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**Biographical Sketch**

Benda Hofmeyr is Professor of Philosophy in the School of the Arts at the University of Pretoria. Before her appointment at UP in 2009 she lived and worked in the Netherlands while completing her doctoral studies and postdoctoral research. She still maintains strong collaborative ties with the Radboud University Nijmegen where she obtained her doctoral degree in Philosophy on the work of Foucault and Levinas. Her research interests fall within the broad ambit of contemporary Continental philosophy (especially thinkers following in the wake of Heidegger with emphasis on post-structuralism and phenomenology) with an enduring fascination for the inextricable entanglement of the ethical and the political. Within the context of both her teaching and research, she reflects on the entanglement of European and non-Western, especially post-colonial African philosophy and the possibility of a dialogue across these divergent yet fundamentally intertwined traditions of thought. For more information about her research and publications, visit: [www.bendahofmeyr.com](http://www.bendahofmeyr.com)

## An Untimely Meditation on a Time ‘Out of Sync’<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Genealogy as Critique

In the last few decades – especially in a time in which there has been growing global sensitization to the traumatizing othering and effacement of others by colonialism and the persistence thereof in neo-colonial and ‘post’-colonial guises – growing numbers of philosophers have underlined the glaring incommensurability between Kant’s universal moral theory, with its inspiring Enlightenment ideals of human autonomy, equality and dignity, on the one hand, and his racism, on the other.<sup>2</sup> It might therefore come across as exceedingly misguided or even *untimely* to start a critical reflection on who we are today in our so-called postcolonial present(s) by revisiting Kant’s 1784 response to the question posed by the German periodical, *Berlinische Monatsschrift: Was ist Aufklärung?* I nevertheless beg your indulgence and venture this brief ‘untimely meditation’, for as Foucault pointed out in his 1984 essay by the same name, it was Kant who approached the question of a philosophical consideration of the present in a way that deviated in an instructive way from previous attempts.

For Kant, a critical interrogation of one’s own present is not an attempt to find how it diverges from the past following some dramatic event, nor is it an interrogation of the present to unearth signs of a forthcoming event, or of a point of transition toward the dawning of a new world (Foucault 1984: 33). Here Kant makes no mention of ‘origins’, ‘progress’ or ‘the internal teleology of a historical process’ as in his other texts on history. His exclusive concern is with contemporary reality. Enlightenment, for Kant, is a “modification of the preexisting relation linking will, authority, and the use of reason (*ibid.*, p. 34). One’s will should be guided by the use of reason even if it finds itself in opposition to authority. For Kant, this is not only an ongoing task but also an obligation; and as an obligation that risks critiquing authority, it requires immense courage. It is matter of questioning authority not *in principle* (which would risk anarchy in presenting oneself as ungovernable), but of not merely relying on authority – as a matter *of principle*. Foucault words it as follows:

“how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them” (Foucault in Lotringer (Ed.) 2007: 44).

Across the globe divergent geographical locales have borne historical testimony to the exigency of the continuous and ever renewed interrogation of particular historical

presents – and how our relationship to our present affects the relationship that we have with ourselves. Foucault referred to this Kantian obligation as “a historical ontology of ourselves”, i.e. “a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying” (1984: 115). The South African present is not unique in being a ‘postcolony’ in which re- and neo-colonial tendencies persist, but a genealogical survey of its history throws particularly conflictual lines of dissent into relief. More precisely, genealogy seeks to engage with history not as discipline or science [*Historie*], but as event(s) and hence it embarks upon the excavation of the *Entstehungsgeschichte* [history of the moment(s) of emergence] of such events.<sup>3</sup> A history of the moment(s) of emergence does not seek to uncover the point of origin or a teleological progression, but critically engages a present locale in the midst of an *effective* history,<sup>4</sup> in which the effects of the past remains effective of the present in unpredictable and indeed untimely ways. The moment(s) of emergence is therefore not to be understood as a culmination, or the final term of a historical development.

Instead, “they are merely the current episodes in a series of subjugations” (Foucault 1971: 99). Almost all of South Africa’s peoples came from elsewhere; almost none are left that can rightfully claim to be autochthonous. All of its peoples descended from the north either by land or by sea – all of them have blood on their hands, the colonialists’ hands undoubtedly the bloodiest. The first white settlers found the native hunter-gatherers and tribespeople under threat from the southwardly migrating Bantu peoples. In the subsequent colonial and apartheid pasts the hands of lighter hues were far bloodier than others, whereas in the more recent and immediate pasts, hands of all complexions have become indistinguishable in the dirt and disgrace that stain them. Mzansi<sup>5</sup> is not Graceland,<sup>6</sup> to be sure; Mzansi is the place of incessant *disgrace* whose perpetrators belong to all races, all colours, all socio-economic positionalities.<sup>7</sup> It is a place and time of pervasive civil disgruntlement with persistent inequality and injustice, a time of direct and structural violence, of stagnating social, political and economic developments, of irrational politics and the fragmentation of society. Foucault described such scenarios as the age-old reversals of forces, the usurpation and re-usurpation of power, “the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry”, he says (1971: 104), “of a masked ‘other’”. To my mind, a critical interrogation of our historical present, which is also simultaneously a historico-critical

analysis of who we are in this present, should bring us face-to-face with this “masked other”, not in an attempt to unmask the other, since ‘the other’ is not the problem. The scourge that we are up against is *the very process of othering*. Put differently, unmasking the other does not and cannot stop the perpetual emergence of others by way of othering. In fact, and far more sinister, is the genealogical insight that the source(s) of othering is itself irremediably other, inaccessible, not to be located, nor experienced, but ever festering.

If we are to believe Nietzsche, the philosopher as genealogist nevertheless retains the task – perhaps not despite of, but because of this fatalism – to ascertain how to engage with history so as to serve life. If history is to serve life, history itself cannot but be untimely, not of this time, ahead of its time, for the future – both diachronous and synchronous: through time, yet at this same time, concurrently (cf. Nietzsche’s 1874 essay, the second of the *Untimely Meditations* titled, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” in Nietzsche 2007: 57-124). To have a sense of the past that serves the present involves not only memory but forgetting, or forgetfulness of the past for the sake of life in the present. If the past is to be forgotten for the present to be tolerable, we are dealing with repressed trauma – the very domain of psychoanalysis. Given the senselessness of the eternal return of the same traumatizing processes of othering that seems to hold the key to a critical understanding of our present, which might allow for the right measure of remembering and forgetting so as to serve life, the role of repressed trauma requires closer interrogation. To this I shall return shortly, but let us first turn to *our* present.

## **2. Burning Rage**

‘South Africa burns with rage!’ This message dominated local headlines in the recent past. The economy is failing and structural inequality prevails. The widespread frustration with the Zuma government eventually led him to resign after being recalled by the African National Congress (ANC), but the new administration is eons away from proving to be the *deus ex machina* of the disgraced ruling political party. South Africa has not only been dubbed ‘the protest capital of the world’,<sup>8</sup> but the very nature of the protests especially between 2015-2017 signalled a kind of fury not seen since the anti-pass protests preceding the Sharpeville-massacre in 1960 – being given to violence, general lawlessness and destruction. The many reasons for the protests

include housing allocations and service delivery issues, municipal demarcation, xenophobia, labour related demands and unemployment, water shortages and cost of electricity, land related issues like evictions and forced removals, quality of school education, university fees, corruption and crime.<sup>9</sup> The senseless violence of the protest actions reeked of desperation and frustration: the most telling perhaps was the self-flagellating burning of busses and schools. South Africa was literally, and still is figuratively, burning with rage.<sup>10</sup>

A persistent leitmotif in the discourse of rage of especially the so-called born-free generation was that the ruling “liberating” party failed them because the legacy of apartheid – considered to be the third in a series of subjugations (following slavery and colonialism) – seems to be insurmountable (cf. Mbembe 2001: 3). The pressing task at hand, from a genealogical point of view, is to try to understand why the fury that fuelled the fires – so emblematic of this rage – is so irate at this particular historical juncture.

### **3. *Traumadeutung: Signs of Trauma?***

Achille Mbembe has attempted to think through the unique situatedness and positionalities of those living in the postcolony as gleaned from African modes of self-representation (2001). For the first modern African thinkers, liberation from servitude was equivalent above all to acquiring formal power and making their own decisions autonomously. Importantly, Mbembe notes, the fundamental question, that is, “how to renegotiate a social bond corrupted by commercial relationships (the sale of human beings) and the violence of endless wars”, was considered secondary (*ibid.*, p. 9). Mbembe argues that in the postcolonial African quest for identity and power, one of the key categories that were mobilized to this end is the figure of the African as a “*victimized subject*” (my emphasis):

“at the heart of the paradigm of victimization we find a reading of self and the world as a series of fatalities. In African history, it is thought, there is neither irony nor accident. Our history is essentially governed by forces beyond our control. The diversity and disorder of the world, as well as the open character of historical possibilities, are reduced – in an authoritarian manner – to a spasmodic, unchanging cycle, infinitely repeated in accord with a conspiracy always fomented by forces beyond our reach [. . .] Ultimately, the African is

supposed to be merely a castrated subject, the passive instrument of the Other's enjoyment...

[ ... ]

Under such conditions the imagination of identity is deployed in accord with the logic of suspicion, of denunciation of the Other and of everything that is different: the mad dream of a world without Others" (pp. 10-11).

Mbembe further argues that the primary effect of slavery, colonization, and apartheid was to divide African societies against themselves. This division opened the way for Africans to participate in victimizing their own people. The neurosis of victimization and impotence in the face of it, then leads to a xenophobic persecution mania (masking a profound desire for recognition and vengeance) (cf. p. 11). As a result and in support of this construction, a diabolical couple is fabricated: the enemy – or tormentor and incarnation of absolute wickedness – and the victim, full of virtue and incapable of violence, terror, or corruption (*ibid.*) A false dichotomy is created between the self and the other by attempting to oust or 'other' the other. What Mbembe seems to be arguing here is that this conscious suppression of the traumatizing external other is symptomatic of the unconscious repression of the traumatizing internal other. I'll get to this point shortly.

How can we break with this defunct and worn out mode of thought, asks Mbembe? (p. 16) To be sure, thinkers such as Mudimbe<sup>11</sup> have tried to deconstruct tradition (and thereby Africa itself) by showing the latter to have been invented. Others, such as Appiah<sup>12</sup> have attempted to problematize the very notion of a definitive 'African identity' by acknowledging the fact that identity is always in a state of becoming and indebted to diverse genealogies, including traditions inherited from colonial history (cf. pp. 16-17). These attempts, however, do not wholly satisfy Mbembe. Once slavery, colonization and apartheid have been acknowledged as factual events that have structured, for Africans, a certain experience of the world and of themselves; and once it is acknowledged that these events are subject to several simultaneous interpretations that constantly derail any attempt at attributing any definitive meaning to these archives, the genuine philosophical labour of sense-making can commence.

The one lacuna in African scholarship, which Mbembe points out, has to do with *the work of memory*. Properly speaking, there is no African memory of slavery. What memory there is, is distinctly coloured by diffraction. Figments circulate and are invoked mainly to arouse feelings of culpability in the Other while at the same time evading the weight of the peculiar responsibility incumbent upon Africans themselves in the element of tragedy – which is not the only element – in their history (cf. p. 19). Mbembe maintains that at best, “slavery is experienced as a wound whose meaning belongs to the domain of the psychic unconscious” (ibid.). What remains unsaid, unacknowledged, and perhaps even unthought in existing recollections is that troubling aspect of the crime that directly engages their own responsibility:

“For the fate of black slaves in modernity is not solely the result of the tyrannical will and cruelty of the Other – even though the latter is well-established. The other primitive signifier is the murder of brother by brother” (p. 20).

What is being obscured is the fact that the rapacity of capitalism at the root of the slave trade was concomitant also with murders within the family (fratricides). Continental Africans were not only sold into slavery, but sold into slavery *by* Africans to European slave traders. This repressed reality means that the manner and degree of inflicted trauma, subjugation and treachery suffered on the two sides of the Atlantic were anything but the same. More importantly, it implies that the appeal to race as the moral and political basis of solidarity among ‘Africans’ flounders in the face of the founding fratricides of the slave trade.

In a lecture presented in 2016<sup>13</sup> Mbembe reiterated this point. He argues that things might have changed in South Africa, but they have not changed enough in the sense that the vacation of previous forms of injustice and inequality has ushered in new forms of injustice and inequality that lay bare the painful elision at the heart of slavery, colonization, apartheid and racism. The fact that slavery was not only the fault of those who bought slaves, but also that of those who sold slaves and built their kingdoms on the revenue generated in this way. The fact is that colonization and apartheid cannot exclusively be explained based on the logic of us vs. them, black vs. white, autochthonous vs. allochthonous, settlers vs. natives, because the ‘we’ is internally divided against itself, which is of course also the basic insight that the apartheid regime missed (and which therefore became more foregrounded with the fall of apartheid): keeping us and them apart does not address the internal divide.

On the face of things, as noted and might be expected, the burning rage displayed by the new generation seems to be linked to the fundamental disillusionment of what post-liberation lived freedom actually means, what it ended up amounting to more than two decades after the fall of apartheid. What has dawned with unambiguous clarity is the realization that the former national liberation movement has become a ransacking organization more invested in profit than in the pressing need to alleviate the fate of the poorest of the poor.

If the original trauma of slavery (fratricide) did indeed remain repressed, or at least unthought or unassimilated into the popular imagination, it could explain why the present trauma of the post-liberation ANC's self-enrichment and other-betrayal, the forsaking of the most vulnerable, resulted in such violent, burning rage. For as Žižek explains, both Freud and Lacan contend that traumatic events that we undergo in the present owe their properly traumatic impact to the way a pre-existing traumatic 'psychic reality' (the Real) is aroused through it. *Trauma has always already occurred* (cf. Žižek 2008: 10-11). Put differently, we are bearing witness to the post-traumatic stress disorder of a generation, which expresses the always already character of the trauma (cf. Malabou 2012: 227). This explains the seemingly inexplicable: the mass social psychosis or communal suicide evident in the irrationality of school burning shrouded under the pretence of legitimate protest action – a sign of a community that has lost its collective mind. If service delivery is at the heart of the demarcation grievances, why burn the most valuable symbol of service to any community, as Tinyiko Maluleke (2016: 24) rightly asks. It exposes this generation as a wounded generation at war with itself (cf. *ibid.*).

### **Victim or Agent?**

The ethical question at the heart of this discussion bears on the position of the 'patient' – in this case, the born-free student, towards the traumatic situation. As Verhaeghe puts it: "Either one considers the patient as a mere victim of an external agent, which means s/he is entitled to help and support; or one considers the patient not solely as a victim but as someone with an impact of his or her own, even with a limited form of choice" (Verhaeghe 1998: 88). When this question is raised within a political context, patients will more often than not be considered as victims and survivors. Within a (modern) clinical context, on the contrary, clinicians tend to



choose the second approach. Analysts will stress the necessity for emotional distance, that is, for taking your distance from the all too supporting role. The taking away of responsibility from the patient is even considered by some as one of the major therapeutic mistakes. It is argued that it remains the patient's responsibility to understand what and how things happened to him/her, and to choose what attitude will be assumed in relation to the trauma.<sup>14</sup> These ideas reiterate the original Freudian position on the so-called '*Neurosenwahl*',<sup>15</sup> i.e. the choice of neurosis. This choice is precisely the factor that makes psychotherapy possible. The first response implies a complete determinism and thus therapeutic pessimism, even fatalism: the patient has become what he had to become, due to his/her traumatic experiences. The second response, on the other hand, implies a minimal element of choice and implication for the subject, which is precisely the minimal condition for change. Hence the fact that Lacan stresses the 'future anterior' in contrast to the 'past tense': 'I will be what I am now through my choice', instead of: 'I am what I already was'. Choices made now will determine the future of the subject (ibid.). In the present context, what is termed 'choice' is the impossible double-bind of the patient-subject's 'auto'-nomy: the delineated freedom always already determined by a law not of his/her making.

### **Genealogy as Cure**

What are we today then? What are we today in relation to the rage of the present generation of students that we face in our lecture halls, in relation to so many #Must Fall campaigns, to so many protest actions, in the face of excruciating political and economic precarity? What are we today in relation to a wounded generation at war with itself? Our students, our children, our youth are part of a generation split between the appeal, 'Can't you see we're burning?' and the demand for autonomy: we no longer want to be delivered over to a world not of our making, we want – no, we *demand* to choose for ourselves. Split-subjects caught in the double-bind of their thrownness. Racked with the trauma of recurring betrayal by brothers and others alike, and the responsibility they demand but cannot possibly assume for their own future and fate.

As educators, and as those that are themselves determined by the collective guilt of slavery, colonialism, apartheid and racism, we might feel inclined to assume the patriarchal role of aid worker, to empower those victimized by circumstances not of their making, forsaken by their own liberators, in the recognition that we are

dealing with a generation that has become what it had to become by virtue of their traumatic circumstances. Or we could heed the advice of the psychoanalyst who insists on distancing oneself from an *overly* supportive role. This is not to be mistaken for an acquittal or a renouncement of responsibility. We as the previous generation(s), as parents, as educators are irrevocably inscribed in and implicated by the politics of trauma. We therefore find ourselves in the quintessential Levinasian double-bind of an impossible responsibility: a responsibility that we cannot renounce, without ‘murdering the Other’, yet cannot assume without risking re-enacting the patriarchy so emblematic of colonialism and apartheid and thus their continued disempowerment and victimization. We have blood on our hands, yet ‘the child is not dead’.<sup>16</sup>

The child demands freedom and justice; the child demands political accountability; the child demands a future. This is the generation whose present is marked by a trauma to which it has no access. If the trauma has been repressed it has not properly been lived. From a genealogical point of view, what is at stake is not properly a past but a moment of arising. Access to such a moment can only be obtained by returning to the point where it was covered over and neutralized by tradition. Tradition serves as a form of solidification or canonization that bars access to actual historical sources. Put differently, we have to return to the point where the split occurred between what is conscious and the unconscious, between history as science [*Historie*] and history as event [*Geschichtlichkeit*] (cf. Agamben 2009: 105-106 citing Melandri). Agamben too – like Lacan – notes the peculiar temporal structure of this excavation. Beyond memory and forgetting what is sought is a past that can only be experienced in its future. The trauma that *will have been* – repressed trauma’s peculiar temporal structure is that of a *future anterior*. Furthermore, this trauma that will have been stands between the traumatized (generation) and its access to the present.

Finally, I have come to a point where I can venture a response to the problem, which prompted the foregoing meandering line of investigation: what is the cause and effect of our present understood as a time ‘out of sync’? Put differently, what is trauma to the future? What we have been able to ascertain is that trauma is untimely. It belongs not to the past, but blocks its victims from gaining access to their present. A repressed traumatic event is therefore not past but contemporaneous with the present. Its recovery requires the genealogical excavation of the sources of history [*Historie*] as discipline in order to reanimate history as event [historicality or

*Geschichtlichkeit*].<sup>17</sup> In such a way, the traumatic event, which was repressed, can be experienced for the first time in its future. Trauma has not just always already occurred (Lacan), but due to its repression trauma *will have been*. In Nietzschean terms, the genealogical unlocking of the *will have been* might be conceived as an engagement with history for the sake of life. From a genealogical point of view, it's not so much a restoration of a previous event or stage as Freud would have it, but a decomposition and overcoming of a past trauma to disarm it as over-determinative of the future that follows.

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<sup>1</sup> This response consists of selected excerpts from my essay, “What is Trauma to the Future? Reflections from our (Post-) Colonial Present” published in Imafidon, E. 2019. *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference: The Othering of the Other*. Springer [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04941-6\\_21-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04941-6_21-1).

The title references Lovelyn Nwadeyi’s description of our time as “disjointed, out of sync, plagued by a generational fault line that scrambles historicity” quoted by Professor Rose in the lecture. Cf. <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-06-29-we-all-have-agency-and-we-must-use-it-to-disrupt-the-status-quo>

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Eze’s “The Color or Reason: The Idea of ‘Race’ in Kant’s Anthropology” (Eze (Ed.) 1997: 103-140).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Nietzsche’s 1874 *Untimely Meditation*, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (Nietzsche 1997: 57-124) as well as Foucault’s 1971 essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in Rabinow (Ed.) 1984: 76-100.

<sup>4</sup> According to Foucault’s reading, Nietzsche refers to *wirkliche Historie* in opposition to traditional history. The former should be understood as an historical tracing that ‘deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, and their most acute manifestations. As such an event is “the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power” (Foucault 1971: 88).

<sup>5</sup> isiXhosa for the country of South Africa (literally meaning ‘south’). The isiZulu variation is *Mzansti*.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Simon’s 1986 LP, *Graceland* was recorded in Johannesburg with local musicians during the time of the international anti-apartheid boycott. His hope was that art could transcend politics at the risk of undermining the anti-apartheid cause. The lyrics portray Graceland as a place of hospitality and of good will.

<sup>7</sup> As poignantly depicted by J. M. Coetzee in his 1999 novel, *Disgrace*, which won the Booker Prize. The author was also awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature four years later.

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia calls South Africa ‘the protest capital of the world’ ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests\\_in\\_South\\_Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests_in_South_Africa)) referencing the following article: <http://thoughtleader.co.za/chrisrodrigues/2010/04/05/on-revolutionary-songs/>

<sup>9</sup> Most of these issues still fill our daily news feeds.

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<sup>10</sup> It remains to be seen how long the lull in the outspoken disgruntlement following Zuma's replacement by the Ramaphosa administration will last. It is but a matter of time, I fear, before something gives again given the scale of the pervasive socio-economic crises in the country.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994).

<sup>12</sup> See especially *In My Father's House* (1992).

<sup>13</sup> Keynote address titled, "Franz Fanon and the Politics of Viscerality" presented at the Franklin Humanities Institute, at Duke University, on 27 April 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Verhaeghe explicitly mentions two American psychiatrists, Judith Herman and James Chu, as proponents of this view (cf. Verhaeghe 1998: 88).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Freud 1913. "The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis. (A Contribution to the Problem of Choice of Neurosis)", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XI*, pp. 317-326.

<sup>16</sup> A line from a poem (by South African poet Ingrid Jonker. It was written in Afrikaans, and later translated into English as "The Child Who was Shot Dead by Soldiers in Nyanga" and published in *Black Butterflies* (2007). Nelson Mandela read the poem in the original Afrikaans, during his address at the opening of the first democratic parliament on May 24, 1994. The English translation is available online: <https://allpoetry.com/The-child-is-not-dead>

<sup>17</sup> A distinction originally made by Heidegger in *Being and Time* in 1927. See, for example, p. 381: "The proposition, 'Dasein is historical', is confirmed as a fundamental existential ontological assertion. This assertion is far removed from the mere ontical establishment of the fact that Dasein is the basis for a possible kind of historiological understanding which in turn carries with it the possibility of getting a special grasp of the development of historiology as a science". See especially Division II: Section V: "Temporality and Historicity" (pp. 424-455).