

EXPLOITING PHUMELELE NENE: POSTMODERNISM, INTELLECTUAL WORK AND ORDINARY LIVES

Ari Sitas

I Our intellectual work in South Africa is beginning to be shaped by 'post-modern' ideas. At first these ideas found fertile ground in literary studies and gender research programmes. By the mid-1990s their spread and vigour reached historiography and the social sciences. This paper presents a tentative criticism of some of the defining claims of this current, whilst at the same time appreciating the democratic and libertarian impulse that animates many of its contributions.

Post-modernism has opened up a space and has provided the language for minorities, usually of 'colour', in advanced capitalist countries to develop a politics of identity and 'post-coloniality', so central to our contemporary period (West, 1989; and Ferguson et al, 1992).

It has, also, in important ways enriched the critique mounted by feminism against patriarchy (Barrett and Phillips, 1992). Finally, given the asymmetrical relationship between the universities of the USA, Britain and France with the rest of the world, the old transmission-belt has carried these new ideas further: from New Delhi to Sao Paulo, from Durban to Lagos.

For our purposes, which involve the development of a style of theorising sensitive to our differences, our social identities, cultural formations and local sensibilities, post-modernism's attack on 'rationalism' and 'subjectivity' presents a tremendous challenge.

In denying the philosophical and scientific certainties of the 'West' it has disturbed the way we speak of structure, social conditioning, historical process and truth (Haraway, 1989; Natoli and Hutcheon, 1993); it has also disturbed the way we speak of our 'self' - we can no longer claim a coherent entity that is reason's and choice's little centre. Neither the 'subject' of dialectical philosophy nor the 'individual' of bourgeois empiricism has survived its critique.

I feel that post-modern thought has developed an important marker, has signposted a problem, and has even moved to express its implications; but I will be arguing that it has failed, and will continue failing as long as its focus renders invisible 'our' concrete materialities.

In this paper I intend presenting some of the important claims post-modern

ideas generate about 'difference' and scientific work. In this context and by exploiting the narrative account of Phumelele Nene, I hint at the serious weaknesses of the post-modern critique. In this light I hope to start a dialogue about the relationship between reliable forms of knowledge, responsibility and intellectual practice.

II There was a time when social scientists were iconoclasts: we smashed idols and pointed to the engineers that constructed them; people dropped tortoises from trees to discover the furnishings inside their shells; Buendia could claim in the classic novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, that the world, despite appearances was round like an orange (Garcia Marquez, 1973). Aristotle thought the same meditating on the appearance of first the sails and then the ships on the horizon; magicians could claim that they manipulated invisible forces to alter the relationship between feelings and objects.

At a very crucial level post-modernists have brought the idols back. Their iconographies and signs are coincident with a world of surface texts and imagery through which, and within which, our psyche and libido were to thrive. Whether one scanned Lyotard's (1984) or Baudrillard's works (1983), the 'simulacrum', the 'simulation' or the multiple sign/icon pressing at us, had been pro-figured.

The rise and victory of post-modern thinking within many universities has coincided with crises in four emancipatory promises: that science with its Reason and Methods (and of course technology and its gadgets) would set us free from 'necessity'; that capitalism was to create a just, egalitarian world and a mass-consuming world system for us all; that the socialist fortress Stalin built was to create a rational and planned society of plenty; and, that the national democratic revolutions of the 'third world' would create facilitating and caring states that would in turn bring about development and growth.

The post-modern semioticians are not iconoclasts. Nor do they carry hammers. They leave the world as it is, as it presses onto our apertures. Instead through deconstructive strategies, they point to the subtle powers that interplay within our texts, our sermons, our television sets. Through that they have arrived at a critique of all 'grand theories', 'grand narratives', 'universalisms', 'essentialisms' and 'teleologies' (Bauman, 1991; and Derrida, 1993). And at a time when claims of universalising *collective* possibilities are crumbling, they have arrived at a pluralistic notion of social and subjective *difference*.

It is also the case that many cultivate and celebrate social amnesia and in-difference; many are at the heart of tribal reinventions. But many too (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, for example) have translated their work into a profoundly democratic impulse which has been undermining totalitarian inclinations of the left and right. And it has given a space and a voice to those who have been

constructed as 'other', and 'marginal'.

From that space has sprung a sense of purpose and a pride in 'difference'. Women at first, Afro-Americans, 'Hispanics', immigrants of all descriptions later (Ferguson et al, 1992; Trinh-Minh-ha, 1989 and Spivak, 1987), have asserted a new politics of 'multiculturalism' and 'identity' and have generated powerful visions.

The attack of Modernity and Modernisation (and by implication of Eurocentricity and Teleology) has started once more the questioning of the first world's scientific values, its cold and calculating rationalism and its presentation of itself as the goal and medium of civilisation.

Such castigations have been with us since the advent of colonisation. They were developed by marginalised 'outsiders'. Responding to their colonial 'otherness', the embarrassment of metropolitan racism and discrimination, they began cultivating a pride in their difference. The, predominantly middle-class, intelligentsia used whatever means it had at its disposal, gathered whatever was gatherable from its colonial pilgrimages (be it Bergson's philosophy of the *élan vital*, surrealist anti-rationalism, Hegelianism) and pitted itself against rationalism's claims.

Aime Cesaire's (1969) inspired polemics against the degradation of nature and humanity that Europe's industrial civilisation had accomplished, began a search for moral and emancipatory alternatives. These efforts though, were short-lived due to unfortunate circumstances: despite the critique's intense sensibilities and its radical new forms of naturalism, it exhausted itself alongside post-colonial societies. The lack of scholarly resources in the so-called third world, the dependence of emerging universities on the colonial metropole helped muffle its voice.

The resumption of a discourse of 'difference', 'otherness' and 'marginality' re-emerged through an implosion within the first world's academy (Ahmad, 1993). On the broader left it was started by social and working-class historians and it was only later completed by post-modernists.

In the former case, the discovery of the voice of the up-to-then 'voiceless', coupled with the romantic populism of oral history methodologies, brought the 'local', the 'personal', the 'micro' into social science (Thompson, 1978; Passerini, 1980; Grele, 1985; Bozzoli and Delius, 1990).

The historians' dissatisfaction with Lenin-inspired organisational theories and official trade union propaganda, recorded and reproduced the voices of dispossessed labour tenants, squatters, farmworkers as against the dictates of the fashionable structuralisms of the day. Their debates and reflections on orality finally, led to the re-evaluation of 'sources' and 'facts', and, by implication, of meaning, of language, of communication (Faris, 1980; and Grele, 1985).

It was not long before an emerging politics of difference pioneered by feminism and later by those mentioned above who have been 'othered' and 'marginalised', generated the advocacy of multi-perspectivism and pride in cultural autonomy, which coincided with the historians' plight. In short, they pioneered the 'politics of identity' despite each other and in many instances unaware of each other's work.

The tensions between the repressed voices of the underclasses that social historians rememored and the search for an identity in difference has produced the most remarkable achievements in expressivity from Alice Walker's (1976 and 1983) to Toni Morrison's novels, and the literary criticism in the works, for example, of Edward Said (1994). In their work the echo of the plantation, the mine and the chain-gang still haunt their lines, not as textual figurations but as a defining horror and memory.

Post-modernism's contribution must not be overestimated either: in celebrating ground-lessness and anti-foundationalism it destroys the basis of its own claims; in celebrating Nietzsche's transvaluation of all morals it forgets that for him, ordinary people were mobs, sheep, weak, unworthy; in celebrating the particular singularity of difference it remains an index of fatalistic pain. There is nothing inherently liberatory in ethnic or cultural difference.

Perhaps the litmus test of its cognitive and practical potential can be felt if its limitations are traced in what is supposed to be its *raison d'être*: the voice of a unique, singular 'subaltern', black woman. I shall start from the irreducible voice of a marginalised black woman/mother/peasant in KwaZulu's countryside and draw out some of the implications for our own 'logic of practice' and thinking.

III Phumelele Nene was a peasant. Now she is a hawker in Durban. For the last six years she was a waged worker in a Public Authority warehouse. She was laid off recently due to the Authority's fiscal crises. She was a shop steward and a trade union activist. She is 36 years old, the abandoned mother of two children, aged 15 and 12. Her story, so similar to millions of others and so different, needs further elaboration.

IV The peasant in her in 1987 wanted to know why the crop she had planted wilted (peasants still do outrageous things like that).

The *inyanga* claimed it was because of the disquiet in her ancestral line, the collapse of her clan's relation to tradition. The peasant thought it was because the big white farmers had poisoned the air to exterminate her lot. The organiser of the credit union, a homeland government development officer in her area,

claimed that it was because she had not been using fertiliser. The scientist from the local university claimed something different: land erosion caused the wilting, caused in turn by overcrowding, a legacy of apartheid's homeland policy and racial domination.

Each analysis or 'discourse' pointed to something intangible which was supposed to be the 'causal' nexus of her distress. Each one offered in their answers a series of distinct strategies: from the ritual amends to appease the ancestral line to the buying of fertiliser, from the struggle against the *amaBhunu* or organising for redevelopment, each one was a plausible choice and each one involved a major risk. Each one claimed to be a reliable form of knowledge in a lifeworld where the peasant's next act could mean life or death for herself and her children.

Our actress, of course, was already better predisposed to some of the analyses and strategies, but, given her despair, she was open to most. At least she said she was.

Let me not be misunderstood - our peasant is not an exemplar of Rational Action Theory: in the end she acted in a rushed and impulsive way. The kids were hungry, her kin were pressurising, her fears were mounting - as in most such cases there was no time to experiment with the plausible causes and strategies delivered by all of the above.

Also, whatever the case might have been, she needed money: debts had to be paid, 50 percent of her provisions for survival needed to be bought, the children needed shoes, and school fees. The grip of material life in a capitalist economy was firm no matter how cultural magnetisms and emotional intensities pointed another way.

Indeed she followed none of the analyses and strategies offered above - she passed her children over to her mother and abandoned the countryside to seek a job in the cities. She was proletarianised. She became part of demographic accounting, part of the population that squatted on the margins of the city and later she was to become a trade union militant, and still later a cultural activist in the labour movement. The 'urban', the 'home of Satan' shall detain us later. So too will the 'symbolic capital' of her decisions.

One is not saying that she was not experiencing other forms of domination or that her response was or would be an automatic class response - far from it: her predisposition to act was culturally conditioned, gendered and informed by her metaphysical bearings.

What I want to emphasise here is the continuing relevance of class and dispossession that animates our lives down south. It is only at a certain level of material affluence that the old-fashioned, reductive, 'discredited' metanarrative of exploitation and oppression, class and racial institutions and their pressures,

become a plausible target of ridicule or textual critique.

Also, I take the creative licence to imagine that, instead of a 'crop pathologist', the University might have been convinced to send a post-modern semiotician, convinced that since all discourses obey 'story' or 'narrative' structures, none held, to steal from Aime Cesaire, the monopoly of beauty and power.

Our semiotician could have helped with subtle analyses of the textuality of each discursive option available to Phumelele Nene; to define and show how power was embedded in each one of her choices. If such a textual analysis was done sensitively, the peasant would have had a more nuanced choice to make after the semiotician's 'deconstruction'.

Unfortunately, where our post-modern helper would prove of no help, the peasant would still need to know, in a reliable way, and in a way that commits one to devastating mistakes, the way to stop the crop wilting. Here our post-modernist will have to bow out, or commit herself to the responsibility of personal and historic outcomes with all their weights and tragedies.

Our peasant would have to move beyond the 'intertextuality' of advice and dare an answer: borrow money and try 'this' or try 'that' - remove all the simulacra, including, perhaps, 'that' farmer that caused her so much pain.

Of course what is at stake is the status, and I use the word 'status' in its socio-psychological meaning, of failure. The *inyanga's* counsel risks most: at a time of crisis in 'traditional authority' in KwaZulu, when his abilities are in demand, a failure of his diagnosis and remedy would create difficulties for his craft. His life-project is too near to the Nene's lives and too volatile to afford further challenges. The homeland bureaucracy man would fear less: the distance between bureaucratic procedure and programmes in the homelands is so great that another failure would simply add to the horizon's distance. Nevertheless, the status of failure though relates to his job opportunities and his promotion. The success or failure of using fertiliser means something to him, and at a very indirect level his advice harbours some vulnerability.

It is the scientist and the semiotician who risk almost nothing; their insights are not necessarily contingent on any relationship with any peasant. They can pack and go. Their relationship to the peasant is highly asymmetrical and depends on pure voluntarism, or a fictitious order by a fictitiously benign University.

V The descriptions above were written by me; a male sociologist who has at the same time marked time as an elected official in the Natal Culture Congress and the South African Workers' Cultural Unit. She, by now an ex-peasant, was an active member in both organisations. Such a relationship between the two of us might and should be problematised.

I have written the above on the basis of the following transcript of an interview:

I prayed and prayed ... to God for help. Nothing happened. He was testing me, testing my faith. He was testing everyone's faith.

I have a piece of land. It was my husband's piece when we were married. I came from far, from near Sweetwaters to this area. This was my husband's area. He then left for Newcastle and after for Springs. He is with another woman in Springs.

At first he sent money. Then he sent nothing. I live on money my brother sends me for the store. He is a good man ... And we used to grow mealies and pumpkin. I had many chickens. They are in my children's bellies.

For three years the mealies wilted. I thought to myself it must be the white farmer. He accused us of stealing his sheep and cattle-feed. He used to fly with an aeroplane and spray poison. The children would scratch and scratch everytime the aeroplane flew ... I don't know if the farmer was in the plane ... Who else? He was poisoning the air, that's why the crops died. No-one believed me.

... On the way back from the river my children were stopped by the *inyanga*. He was a big, famous man. People used to come in big trucks from Durban to load his *muti* for the fighting against the comrades (the word 'comrade' must have been a later addition to her vocabulary). He said to the girls that they must tell me to go see him. They were scared and ran all the way home.

I stared on the floor as he said that bad things are happening on the land ... Our ancestors are hungry and thirsty in the wilderness. He agreed that my husband acted wrongly but said that it was the way of some men. He said we had to purify ourselves and appease the ancestral line. He would look after the medicines. I would have to go and speak to his mother and to my paternal uncles, to start planning for the ceremony. I have no money, I cried. You will find the money, he said. I felt my spine bones crumbling. I could not sleep properly for days.

I had to travel far to go to my parental homestead. My mother was still alive and ready to help in little ways. She despaired at the thought of my fate. All she could say was that she made such a mistake thinking highly of my husband. But she was too frail to do much; she needed to send word to my brother to come and take control of the situation. So I returned poorer with no progress.

I told the *inyanga* that my brother was to be coming to take care of the situation. He was pleased. He gave me some nice herbs to ease the horrible pains and tortures I was going through.

There was a ... man from the University around, staying near the headman's place over the hill. He was looking at the land dying. He was here before when there was the big drought (1982/3) and

he helped. He used his car to go fetch water and milk for the children from miles away ... I don't know what he was up to really ... white people do funny things. He was different from other whites. He said, Phumelele you know, there is too little land and too many people and it's the government's fault. Black people are too crowded in the homeland and the land breaks and it bleeds.

I didn't know what to do ... Time was running out, no credit, no school fees, no pencils, no brother and pressure, pressure, pressure.

I have to trust her narrative in a singular and fundamental way, and also to confess that gender, my gender, was a problem. I found myself feeling gushes of embarrassment every time an issue of relationships to men was alluded to, and when I probed, asking questions of clarification and sensing the potential violation of taboos - mine, hers, 'everyone's'. Indeed I would venture to argue that there is no social researcher or activist who can assume an organic relationship to one's subject by birthright or commitment. At best there are differential empathetic dispositions. Mine might be of the worst possible kind.

The point here is that if I trust her narrative, despite my limitations in eliciting it (for some my genetic disqualification from even trying to understand it; for others my cultural incompetence in trying to decipher it), I am asking the broader community to trust the cluster of intuitions, constructions and practices, and to trust that I will be able to demonstrate the reliability of my work methods and conclusions.

I felt very intensely the research-sense described by Levi-Strauss as the craft of the 'bricoleur' - an improviser, a 'dealer in the grouping of heterogeneities', using a variety of ad hoc methods.

Derrida (1993) weaves his argument about the human sciences by reducing the work of the scientific engineer and the anthropologist to one kind: ad hoc 'bricolage', of fantastic narration. Where the difference between my project and a deconstructionist's lies is my claim that my 'bricolage' is a product of, to steal from Adorno (Buck-Morss, 1977), an 'exact fantasy' which can be demonstrated, re-produced in a reliable way by everyone. It stands or falls by its 'apodeictic powers'.

VI Post-Derridian deconstruction and its readings face a problem: the problem of 'apodeixis', or the many-a-time corrupted word, 'demonstration'. Our pomo 'multiflexer' sent by the University, has two choices, to state that for some reason her reading and exposition of signifying powers is the most appropriate one in this situation; or that hers is only one of many possible 'readings', with each one being different, each illuminating in its own right, each radiant in its difference,

and, therefore each reading will be of coterminous significance.

In the former case, it would mean that she would have to bind herself to a metanarrative of proof, demonstration, totalisation, an act of 'incredulity' for post-modern textual analysis. In the latter case, she would not: hers would be an open reading as centred in herself as all others are in theirs. And in all honesty she would have to admit that others could decipher different modes of power operating in the texts which could end up in a *reductio ad absurdum*, and for the peasant it would end up in, to use another fashionable word, 'disempowerment'.

As a parenthesis: in this case the text was pre-chosen for our post-modernist. It was not chosen by her as an exemplar of essentialism or a marker for an epistemic break. Usually texts, selected for semiotic massage, written or oral, do not have peasants lurking with a spade and a plough somewhere behind them. They are drawn out of a labyrinth of texts, each one an exemplar of that writerly practice that produced them, each one arbitrary and the result of a concrete writer's labour.

But there, exactly is the bad faith: what foregrounds choice? What propels Derrida to plough through Rousseau and Levi-Strauss? Why Rousseau and not a million other texts? What privileges specific sources? Why not a diary of a traffic attendant in combination with a factory time-log? Enter: *Homo Academicus*, tradition, distinctions, salaries, curricula, power. We have moved from a metaphysic of presence to a manufactured, rhetorical incredulity. Or to put it more bluntly, like Cornel West does: 'a kind of European navel-gazing in which postmodernism becomes a recurring moment within the modern that is performative in character and aesthetic in content' (1993:391).

The existence of the peasant, unlike Foucault's (1970) face in the sand, remains there to disfigure textuality and arrogance, hers is not the 'otherness', it is the discursive practice of the academy that remains 'foreign', 'other', 'strange' and outside her 'discursivity.' Like the white scientist who does 'funny things', our post-modernist would do funnier ones still, and go.

Demonstration of efficacy, or the decipherment of signs as proof, or semiotic readings, or the cause and effect dialogue of scientific practice, all need an apodeictic moment: the apodeictic moment for the natural sciences is not a narration, it is an operational demonstration and then, perhaps using Hintikka's lemma, a demonstration of the logical 'trees' of its application (Smullyan, 1971:27). The reduction of natural scientific experimentation to a 'story' among others by Lyotard (1984) and Bauman (1991) is suggestive, subversive, but highly inappropriate.

The 'white man' scientist in the countryside has arrived at his explanatory kernel after some time of growing and destroying plants, reading, syllogising, drinking, riding his cycle, calculating and repeating. But at the end of the process

he had to convince himself and some others of the apodeictic prowess of his work. He is not only committed to the 'apodeixis' but also to outcomes, to results, to the repeated success of his 'science.'

In a similar way Derrida commands us to open Rousseau on page 126 and read the third paragraph; 'presto! Now open Levi Strauss on page 32, what is going ON there? Are they schmucks or what? I am telling you duckie this is it!', we are told. And since these concepts are not elements or atoms and since they are taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing drags along with it the whole of metaphysics' (Derrida, 1993:227).

Their exegeses are totally different and yet, contra its anti-foundationalism, the latter deconstruction is founded on the demonstrableness of its claims, which it methodically denies. The words 'bad faith', 'pava', 'byt' would not lack metonymic power.

We need to dwell longer on post-modernism's claims, because the dilemma of 'apodeixis' signals a crisis within a very important project (I am only using the word because the usage of the usual concepts, verification, proof, falsification has so much positivist baggage that it would take years to unravel. If there is a better word use it).

If the first point that had to be made was about apodeictic power, the second has to be the one about the 'status of failure' in intellectual work - to be within reach, to belong to 'a logic of practice', to make oneself available to a constituency of people, or to position oneself in such a vulnerability, or to even behave as some of us intellectuals do, to act as if such positioning was important, presupposes a commitment to an emancipatory interest, precisely a *metanarrative*!

VII Phumelele Nene's life was and is bracketted, channelled, limited by class and race contours, boundaries and fences. This part of the exploration will detain us later. What troubles and what animates me now is to explore precisely the fissure between self, social identity and broader structural constraint. To remain, in other words, within her concrete materiality and scan outwards from the 'micro', the local, to the 'macro'. Her relationship to the social milieu in the countryside was complex and not easy to dissolve into an abstraction.

Her narration spoke of actions that were patterned by her 'fears' - she feared the inyanga since he took a specific interest in her predicament; she feared the headman, he was mobilising for all kinds of political causes, he had already chased too many youths out of the area, he was a man who would not accept a 'no' for an answer; she feared the police, black and white, she saw what they had done to people; she feared the white farmer nearby, for he was a man of immense power and arrogance; she feared strange men who were wandering around the countryside; she feared witches and witchcraft, there were escalating accusations

of destructive sorcery in the countryside. She feared also the consequences of declining resources, poverty and hunger.

If 'fear' would energise her towards a pattern of choices and behaviour, this must not be confused with 'obedience' - she claimed that she would obey the police, she would obey her brother's injunctions. The other 'fears' would lead her to an everyday politics of 'avoidance'. She tried to stay out of their way, their paths and the places they frequented. And she would pray to God to protect her from their nastiness, their 'everything'.

Within this climate of constraint, she claimed that she could only take seriously four kinds of counsel: of the *inyanga* because despite her fears about him, he embodied serious kinds of wisdom - 'they know a lot, they see too much, too clearly'; of her own kinship networks and not those of her husband's, despite their immediate closeness to her; of the priest who ministered from a church eight kilometres away and who was 'a good wise man'; and amongst her co-congregationists she would listen to a woman called Martha - a good friend through the church, a woman who had been to the city and now farmed ten kilometres away.

As for spiritual comfort, she could find none in her own homestead or the homesteads of her husband's family; she could only find them in other women who were fellow church-goers; she thought she could also find comfort in her mother's homestead. And of course in God and prayer.

There is no general theory of class or race, ethnicity or gender that can capture the processes of identity formation and the structures of feeling that propel Phumelele Nene to act. Such theories help map her constraints and possibilities, they also can map the landscape of her horizon. It would be presumptuous to think they could do more. Let me indulge a bit further.

In the distance, eastwards from her homestead starts the fence of the white farmer. Crossing the fence would be trespassing, and taking anything from what it fences in, would be theft. He owns the land. That area was designated as Natal where whites (but not blacks) could own means of production and land. This side of the fence was KwaZulu. She was there because *lobola* was paid for her by her husband. He had to work as a migrant worker because 77.2 percent of rural income was from migrant remittances. He stayed in hostels and worked. He left her for some other woman in Springs. Her ability to survive was proscribed. The interaction of all these structural constraints undoubtedly shaped the world and provided her with much of the emotional capital that embedded her symbolic order.

In 1987 it was 'pressure, pressure, pressure' ... An intellectual can only respond to this problem context in three ways:

1. Turns to her and provides reliable knowledge, or apodeictically grounded

knowledge and leaves.

2. Turns to her, provides 'empathetic' guidance based on reliable knowledge but is also committed to a metanarrative of emancipation and therefore attempts to interact in practical ways to overcome the 'pressures'.
3. Uses her as case-study material to prove a point in the Academy.

We can do all three or any number of them, for we are not proscribed in our movements the way she is. Usually post-modern arguments even at their most rhetorically-committed pronouncements are of the third variety. What I am doing at the moment is of the third variety. I claim however that in the period 1983-86 a 'logic of practice' developed that made us available for relationships of the second kind. Methodologically, that is if the claims of most postmodernist thinkers are taken seriously, the third option is the only option. It is a text that is privileged for gains and victories in discursive combat and other power narratives, elsewhere.

Phumelele Nene's concrete materiality, her little struggles and defeats, unlike a discursive face in the sand, persevere. It is to her 'pressures, pressures, pressures' that we need to turn for a closing gesture.

VIII Before her irreversible choice to migrate to the cities she was, according to her 'story', deteriorating at a social and individual level. On the one hand, the loss of her 'husband' and the pangs of poverty were experienced as loss of status, of standing in her immediate community. Even though the community might not have stigmatised her, she felt that she was; she felt that she was under constant scrutiny and judgement. She felt dislocated from 'tradition', 'custom', 'community'. On the other hand, she would go into paroxysms of self-blame: she felt spells of dizziness, pain, that she could not get up in the mornings, that she was to be paralysed. The pressure was fracturing her sense of social identity and her sense of self.

The *inyanga* offered a ritual and physical re-integration and (possible) regeneration. The gathering of the community for the ritual appeasement of ancestral links would have brought with it new strategies for her re-absorption and her revaluation. Most probably she would have had to be taken care of by her husband's brother. What she did was to create a web of solidarities with the women co-congregationists, a community of care that gathered every Sunday at the church, made up of women from homesteads away from hers. There she found comfort. The battle against pain, self-blame, was an internal one: prayer, the excruciating walk to the church and back, the increasing fervour about the well-being of her children.

Over and above all of that came the unabated pressure of money, hunger and need. The city, eDolobheni - Durban was five kilometres' walk and then as close

as a bus ride could make it.

The nightmare of rootlessness and pressure, feeling and loss, has been the preserve of theories of alienation and anomie. It is to them I will have to turn to offer some clues to understand cultural formation, their magnetisms, the hues they create around a somatic co-presence in a web of relationships, the practices and their organising logics, their 'neuronic' equilibria and their unconscious image-sets, their reflexes, their directionality. This is a task beyond the limits of this paper.

The responsibility of our intellectual work demands that we move beyond the mundane sense that all 'representation' or 'communication' is possible only through discursive utterance; that each utterance and sign-cluster is constructed like a text; and each, whether 'scientific' in its claims or not, is an edifice for deconstruction, and dare to examine the creatures that speak them.

All we have learnt from the first world's academies is to recognise that relations of production are not the only source of pain. We should have known that. We do not need a pseudo-non-foundationalism to do so. We needed postmodernists to remind us that there is an asymmetry between structure, social being, cultural formation, identity and feelings. In exploiting Phumelele's narration as an intellectual, I am making another point too: that a politics and a praxis that ignore her very own structures of feeling, her difference and her autonomy within a broader collective project are a lifeless, sap-less, modern futility.

Nevertheless, a social researcher, although politically and morally concerned with the integrity and dignity (indeed, the irreducibility) of Nene's story, is animated by a different passion: to yield from the story a surplus that translates into a stock of reliable insights that help understand and transform the pressures that have raged, ruthlessly, at her life.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, A (1992) *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London, New York: Verso.
- Amin, S (1989) *Eurocentrism*, New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Barrett, M and A Phillips (eds) (1992) *Destabilising Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Baudrillard, J (1993) *Simulations*, New York: Semiotext(e).
- Batman, Z (1991) *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bozzoli, B and P Delius (1990) 'Radical history and South African society' in *Radical History Review*, 46-47.
- Buck-Morss, S (1977) *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, Sussex: The Harvester Press.
- Cesaire, A (1969) *A Return to my Native Land*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Derrida, J (1976) *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.
- Derrida, J (1993) 'Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences' in J Natoli and L Hutcheon (eds) *A Postmodern Reader*, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Paris, DE (1980) 'Narrative form and oral history: some problems and possibilities', *International Journal of Oral History*, 1(3).

- Ferguson, R et al, (eds) (1992) *Out there: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures*, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art.
- Foucault, M (1970) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Pantheon.
- Garcia Marquez, G (1973) *100 Years of Solitude*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Grele, R (ed) (1985) *Envelopes of Soul: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory and Practice of Oral History and Oral Testimony*, Chicago: Precedent Publishers.
- Guha, R and GC Spivak (eds) (1988) *Selected Subaltern Studies*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haraway, D (1989) *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist Thinking Black*, Boston: South End Press.
- Kruger, B et al (1989) *Remaking History*, Seattle: Bay Press.
- Laclau, E and C Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso.
- Liotard, F (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Morrison, T (1987) *Beloved* New York: Random House.
- Natoli, J and L Hutcheon (eds) (1993) *A Postmodern Reader*, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Passerini, L (1980) 'Italian working class culture between the wars: consensus to fascism and work ideology,' *International Journal of Oral History*, 1(1).
- Said, EW (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage Books.
- Smullyan RM, (1971) *First-Order Logic*, Berlin, Heidelberg, New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Spivak, GC (1989) 'Who Claims Alterity?' in B Kruger et al, (eds) op cit.
- Spivak, GC (1987) *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York: Methuen.
- Thompson, P (1978) *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Trinh-Minh-ha, (1989) *Woman Native Other*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Walker, A (1976) *Meridian*, London: Women's Press.
- Walker, A (1983) *The Color Purple*, London: Women's Press.
- West, C (1992) 'The new cultural politics of difference' in R Ferguson et al, (eds) op cit.
- West, C (1989) 'Black culture and postmodernism' in B Kruger et al, (eds) op cit.