

THE GRAMMAR OF DOMINATION AND THE SUBJECTION OF AGENCY: COLONIAL TEXTS AND MODES OF EVIDENCE¹

PREMESH LALU

Grammar is politics by other means.²

We must delve into the archaeologies of the dead.³

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on colonial accounts of the killing of the Xhosa chief, Hintsas, in 1835 at the hands of British forces along what came to be known as the Eastern Cape frontier. It explores the evidentiary procedures and protocols through which the event came to be narrated in colonial frames of intelligibility. In proposing a strategy for reading the colonial archive, the paper strategically interrupts the flow from an apartheid historiography to what is commonly referred to as "alternative history." The aim in effecting this interruption is to call attention to the enabling possibilities of critical history. This is achieved not by way of declaration but rather through a practice whereby the foundational category of evidence is problematized. The paper alludes to the limits of alternative history and its approaches to evidence on the one hand, and the conditions of complicity within which evidence is produced on the other. Whereas alternative history identifies its task as one of re-writing South African history, critical history, it is suggested, offers the opportunity to reconstitute the field of history by addressing the sites of its production and also its practices. In exploring the production of the colonial record on the killing of Hintsas, the paper seeks to complicate alternative history's slippage in and out of the evidentiary rules established by colonial domination even as it constitutes the category of evidence as an object for a politics of history of the present.

I

In alternative accounts of the South African past—alternative, that is, to the grids of colonial, liberal, and apartheid thought through which the past has been filtered—the particular story of the killing of Chief Hintsas in 1835 is frequently, and perhaps strategically, deferred to a third-person narrator or represented in the idiom of doubt. The habit seems to have been formed many years earlier in the literary and historical contributions of Samuel Mqhayi and S. M. Molema during the 1920s. Framed variously as a logical outcome of colonial advance, or in terms of the predictability of colonial violence

1 Qadri Ismail, Adam Sitze, Marissa Moorman, Gary Minkley, Leslie Witz, and Andrew Kincaid generously commented on an earlier draft. Thanks to the HSRC (South Africa) and the MacArthur Program (University of Minnesota) for financial support. The usual disclaimers apply. The article is part of a larger project that re-theorizes the historical event in colonial, nationalist, and historiographical accounts by reflecting on interventions made by Michael Taussig (on the frontier as a space of death) and the recent work of Pradeep Jeganathan, Qadri Ismail, John Mowitz, and Arjun Appadurai (on violence and disciplinarity). This article is an uncomfortably tentative gesture in the direction charted by these scholars. It is written for my colleagues in the History Department at UWC for their continued support.

2 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991), 3.

3 Mark Espin, "Beyond the Realm," unpublished poem, 1998.

taken place. To claim that subaltern consciousness, voice, or agency can be retrieved through colonial texts is to ignore the organization and representation of colonized subjects as a subordinate proposition within primary discourses. While colonial discourses are premised on a subordinate will— Foucault would say that silence and marginality are constitutive of a discourse— that will is neither representative of a subaltern collective consciousness nor independent of the determinations of a colonial will. We might then seek to retain a sense of the colonized as an unfathomable point of irreconcilability—what Spivak calls misfits of the text—in dominant frames of intelligibility. To claim that colonial texts unwittingly permit a recuperation of the subaltern is to declare a premature victory. It is to surrender the consciousness or will of subaltern subjects to the workings of colonial domination.

We need to approach that which is often mistakenly perceived of as subaltern consciousness in colonial records as an effect of domination rather than as representative of the consciousness of the underclasses. What we are treated to in colonial texts is not the presence of the subaltern but the mechanics of Europe producing itself as sovereign subject through its Other. One cannot hope to retrieve a silence(d) subject (as has been suggested in some recent historiography) by way of the colonial archive. Reading against the grain, to use Pam Scully's naming of a tactic whereby the colonial archive is mined for subaltern agency,⁴⁷ is perhaps more usefully deployed as a practice of criticism rather than as an attempt to represent. As I suggest in this article, agency has already been organized in relation to a condition of domination. We may then read the colonial archive in terms of a practice of criticism which, according to Ranajit Guha, starts with examining the components of a discourse, the vehicle of all ideology, for the manner in which these might have described any particular figure of speech.⁴⁸

University of the Western Cape Bellville, South Africa

47 Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823-1853* (Cape Town, 1998). In the work of Terry Eagleton and Gayatri Spivak the idea of reading against the grain assumes a different tactical implication. Spivak suggests that a reading against the grain is enabled by moments of transgression in the text. But transgression is not seen in terms of an invasion—a *la* White. Rather it is intrinsic to the very operation of the Law. Transgression may interrupt or bring a discourse to crisis, but it can never reveal a transcendental subject. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

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48 Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi, 1983), 9.