formerly colonized peoples. It is a strategy especially embraced by women writers, for whom self-portraiture (the autobiographical genre) is transformed into a piecing together of a collective history. In a context in which one’s history has been writ-

ten by the hegemonic dominant, anamnesis becomes a way of resisting the occlusions created by official history, of recovering the traces of another, submerged history in order to create a counter-memory. Because of the gaps existing in historical discourse due to the erasure of records, the dearth of archives, and the death of the witnesses, postcolonial writers often turn to fiction to reconstitute a past that will help them and the community/Nation heal in the present and move forward into the future. Anamnesis may be part of a national project (as discussed in Bensmaïa's and Mudimbe-Boyi's essays), and always involves a collective effort of tracing back history. Writing the joint anamneses of the self, the female genealogy and Algeria in her dazzling novel *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), Assia Djebar uses the metaphor of spelaeology to render the writer's task of exhuming her people's history through French archives, written documents, as well as oral Algerian traces (91). For her, fiction is the only way to flesh out "la plate sobriété" 'the flat restraint' of historical documents in order to fill their gaps (15).

Each of the essays in this section focuses on a specific context of de/colonization with France: Africa, Indochina, and Algeria. Panivong Norindr elucidates how a focus on colonial subjects can provide an invaluable interpretive grid to re-conceive French art and history. He takes French cinema as his point of departure to investigate what marginalized representations of colonial soldiers during World War I have to say about the contemporary after-effects of colonization. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi's text similarly follows a double temporal focus in her examination of recent novels from the African and French contexts that take the reader back in time and underscore the difficulties of narrating a much older, partly erased history. Finally, both Réda Bensmaïa's and Assia Djebar's essays reflect in very different ways on the intricate undertaking of writing history in the Algerian context. Bensmaïa traces the changing ways in which writers have envisioned their role in the creation of a national culture after independence, while Djebar weaves a complex tapestry of memory and silencing made of multiple (personal, genealogical, and national) threads. The rest of this introduction examines in more detail what each essay contributes to a redefinition of memory in the context of de/colonization.

Norindr's project in his essay is "to exhume the 'tirailleurs indigènes' as filmic traces" in Bertrand Tavernier's 1989 film *La Vie et rien d'autre* (*Life and Nothing But*). Norindr first provides a brief history of the *tirailleurs* in World War I and of their changing rep-

resentations in France. He foregrounds the ambivalence of memorialization, an act that can serve both as a way to bear witness and to induce forgetting. He argues that “lieux de mémoire” ‘sites of memory’ such as the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the war memorials present in every French city, town, and village, paradoxically exemplify “selective remembering and historical amnesia.” There are precious few war memorials dedicated to *tirailleurs*, and the ones that exist, in contrast to all other memorials, do not list the names of the fallen men, who remain anonymous, at the same time remembered and forgotten. Tavernier’s film functions in a similarly ambivalent way. An attempt at memorializing the search for hundreds of thousands of MIAs after the end of World War I, the film fails to fully account for the presence of native troops in the war and as MIAs. The MIAs everyone is interested in are from hexagonal France, and *tirailleurs* only appear at the edges of the film, “as filmic extras or ‘supplements’,” pointing to a repressed history. In the film, the search for the body of an Unknown Soldier for the Paris memorial exemplifies the impossibility of adequate mourning or memorialization: the body must at the same time be unmistakably “French” (i.e., white, but not German!) and absolutely unidentifiable. Moreover, the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, rather than keeping the memory of the war trauma alive, serves to induce forgetting at two levels: 1.5 million killed men are subsumed under one, and the *tirailleurs* are by definition excluded from the memorial. National efforts at memorialization are thus revealed to impede, rather than facilitate, the work of anamnesis.

Mudimbe-Boyi traces how the “silences of official history” constitute a form of epistemic violence often used to conceal the physical violence exercised in establishing the Nation. She follows “the emergence of a counter-memory” of resistance to the violence of official history in two recent novels, *Les Tambours de la mémoire* by African writer Boris Boubacar Diop (1990) and *Onitsha* by French writer J.M.G Le Clézio (1991). Diop’s novel takes place in a postcolonial African country and follows the trajectory of Fadel, a young man trying to recreate the story of Queen Johanna (the now-deceased leader of the resistance struggle for independence) through archives and oral interviews. The authoritarian regime is disturbed by his search since Johanna, who was assassinated, has become an embarrassing symbol. Fadel’s anamnesis, his work of collective remembering through a focus on one significant person’s life, proves to be a failure as his voice is silenced through murder. The history

cannot be entirely suppressed, however: it lives on in Fadel's sister's memory, as well as through his notes, now assembled into a coherent counter-narrative (the novel we are reading). In Le Clézio's novel, the narrator's father is also engaged in anamnesis, reconstructing history, reconstituting the founding narrative of origins of the Umundri people from Meroë through investigating a variety of sources, written documents, iconography, and oral traces. The story, which includes proof of the African origins of Egyptian civilization, is pieced together in a fragmentary fashion, and told to the narrator Fintan by his father. In both novels, Mudimbe-Boyi shows how "anamnesis develops as an individual process transformed into an initiation journey." Both works challenge hegemonic historiography and "uncover" the politics of constructing memory.

Réda Bensmaïa takes postcolonial efforts to rebuild a national culture as his point of departure. After the Algerian war of liberation, the situation was "catastrophic" for national culture, due to a combination of deculturated masses and acculturated intellectuals. In such a context, it is very difficult to reterritorialize, especially at the level of language. Whether writing in Arabic or in French, all writers have to face the question of "how to live in several languages and only write in one?" Bensmaïa argues that there are four types of languages at work in Algeria: the vernacular, itself a mixture of several languages; the vehicular (classical Arabic, French, or English); the referential (proverbs, literature, archives, etc., mainly in Arabic and French); and the mythic (religious and spiritual, mainly in literary Arabic). In such a heteroglossic context, it is theater, rather than the novel, that can integrate all four registers. Paradoxically, however, most Algerian writers, including playwrights, are known first and foremost as novelists. Bensmaïa distinguishes three stages in the formation of Algerian national culture: in the years preceding the war of national liberation, the literature focuses on the civil rights of Algerian natives in "French Algeria." In the 1950s, with the "Fanonian period," writers advocate for the revolutionary struggle in their works and reject any compromise with France, viewing writing as a crucial component of nation-building. This is the time of mythical writing about the Nation and "authentic" Algerian culture, the time in which the myth comes to be viewed as the "truth." In the 1970s, some writers begin interrogating the founding myth of "Algeria." They point out its status as a fiction, a construct, and underscore the dangers of myth-writing in a realistic mode. The myth of national unity is interrupted by authors such as Nabile Farès and

Assia Djebar, whose works make heard other, dissenting voices. Because it unsettles the myth of the Nation, this literature is viewed as “unbecoming,” with the tragic consequences that have been the lot of Algerian intellectuals in the last few years.

Djebar’s poetic essay is a perfect illustration of Bensmaïa’s “unbecoming” voice. It returns us to the question of anamnesis, history, and writing. She interrogates not only a hegemonic national myth, but her own literary practice as well. She connects writing to pre-memory, or collective (rather than individual) and generational memory. Anamnesis is a matter not of immersing oneself in memory, but of physically bringing oneself to sense the space of memory and its gaps. Reflecting on her recent novel *Vaste est la prison* (1995), Djebar tracks gaps in memory, things she had left unsaid. Like the national myth, her family’s chain of oral, female transmission also silenced a crucial event, that of the sudden death of her great grandmother whose husband had just taken a second wife. Djebar’s grandmother, the one who told her all the stories of the tribe, never spoke about her own mother’s death: she “turned her back on memory” and “swallowed [her mother] in forgetfulness.” Djebar’s anamnesis is thus inaugurated by the daughter’s denial of the sacrificed mother, and continues with a reflection on Djebar’s mother’s total loss of speech as a six-year old girl due to her older sister’s death. Djebar connects these relatives of hers to all the dead and silenced Algerian women of yesterday and today. In the face of such generalized, traumatic silence, in a country that has witnessed so many female deaths from the time of the war of liberation until today, how is anamnesis possible? Moreover, how can the mobility of a woman’s narrative be transcribed into the fixity of the written, French language? If the writer cannot let the sounds of oral languages, the sounds of women and mothers bubble up underneath the French language, she runs the risk of putting a deadly grip on the women’s narratives and fears turning into an accomplice of the mother’s sacrifice.

All the essays in this section converge in at least one aspect: they all describe an ambivalent movement, not *from* amnesia *to* anamnesis, but *a shuttling between* the two. We witness partial failures of anamnesis in the cases of Diop’s novel and Tavernier’s film, as well as what could be viewed as a problematic praise of nostalgia for origins and myth-writing in Le Clézio’s book. Finally, we are confronted with the tragic failure of anamnesis in the case of Algeria, in the face of a national myth that has been substituted for history, and

of Algerian women who find themselves caught in a repeating cycle of trauma and swallowed, unspoken memory. The status of anamnesis in these postcolonial situations is symptomatic of the generalized crisis of an unfinished decolonization.

Works Cited

Djebar, Assia. *L'Amour, la fantasia*. Paris: J.C. Lattès, 1985.

—. *Vaste est la prison*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.

Lionnet, Françoise. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.

Rich, Adrienne. "Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life." *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1986. 136-55.