

(Remarks at a post-retirement conference at UC Santa Cruz, 2008)

## **My Hayden White**

James Clifford

It might seem naïve, or at least perverse, to try to historicize the work of Hayden White, especially if one takes seriously, as I do, his critiques of just this kind of move. And so, I hasten to say that I'm not suggesting a historical "context" that explains his work as much as a conjuncture that justifies my appropriation of it. I want to register something like an epistemological shift that I think we have all been living through, whose meaning or ultimate direction is unclear, but that we experience as "historical," historical in the sense of a rug pulled out, a whole view of things suddenly made partial, a universalism specified. It is the process that I think Dipesh Chakrabarty crystallizes in his title *Provincializing Europe*, and whose uneven, non-guaranteed, negotiated, translated, and necessary possibility he brilliantly explores. (Teresa De Lauretis in her recent contribution to a *Critical Inquiry* symposium, expresses this sense of historical rupture with her own dark rigor—a feeling of being at the end of a whole discursive world that once seemed real and progressive to us in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and a sense of profound paradox and open-endedness that we need to learn to accept and to work with.)

More than 25 years ago, when I arrived at Santa Cruz to be Hayden's junior sidekick in the "New Histcon" as people were calling it (with the usual ambivalence), *Metahistory* was stirring up major trouble. *Tropics of Discourse* (with its trenchant, erudite essays from "The Burden of History" to "Foucault Decoded" by way of Vico and the Noble Savage) was about to appear.

I myself had recently finished a dissertation in which I came around to seeing Melanesian societies, not as relics of a primitive past, but rather as prefigurations of a postmodern *future*. (I could have used, back then, the notion of figural realism!) And I was wrestling with the surprising (to me) existence of Indian Tribes in Massachusetts, the Mashpee trial

of 1978 in which (I argued in my Hiscon job talk) a group of Cape Cod Indians was defeated in a court test of their identity by the epistemological authority of history, its privileging of written over oral evidence and its assumptions of narrative continuity.

The author of *Metahistory* was taking apart historical discourse and authority from “inside” the West, and my emerging work was increasingly concerned with the agency of non- or not-entirely-Western people--contesting and defining the real in fraught relations of colonial, post- and neo-colonial power. I recall that Hayden sometimes cultivated an aggressive ethnocentrism (usually when he suspected that I, or students in the program, were romanticizing non-Western and subaltern “others,” and not rigorously confronting our own representational desires, protocols, and modes of appropriation.

I think it was Jack Schaar who, interviewed by the Student newspaper on the occasion of Hayden’s arrival at UCSC, said something like: “Hayden White is a man who likes to go up to an idea and punch it in the nose.” A lot of our best ideas received this treatment. And many of us here today have come back for more...

Hayden liked to find out if we had a sense of humor about things we held sacred. For example once when I was going on, in my way, about things Melanesian he interrupted: “Look, who’s interested in losers?”

For him exoticism was always a cop out—and he put a lot of ethnographic exceptionalism in that category.

But Hayden White’s work, focused on European traditions, has been profoundly subversive of Western authority.

A foundational text for Hayden when we began working together in 1978 was Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind*, and especially the final argument against Sartre which claimed equality—indeed primacy—for “mythic” systems of synchronic classification with respect to the diachronic orders of “history.”

And Hayden—always helpful, even for projects that weren't his--regularly recommended to me works of anthropology that he had come across and already processed in his rather intimidating reading practice.

Moreover, the whole concept of “genealogy”—immediately derived from Nietzsche and Foucault, and developed in the books on Narrative and Figuration—is, of course, a practice long associated with oral, traditional, tribal societies. Genealogy, in an older structural-functional anthropology, was a prominent feature that distinguishing non-Western styles of memory and authority from the documentary and purportedly objective forms that belonged to “properly historical” civilizations.

Hayden White's assault on archival empiricism, and his validation of the “poetics” of history (derived from Vico, Burke, Barthes and many more) opened spaces for taking seriously storytelling, and orality in all of its Western *and* non-Western forms. For this reason alone his work has been profoundly anti-ethnocentric and decolonizing .

From 1978 until now, with exemplary rigor and clarity, Hayden White has worked through the linked problematics of tropology, narrativity, and figuration in a relentless critique of Western epistemologies of “the historical.”

And the project is more than just a deconstruction, leaving us with relativism, with no way to represent “real” events in time and space. While there has always been an urge to detonate “proper” historical discourses and habits of mind (the punch in the nose), there has simultaneously been an interest in alternate ways of encoding and narrating the truths of our embeddedness in temporality. The last book, *Figural Realism*, makes this clear—especially in the reading of Erich Auerbach as modernist. Here the project is about recognizing an open-ended genealogy of representational practices in which diverse “realisms” succeed each other, overlap, and contend.

For “modernism,” after Auerbach, will become detached from the teleologies of modernity and modernization guaranteed by the “grand narratives” which White catalogues: “fate, providence, Geist, progress, the dialectic, and even the myth of the final realization of realism itself.” (p.100) Modernism will be globally (thus multi-locally) translated, articulated, performed, in ways that can’t be reduced to a diffusion of European culture. (This is *my* approach to *Mimesis* as a work prefiguring other styles of realism, historicizing by other means.) Read today, *Mimesis* seems to cry out for additional chapters— discussions that grapple with what happened *after* 1945: that deal with Third World modernisms, with so-called Magical Realism, with Bollywood cinema, and, I would insist, with the distinctive historical-realist discourses and *practices* of indigenous actors. A lot of claims are being made about the historical real, in distinctive idioms which are, following Auerbach, “products” of their “periods,” in much the same way that Balzac was the product of his, Virginia Woolf of hers. Reading Auerbach’s genealogy of realism as prefigurative and open-ended (as I think Hayden’s account permits) could lead us to recognize peripheral practices of *presentation* of the real that engage with European traditions of historicism, but can’t be reduced to them. This, I take it, is Chakrabarty’s project, and also the work, during the past couple of decades, of much historical ethnography, which is increasingly the ethnography of different historicities.

If there were time I would trace the paths by which anthropologists have moved beyond Lévi-Strauss’s reversal: Western history is really just its myth, a taxonomy of differences deployed syntagmatically.

Marshall Sahlins, in a series of works, showed how purportedly “mythic” cosmologies and social orders were dynamic ways of processing novelty, encoding and narrating events, such as the arrivals of Captain Cook in Hawaii, that even the most conventional historian would agree take place in ontologically real time. A *transformational* science of the concrete. The conventional opposition of myth and history, as well as of the primitive and modern societies supposedly defined by these opposing modes of consciousness, fell apart.

Renato Rosaldo was forced by his Ilongot collaborators in the Philippines to recognize a distinctive “historical” idiom. Mysterious long lists of place names told to him as if they were stories turned out (after a sojourn back at Stanford, and some reading in journals like *History and Theory*) to be accounts of unique events in non-repeating time (checked against an “independent” timeline defined by the Japanese invasion in WW2). The Ilongot were telling Rosaldo stories that qualified on most important counts as “historical” by Western standards. And these were precisely the kind of non-literate, “tribal” people who should by definition have been telling him legends or myths, rather than precise, verifiable histories. Their archive, rather than written documents, was the landscape with its chronotopic place names.

Work by Richard and Sally Price, Greg Denning, Johannes Fabian, Margaret Jolly and many others have multiplied the available examples of different historical *idioms* and *practices*, ways of *presenting* (I’ll return to that word in a moment), configuring and narrating real events in historical (that is non-repeating, roughly chronological) time.

The Western civilizational thinking that had sorted the world into peoples with and without history was, during the 70s and 80s definitively deconstructed, both theoretically and empirically--a scholarly achievement, I hasten to add, which did not, of itself, make the habit of thought disappear.

A different, though related development, has, more effectively, challenged the habits of thought that sustained for so long the myth/history opposition as a geo-political sorting device. I have in mind the survival, revival, rearticulation and emergence of “indigenous” cultures and social movements during the same, post-Sixties, decades.

The growing “presence” in various national and international public spheres, of indigenous voices, cultural performances and political claims is surely one of the surprises of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Everyone (except them), every hard-headed account of modernization (pro-or con) knew that these perennial victims of progress were destined to disappear, either physically or by acculturation. Yet they and their distinctive historical

practices have not stopped appearing and reappearing: now a global *Présence Indigene*, from the UN to the Olympics, from circumpolar conferences to the World Social Forum, from land claims and sovereignty movements, to California gambling casinos and Gubernatorial politics, tribal museums, art markets, cultural tourism...

We often find ourselves in a situation of confrontation and translation between different historical idioms. "Historical consciousness" now appears to be a lot more diverse than previously allowed. Narrative links of past and present once thought of as "tradition" (in what Levi-Strauss called "cold" societies) now seem "hot"--dynamic genealogical/ prefigurative historical practices and counter-memories.

Let me end with a couple of too brief examples:

1) For some time now, I have been wondering about a statement made by Alutiiq Elder Barbara Shangin, words I have already cited more than once (eg. *Routes*, 1997: 343).

Our people have made it through lots of storms and disasters for thousands of years. All the troubles since the Russians are like one long stretch of bad weather. Like everything else, this storm will pass over some day.

One might understand Barbara Shangin as positing a cultural identity or tradition that is, in a fundamental sense, impervious to history's destructive storms, that waits out the bad weather. A feeling for this kind of deep continuity with a "pre-historic" past is always part of the indigenous "longue durée," But there is surely more to the metaphor. As Craig Mishler's contribution to *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People* (2001: 150-51) "Kodiak Alutiiq Weather Lore" makes clear, weather in places like Kodiak Island is never something that happens to you, from the outside. Storms happen, and you are part of the happening. People who live exposed to winds and tides, whose everyday livelihood depends on them, have a detailed and exact knowledge of the changing weather. They know what is happening or is about to happen: they act, and do not act, accordingly. Thus when Shangin says that the arrival of the Russians in the 18<sup>th</sup>

century began a long bad spell she is not invoking something external to Alutiiq life. History's weather, its disasters and clearings, are an order that is neither "natural" nor "cultural" but, simply, given existence. Events in time occur in cyclic patterns which are both familiar and uncontrollable. In this perspective, the Russian bad weather (which brought epidemics and forced labor, as well as the Orthodox religion which became a central element of their culture) and the American bad weather (missionaries, boarding schools, World War Two, land claims, ANCSA, identity movements....) become part of an unfinished *Alutiiq* history. In this perspective there are no grounds for denying the status of historical realism to Barbara Shangin's narrative.

2) "Oral" sources in fraught translation situations. The long-held belief that proper "history" required literacy, documented facts, has been eroded in recent decades. Courtroom struggles over indigenous land-claims and assertions of primordial sovereignty are prominent contexts for changing assumptions about what can count as reliable evidence. Import decisions in Australia and Canada (Mabo and Delgamuukw) have opened the door to the evidence of oral cultures: traditions, dances, stories, collectively drawn maps.

As I've said, I arrived in Santa Cruz in 1978 fresh from attending a trial in Boston Federal Court that fundamentally addressed the ways that tribal identity and continuity across changing times could be understood. The Mashpee case of 1977 would eventually become an important chapter in my book *The Predicament of Culture*. And it set the agenda for much subsequent work, showing me the effective and ethnocentric authority of "history," now a contested concept.

Since then, I've been concerned with translation experiments in all sorts of interactive, power-charged situations, from courtrooms to museums-- sites where historical idioms clash and partially articulate different ontologies. This is where new forms of "realism" (a category Hayden decisively opened up in European contexts) are being pragmatically cobbled together, improvised, negotiated, and translated.

An extraordinary endnote from Hayden's discussion of Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* can serve as an exegesis for the performativity of historical realism in the land-claims courtrooms I've just evoked. (*Figural Realism* p. 192) The footnote, really a small essay, moves characteristically from philological erudition to a wider argument about the practice of fraught translation in our work as *historically* engaged intellectuals. While the discussion remains centered, following Auerbach, on "literature," it can readily be extended to wider social, inter-cultural, and political contexts (as suggested by my additions in brackets).

Notice that the subtitle of *Mimesis* is *Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendlandlichen Literatur*. Although this subtitle is translated into English as *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, in the German the focal point is *Wirklichkeit* ("reality") not representation (*Vorstellung*). Indeed, the notion of representation appears only in the form of a gerundive adjective (*dargestellte*) which suggests not so much a thing (or a representation) as an activity, specifically the activity of presentation. Thus, the original subtitle of *Mimesis* comes to mean something like "*presented* reality in Western literature," with the connotation that specific representations of reality have been worked up or, more accurately, styled for presentation to someone or something for some purpose, aim, or end. In German, *darstellen* encompasses the meanings: "to present," "to show," "to produce," and "to exhibit," as well as: "to sketch," "to delineate," and "to mimic"; and, in theatrical usage, "to perform." So we might say that the phrase *dargestellte Wirklichkeit*, which gets translated into English as "the representation of reality," might be more accurately—though, to be sure, less eloquently—rendered as "the *presentation* of reality." Translating thus, we could capture both the sense of the constructed nature of any representation of reality and Auerbach's point that there is no such thing as *the* (in the sense of a single or unitary) representation of reality (in the sense of a changeless substance or noumenon) whose nature is gradually being fully described by successive efforts to represent it realistically. What he himself presents is a sequence of successive efforts by writers [culturally embedded social actors] working in a generally delineated tradition of presented representations to



devise ways of capturing in written utterance [or ritual or symbolic action] *the multiplicity and change characteristic of social and more generally human reality*—and always failing in that process in the end. [my brackets and emphasis]

The inevitability of this failure is suggested by the epigraph of the book, a line from Andrew Marvel: “Had we but *world enough and time*” (original emphasis).

## Remembering Hayden White

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I was Hayden's junior colleague in 1978 when we both arrived in Santa Cruz as the History of Consciousness Board's first full-time faculty. The campus was in the midst of radical reorganization, and the program suffered from problems of continuity and faculty commitment. Histcon was anarchic in both bad and good ways—the good ways having to do with its extraordinary students: idealistic, original, unwilling to bow to authority. As the new Chairperson, Hayden brought essential stability and a fresh vision. There were widespread fears that he would initiate a reign of “high theory” and academic professionalism. But he didn't impose an orthodoxy or a required curriculum, and it was soon apparent that he valued the unruly multiplicity of Histcon.

He resisted pressure to come up with a less outrageous name. And he adopted as departmental logo... the sphynx.

Hayden understood that a program like Histcon had to be open and experimental. It could not be disciplined, from above. It would be composed of the always-changing interests of its members, held together by intellectual passion and human connections. “Loyalty to people,” he used to say, “not to institutions.”

Of course, by then he was a world-renowned scholar and critic. I won't try to sum up his many contributions to understanding historical thought and practice. As an intellectual, he characteristically combined radical openness with intellectual rigor (“anarcho-formalism” I used to call it). This attitude was exactly what a program like Histcon required. We needed to let a hundred flowers bloom without sliding into “anything goes” relativism. Good intellectual work, Hayden knew, could take many forms. There was no sovereign theory or inherently virtuous approach.

Around 1980, when our dynamic humanities dean, Helene Moglen, offered Histcon two senior positions, but only if they were feminist scholars, Hayden said “why not?” Feminist theory had not been a part of his own thinking. But he recognized an emerging field with exciting possibilities.

This openness was evident in Hayden’s academic advising. He directed dissertations from all over the intellectual and political map. To mention only a few from the early years: Sharon Traweek was doing fieldwork among Physicists. Susan Foster disentangled the forms of dance. Jose Rabasa did close readings of 16<sup>th</sup> Century conquest narratives in Mexico. Chela Sandoval explored “oppositional consciousness” in contemporary Third World Feminism.

Hayden seemed interested in everything and (intimidating to a younger colleague) to have read everything! The only qualities he couldn't stand were literal mindedness and sanctimoniousness.

He knew how to provoke. I’ll never forget the stunned silence that greeted his advice to our first pro-seminar in 1979. “In our line of work,” he informed the students, “You have to love reading more than anything—more than food, more than politics, more than sex...”

Our late colleague Jack Schaar introduced Histcon’s new Chair to the campus newspaper: “Hayden White is a man who likes to walk up to an idea...and punch it in the nose.”

Working with Hayden (and this went for faculty as well as students) wasn’t always comfortable. He would step on what you held sacred. And he could be wickedly accurate. But we discovered that if you stayed with him, stayed in the conversation (and he so loved conversation), he would do anything for you. Watching him work with students, I was always amazed by how much he took on, how generous he could be. An incredible energy...

And if he wasn't always gentle, he was exciting. What an oral performer he was!

Hayden had a special magic: often after a conversation with him you would come away inspired, feeling better about yourself. I still don't know how he did it. Maybe it was just his way of taking your confused contribution to the life of the mind seriously.

Looking back, I'm most grateful for the freedom and the security I found in Hayden's Histcon. Permission to thrive. (I've heard Donna Haraway say much the same thing.) It was a place where we were free from disciplinary conservatism. We could experiment and take risks.

For forty years, Hayden would be a model of deep collegiality and, with Margaret, a true friend. When Judith and I looked for someone to marry us in our Westside backyard Hayden was the obvious choice. Wearing a white, three-piece suit, he rose to the occasion magnificently, and without a trace of irony.

His was an amazing energy--a kind of life-force that swept up those around him.

It's hard to accept that this energy is now gone. But we all take some of it with us, and if we follow Hayden's example, we'll find ways to pass it on.



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