DISCONTINUOUS CONTINUITIES IN ASSIA DJEBAR'S *L'AMOUR LA FANTASIA*

Kathryn M. Lauten

"Archeology is the search for *facts*" spouts the archeologist Prof. Jones in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* to his impressionable Introduction to Archeology class as he writes that key word, "facts," on the blackboard. He continues by adding that archeology is not the search for "truth," as that is left to philosophers. The first scenes in the movie are of a young Indy recovering an ancient cross from some scavengers since, as he says, "It belongs in a museum." The cross is subsequently taken from him and given back to the "bad guy." Much later in his life, Indy again retrieves this cross from the same man, and he finally gives the cross to a museum, "where it belongs."

Indeed, a large percentage of items retrieved in "official" archeological digs are categorized, analyzed, and placed in museum collections allowing people in the present to see remnants of the past, whether they be paintings, vases, cooking utensils, mummies, etc. In any case, museums try to help visitors "bring to life," or make more familiar, something from the past by putting it on display and labeling it. This intent of displaying a past certainly has political ramifications no matter who or what is involved. Here I would like to consider what some of those politics are in a specific situation while taking into account theoretical views of "writing history."

In his chapter "Census, Map, Museum" of *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson examines how those three colonial undertakings (the census, the map and the museum) "profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion -- the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry" (164). His view of the inter-connectedness of these institutions is very revealing in terms of how a state established a perception of nation, but what interests me most here is the vocabulary Anderson uses to describe the museum efforts to restore monuments:

> It is noticeable how heavily concentrated archeological efforts were on the restoration of imposing monuments (and how these monuments began to be plotted on maps for public distribution and edification: a kind of necrological census was underway). (180)

Anderson links the archeological endeavors involving things of the "past" with a "present" preoccupation of taking a census of living people. At the same time, he places a great emphasis on these monuments, which he correlates with human corpses, by involving them in a "necrological census."

Mary Louise Pratt examines some ramifications of the archeological project of colonizers that will also help inform this discussion. I give here a lengthy quotation as it contains several points to which I will refer in the course of my analysis.

> As with the monumentalist reinvention of Egypt . . . the links between the societies being archeologized and their contemporary descendants remain absolutely obscure, indeed irrecoverable. This, of course, is part of the point. The European imagination produces archeological subjects by splitting contemporary non-European peoples off from their precolonial, and even their colonial, pasts. To revive indigenous history and culture as archeology is to revive them as *dead*. The gesture simultaneously rescues them from European forgetfulness and reassigns them to a departed age. . . . [T]he archeological perspective obliterates the conquered inhabitants of the contact zone as historical agents who have living continuities with Pre-European pasts and historically based aspirations and claims on the present. (134-5)

Before I further address this quotation, I would like to introduce the novel *L'amour la fantasia* by Assia Djebar. This work has a complex narrative structure of three major parts, each of which is divided into sections. The subsections form a pattern that involves at least two different narratives running parallel to each other. For example, in the first section, the first person narrator describes parts of her life (in the twentieth-century) alternately with a recapitulation of the French invasion of Algeria in 1830.

Djebar, herself an historian, uses archival materials to represent the colonizers' view-points, then surrounds and infiltrates that with her own prose. This works to destabilize the colonial dominant voice that surfaces in that archived "historical" literature regarding Algeria, and in so doing, it counters the colonial project as described by Pratt above. As Dorothy Blair writes in the introduction to her translation of the

novel, "for the chapters devoted to the War of Colonization, Djebar . . . disinters little-known eye-witness accounts written at the time by artists, obscure officers, publicists . . . ." At times she quotes directly from these accounts. At times she uses them as a departure for her own representation of the scene. But she never lets them stand alone. She frequently uses them as something to contradict or amend in order to include that which she sees as *missing* in the French accounts yet important to her own — such as representations of Algerians (especially of women) as live complex beings, not just mute corpses.

The archives are "disinterred," pulled from their museum, and brought to the present in order to counter, revise, and refocus them. As the narrator says in reference to an account written by a man named Pélissier, "I accept this palimpsest on which I now inscribe the charred passion of my ancestors" (79). This sounds like a fairly common reclaiming and rewriting "ones own" in a situation where the historical accounts are lacking. But as is the case here, and in most projects of writing history, the complications are intricate.

In this consideration of history, museums, and relics from the past, it is important to see that she takes what is *already* labeled a palimpsest in order to write her own version over that which came before. Hence, the person from whom she receives it, Pélissier, was not the first to write on it either since it was already a palimpsest.

Yet where did it come from? Where will it go after the narrator sets it down? It seems the importance of it being named a palimpsest is not so much to be able to specifically define its origins or guess its future; rather it is to recognize that as a palimpsest, it has a past, a past that might wear through the new overwriting, and blend with it or inform it in some way. This portrayal of a sense of continuity and inescapability from the past is a preoccupation in *L'amour la fantasia* which encourages some interesting considerations.

An obsession with the past and with past generations has been documented and theorized by many in the West, especially since the nineteenth century. Even in recognition that the cultural positions of the authors of the works I bring to this discussion are different from that of Djebar, I think they have an important place in this paper. Many would argue that the continuity stressed by the narrator in *L'amour la fantasia* cannot be. Tom Conley wrote in the introduction to his translation of *The Writing of History*:

> Scholars must draw a line between what is dead and what is not . . . . Historians endlessly establish contingent time through archeology; they produce the past by virtue of practicing arcane crafts of resurrection, animation, and even ventriloquism. The aim of creating worlds that convey — and betray — the truth of the past is thus based upon the obsessive relation that the contemporary age holds with death. (viii)

This introduction, which contains the key words for my paper — death and resurrection — leads one into the work in which Michel de Certeau elaborates on the idea that historiography works on the premise that there is a "rupture" between the present (the living) and the past (the dead). As he writes:

> [C]hronology is composed of 'periods' (for example the Middle Ages, modern history, contemporary history). . . . In their respective turns, each 'new' time provides the *place* for a discourse considering whatever preceded it to be 'dead,' but welcoming a 'past' that had already been specified by former ruptures. (4)

Pierre Nora in his introduction to the voluminous work, *Les lieux de mémoire*, writes of this break with the past and the lack of continuity, but in addition, he elaborates the idea that memory and history are two distinct concepts. Integral to his argument is that the past is seen as dead and lived only through commemoration. He writes:

> Places of history are primarily remains. [They] are born and live of the feeling that spontaneous memory exists no longer, that it is necessary to create archives, retain anniversary celebrations, deliver funeral eulogies, because these actions are not natural. (xxiv)

Nora emphasizes the proliferation of archives in the twentieth century. Museums, documentaries, books, films on the past are everywhere. Whatever is found, recovered, exhumed, is documented and placed in an archive as prescribed by Indiana Jones. These remains, however, are not resuscitated or brought back to life. They are commemorated as a necrological census of representations of the past.

So what of *L'amour la fantasia*?

Djebar's continual juxtapositions of the past and present, 1830 and 1954, seem by default to exemplify this break or rupture. Nineteen fifty-four is not 1830. The French who colonized and the Algerians who fought against them in 1830 are all dead. Not only are the people dead, but so are the unrecorded voices that the narrator tries to compensate for by inserting them in the "official" French texts. But let us remember as de Certeau reminds us that:

> Far from being self-evident, this construction [of a rupture with the past] is a uniquely Western trait. In India, for example, "new forms never drive the older ones away." Rather there exists a "stratified stockpiling," Louis Dumont has noted. . . . A "process of coexistence and reabsorption" is, on the contrary, the "cardinal fact" of Indian history. And, too, among the Merina of Madagascar . . .: far from being an "ob-ject" thrown behind so that an autonomous present will be possible, the past is a treasure placed in the *midst* of the society that is its memorial, a food intended to be chewed and memorized. History is the "privilege" (*tantara*) that must be remembered so that one shall not oneself be forgotten. In its own midst it places the people who stretch from a past to a future. (4)

In a very tactical move in *L'amour la fantasia*, the narrator excavates caves and mass massacre sites to "exhume" and "resuscitate" those Algerians killed by the French in the nineteenth century. She is led to these sites by the archived writings of some men involved in the massacres. One account describes how hundreds of people were in a cave and the French officers built fires at the cave opening and suffocated those inside. Djebar's "archeological" efforts in examining the documents and then writing about the accounts in her own way serves to revive the past and bring it into the present.

One of her stated purposes is to give voice to those who had no voice in the writings of the French. As she writes, "The asphyxiated victims of the Dahra, that words expose, that memory disinters" (76). This uncovering, recovering, unearthing has the effect also of "unsilencing" as can be heard in the word play of the French word she uses "que la mémoire *déterre*" (to disinter) or "dé-taire" (a construction of the word "taire" to "silence"). At other moments in the text, the

narrator writes and thus claims to resuscitate people of the "past": "I imagine you . . . I re-create you . . . I resuscitate you" (189).

In this situation, the narrator, specifically in her vocabulary, is again countering the colonial archeological project described by Pratt which states that "To revive indigenous history and culture as archeology is to revive them as *dead*" (135). In *L'amour la fantasia*, the act of reviving is one of re-membering, putting back together the pieces of that past not only to re-create and reinterpret the events, but also to try to further understand their existence in the present. Those who fled to the caves in 1830 are at least spiritually *alive* in those who use the caves in the 20th century war — not revived as dead. The women of today incorporate the women of the past.

The "exhuming" of the bodies and rehumanizing of the dead through reviving them and giving them voice is apparent in these specific examples and also in the general structure of the novel. It is shown in the "enlacement" or interlacing of the stories as has been described here and is most explicitly evident in the third part of the novel where voices of female liberation fighters in the present are woven with voices of women from the past. It is in "reviving" the voices of the past and combining them with the voices of the present that the narrator refuses to "obliterate the conquered inhabitants of the contact zone as historical agents who have living continuities with Pre-European pasts and historically based aspirations and claims on the present" (Pratt 135). By re-membering, she is able to constitute a solidarity of women across centuries which she posits, though not without some strong hesitations, as a hope for the future. The archeological project here is one that establishes ties between the past and present in a collective sense. By using notebooks, letters, stories from the past the narrator puts meaning and structure to the voices of the past and their relation to the present. She re-members all the parts, creating links and cohesive stories.

She does this not to merely put it in a museum, however. It is to regain the continuity lost by a rupture imposed outwardly by the French colonization process. She bridges that period by interlacing the present with the time before colonization. Just as she juxtaposed texts to counter hegemonic discourse, so she uses terms referred to by many who theorize the writing of history, that of resuscitation and revival of the dead to do explicitly just that. She revives the dead to recreate continuity almost in direct opposition to the Western conception of a

past ruptured from the present. The archeological project in this book disallows the colonizer's tendency to ensure that "the links between the societies being archeologized and their contemporary descendants remain absolutely obscure, indeed irrecoverable" (Pratt 134).

Nietzsche, who is fundamental to the more recent theoretical writings on history, wrote in *Untimely Meditations:*

> Forgetting is essential to action of any kind . . . to determine [the degree to which the past has to be forgotten if it is] not to become the grave digger of the present, one would have to know exactly how great the *plastic power* of a man, a people, a culture is: I mean by plastic power the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken molds. (62)

In *L'amour la fantasia*, there seems to be an attempt to experiment with this advice, to appropriate this productive aspect of the idea and refute the existence of an unerossable gulf between a present and a past.

Certainly the success of this is tainted with the realization that, in doing so, she has perhaps managed only to write, borrowing the term de Certeau uses to describe historical writing, a "scriptural tomb." He wrote, "Writing speaks of the past only in order to inter it. Writing is a tomb in the double sense of the word in that, in the very same text, it both honors and eliminates" (101). Perhaps *L'amour la fantasia* only manages to commemorate the past in its resuscitation attempts. I would posit, however, that Djebar's pushing of the boundaries, and countering of attempts to colonize urge the rapprochement of those distinctly different times in this lyrical and vivacious project. Indeed the "rehumanizing" process was not for a "post-colonial" world or a pre-colonial world, but rather for an invocation of a new concept of continuity of time and history.

University of Michigan

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 1983.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Writing of History*. Trans. Tom Conley. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.

Djebar, Assia. *Fantasia, and Algerian Calvacade*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. New York: Quartet Books, 1985.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life." *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.

Nora, Pierra. *Les lieux de mémoire* Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984. (translation my own)

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes*. New York: Routledge, 1992.