

PERFORMING LITERARINESS: LITERATURE IN THE EVENT  
IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation “literariness” is defined not merely as a quality of form by which texts are evaluated *as* literary, but as an immanent and critical sensibility by which reading, writing, speaking, learning, and teaching subjects within the literary humanities engage language in its immediate aesthetic (and thus also historical and ethical) aspect. This reorientation seeks to address the literary academy’s overwhelming archival focus, which risks eliding literary endeavor as an embodied undertaking that inevitably reflects the historical contingency of its enactment. Literary endeavor in higher education is thus understood as a performance by which subjects enact not only the effect of literary texts upon themselves but also the contingencies of their socio-economic, national, cultural, and personal contexts. Subjects’ responses to literature are seen as implicit identity claims that, inevitably constituted of biases, can be evaluated through the lens of post-positivist realism in terms of their ethical and pragmatic usefulness.

Framing this reoriented literariness in terms of its enactment in higher education literature classrooms, this dissertation addresses its pedagogical, methodological, and personal implications. The events of the South African Truth and Reconciliation

Commission (TRC) and the literature arising from it serve as a pivotal case study. The TRC Hearings, publically broadcast and pervasive in the national discourse of the time, enacted a scenario in which South Africans confronted the implications for personal and national identities of apartheid's racial abuses. The dissertation demonstrates through close reading and anecdotal evidence how J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* formally reactivate this scenario in the subject in the event of reading, while surveys of critical responses to these texts show how readers often resisted the texts' destabilizing effects. A critical account of the process that resulted in *Telling, Eugene* – a stage production in which U.S. military veterans tell their stories to their civilian communities – analyzes the idea of literariness in the U.S. and assesses its potential for socially engaged literary praxis.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS LITERARINESS?

In this dissertation, I undertake a defense of literary scholarship in higher education. I do so because I believe that literature and literary studies changes people in useful ways. It challenges them to engage the complicated networks with which they live with deeper insight and in more ethically self-reflexive ways.

The conviction that literary scholarship “betters” its practitioners is, of course, neither unusual among literary scholars, nor historically un-contentious. It is implicit to the nineteenth century beginnings of the formal discipline in both the Commonwealth and U.S. Empires. In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff describes this as the uncomfortable “union of Arnoldian Humanism and scientific research which gave birth to academic literary studies” (Graff 3).

Summarily, Arnold’s Humanism claimed benevolent secularism (even as Arnold deploys evangelical religion as an analogical model), and sought to spread “perfection” or “sweetness and light” through the best that had been thought and written in English culture. Culture was Arnold’s prescription for staving off anarchy, which he thought the inevitable outcome of the pervasive tendency of people to do as they willed. The pedagogy of (Western) culture, in other words, sought to create good citizens. As the Indian post-colonialist scholar Guari Viswanathan points out, it also coerced colonized people into being good subjects of Empire. Insofar as English Literature “appeared as a subject in the curriculum of colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country” (Viswanathan 2-3), it rendered the “anarchic” bodies of colonized subjects as the testing grounds for formalized literary study. In this way, the purported benevolence

of humanism, implicit in the claim that literary scholarship “betters” those who undertake it, marked “the effacement of a sordid history of colonialist expropriation, material exploitation, and class and race oppression behind European world dominance” (20).

Vishwanathan’s antipathetic account of traditional humanistic pedagogy is unquestionably valuable. It enacts one of the ways in which, as Graff suggests, “much contemporary theory amounts to a radical attack on the premises and values of traditional literary humanism” (Graff 3). From critical theory, to post-structuralism, to post-structuralist psychoanalytical theory, to new historicism, from feminist theory, to ethnic studies, and so forth and so on, the critical output of the literary academy enacts a laudatory distaste for monologic epistemological schemes that impose ideologically suspect notions of propriety. Additionally, the academy performs its disaffection materially. The supposed birthright of white privileged men-of-letters to speak *their* ground is necessarily challenged through the diversifications of faculty, students, canons (if not the refutation of the very idea of canonicity), and through the practice of de-centered pedagogies.

However, as Graff understands such conflicts, they enact not a disavowal of humanism *per se*, but a perpetual reactivation of its base premises.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in all its diversity, without a singular notion of “the good,” un-tethering itself where it can from prescriptive essentialisms, the literary academy acts on the *theory* (perhaps “faith” is a better word) that the rigorous engagement of literary and cultural artifacts performs

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<sup>1</sup> *Professing Literature* is an “institutional history” in which Graff traces the development of humanism’s critique, not back to the post-1968 proliferation of resistant theory, but to the very beginnings of formalized literary studies. In so doing, he convincingly argues that contemporary critics of humanism *continue* to “raise the kinds of questions about the nature and cultural function of literature that *used to be the concerns of traditional humanists*, even as [contemporary critics] reject the traditional humanistic answers to those questions as no longer sufficient” (Graff 3 – my italics).

important functions, that it potentially “better” the world within which it operates through those that encounter it.

This is the theory to which I hold, and to which end I write this dissertation. “All teachers of literature are ‘theorists,’ and have a stake in theoretical disputes,” Graff writes. “For that matter, there is a sense in which a literature department (and curriculum) is itself a theory, though it has been largely an incoherent theory, and this incoherence strengthens the impression that the department has no theory” (2-3).

For all its well-meaning, however, it is arguable that the contemporary literary academy struggles to enact this incoherent / cohering “theory” in ways that *transcend* the discipline. It battles when asked to justify the value of literary studies to its own undergraduate students, never mind the world beyond the university. It cannot simply say *this* is the good that comes from what we do every day, *this* is the worth of our endlessly proliferating archive of criticism and theoretical writing, and *this* is how we benefit society more broadly. In effect, literary theorists, critics and pedagogues often enact a curious disciplinary solipsism by which literary studies are ends in themselves, even as they believe themselves to be bettering the world *through* their discipline. The result is a bifurcation between the literary academy and the world beyond, suggested by a host of pervasive motifs and associations that speak to the idea that literary scholars are cloistered idealists. Literary academics live in “an ivory tower.” Intellectualism is elitism. Academics wander “hallowed halls.” “What are you going to do with *that*?” Undergraduates are frequently asked when it becomes apparent that they are majoring in literature. Of course, literary scholars often feel insulted by such iterations, holding, as they do, to “the theory,” and respond in kind. But the pervasiveness of these motifs is as

much a symptom of literary studies' failure to cross the divide between itself and the world that contains it, as it is of the ignorance or anti-intellectualism of those who wield them.

In this dissertation, I argue that attempts by the literary academy to cross this divide are stymied by its epistemological adherence to the ontological status of its *object* of study, the literary text (notwithstanding the scope and scale of the methodologies, canon and media the institution accommodates). This, as will soon become evident, is the *methodological* stake. Crucially, however, the stakes are also *personal*. My own undergraduate and early post-graduate experiences are exemplary of the disjuncture between the literary academy and the world. The Rhodes University English department in South Africa in which I was “raised” was by many accounts a bastion of white English-speaking South African traditionalism. It heavily emphasized close formal reading, the English canon, and to a lesser degree the white South African canon, with only occasional departures into American, African and Indian post-colonial texts. Assiduous historical readings were encouraged, but the histories that made sense of our readings were almost invariably metropolitan in origin and imbued with the aura of objectivity. Theoretical approaches by which to critique their enlightenment underpinnings were cursorily engaged within the curriculum.

I do not mean to cast aspersions on the curriculum of the Rhodes University English department, nor for that matter on its faculty. I too am responsible for the foci I chose and the available courses I did not. That said, I find it remarkable that it took me until a year into working on my Masters thesis (a close formal analysis of William Blake's and T.S. Eliot's prophetic works), to grow disaffected, to take a look around and

ask, what am I doing, *here*, in Grahamstown, in South Africa, *now*, committing vast swathes of time to two poets who wrote *there* and *then*.

For all its virtues, my undergraduate English major (and Philosophy – pervasively analytical, begrudgingly continental, *never* African) facilitated insularity. Certainly, my literary training did not require me to address my understanding of myself in relation to the world. It required me, exclusively, to perform its constitutive skill-sets sufficiently. This is all the more remarkable considering the historical backdrop to my undergraduate degree. It coincided with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (1996-1999), a fraught and public negotiation of South African history, and an explicit attempt to (re)invent a national identity out of a fractured and traumatized landscape.

Of course I was aware of the TRC, and was deeply affected by the scenes that were remediated to me via television, radio and print. I was not blind, either, to the poverty and inequality that pervaded Grahamstown where Rhodes University was situated. But such daily negotiations appeared nowhere in my academic work. There were no beggars on campus. Every work day I would sit at a desk in a shared office, highlighting passages from *Jerusalem*, or scanning lines from “Burnt Norton,” or chasing after Eliot’s and Blake’s allusions in the archive. I read alone. I wrote alone. I facilitated small group discussion on poetry, invariably British, to support myself. The simple fact of the matter was that there was a stark disjuncture between the complex and conflictive experiences that marked South Africa post-apartheid nascence, and the English Department and library in which I sat.

On a personal level, then, I think of this dissertation as an attempt to reconcile my professional identity with the world outside it then bypassed. More abstractly, however, I

seek to formulate a specifically *literary* methodology that allows for a dynamic and immanent negotiation between rigorous disciplinary requirements and the experiences undergone daily by reading/writing/teaching /learning/speaking subjects within their contingent social and cultural networks. I do so by reclaiming to the *body* a term that is overwhelmingly understood within the literary academy as an element of the written (that is to say *abstract*) text. That term is “Literariness,” which I think of not merely as an aspect of textual form, but, drawing on Performance Studies, as an immanent, relatable, analyzable, and changeable sensibility.

By way of demonstration and subsequent definition, I will soon refer you to an experience of mine, standing before a lecture hall in South Africa. Prior, however, it is worth noting that, as an anecdote, my account will formally enact the tensions that go to the heart of the broader discussion. Joel Fineman argues that,

[t]he anecdote...as the narration of a singular event, is the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real. This is not as trivial an observation as might at first appear. It reminds us, on the one hand, that the anecdote has something literary about it, for there are, of course, other and non-literary ways to make reference to the real – through direct description, ostentation, definition, etc. – that are not anecdotal. On the other hand, it reminds us that there is something about the anecdote that *exceeds its literary status*, and this excess is precisely that which gives the anecdote its pointed, referential access to the real. (Fineman 67)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My italics



Fineman later writes that the anecdote, “however literary, is *nevertheless* directly pointed towards or rooted in the real.”<sup>3</sup> *Despite* their formal qualities, he suggests, the anecdote refers to *real events*. The point is perhaps more clearly made by Fineman’s use of the verb “exceeds”. That “something” about anecdotes that “exceeds” the literary implies at once a transgression and / or a surpassing of the bounded territory populated by, one assumes, otherwise avowedly literary things. It suggests that “something’s” superiority and / or impropriety, its bounty and / or immoderacy in relation to the literary. Carefully ambivalent, Fineman vaguely (“something”) defines the meeting point of the literary and the real as somewhat antipathetic. Later he calls the point of their meeting “a wound.”

For me, this “wound,” the site at which “the real” and “the literary” endanger each other, is the stage on which the literary academy may most productively exceed its own disciplinary bounds. Incidents, events, subjective experience, which the written form of a dissertation requires me to convey anecdotally, are thus crucial to my methodology.

Not coincidentally the event the following anecdote describes was for me the clearest and most shocking invocation of the disjuncture between my academic endeavor and the history it bypassed. It was the moment that my vague (if often openly lamented) dissatisfaction with the disengaged nature of my academic work gave way to the recognition that it *need not be so*, that the stakes of critical literary work need not be distinct from those caught up in the experiences of individual subjects finding their way.

\* \* \*

As an English Literature lecturer in the School of Media, Language and Communications, I taught a mandatory lower-division class on Apartheid drama in 2003 at the University of Port Elizabeth (now the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University).

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<sup>3</sup> My italics.

One hundred and sixty-odd students – ethnically diverse, economically disparate – sat in rows of fixed desks banked upward to the ceiling. The room sloped the students’ attentions towards me. I stood behind a large counter on which at center a small dais contained my notes. The very architecture and arrangement of the room thus asserted the authority with which the institution had charged me, There I stood, with a freshly-minted M.A. that evinced (my superiors agreed) my refined understanding of T.S. Eliot and William Blake and a curriculum vita that espoused some past experience in the theatre.

It was the introductory lecture of a ten-week course: *The Ugly Noo-Noo, You Strike the Woman You Strike the Rock, Master Harold and the Boys, Woza Albert!* Nine years after the first fully-inclusive elections in South Africa and fifteen years after the release of Nelson Mandela, I was told by a senior colleague to anticipate some resistance from the students. Rainbow-fatigue had set in, she suggested. Apartheid and The Struggle was to this generation of students, barely a decade younger than me, what Jan van Riebeeck, *Die Groot Trek*, and the South African Wars had been to me. At best they were History (the kind you learn because you might get tested), at worst it was Boring.

I thus budgeted a fifteen-minute discussion period into my ninety-minute lesson (read “lecture”) plan. “Why,” I asked, “are we resistant to talking about Apartheid?”

Silence.

Lethargically, a few hands began to rise before an unsolicited voice from the middle of the room said, “We should move on.”

“Why?” I responded.

Silence. The few hands had disappeared.

A man in the front row, a black man, slightly older than the average student, older than me, with dreadlocks and a Pan-Africanist Congress T-shirt (I don't remember if he wore it that day, but he certainly wore it at other times) spoke, "Who are you to stand before us and teach us these things? What did you do?"

*That* I did not anticipate. It went against the very architecture of the room. "I have an M.A. in English," I wanted to say. But that was not in question. I spluttered, "Nothing. I did nothing." I was surprised at my honesty. "I watched apartheid on TV. The ANC<sup>4</sup> were terrorists. A black woman made my bed three days of the week. Tuesday, Thursday and weekends my bed never got made. I still don't make my bed. And we had a gardener who would pick up the dog shit in the back garden. It was my job, and my sisters', but Goodman had to do it before he mowed the lawn, so we left it for him. And I used racist words all the time. And I was terrified of what would happen when "The Blacks" took over. So many conspiracy theories were doing the rounds, you know? I mean, we were young, I was young, but I knew enough to know...that it wasn't right. I don't know how to separate all that out. I mean, what part of it is just me being a child and what part should I...feel guilty for? And I know I'm not entirely to blame but I'm not okay with it all yet...and so I...it still sits with me every day" or some such blather.

Silence. I was mortified. It was as though I'd accidentally pushed over a piece of scenery, or as though the backdrop had been lifted to reveal the nuts and bolts and greased pulleys that buttressed the illusion. "Does that answer your question?" I asked,

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<sup>4</sup> The African National Congress, the party of Nelson Mandela, was the face of the struggle. It was established in 1912 and adopted its freedom charter in 1955. As of the establishment of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) in the wake of the 1976 Soweto Riots, its largely exiled diplomatic front, and its armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* ("The Spear of the Nation"), were bolstered by a broad coalition of labor unions.

trying to re-gather control of the room. The older student sat back in his chair. I asked again, “Why do we not want to talk about Apartheid?”

Several hands went up. A white student said, “I don’t think we should talk about it forever. It has to stop sometime. It can’t keep being an excuse. It’s been almost ten years.”

“Excuse? It didn’t just end. It’s not over yet,” a black student responded, “I see apartheid every day. Where I live, people still shit in buckets.”

“I see it in the faces of my parents,” said a young black woman, “I don’t want to see it anymore.”

“I feel like I am discriminated against. Affirmative action is just reverse discrimination,” insisted a white male student from the very back of the room.

“Do you think we’re that stupid that we would just reverse the system?” responded a black student.

“I don’t discriminate. Don’t assume we do” said another.

“Don’t assume we assume,” came the retort.

“Who’s we?” asked a Coloured student, “I was too dark to benefit from apartheid and now I’m too light to benefit.”

So it went for much longer than my budgeted 15 minutes, until, nearing the class’s end, I felt it necessary to suggest some outcome to the discussion. We all had baggage, I posited, and we all disagreed on something, and that was good reason to look back at how playwrights and performers understood, even if the things we found out about ourselves in the process were unpleasant.

\* \* \*

The older student's challenge of my "authority," it strikes me retrospectively, was profoundly appropriate precisely because it challenged the hierarchy that, to me at least, was naturalized by my position behind the dais, by the required attention of the students, and the learnedness implied by letters behind my name. His question's tone was strident and cutting. It demanded a response that did not defer to academic register because I was not alone in being interpolated. To him, I was more, or less, than myself. I represented whiteness, maleness, abstract solipsism, the embodiment of an institution (apartheid and the South African literary academy) with a history of segregationist complicity, (the University of Port Elizabeth was, under apartheid, a white, Afrikaans institution). Benevolent as my pedagogy may have seemed to me, engaging as it did a canon of South African drama that resisted apartheid, the student was challenging the residue of prescriptive humanism, implicit less in the texts that we were going to read, than it was in the arrangement of the room, in the captivity of the audience, and in the embodied color and attitude of the lecturer.

I could not account for what had happened in that classroom, ostensibly a literature classroom, in merely literary terms. The affect of his challenge and its effect on me was contingent on the embodied relations of the people in that room. He was challenging. I was being challenged. We were both being watched. And once it had happened, once we walked out of that room, it was over, gone, subject forever to the flawed recollections of those who remember it. No text survived it, barring the subsequent language with which I attempted to frame it.

And yet it was also literary. This was true not merely in terms of the disciplinary frame within which the course was contained, although that, to me, would be sufficient

reason to consider the embodied and immanent nature of the pedagogical transaction as a definitional aspect of literary endeavor within the academy (an idea to which I will return briefly in the conclusion of this dissertation). The linguistic structure of his question was so incisive. “Who are you to stand before us and teach us these things? What did you do?” was an identity claim of its own: “I am a black man. I know these things because I was there.” It was polemical powerful in its homogeneous interpolation of the class. While the “us” of his question may have belied the diversity of students in the class, it also had the effect of isolating me as the antagonist-until-proven-wrong, an antagonist *because* he teaches possibly from a position of false authority conferred by a corrupt institution. His interpolation of me, the “you” of his question, even with his aggressive affect, was also an invitation. “Define yourself,” it demanded. However, he also implicitly required that my account did not defer to abstract qualification or lettered-ness (which had no bearing on *his* notion of authority), but in terms of my past actions. “You are what you do,” he implied, “and I want to know what you did, so I can know who you are.”

Within the context of the tiered classroom, the embodied presences of the students, and with the history of social relations at play, the question, formally and functionally, struck me with the force and intensity of a wonderfully conceived caesura at the heart of Petrarchan sonnet, or a perfect couplet, or like the moment of a protagonist’s most devastating and/or life affirming realization. The text, his language, tore me from the naturalized assumptions that sustained my position in front of the class. It was utterly dependent on the embodied context within which it operated. It collapsed me into the presence of the moment, such that the only stance left was not a defensive iteration of

identity, but an affirmation of non-knowing. It rendered me a stranger in a realm I believed prior was mine, and in which, now, the only defensible stance was earnest curiosity. The effect, between words and the event, was *aesthetic*.

\* \* \*

“Literariness,”<sup>5</sup> as I will use the term in this dissertation, refers to a sensibility that allows the reading / writing / teaching / learning / speaking subject to negotiate between words in their *aesthetic* aspect and the embodied event of their encounter. I will engage how I understand the term “aesthetic” in due course. Suffice it to say for now that the imputation of the body in its immanence onto the literary might seem counter-intuitive. The etymology of the word “literature,” whether it derives from the old French *letrëure* or directly from the earlier Latin cognate *litterātūra* (OED), have at their root the “letter,” *lettre*, *littera*, the orthographic symbol for an elementary sound used in speech. At the core of the concept of the literary is the idea that it distances utterances (or parts of utterances) from the body, abstracts them, sets them down, records them for posterity in stone, or on vellum, or paper. Implicit to the “literary,” then, is the idea of the separation of body and text, and temporally, the salvaging of the originary utterance and its significance from the changeable body, from faulty memories undone by the vicissitudes of time, context, and experience. It is hardly surprising that “literariness,” in its broadest definition, refers to “*books or written compositions*; in a narrower sense...to [written texts that] have the characteristics of that kind of *written* composition which has value on account of its qualities of form” (OED)<sup>6</sup>. Nor is it a shock that academic endeavor that

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I capitalize the term “Literariness” in order to distinguish it from its formalist fore-bearer.

<sup>6</sup> My italics.

sought to isolate literary form did so by treating the immanent and embodied experience, the event, of a text's encounter, be it its composition or interpretation, as an unwelcome interloper to its critical outcomes. Rather, the text, the language, distinct from the body, or the event of its creation / encounter, becomes a *pure* object of analysis. So some Russian formalists<sup>7</sup> argued that the term "literariness" should define "what makes a work specifically a literary work as opposed to some other kind of work" and that it "requires a foregrounding of language in such a way as to make its "background" (the world it usually refers to) virtually disappear" (Murfin and Ray 236-7). Wimsatt and Beardsley famously saw authorial process and subjective readerly responses, implicit in their mutual bugaboos "intentionality" and "affect," as ultimately inaccessible and all-too-ethereal or ephemeral determinants of meaning for a New Criticism methodology that sought to impute the work the literary academy with the disciplinary heft of a science.<sup>8</sup>

Claiming Literariness as an immanent and changeable sensibility, rather than an aspect of form implicit only to the written work, is to accommodate the reading / writing / teaching / learning / speaking *subject* within the workings of a literary transaction or event. In this way, it might be seen to echo the claims of reader-response approaches. However, notwithstanding individualist approaches, reader-response defers all too easily to a transcendent reader in its conjecture, or *the* reader. Efforts to accommodate a diversity of different readers still rely too heavily on generalizable subsets of readers or interpretive communities. Besides which, reader-response approaches tend exclusively towards the reader's response to written texts, whereas this dissertation seeks to examine the ways in which Literariness is the enactive principle of a broader network of endeavor

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<sup>7</sup> Murfin and Ray cite Jan Mukarovsky or Victor Shlovsky.

<sup>8</sup> I refer, of course, to their seminal essays "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy".



within the literary academy. We also write, teach, learn, and speak within our disciplinary confines.

I want, rather, to think of Literariness in terms of a “performance,” a term which, as Shannon Jackson’s genealogy of its development, *Professing Performance: Theater in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*, suggests, has become somewhat over-determined. It is subject to “intellectual ferment” constituted of “many disciplinary strains” (Jackson 4). “P-words of various sorts – couched amongst various prefixes and suffixes – circulate in the contemporary academic discourse of various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences” (3). Indeed, if literary studies has a strain of its own, then it is the P-word, “performativity,” which draws on J.L. Austin’s understanding that certain utterances, “performatives,” enact, or “do” things, rather than merely communicating, reflecting, or describing. His archetype of the performative utterance is the marriage vow, the “I do” constitutes more than a mere statement of intent. Rather, it enacts a contract. Judith Butler has famously extrapolated “speech-acts” to include discourses more broadly. For her, “performativity” – with which she argues that gender identity is not essential but constituted – is the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler 2).

If literary studies emphasize performativity, then it must be remembered, as Jackson points out, that “scholars drawing from anthropology, sociology, art history, folklore, and media studies have developed vocabularies of performance to understand artifacts and events ranging from parades to television, from story-telling to religious ceremonies” (Jackson 4). Or, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett defines it, Performance Studies constitutes a “postdiscipline of inclusions, [it] sets no limit on what can be

studied in terms of medium and culture, nor does it limit the range of approaches that can be taken” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 43).

However, this very disciplinary over-determination of “performance” is also the reason it can be difficult to pin down.

The aspects of performance [that various scholars and disciplines] emphasize can be quite different; the theoretical models that they derive may be incompatible, and even the reality principles they assume may appear to undermine each other. Scholarship looks uninteresting to some when there is no abstraction, ungrounded to others when there is no description, romantic when there is no consideration of structure, incomplete without an account of production, determinist without a theory of agency, naïve when it assumes a real historical referent, apolitical when too theoretical, apolitical when it is not theoretical enough. (Jackson 4)

I will return in due course to a “reality principle” that, I will argue, is potentially dynamic enough to critically negotiate the vicissitudes of Literariness as I will define it. I will suggest a “post-positivist realist” critical frame. For now, however, that the implicit heterogeneity of the term “performance” renders both the “the opportunities and hazards implicit to interdisciplinarity” and that I recognize my rendering of the term here to be limited, so as not to perpetrate “synechdochic fallacies in cross disciplinary inquiry – moments when scholars assume that one body of texts adequately represents an entire field.” I would add that I recognize this same hazard to be implicit to any rendering of the phrase “literary studies.”

That said, I want to imbue Literariness with “performance” as Diana Taylor understands the term in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, and want, later, to trouble the polemical gesture by which she excludes “the literary” from her conception.

Taylor’s most rudimentary formulation of performances is as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (Taylor 2-3)<sup>9</sup>. While always immanent, and always embodied for the participant/spectator, “performance” is nevertheless differentiated from the general course of daily happenings. Performances are “usually bracketed off from those [events] around them to constitute discrete foci of analysis. Sometimes that framing is part of the event itself – a particular dance or a rally has a beginning and an end; it does not run continuously or seamlessly into other forms of cultural expression.” Crucially, then, “to say that something *is* a performance amounts to an ontological affirmation, though a thoroughly localized one” (Taylor 3).

Additionally, Taylor suggests,

performance...constitutes a methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events *as* performance. Civic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example, are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere. To understand these *as* performance suggests that performance also functions as an epistemology. Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers ways of knowing. The bracketing of these performances comes from

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor cites Schechner’s *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1985.

outside, from the methodological lens that organizes them in to an analyzable whole. Performance and the aesthetics of everyday life vary from community to community, reflecting cultural and historical specificity as much in the enactment and in the viewing/reception....The *is / as* underlines the understanding of performance as simultaneously ‘real’ and ‘constructed,’ as practices that bring together what have historically been kept separate as discrete, supposedly free-standing, ontological and epistemological discourse.

For Taylor, then, performance is at once the object and embodiment of a critical methodology, one that, in its epistemological and ontological conflation is constitutively self-reflexive. As she performs the analysis of performance, she finds the term’s “undefinability and complexity...reassuring. Performance carries the possibility of challenge, even self-challenge, within it. As a term simultaneously connoting a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission...and a means of intervening in the world, it far exceeds the possibilities” of terms such as “theatre,” which she claims is “weighed down by “centuries of colonial evangelical and normalizing activity” (15).

While I, like Taylor, am excited by the multivalent and self-reflexive implications of the term “performance” (implications I want to apply to my definition of Literariness after all), I am less inclined to throw out the theatrical baby with the polemical bathwater. Theatre, in her formulation, is rendered all too cursorily. It merely connotes, for her purposes, institutional imposition, and not, as it also might, a dynamic, shifting, hybrid, and often resistant mode of cultural production. Rather than a passing moment in *The Archive and the Repertoire* it foreshadows her treatment of “writing,” which she

polemically situates as the staid and imperial foil to the liberatory dynamism of performance.

This is not to suggest that there is no value to the epistemic maneuvering that occasions this antagonism. For Taylor, vested as she is in “revalorizing expressive, embodied culture” as the transmission of social knowledge, “writing” – which she monologically renders in its noun form, implying instead of the activity, or process, the abstract “written” product – is the exemplary means by which an *archival* repository of memory and knowledge displaces the embodied *repertoire*.

For Taylor, “writing” represents the displacement of performed utterance in the Americas. If, for example, for the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas writing was “highly valued [but] primarily a prompt to performance, a mnemonic aid” (17) then the Conquest “legitimized writing over other epistemic modes and mnemonic systems” (18) so that “[n]on-verbal practices – such as dance, ritual, and cooking, to name a few – that long served to preserve a sense of communal identity and memory, were not considered valid forms of knowledge.” Taylor highlights the epistemic assumption lies at the heart of this displacement, which is that only “enduring materials” (19) – such as the written text – can properly sustain cultural memory and knowledge. “The writing = memory/knowledge is central to the Western epistemology. ‘The metaphor of memory as a written surface is so ancient and so persistent in all Western cultures,’ writes Mary Carruthers, ‘that it must, I think, be seen as a governing model or “cognitive archetype”’” (24).

The repository of these enduring materials, of writing, as Taylor conceives it, but also, for example, of buildings, bones, DNA evidence, and photo IDS, is “the archive,” which she traces etymologically to the Greek *arkhe* – “a public building,” “a place where

records are kept,” but also, “a beginning, the first place, the government” (19). [T]he archive sustains...power:”

Archival memory works across distance, over time and space; investigators can go back and reexamine an ancient manuscript, letters find their addresses through time and place, and computer discs at times cough up lost files with the right software....archival memory succeeds in separating the source of ‘knowledge’ from the knower – in time and / or space....the unchanging text assures a stable signifier. Written texts allow scholars to trace literary traditions, sources, and influences. Insofar as it constitutes materials that seem to endure, the archive exceeds the live.

The epistemological primacy of archives, she argues, is sustained not only by the institutions that house them, but also by “myths.” The notion that the archive is unmediated, for example, speaks to the purportedly transcendent and universal accommodation of Western Enlightenment epistemological modes. As she points out, however, objects are archival because they are “selected, classified, and presented for analysis” and as such are susceptible to change, corruption, and political manipulation. Taylor argues for the epistemic validity and analyzability of another repository, the repertoire, which

enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically a ‘a treasury, an inventory,’ also allows for individual agency, referring to also to the

‘finder, discoverer,’ and meaning ‘to find out.’<sup>10</sup> The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being part of the transmission. As opposed to the stable objects of the archive, the archives that are the repertoire do not remain the same.

I will return in due course to her proposed methodology by which the repertoire is analyzable – she posits that performances can be isolated and understood in terms of “scenarios,” a term I will incorporate into my methodological frame. More immediately, however, I want to counter Taylor’s monological account of “writing” as a point of departure for the definition of Literariness as I understand it.

\* \* \*

I am *writing*. It is a bracketed and ritualized event. I sit in a coffee shop with books, coffee, a glass of water, and my laptop on the table. It is almost always so when I write. My body carries the tension of a familiarly hunched posture. I hardly look at the keyboard because my fingers remember the spatial arrangement of the keys. Were I to be writing by hand, the nib would trace habitual arcs and curlicues. I thus enact a repertoire of sorts even as I commit words to an enduring archival object, to my hard drive, or to paper. It is via that archive object that those words are transmitted to you. You read them now – most likely sitting in a familiar position, at a desk, or in a chair. And while we are spatially and temporally separate, you are a determining presence of my performance. Your gaze constitutes the *raison d’être* of my current actions. I enact my understanding for you. I court you nervously. I want you to agree with me. I fear that you will not. I

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<sup>10</sup> In footnote Taylor recognizes that she uses OED definitions of “Repertoire” and “Repertory” interchangeably.

write. I backspace. I pause and think. I structure. I cut. I paste. I produce. I *do* this *now* because of what you will do later: you are *reading*. We are joined and separated by the archival object, as we are by the immanent process of its production and consumption.

\* \* \*

To say that an event or object *is* “literary” is an ontological affirmation. It is to say that it is constitutively imbued with literariness, that is to say, a quality of form which renders language, words, with aesthetic effects at the moment that the reader / writer / teacher / learner / speaker encounters them. Making this claim, however, implicitly assumes the sensibility by which the literary qualities of the event or object are experienced and identified. It is to experience and identify these qualities *as* literary. In this regard, literariness is not merely the object of the claim, but also suggests the aesthetic lens implicit to the observing subject. It is at this nexus of the *is* / *as* that I would situate Literariness: it is the simultaneity of effect and affect enacted by and upon the observing subject by and upon the literary event and / or object.

So, just as Taylor understands performance as bringing together practices that have been kept separate under discrete ontological and epistemological discourses, I would argue the same is true of Literariness. If formalist critical conventions treat the literary text as an object of anatomical study unto itself, and in the process elide and dehistoricize *events* of the writing and / or reading, then Literariness enacts literary form while accommodating the subject-specific response of the reader / writer / teacher / learner / speaker.

An inevitable charge will be that this accommodation of subject-specificity is recipe for relativistic anarchy. Certainly, within this dissertation, the agitation of



Literariness, is the definitional starting point of the ontological claim that an object or event *is* literary. But this spreads thin “the literary” as a “discrete locus of analysis.” It is arguable, for example, that we perpetually respond to the affects of linguistic utterances – whether we read or write criticism, novels, plays, poems, or memoirs, or speak in classrooms, or converse next to the water cooler, or struggle to understand languages from different cultural or national contexts – no matter how well read, or for that matter illiterate, we may be. However, I want to suggest that the very fact that affective linguistic events are not exclusive to, say, lettered middle-class subjects, is one of the great political boons of this epistemological shift because it necessitates a methodological broadening of the purview of critical literary analysis and pedagogy within and around the literary academy. As I understand Literariness, its operations are dependent on neither access nor understanding of a literary archive. In this regard, Literariness potentially constitutes a site of resistance to the literary archive, and its coincident institutions of learning, as the *only* repository of valid understanding.

That said, in this dissertation I am vested in a methodology for the literary academy. I want, in this regard, to offer an account of Literariness as isolatable, analyzable, and upon which we can enact change if we deem such change necessary or desirable. I seek, in other words, a Critical Literariness (I understand this critical mandate to be implicit to my deployment of the term “Literariness” hence). What is required is a *methodology* by which to isolate literary events, and a *reality principle* by which to hold manifestations of Literariness accountable.

To begin with the latter, as has already been intimated, “post-positivist realism” is apposite, an epistemological formulation that draws together the work of such thinkers as

Satya P. Mohanty, Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Paula M.L Moya, and Michelle Elam. Post-positivist realists seek to provide an objective critical method that nevertheless accommodates the subjective experience of its practitioners. In this regard it offers a mode that does not genuflect to the principles of transcendence and universalizability by which positivist objectivists exclusively validate knowledge or memory (the very principles by which the archive, transposable across time and space, attained its epistemological heft). Neither does post-positivist realism defer to the idea that subjective experiences and truths should be held above reproach, as evidenced by pervasive relativism by which postmodern subjects hold themselves and others immune from critical inquiry. Rather, as Satya P. Mohanty and Linda Martín Alcoff suggest in their introduction to *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, post-positivist realists attempt to reclaim “subjective experience” as a site of critical inquiry. They do so by countering the dismissal of subjective experience under the guise of enlightenment “objectivity”, an epistemological requirement that casts subjective experience as “epistemically suspect” (Martín Alcoff and Mohanty 4). Subjective experiences, they argue, “are not unfathomable inner phenomena but rather disguised explanations of social relations, and they can be evaluated as such” (5). However, rather than dismiss objectivity as some post-structuralist theorists have (in the process, I must add, enacting crucial gestures towards the denaturalization of the transcendent and universalizing assumptions of the enlightenment) post-positivist realists seek to base their inquiry in *social fact*, or *social phenomena that are “objective enough”*. In this way, they counter the deconstructive purview of post-structuralist approaches, which have extended themselves beyond the de-centering of western and hegemonic assumptions with the effect that even marginalized

experiences are cast as “arbitrary, and...politically unreliable.” (4). Post-positivist realism, rather, enacts a reclaiming of “identity” – the “socially embodied facts about ourselves in the world” (6) – and “identity politics,” which is “in itself neither positive nor negative. At its minimum, it is a claim that identities are politically relevant, an irrefutable fact. Identities are the locus and nodal point by which political structures are played out, mobilized, reinforced and sometimes challenged” (7).

Pivotal loci of the post-positivist realist critical gaze, then, are cultural, theoretical and subjective *biases*. Biases are understood not as the countermand to epistemological validity, but as iterations of identity which can, and should, be held to account in light of social facts and phenomena deemed sufficiently objective. The aim of such an accounting is not merely the falsifiability of *biases*, but the establishment of their *value* within the cultural and / or theoretical network within which biased subjects live. The post-positivist realist analysis “distinguishes those biases that are limiting or counterproductive from those that are in fact necessary for knowledge, that are epistemically productive and useful” (Mohanty 804). Paula M.L. Moya extrapolates:

Realists do not shy away from truth claims, but...they understand those claims to be ‘fallibalistic’ – that is, like even the best discoveries of the natural sciences, open to revision on the basis of new or relevant information. In fact, it is realists’ willingness to admit the (in principle, endless) possibility of error in the quest for knowledge that enables them to avoid positivist assumptions about certainty and unrevisability that inform the (postmodernist) skeptic’s doubts about the possibility at arriving at a more accurate account of the world. Just as it is possible to be

wrong about one's experience, post-positivist realists insist, so it is possible to arrive at more accurate interpretations of it. (Moya 13)

Post-positivist realism, then, is a useful framework on several counts by which to guide our critical maneuvering through the simultaneously ontological and epistemological claims implicit to the agitations of Literariness. It is attractive primarily because it understands truth claims as implicit identity claims, identity claims that it nevertheless holds to critical account. So too, I contend that our embodied responses within and to literary events constitute implicit identity claims. I contend that the manner in which we experience literary events, which bespeak our aesthetic predispositions, arise not merely out of subjective desires and needs, but also bespeak our historical, social, and cultural situated-ness, and the epistemological assumptions they precipitate in us. It enacts, in other words, our biases. Post-positivist realism demands dynamic self-reflexivity. It demands that we denaturalize the otherwise unquestioned tenets of our experiential lenses – be that an untrammelled adherence to a single theoretical frame, entitlement to an opinion, or the simple matter-of-factness with which we accept the aesthetic effects upon us of literary form or our identification with literary characters. Aesthetic effects, in other words, are not merely “done to” the subject in the literary event, but the subject also enacts them. Subjective aesthetic responses, in other words, become a locus of self-reflexive critical analysis, as Bertolt Brecht, whose example will be a recurring one in this dissertation, well understood. But self-reflexivity is not an end in itself. The post-positivist realist mandate that we *evaluate* our biases (literary or otherwise) in terms of their productivity and / or usefulness within the historical, cultural, and theoretical framework of their operation allows for goal-orientated curiosity, even if

the goals are, in principle, perpetually deferred. The outcomes to which we aspire are themselves held to the same self-reflexive process. This perpetual deferral, nevertheless enacted with purpose, accounts for the productive dynamism that renders post-positive realism an attractive critical mode by which to engage the immanence of performance and Literariness.

Inevitably, of course, this dissertation *will* examine literary texts. However, crucially, I understand literary texts to operate in relation to the broader social, cultural, and historical milieus that enact themselves, variously, in the bodies of literary subjects. In this regard, the text is not, in and of itself, the only end of my analyses. Rather, and here I return to Diana Taylor's methodology, understanding the "scenario" of the reading / writing / teaching / learning / speaking event is crucial to the end of isolating Literariness, and, subsequently, the holding to account of the subject for their implicit identity claims.

Taylor describes "scenarios" as distinct from *text* and *narrative* insofar as they frame the embodied rather than merely abstracted relations. Nevertheless, she argues, they are "meaning making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes" (Taylor 28). Her archetypal example, in keeping with her books focus on the Americas, is the "Western discovery scenario," the arrival of explorers, the ritual claiming of soil, their encounters with native people. This "scenario," she suggests, is transposable. So "at times, people may actually undertake adventures to live the glorious fantasy of possession. Others may tune in regularly to television shows along the lines of *Survivor* or *Fantasy Island*. The scenario structures our understanding." Scenarios operate as "a sketch or outline of the plot of a play. Giving particulars of

scenes, situations etc.’ [and] like performance, means never for the first time...Its portable framework bears the weight of accumulative repeats. The scenario makes visible, yet again, what was already there, the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes” (Taylor 28). This visibility, I contend, allows us to hold to account the manner of our response within the literary event. In this dissertation, for example, I will read literary texts not as objects of analysis in and of themselves, but as occurring within familiar scenarios: the reading / writing / teaching / leaning / speaking events that occur within and in relation to literary scholarship. The classroom, the library, the scene of the subject reading, the setting of the subject writing, the affected speech patterns of the nervous Ph.D. candidate undertaking a defense. In this way, I am allowed to examine literary endeavor, not merely in terms of textuality, but also as the nexus of embodied attitudes that are otherwise all-too-frequently obscured by the fetishization of the literature as object.

Taylor continues,

The scenario includes features well theorized in literary analysis, such as narrative and plot, but demands that we also pay attention milieu and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language. Simultaneously *setup* and *action*, scenarios frame and activate social dramas. The setup lays out the possibilities; all the elements are there: encounter, conflict, resolution, and denouement, for example. These elements, of course, are themselves the product of economic, political, and social structures that they, in turn, tend to reproduce. All scenarios have localized meaning, though many attempt to pass as universally valid. Actions and behaviors arising from the setup might be predictable, as

seemingly natural consequence of the assumptions, values, goals, power relations, presumed audience, and epistemic grids established by the setup itself. But they are, ultimately, flexible and open to change.

The recollection or recounting of scenarios, Taylor suggests, requires attention to specific details of the events. First, the physical scene is pivotal (29). To return to my earlier anecdote, the tiered classroom in a post-apartheid South Africa invokes implicit but intentional power relations through which the (previously racially exclusive) institution of higher education interpolates its teachers and learners. Second, the embodiment of the social actors is important to note. The embodied attributes of the participants in that classroom was crucial to the event's unfolding. I am white. He was black. The classroom demographic bespoke heterogeneous race, class, and gender. Third, we need to invoke the established conventions of the scenario, or "the formulaic structures that predispose certain outcomes and yet allow for reversal, parody, and change" (31). The form of literary pedagogy, as it has traditionally been practiced, enacts a top-down model. The older black student's irruption had its effect precisely because of its implicit reversal of conventions. Fourth, in Taylor argues the necessity of noting the "multifaceted systems at work in the scenario itself: in passing it on, we can draw from various modes that come from the archive and/or repertoire – writing, telling, reenactment, mime, *gestus*, singing... The challenge is not to 'translate' from an embodied expression into a linguistic one of vice versa but to recognize the strengths and limitations of each system" (31-32). In the classroom, my "expertise" in textual analysis, in light of which I was charged with teaching students, was forcefully challenged by the student's insistence on experiential

credentials. My thinking fell short of the embodied history my students brought to the event.

The last two principles that Taylor argues are important to the critical recounting of scenarios are also key structural determinants of this dissertation. So, fifth, she argues, re-invoking scenarios requires us to “situate ourselves in relation to it; as participants, spectators, or witnesses, we need to ‘be there,’ part of the act of transfer” (32). As I have already intimated, this dissertation is an attempt to reconcile *my* scholarly endeavor with the South African history it *then* bypassed: a bypassing I want, ethically and methodologically, to counter. In this regard, the scenarios I will re-invoke, at least in the first three chapters, speak to the contexts that have most directly influenced *my* literary sensibilities. I situate *my own* responses, and hold them to account, in relation to the social, cultural, theoretical and aesthetic networks they enact. South Africa’s nascence after Apartheid, in this regard, is a crucial backdrop. I frame and discuss it in the first chapter, not merely as a series of historical events, but also as a shift in the practice and stakes of literary representation and reception. I argue that the disjuncture between the events of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings and its subsequent Report potentially enact a shift in such practices and stakes. In so doing, and drawing on, amongst others, Roland Barthes and Derek Attridge, I further define critical Literariness.

Sixth, Taylor argues, we need to recognize that scenarios are *changeable* even as they “allow for a continuation of cultural myths and assumptions.” In this regard, “[they] usually work through reactivation rather than duplication.” The TRC Hearings, as I think of them, enacted a scenario that is frequently reactivated within a broader South African



context, not least, in the endeavor of its literary academy. Publically broadcast TRC survivor and perpetrator hearings – markedly different in their tone and outcomes – enacted a deep dissonance in the language and embodiment of *being* South African, be that on the level of national debate, or in the day to day experiences of South African subjects. More than throw up the heterogeneity of South Africa, the TRC Hearings also enacted the difficult *process* of holding subjects immanently in relation to their historical and material context. It is my contention that the literary texts I engage in the second and third chapters, J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* potentially reactivate this immanent process. That said, recognizing this reactivation requires that we think beyond their mere textuality. It requires us to think of them as events, and to recognize the immanent experience of their encounter as enacting, not just literary form, but the scenario of an individual confronted by and confronting their subjection to and / or complicity in history. This negotiation of the subject and form, immanence and history, is enacted by Literariness. In each of these chapters, I examine how critical responses have broadly elided this scenario.

In the fourth chapter, Literariness will be situated in relation to an analog, Theatricality. Structurally it will enact my own temporal, spatial and methodological displacement from the events and literature arising from the TRC. My experience as a facilitator of The Telling Project Process, in which transcribed interviews with U.S. Military veterans were shaped into a play-script that the veterans performed themselves, forms the basis, at once, of a discussion of the subject as Literary (facilitated by my own contingency as a South African in the United States, whose ethical, epistemological and aesthetic lens draws on the formative experience of bearing witness to the TRC – if I did

not witness it directly, I certainly experienced it within its national context or as a participant in the *zeitgeist* it precipitated), and a further iteration of the stakes vested in the aesthetic of subjective iterations into literary forms. The contingency of my foreignness within the U.S. will be enacted (and assuaged) by situating The Telling Project process in relation to the so-called TRC-plays, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* and the *Story I am about to Tell*, and U.S. and British notions of documentary and verbatim theatre.

Finally, to conclude, I return briefly to the stage of pedagogical transactions in the literature classroom, which I will argue is a largely overlooked but key stage for literary performances within the academy. Addressing Elaine Showalter's *Teaching Literature*, I will suggest that ethically geared and embodied self-reflection in students is dependent on the willingness of their teachers to hold their discipline and themselves accountable, not only to the texts and cultural, social, and historical phenomena they determine and by which they are determined, but also to the difficult immanence of that process.

CHAPTER II  
BETWEEN BRICOLEURS AND BATTERED BODIES:  
LESSONS FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRUTH  
AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

Plurality, Singularity, and Criticism

In the introduction, “Literariness” (distinguished from more traditional and restrictive variations on the term by its capitalization) was defined not merely as a quality of form by which a text is evaluated, but also as the sensibility by which the subject apprehends language in its aesthetic aspect. This chapter examines Literariness as a *readerly* sensibility, making the crucial claim that the experience of reading cannot be properly understood as a mere consumption of the text, but that it must be seen to include the means of the text’s production, or the *writerly* sensibility that negotiates the seam between the embodied and the abstract, between history as material process and its aesthetic linguistic abstraction. This, it is crucial to recognize, does not implicate the reader (critical or otherwise) in an intentional fallacy, as Wimsatt and Beardlsey’s famous essay suggests. Nor should the Author, as Barthes suggests in “Death of The Author”, be conceived of as the transcendent guarantor of the text’s significance. Rather, as Barthes points out in the opening divagation of *S/Z*, it is necessary to negotiate beyond the “pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader...[b]ecause the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes 4). By Barthes’s account, overcoming the pitiless divorce is a matter of shifting the evaluation of literary texts, and

by extension, the sensibilities of readers from mere “readerly” seriousness: “[I]nstead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom to either accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*.” Barthes view of reading, on the other hand, has to do with practice. “Our evaluation,” he argues, “can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is writing.”

Barthes is most certainly not arguing for reading practice that situates the significance of the text within the genius of the author. As his own lexical close-reading of *Sarrasine* demonstrates, he is invested in exploding the text: each *lexia* is the cross-referential punctum of analysis, presenting various interpretive possibilities through which the reader, ideologically, historically and aesthetically situated and situating, negotiates their passage. In this regard, the writerly text is difficult, as is anything immanent, to situate. For Barthes, “[i]t is not a thing” (4). It is a process of production, of iteration, rather than a fixed representative abstraction or archivable text. Indeed, “[t]he writerly text is a perpetual present” that cannot be reiterated through criticism because “to rewrite the writerly text would consist only of disseminating it, in dispersing it within the field of infinite difference” (5), rather than to fix its significance.

Of course, any dissertation chapter, by dint of its sheer thing-ness, necessitates “reading,” “interpretation” and “criticism,” which purports but cannot but fail to superimpose “consequent language” upon the writerly texts it addresses. The risk is that, even with the kind of sustained and explosive lexical reading Barthes undertakes in relation to *Sarrasine* (perhaps especially then, because he “breaks” the text in order to show its plurality (14)), the immanence of reading is precluded from the criticism. The

immediate effect on the embodied identity that iterates itself in the moment of the literary text's engagement cannot be (re)presented. This disembodiment of the reading process in criticism, more than the structuralist insistence on the sovereignty of the text, or the post-structuralist insistence on its contingency, is responsible for the dehistoricization of the text, not in the historiographical, but the material and embodied sense. Literary texts can be said to *enact* or *participate in* history because, well, they *do so* in the moment of the writerly reading, and interpretation of a writerly text. As Barthes sees it, is "not to give it a...meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it" (5). Literature changes people. People change literature. The question is, How?

In Barthes's conception, the iterative moment of writerly reading, the writely text in process, "is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages" (5). We see in this conception not merely an allusion to the psychoanalytic thesis of the subject's emergence, the mirror phase, but also, a conception of the writerly reading that is not unlike the Kristevan thetic: the semiotic (the "before," the embodied,) intruding upon the symbolic in the iterative present, and the symbolic (some single system – law, ideology, genus) straining to control (reduce, traverse, stop, plasticize) the interloper that threatens to explode it.

This, then, is the chapter's broad *theoretical* claim. Echoing Barthes, it holds that the writerly reading constitutes the emergence of the subject into an extant order, into existing codes, which at once constitute and are constituted by the text. This writerly reading, then, is a displacement of literariness as a mere quality of textual form, and

marks it as a *literary event*, literarily constituted, between the text and the subject, facilitated by Literariness.

\* \* \*

I am the reading subject. I take the events of *my* readings to be valuable evidentiary sources as much as the texts themselves. These events irrupt. They exist in addendum and opposition to the form and function of theory within this chapter. I do not, cannot, re-invoke these events. The language I use to describe them is, at worst, merely a consequence of the reading event. At best it constitutes and is constituted by new literary events, facilitated by the Literariness of the subject who reads these words.

I want to understand the reading subject – not merely in the moment of the textual encounter, but also as a subject of history, and as an ethical subject. I want, in other words, to hold the reading subject accountable. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will contextualize encounters with J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*, and my own involvement with The Telling Project, against the backdrop of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Hearings and its *Report*.

The Hearings, televised through the most formative of my young adult years, constitute more than memories. They provide more than content. They were greatly influential in constituting the form of my literary sensibilities, or Literariness. The intensity and urgency and stakes vested in those hearings, the act of story-telling, multiple stories, told from and to multiple perspectives, not merely after the fact but in the momentary encounter; *that*, to me, is also the intensity and urgency and stakes vested in the greatest literary encounters.

I am a white South African. I will write about *Disgrace* and *Country of My Skull* knowing full well that they do not, in their collocation, represent an oeuvre of “South African writing.” Indeed, my own involvement, as a South African, or a representative of the South African white Diaspora, with The Telling Project, might arguably render the text that emerged, *Telling, Eugene*, as representative of a South African national literature – an argument that flies in the face of its every theme. Leon de Kock writes persuasively in “South Africa in the Global Imaginary” (and essay we will encounter again in this work) the very idea of a South African literature presupposes principles of commonality – language, geography, history, genre etc. – that are very difficult to argue in relation to a South African context. The authors, and the majority of critics I will site, are white. To suggest that they are representative of a genre, say “TRC Literature” is to elide a host of other literatures, recalcitrant and emergent, that thrived from that event. I do not mean to exclude these literatures so much as I hope to argue that Literariness, in its ideal manifestation, constitutes an ethical and epistemological imperative to be open to them.

I will write about *Disgrace* and *Country of My Skull*, because they, more than any others, seem to knuckle into my literary pressure points. If, as I will show, the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) marked the moment when South Africa was most explicitly and publically re-negotiating national identity/ies, *Disgrace* and *Country of My Skull* instilled and continue to arouse in me the uncertainty and discomfort that drive my critical, ethical and creative undertakings.

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To subject the literary event to an ethical imperative would seem to be at odds with Barthes’s notion of the writerly text. An ethic constitutes, arguably by definition, the

kind of “singular system” that “traverse[s], intersect[s], stop[s], plasticize[s]...the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” that constitutes the writerly text. However, Derek Attridge, himself not coincidentally a preeminent J.M. Coetzee critic, provides a useful alternative formulation in *The Singularity of Literature*<sup>11</sup>. The value of Attridge’s account is that it offers a pragmatic ethical imperative to the event of reading that Barthes, in his uncompromising insistence on the plurality of entrances that facilitate the subject’s engagement with the text, resists.

Attridge is invested in what he calls the *singularity* of the literary event. Like Barthes, he begins with the premise that the literary work is “an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of history into which it is projected and within which it is read” (Attridge 59). The singularity of a literary encounter, may be thought of as the “*demand* that [the] specific collocation of words, allusions, and cultural references make on [the reader] in the event of the reading, here and now, as a member of the culture to whom these codes are familiar” (76).

Accordingly,

[s]ingularity exists, or rather *occurs*, in the experience of the reader (including the writer-as-reader), understood not as a psychological subject (though singularity has its psychological effects), but as the repository of...an idioculture, an individual version of the cultural ensemble by

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Attridge conceived of *The Singularity of Literature* in conjunction with another book, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. He cites his experience of reading Coetzee novels as crucial to the genesis of the former text. He describes Coetzee’s as “an *oeuvre* which explores and exemplifies with particular intensity and urgency the theoretical issues I wanted to follow up” (Attridge, *Singularity*: xii)



which he or she has been fashioned as a subject with assumptions, predispositions, and expectations.

Singularity, in other words, is an experience which, in its irreducibility, “involves an apprehension of *otherness*”: it is “perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations” (63). It is not a property of the archival text, the material object, but “the event of singularizing that takes place in reception” which “does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it. It is produced, not given in advance; and its emergence is also the beginning of its erosion, as it brings about the cultural changes necessary to accommodate it.” (64)

A crucial intervention that accompanies Attridge’s singularity is the idea that readers have an ethical *responsibility* towards it. Attridge likens the reader to a judge who must “dissipate” the uniqueness of a “particular case by relating it to the general field of the law” but who also has a responsibility to “move beyond any calculation which could be made in terms of codes of legal practice, and to act with a decisiveness that no machine could emulate. Only in so doing is the act truly responsible, truly responsive to the singularity of the case” (128). Extending the metaphor, he argues that

[i]t is this singularity [or otherness] that makes a demand on the judge, as judge. No justice is possible without the singularity of the case – and of the individual standing trial – being so affirmed (and only, it might be added, in similar acts of affirmation throughout daily existence can just or ethical social life prevail). To act morally towards other persons entails, it hardly needs saying, as full an attempt at understanding them and their situation as one is capable of. Yet both the primary claim of another

person upon one and the final measure of one's behavior lies in the response to and affirmation of the otherness which resists that understanding. (129)

In light of Attridge's intervention, then, we may add an ethical component to the notion of Literariness, one that draws on his understanding of the "alterity" or "otherness" of the literary encounter and the necessity of "a trust in the unpredictability of reading, and an openness to the future" (130). It is arguable that Attridge is, at times, somewhat blithe in his suggestion that the singularity of the literary encounter requires a suspension of preconceptions and biases. As this dissertation's introduction makes clear in its underpinning of the broader argument in a post-positivist realist understanding, the suspension of biases is neither entirely possible nor necessarily desirable. What is desirable, however, is that biases and presuppositions are challenged or endangered. And where the evidence is *sufficiently objective* (as opposed to transcendently, universally objective) to suggest the necessity, such biases and presuppositions must be altered to facilitate more productive encounters with text and the world.

The purpose of the literary text, as Attridge's association of the singular text with "alterity" suggests, is precisely to provide the circumstances for the possibility of such challenges and endangerment. To exercise Literariness is to be open to the work that the singular text might facilitate. It is that sensibility whereby the subject conceives of and is reconceived by the textual encounter. It is to give the text its due at the expense of certainty and comfort. Literariness is to live, as Attridge describes it, in the event of the creative reading:

To read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work. It involves a suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions, in order to apprehend the work's inaugural power. (It is this rethinking that will continue to have effects as one reads other works). In its encounter with the other, an encounter in which existing modes of thought and evaluation falter, creative reading allows the work to take the mind (understood in the broadest sense) to the borders of its accustomed terrain. And there is no single "correct" reading, just as there is no single "correct" way for an artist, in creating a new work, to respond to the world in which he or she lives. (81)

Like Barthes, Attridge recognizes that the immanence of a singular literary encounter represents a fatal challenge to the critic, insofar as it cannot be assimilated. As, for Barthes, criticism is merely consequent language, so Attridge recognizes that he can bear only "imperfect witness to [the] singularity [of a literary work] – its singularity for me, here, now – by describing a little of what happens when I read it on the occasion of writing...although any such description has to take its chances with readers in the same way that a literary work does" (68).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings and its *Report* will be used here to set up the particular effectivities of the subsequent and consequent texts (*Disgrace*, *Country of My Skull*, and contingently, *Telling, Eugene*) which will be

addressed in subsequent chapters. To draw again on Attridge, “if I succeed in conveying [their singularity] it will be because my description[s] read in conjunction with the [texts], generates, in turn, singularit[ies] for the reader. This is how much successful criticism works” (68).

### “New South African-ness”

No disrespect is intended to any group or political perspective. It is simply impossible to write a history of South Africa without erring on one side or the other of the argument.

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *TRC Report*, Vol. 1, Ch. 1 Sec. 13

Benedict Anderson, writing about the ways in which nationalisms come into being and the frustration experienced by theorists at the political power of nationalisms in light of their “philosophical poverty and even incoherence,” (Anderson 5) has argued that the idea that nationalism is invented, risks “assimilating the ‘constructedness’ of nationalism with ‘fabrication’ and ‘falsity,’ rather than to ‘imagining’ and ‘creating’” (5). For Anderson, national communities are to be “distinguished, not by their falsity genuineness, but by the *style* in which they are imagined.”<sup>12</sup>

Whether for good or for bad – “South African-ness” has been deployed in both prolific and destructive ways since the fall of apartheid – the style of South Africa’s emergence as a “new” entity was telling, not least because of its irreducibility. The New South Africa did not come into being at the moment of F.W. De Klerk’s speech to parliament on January 2, 1990, or Nelson Mandela’s release 9 days later. The New South Africa was not born with the ratification of the interim constitution in November of 1993, nor with the adoption of a new national flag, nor national anthem, nor even with the first fully inclusive elections on April 27, 1994. South Africa did not become itself as *Invictus*

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<sup>12</sup> My italics.

would have us believe, between the moment that Joel Stransky's dropkick sailed between the uprights at Ellis Park, and the final whistle of the final match of the 1995 Rugby World Cup. Nor are the *vuvuzela* drones of the 2010 Soccer World Cup the final natal cries of a nation emerging into itself.<sup>13</sup>

"New," in this regard, could do with the kind of "flexible yet critical usage" that Ella Shohat demands of the prefix "post-" of postcolonialism (Shohat 111). As with *post-*, *new* might usefully be seen as subject to the different "referential emphases" of at least two "genres" of the prefix (Shohat 101): the historical and the philosophical. In its historical mode, "new" implies the finitude of South Africa's racist policy's past and "underlines a passage into a new period and the closure of a certain historical event or age, officially stamped with dates" (Shohat 101). It does this in much the same way as does "post-war", "post-coldwar", or "post-independence". In its philosophical mode, "new" marks a contemporary "state, situation, condition, or epoch", in much the same way as the post of "post-modernism," "post-feminism," and "post-structuralism" does. Here, the emphasis falls not as heavily on linear demarcation, as it does on a complicated and many-stranded "movement beyond" "outmoded philosophical, aesthetic and political theories".

However, more than demarcating mere temporalized abstractions or theoretical movements, the "new" also signifies the materiality of a South African identity. "South African" has an ontological status that is at once complicatedly pluralistic and singular. It is a category that circumscribes at once the newly recognized heterogeneity and hybridity

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<sup>13</sup> *Vuvuzelas* are the long plastic horns ubiquitously blown by supporters at soccer matches during the 2010 FIFA world cup hosted by South Africa. They were repeatedly identified with South African soccer culture and as such, much to the frequent annoyance of international teams and broadcast audiences, were defended on relativistic grounds as local custom.

of its prolific cultural expressions, and the singular evil of, for example, its dangerously facile xenophobias (exemplified by the May 2008 attacks and continuing xenophobic tensions that simmer between many South Africans against foreign and undocumented African laborers). And while it is understandable to throw up one's hands at the over-determination of what appears to be ontological, it is nevertheless crucial to recognize the manner in which it operates as a *social fact*: it is an assignation that determines behaviors, practices and perceptions, and in this regard accommodates, rather than excludes opposing and incommensurate positionalities – an undertaking which should well serve theorists of South African national identities. As Julian David Jonker has argued, “[t]o live in a plural society is to live with very different conceptions of the human self; to take such plurality seriously, as a theorist, is to take these different conceptions seriously, yet to try to understand how and why these meanings come to circulate in the way that they do” (Jonker 216).

No description of a New South African identity that excludes or precludes any one group of people over another will emerge from this discussion, nor even an argument for the ontology of a “New South African-ness.” That said, it is also understood that “New South African-ness,” insofar as the assignation is ideologically deployed to affect a national *zeitgeist*, must contend with a temporal tension. On the one hand, the linear account, in which South Africa’s “rainbow moment” is past – *that* speech, *that* walk to freedom from Victor Verster prison, *that* election, *that* presidency, filled a nation with now erstwhile pride and hope. “New,” here, might be ironically inflected, suggesting a failed project. On the other hand, a more general progressivist movement: the *zeitgeist* cycles, invariably accompanied by some political, cultural, or sporting achievement, from

one “rainbow moment” to the next. “New,” here, suggests perpetual renewal, seemingly at the expense of broader historical awareness. Neither of these accounts are satisfactory in and of themselves. The cynicism of the former and the naiveté of the latter militate against them.

Insofar, however, as “New South African-ness” is an assignation worth understanding in general terms (and its ideological deployment means it should be taken seriously), it is worth examining not as a moment – less as a demarcation on a linear progressivist’s account of history, and more as a complicated process. It is worth understanding not merely as a slow and multiply layered set of theoretical and philosophical shifts, and more as the dramatic (perhaps even dramatized) emergences of a new set of identity formations.

Crucially, this chapter seeks to deploy what the introduction has defined as “Literariness” as a way of understanding this emergence, Literariness being not merely a quality of form by which the value (or even ontology) of a literary text is defined, but also the sensibility that apprehends and understands language in its aesthetic aspect (aesthetic having been broadly defined to accommodate the historical and ethical contexts out of which the texts arise). In this way, Literariness is cast not merely as a way of reading literary texts, referring not merely to literature in the restrictive sense that might be applied to, for example, novels, memoirs, and plays – *Disgrace*, *Country of My Skull*, *Telling: Eugene* – but also as a way to characterize the ways in which such literature – both in the moment of its production and reception – *participates* in history, not as archival remnants of a past moment (in this case the South African Truth and

Reconciliation Commission), not in the merely historiographical sense, but as *rendering anew* history itself.

### The Report

Mandated as a function of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act Number 34 of 1995 (henceforth, The Act), the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (TRCR)* was to be “*as comprehensive an account as possible*”<sup>14</sup> of the Commission’s undertakings (Republic of South Africa 1995). The *TRCR*’s primary purpose, in this sense is *archival*. Its aim is threefold: 1) to provide an historical record of the Commission’s other functions – which the Act describes as the provision of “*as complete a picture as possible*”<sup>15</sup> of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights” between 1 March 1960 and 10 May 1994; 2) to facilitate amnesty for perpetrators of such abuses who make “*full disclosure*”<sup>16</sup> of all the relevant facts;” and 3) to ascertain the “fate and whereabouts” of victims and restoring their “human and civil dignity...by granting...opportunity to relate their own accounts...and recommending reparation measures.”

The Act demands much – “comprehensiveness,” “completeness,” “fullness” – but only within the measure of possibility. Despite this qualification, however, the chairperson of the Committee, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, adds a caveat in the foreword to the *TRCR*. The *TRCR* is not a definitive history, he suggests, because of the various constraints imposed upon the Commission’s findings, from the “legal provisions” contained in the Act (TRC, Vol. 1 Sec. 7), to the enormity of the undertaking with which

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<sup>14</sup> My italics.

<sup>15</sup> My italics.

<sup>16</sup> My italics.



the Commission was tasked, to the time limitations that were imposed upon it:

“Ultimately, this report is no more than it claims to be. It is the report of a commission appointed by Parliament to complete an enormous task in a limited period.” He continues, “Everyone involved in producing this report would have loved to have had the time to capture the many nuances and unspoken truths encapsulated in the evidence that came before us. This, however, is a task that others must take up and pursue” (*TRCR* Vol 1. Ch. 1. Sec 15). Remarkable, especially within the foreword of an official, government-mandated record of historical events, is Tutu’s seeming sanction of the *play* of meaning or textuality. The Archbishop not only anticipates *play* – as it will come to be defined – but tasks readers and writers with it. The possibilities implicit in his use of the word “capture” are tantalizing, especially in relation to the “*encapsulated*” nature of the “nuances” and “unspoken truths.” Capturing, in this relation, suggests not merely a fixing in place of nuances and unspoken truths, but their freeing from the stricture: “capturing” is not merely a matter of archiving, but also of the embodied and immediate processes of interpretation, representation and re-evocation – of reading, writing, and performance. What shortcomings there are to the *TRCR*, therefore, are not merely historiographical, but are also, in Tutu’s conception, literary.

Tutu’s caveat functions, therefore, not so much as an apology, as a signal of an investment in impelling (perhaps on the strength of its author’s peculiar moral authority) the memory of the TRC into a prolific, engaged and perpetual present. The pivotal passage (in which Catherine Cole has suggested, the archbishop sounds “uncharacteristically postmodern”(Cole 122)) is worth quoting at length:

16. A Dutch visitor to the Commission observed that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission must fail. Its task is simply too demanding. Yet, she argued, ‘even as it fails, it has already succeeded beyond any rational expectations’. She quoted Emily Dickinson: ‘the truth must dazzle gradually...or all the world would be blind’.
- However, The Commission has not been prepared to allow the present generation of South Africans to grow gently into the harsh realities of the past and, indeed, many of us have wept as we were confronted with its ugly truths. However painful the experience has been, we remain convinced that there can be no healing without truth. My appeal to South Africans as they read this report is not to use it to attack others, but to add to it, correct it and ultimately share in the process that will lead to national unity through truth and reconciliation.
17. The past, it has been said, is another country. The way its stories are told and the way they are heard change as the years go by. The spotlight gyrates, exposing old lies and illuminating new truths. As a fuller picture emerges, a new piece of the jigsaw puzzle of our past settles into place.
18. Inevitably, evidence and information about our past will continue to emerge, as indeed they must. The report of the Commission will now take its place in the historical landscape of which future generations

will try to make sense – searching for the clues that lead, endlessly, to a truth that will, in the very nature of things, never be fully revealed.

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission 4)

With regard to this passage, it is necessary to make a crucial distinction – one that will be taken up in more detail in the next section of this chapter, on “The Hearing” – between the undertakings of TRC, and the significance of the *TRCR* in relation to them. It is difficult to avoid in Section 16 the fact that the experiences of South Africans (at least those espoused during the hearings) are part of a painful and harsh “reality” or “truth.” A deep and methodical engagement with that reality is the necessary forerunner of the TRC’s nationalist projects of “unity” and “reconciliation.” The “truths” of this past are established, undeniable, and stark. They weigh heavily, perhaps by virtue of their reification. There is, however, a distinct shift in tone in Section 17 and 18 which deal with the *TRCR* as a discursive construct more than they do the embodied reality of South Africa’s history.

With metaphorical flourish, and an insistence that the telling / writing / hearing / reading of stories have “ways,” – aesthetic, methodological, formal, stylistic, contextual – that change with time, and that will affect the manner of the *TRCR*’s future reception and treatment, Tutu seems to situate it as an *event*: the *now* taking its place in a historical landscape, a key find in a perpetual (and thus not eschatological) archeological project. That project is the written history of Apartheid, the totality of which is forever to be deferred. The hypothetical “event” of the *TRCR* is not, in a crucial sense, the telos of the project. It is not, as a less considered account might have characterized it, the beginning / origin, nor the center / middle, nor the outcome / end of a structured project to provide a

definitive written history. The *TRCR* does not transcend this project, claiming a constitutionally immunity as, say, the Word of God, from the activities of those who would seek to amend, addend, appropriate, or restructure it. One might characterize Tutu's understanding by drawing on Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Accordingly, Tutu does not fall prey to "[t]he concept of a centered structure [which] is in fact the concept of a freeplay upon a fundamental *immobility* and a reassuring *certitude*, which is itself beyond the range of freeplay" (Derrida 279)<sup>17</sup>.

Tutu's conception of the *TRCR* breaks from this theological idea – if only to a degree, which will come under scrutiny soon. Rather, the *TRCR* is specifically situated within the realm of signs: "Ultimately, this report is no more than it claims to be. It is the report of a commission." At the risk of overstating Tutu's position:, the TRC might be seen as a sign, even as a system of signs, the "stuff" for *bricoleurs*, whom Derrida, re-conceiving Levi-Strauss's opposition in *The Savage Mind*, places in causal relation to "engineers." The engineer is a "theological idea" (Derrida 282): a constructor of totalities – language, syntax, lexicon – and "the absolute origin of his own discourse... supposedly construct[ed] out of nothing" (281). For Derrida, the *bricoleur* uses the

instruments he finds in at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which have not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous – and so forth.

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<sup>17</sup> My italics.

“[E]very discourse,” Derrida argues, “is *bricoleur*,” and in this regard “the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*” (282). Tutu’s foreword caveat, it may be argued, frees the *TRCR* up from the myth of engineers – the strictures of totality and officialdom – to the play of future *bricoleurs*. It is also, however, a qualified freedom. Hence, Tutu breaks from the theological idea of the engineer only to a degree. Accordingly, the *bricoleur* is subject to a fundamental “truth” that exists outside, if in devastating relation to, the system of signs with which she plays.

### The Hearings

According to Catherine Cole, “theatrical metaphors surrounding the TRC were ubiquitous” (Cole 17). This is evident in the subsequent literature. In *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Alex Boraine, the vice-chairperson of the TRC describes the first hearing, held on 16 April 1996 in East London, a coastal town of the Eastern Cape Province and a center of struggle activity during apartheid:

At last the curtain was raised; the drama which was to unfold during the next two and a half years had witnessed its first scene. The ritual, which was what the public hearings were, which promised truth, healing and reconciliation to a deeply divided and traumatised people, began with a story. This was the secret of the Commission – no stern-faced officials sitting in a private chamber, but a stage, a handful of black and white men and women listening to the stories of horror, of deep sorrow, amazing fortitude, and heroism. The audience was there too, and a much wider audience watched and listened through television and radio. It was a ritual,

deeply needed to cleanse a nation. It was a drama. The actors were in the main ordinary people with a powerful story. But this was no brilliantly written play; it was the unvarnished truth in all its starkness.

(Boraine 98-99)

The passage characterizes the event of the first TRC Hearing much as Tutu's caveat does the "event" of the *TRCR*. Remarkably, however, the tone of the passage seems to move in an opposing direction. Tutu's caveat is invested in denying the teleological status of the *TRCR* and does so by reducing the status of the report from totalizing official record to a piece of a larger bricolage, the completion of which is to be perpetually deferred. Boraine, on the other hand, begins with an extended theatrical metaphor. The Hearings, he suggests, were *constructed* with a view to affect. It was a consciously staged ritual, replete with carefully-wrought manipulations – "[t]his was the secret of the Commission" – of participants, as well as local and global audiences. Going to some length to establish the theatricality of the event, belaboring the point even, Boraine disavows it suddenly. The Hearings, he asserts, were *not* fake. There was nothing aestheticized about the testimonies. This "powerful story" – the singular nature of which is worth noting – was not "written." Rather, its (singular) truth was "unvarnished" and "stark".<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Catherine Cole also addresses the simultaneous invocation and denial of the TRC Hearings' "theatricality," in *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission: Stages of Transition*. One wonderful find derives from the transcripts of the Port Elizabeth Hearings, in which Tutu, admonishing an unruly audience, is quoted as saying "We have been given a very important task: this is not a *show* that we are doing. We are trying to get medicines to heal up our wounds" (Cole 16). Cole argues that the substitution "of a medical metaphor (the healing of wounds) for a theatrical one (a 'show')" sought to invoke the process as an "evenhanded and effective" rather than subject to "spontaneous expressions of emotion from the audience [that] would undermine the legitimacy of the commission." The imposition of a scientific metaphor, in this account, suggests the regulatory force of epistemic modes that defer to objectivity, and thus countermand the irruptive danger of the subject. Interestingly, Cole continues to illustrate the Archbishop's own ambivalent status within this dialectic:

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It is a matter of contingency that I have worked with US veterans – a process the fourth chapter of this dissertation will engage. Trying to understand these experiences, I read Anthony Kubiak’s brilliant *Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty*, which charges American Theatre with the responsibility of revealing the material historical violence that is belied by highly theatricalized and idealized “real” American identity. Kubiak argues that the broad abhorrence of theatricality – from that of the puritan “founders” to that of contemporary Neo-conservative posturing – strategically and ideologically allows claims to an “authentic” American-ness. “What is American history...but a continuous staging of desire?” he asks.

America...generating within...ever-expanding limits its own endless play of desire (more markets, more capital) and significance (still the city on a hill, even now believing in its manifest destiny recontextualized as historically inevitable, unlimited, market growth). America, that in staging its desire still deeply believes in the purity of its authentic identity.

America onstage rejecting its own theater. (Kubiak 12)

I read Boraine after Kubiak. Coming to the moment of Boraine’s disavowal, and notwithstanding seemingly insurmountable contextual differences, I was suddenly struck anew by Kubiak’s formulation. Theatricality sacrificed on authenticity’s altar in the name of nationalist / nationalizing ideology: here was an abstract idea, generalizable enough,

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He was, after all, the unquestioned master of ceremonies, a brilliant showman. Without his talents, it could be argued, the commission would surely have broken down at several particularly fraught junctures. His ability to stage-manage, to orchestrate contending forces, to shift abruptly the tone, style, language and mood of the proceedings kept the audience and all participants slightly off guard. This proved efficacious for moving the ritual forward, for keeping the show on the road, for better or worse. (Cole 16-17)

that in terms of disciplinary mores requires a complex comparative methodology. I wonder if you will let it be enough that I, a South African in the U.S., accidentally and in a moment of intuitive recognition, encountered these (con)texts. We will encounter both Boraine and Kubiak again.

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As with the American repudiation of theatricality, a perpetual gesture necessary to sustain the “purity of authentic identity,” there is an ontological claim at the heart of Boraine’s sudden disavowal. The TRC hearings staged *something*, a *single* thing, a story, *one* truth – South African identity – the theatricality of which needed to be repudiated in order to sustain, or claim for the first time, its authenticity.

This was the nationalist mandate of the TRC hearings. As Ivor Chipkin has argued in *Do South Africans Exist? Nationalism, Democracy, and the Identity of ‘The People’*, “the TRC sought to provide a principle of commonality that would ground South Africans, despite their differences of culture, religion, language and race, as a people” (Chipkin 175). His analysis fails, however, in so far as it misapprehends the “principle of commonality” targeted by the hearings in fulfillment of its nationalist mandate. To Chipkin, this principle is a “common history,” of “apartheid.” His critique of the TRC is that a “national history – a history that defines the limits of the people – ...begs the question. It must know, even before it begins, who the people are. How else could it write their story? This is why the project of nation-building is paradoxical. It is driven to suppose that the nation already exists in itself” (181).

While Chipkin is correct in highlighting the fallaciousness of an *a priori* supposition of “a people” as the basis for a national history, his implication that that the



TRC's nationalizing mandate was fulfilled by a purely historiographical mandate is less assured: The *TRCR* did not "write the people." Written histories, as Tutu's caveat points out, are all too unstable, subject to the gyrating spotlight of future bricoleurs: readers, writers and critics. The hearing sought to situate South Africa's "common history" not as something that was written, but within the evidence upon which any writing would, by necessity, be based – or at least one aspects of that evidence. The speaking bodies that appeared before the Commission in hearings and depositions, especially the speaking bodies of apartheid victims took on a particular immobility within the TRC's re-conception of South African identity. South Africa's common history was undergirded by the *authentic victim subject*. In victim hearings, publically broadcast, particular stories became national allegories, and personal emotional utterances defined a nation's heart.

In order that the authentic victim subject's story be capable of sustaining such a burden, however, it had to be situated as an immobility – the guarantor of history, the center of its system of signs – of a stature Tutu refused the *TRCR* with his caveat. Hence, Alex Boraine's repudiation of theatricality, the constructedness of which implies a freeplay that besmirches the authenticity of the victim subject in the very moment of his or her iteration.

#### Between The Hearings and *The Report*

Mark Sanders, in *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission*, most clearly formulates the relationship between the TRC Hearings and the *TRCR*. He does so by identifying the juridico-legal, therapeutic, and literary codes and practices at work. For him, these "codes and practices are unstable," and he frequently finds himself "adding the prefix 'quasi': quasi-literary, quasi-judicial, and so

on” (Sanders 16-17), a qualification he finds necessary in light of the “differential” (17) accounts of “truth” that inform the practices of the Commission.

The *TRCR* distinguishes between four kinds of “truth,” that fall under the ambit of the TRC’s operation: 1) “factual and forensic truth” (*TRCR* Vol. 1, Ch 5, Secs. 30-34); 2) “personal and narrative truth” (Sect. 35-38); 3) “social truth” (Sect. 39-42); and 4) “healing and restorative truth” (Sect. 43-45). For the purposes of Sanders’ argument, “forensic” and “narrative” truths are the most important. Narrative truths, the subjective narration or witness testimonies of events germane to the Commission’s ambit, are crucial in the fulfillment of The Act’s mandate that TRC “restore the human and civil dignity of victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they were victims” (Republic of South Africa 1995). This was the purpose of the public hearings.

Sanders suggests that it is in its facilitation of narrative truths, or “the weight it gave to individual testimonies,” that the TRC and the *TRCR* “bear most on literature” (Sanders 151)<sup>19</sup>, particularly insofar as to do so required a careful negotiation of juridico-legal codes and practices. Whereas in a juridical setting, the personal narratives of an event or series of events would be subject to forensic and factual analysis, this was not true in the TRC victim hearings. Rather, as Sanders points out, although an official body, the Commission could not approach the personal testimony of victims with an *a priori* juridical skepticism. The commission had a “reparative quasi-therapeutic mandate,” and the “healed wholeness of personhood” could not be restored to victims “unless the

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<sup>19</sup> However, neither the TRC nor the *TRCR* are “literary” in the “restricted sense” (Sanders 149) of, for example, the Emily Dickinson poem cited in the chairperson’s foreword – although such literary intrusions occur infrequently throughout the *TRCR*. Sanders cites, for example, the Brecht poem that is deployed as an epigraph to the conclusion of the *TRCR* chapter dealing with the complicity of the health sector in apartheid (149).

‘personal’ and ‘subjective’ truth of [their] accounts was accepted....[and] officially sanctioned” (Sanders 17).

The restoration of dignity is certainly and rightfully meant to benefit victims. However, the *TRCR*, in its definition of narrative or subjective truth, is not above the unwitting or disingenuous conflation of victim and perpetrator, “[b]y telling their stories, both victims and perpetrators gave meaning to the multi-layered experiences of the South African story.... The stories told to the Commission were not presented as arguments or claims in a court of law. Rather, they provided unique insights into the pain of South Africa’s past, often touching the hearts of all that heard them” (*TRCR*, Vol. 1, Ch. 5, sect. 36). In point of fact, the TRC did not treat victims and perpetrators equally during the hearings:

Perpetrators can be cross-examined, their integrity put in doubt...[there is] a necessarily *asymmetrical openness*...in its weaving of what it enigmatically calls ‘the South African story’...to stories not of perpetrators but of victims. The commission reserves its hospitality for victims. It does not greet perpetrators with the words ‘we welcome you here today’ – such words typically being the greeting made at hearings to victim witnesses. (Sanders 17)<sup>20</sup>

Within the context of the hearing, then, victims’ narrative truths were transcendent. They were above forensic and factual cross-examination. As much as this fulfilled what Sanders calls the quasi-therapeutic and reparative mandate of the Commission, it also served a particular post-apartheid nationalizing function. Victim and perpetrator testimonies were ubiquitously and nationally broadcast. The differing

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<sup>20</sup> My italics.

attitudes of the Commission towards victims and perpetrators translated into public attitudes. Perpetrators (black and white) represented the old, corrupt order, and were treated with cold, hard, juridical skepticism in the form of cross-examination. Victims (black and white) represented the long-suffering and victorious new order; validation of their narratives and emotions were encoded in the commission's patient silence and empathetic utterances.

However, if the Hearings could sustain this asymmetrical openness in its live, quasi-therapeutic and reparative capacity, then the *TRCR* could not: "In spite of its declared openness to 'narrative truth,' for the commission the stories of victims were, like any other statements made before a legal or quasi-legal body, subject to verification and or falsification... This happened... when the commission drew up victims' testimony in its report in order to illustrate a pattern of human rights violations." In the *TRCR* then, unlike in The Hearings, victim testimonies were not treated as the transcendent iterations of authentic victim subjects.

In the larger scheme, however, this hardly matters. The *TRCR*'s subjection of victims' testimonies to cross-examination was at once all-but-invisible and substantially after the fact of the publically broadcast hearings. A crucial disequilibrium results, one that Teresa Godwin Phelps manages at once to characterize and overlook:

[W]ithin [the *TRCR*'s] covers a different story emerges from that which resulted from the daily inundation of victims and perpetrator stories that had rained down on the people of South Africa for nearly two years. The hearings, despite their highly ritualized nature, had let loose a riot of emotion. The hearings had been *carnival*, temporarily releasing the people

from the strictures of the state. The report, on the other hand, is a monumental effort to control the chaos, to reintroduce the state with its orderliness and discipline; this time, to be sure, a new state that values equality and compassion. Nonetheless, the tone of the report is largely formal and bureaucratic, a startling contrast to the hearings.

(Godwin Phelps 113)

No formal and bureaucratic document, no matter its grandeur (5 volumes) or that of the occasion of its publication (Archbishop Tutu handed over the *TRCR*'s bound volumes to then-President Nelson Mandela in a nationally broadcast ceremony), can compete in terms of access or public interest with memories of the riot of loosed emotions, carnival, and daily inundations. In this sense, what Mark Sanders characterizes as the TRC Hearings' asymmetrical openness towards the stories of victims in the re-conception of the "South African Story" is aided and abetted by another *de facto* asymmetrical openness, that of the public towards live mediation, towards the embodied and imminent iteration of the authentic victim subject.

In the last chapter of *Ambiguities of Witnessing* Sanders points out that "the commission, situated between the hearings and its report, between listening and watching, and reading is...a bifurcated event" and asks

how [the *TRCR*] deal[s] with this bifurcation, and the resulting disequilibrium between official record and common memory? Does this bifurcation and disequilibrium, and the response of the report to it, have any bearing on literature after apartheid: not simply, in a restricted sense, in terms of the production of literary and quasi-literary works, but also, in

a broader sense in terms of *thinking* of literature, or of the literary, and its relation to the law? (Sanders 148)

Less interested in the juridical implications of the literary, I share Sanders's concern with the ways *literature* arising out of the time of the TRC negotiates between the hearings and the *TRCR*. It will show how J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Antjie Krog's semi-fictional autobiography *Country of My Skull* situate their concerns their readers in the event of the reading between the embodied iteration of victim / perpetrator subjectivity, and the appropriation of such iterations into a transcribed and carefully formulated historical objects. If the *TRCR* is circumscribed by its supposed officialdom (its mandate and time) the same is not true of Coetzee's and Krog's texts. The writing of the *TRCR*, so Tutu points out, enacts a merely archival function, in contrast to the "truths" and nuances "encapsulated" in the moment of the authentic subject's embodied iteration, in the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Coetzee and Krog's texts intervene in this apparent disparity by engaging the reader's Literariness in the event of the reading.

CHAPTER III  
THE SERPENT'S TONGUE: LETTERED SOLIPSISM  
AND *DISGRACE*

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a beautifully written novel. Its literariness, in so far as the term suggests a quality of form by which the text is evaluated, is often remarked upon. The opening of Michael Holland's astute analysis in "Plink-Plunk': Unforgetting the Present in Coetzee's *Disgrace*" moves towards just such an observation:

"*Disgrace*... fulfils its aesthetic obligation. Like Cape Town, 'a city prodigal of beauty, of beauties' (Coetzee 12), it flamboyantly obeys an imperative which states that novels are primarily works of literature and *ought* to be readable, and read, as such" (Holland 396).

Holland argues persuasively that the novel also simultaneously destabilizes this imperative, asking what the aesthetic assumptions are that underlie the notion of readability, or, for our purposes, what constitutes the event of reading. For him, this destabilization is epitomized by the response of David Lurie, the novel's libidinal protagonist, a middle-aged, white, Romantics scholar and an academic, to the performance of Melanie Isaacs, his Coloured<sup>21</sup> student and the young woman he is later accused of assaulting, in a comedic stage production, *Sunset at the Globe Salon*. As

Holland describes the scene, Melanie, playing the part of Gloria, is

all tarted up and brassy....[Lurie] slips unnoticed into a rehearsal. The climax of the scene – 'a flash, followed by a screaming and a scurrying around' (Coetzee 24) fails to happen because of synchronization problems, and this leads to a significant breakdown in the synchronization of Lurie's

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<sup>21</sup> In South African English the word "Coloured," although it has been contested in the past, does not carry the pejorative implications that it does in American English. It refers to people of mixed ethnicity, a category that, while established under Apartheid taxonomies, is generally accepted.

response. He becomes uneasy, feeling he ‘ought to be gone’: ‘unbidden the word *letching* comes to him’ (Coetzee 24). The flash eventually occurs and, to the sound of Melanie’s ‘squawks’, he leaves. The next day, however, he barges into her digs and ravishes her more or less against her will. (Holland 396)

In this reading Lurie is unsettled by a garish version of Melanie – Gloria, tarted, brassy, squawking, partaking in a failed slapstick scene the “presiding principle” of which seems to be catharsis: “all the old prejudices brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter.” However, as he watches the piece in rehearsal, there is little hope of such catharsis for Lurie because in the cast’s stern efforts to create a seamless comedy, the process of its construction is laid bare. The moment calls to mind Brechtian *Verfemdungseffekte*, even as it is in no way the cast’s intention. The actor’s performances, in the manner of *gest*, are obviously (albeit artlessly) stylized: Melanie is not skilled enough in her portrayal of Gloria to be “wholly transformed into the character played,” for her “feelings [be] at bottom those of the character,” as Brecht might argue (Brecht 515), and so resorts to an obvious type, “her accent is glaringly *Kaaps*.<sup>22</sup> The director demands a snappier “Marx Brothers atmosphere;” the technical failure disrupts any (even if already scant) pretense of realism. The disruption puts paid to Lurie’s illusions, and in a moment of atypical clear-sightedness he perceives his own gaze upon the young woman as unseemly, and himself as “on the point of joining the company” of

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<sup>22</sup> “*Kaaps*” is Afrikaans for “of the Cape,” a reference to the geographical location historically occupied by “Cape Coloureds:” people of mixed ethnicity (Khoi, San, White, Malay), whose dialect, both in English and Afrikaans is very distinctive, and frequently deployed to satirical ends. Gloria, in other words, is an expression of a stereotype.



dirty old men: “tramps and drifters with their stained raincoats and cracked false teeth and hairy earholes” (Coetzee 24).

Just as Brecht’s theatre demands critical distance of its audience by signaling its own artifice, or theatricality, so *Disgrace* demands that its audience pays attention to literature as literature. And just as Brecht aimed to facilitate a critically engaged distance between a bourgeois audience and their otherwise naturalized self-iteration, so *Disgrace*, literary though it undoubtedly is, estranges readers from an unquestioning appreciation of “the literary” through Lurie’s gauche deployment of it. Lurie fails to seduce Melanie with his grandiloquent declarations, and, in the process, levels the literary against itself. His pretentious lettered flirtation is painfully obvious. Earlier, having invited Melanie into his home, he entreats her with garishly instrumentalist pith, “a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone....She has a duty to share it.” A little later, he says with allusive pretentiousness “From fairest creatures we desire increase...that thereby beauty’s rose might never die” (Coetzee 16). Just as Lurie feels the desire to leave the auditorium the moment that the rehearsal’s theatricality grates against itself, so Melanie excuses herself the moment Lurie quotes Shakespeare’s first sonnet, an outcome he places squarely on the shoulders of literary form: “Her smile loses its playful, mobile quality. The pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent’s words, now only estranges. He has become a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture hoard. She puts down her cup. ‘I must leave, I’m expected’” (Coetzee 16).

The danger of the serpent’s words, however, lie not merely in their potential seduction of Melanie and the audience, but also, more importantly, in the way they facilitate Lurie’s amoral solipsism . There is something profoundly masturbatory about

Lurie's relationship with the literary, as though, in attempting to coerce or seduce others he is blind to the failure of his lettered admonitions to affect his desire in others, and manages to seduce only himself. So, hardly a beat passes in the auditorium between Lurie's momentary clear-sightedness and his self-indulgent prevarication: the old men he is in danger of joining were "once upon a time children of God, with straight limbs and clear eyes. Can they be blamed for clinging to the last to their place at the sweet banquet of the senses?" The sense that he is *letching* is all too easily sublimated by such sentiments. Indeed, by the next afternoon, it has been incorporated into his justification for barging into Melanie's flat and ravishing her. The feelings she invoked when he sat in the audience, "[s]omething to do with the apparition on the stage; the wig, the wiggling bottom, the crude talk," have become "Strange love! Yet from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves, no doubt about that" (25).

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*Disgrace* has been particularly resonant for me, although it stole upon me slowly rather than by some disruptive flash of sudden insight. I first read it late in the year of its initial publication. If I remember correctly, I bought it at a national book-selling franchise in Benoni's fresh new Lakeside Mall complex with a gift certificate I had received for Christmas from my parents. I shot through the novel, Coetzee's sparse prose compelling me forward and nothing in the plot, as far as I can remember, giving me pause.

My tone-deafness in that first reading still surprises me. I was 24. The millennium beckoned. The 1990s, momentous as they were, were behind us. I, like so many in the white middle-class for whom very little had really changed and for whom "news" happened in newspapers and on television, was under the carefully sustained illusion that

my existence was “apolitical.” I had read the news and I had watched the television. I had read *Age of Iron*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* as well as critical works regarding these texts. But these novels’ unflinching gaze on the dangerous texts that constitute identity and power relations remained, in my experience, sedimented in the realm of ideas. They did not speak to the circumstances of my life, or at least, I was looking the other way.

So, after the New Year, having finished the novel, I packed up my bags, and travelled south from Johannesburg, through the Karoo, to Grahamstown’s Rhodes University. Grahamstown is a short drive from Salem, where, in the novel’s world, Lucy is raped and Lurie is attacked. Grahamstown is where Lucy sells flowers and vegetables and where Bev Shaw has her animal clinic.

The town enacts the frontier; I lived in British settler houses a few streets up from the start of rolling valleys of townships and shanty towns – Rhini, Eluxolweni, Makana, Kings Flats, Sun City Informal. Grahamstown is where, the year before, I had read Wordsworth and Byron under the pedantic direction of an immaculately attired white academic. It is where I would, over the next two years, write a master’s thesis on form and metaphysics in William Blake and T.S. Eliot.

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To read *Disgrace* as a *roman à clef* is to do it a disservice. The literary academy in South Africa can be an echo-chamber, and so it is tempting to read Lurie as based on someone – probably a colleague of Coetzee’s at The University of Cape Town, probably the University of Cape Town, probably Cape Town. However, reading for direct referents impoverishes the *event* of the reading. As Derek Attridge suggests of *The Life and Times*

of *Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* in his essay “Against Allegory,” the *meaning* of a text should be understood not as a “noun” but a “verb” (Attridge 67). That said, as undergraduate students are constantly reminded: complete sentences require both verbs and nouns. What the novel does, in other words, it does in relation to the world to which it refers – be it directly, objectively, or in the singular estimation of the reading subject. Potentially, the TRC is one such worldly referent, one to which this analysis will soon return. Even more clearly, however, the novel situates its concerns within the literary academy. It implicates a literary professor, and by extension, the literary humanities, in a dangerous anachronism that, even though it might not apply directly to all literary academics or institutions, needs nevertheless to be taken seriously as a direct or cautionary institutional and / or personal critique. This, at least, would seem to be the ethical imperative with which Literariness, the facility by which the reading subject engages the text in its aesthetic aspect in the event of the reading, charges readers.

Indeed, Lurie lacks precisely this self-reflexivity. The post-apartheid rationalization of the academy is thus not a reflection of its anachronism, but, to his mind, its emasculation (Coetzee 4). Immunizing himself to the new dispensation’s critique of the old, and in the face of the overwhelming historical necessity of the academy’s reconfiguration, Lurie doggedly sustains the *idea* of the literary humanities. He finds succor for his solipsism in this idea, not merely by virtue of the “official” authority granted him by the University at which he teaches, but also insofar as the literary humanities provide him with the hermeneutic and epistemological justification for his understanding of himself. This is not to suggest that the literary humanities represent the

telos of Lurie's solipsism, but rather that Lurie's solipsism and his profession are functions of each other, one the chicken to the other's egg.

The novel begins with Lurie stubbornly constituting himself as a white, privileged Enlightenment subject – the very first sentence suggests the solipsism that sustains his own primacy: “For a man of *his* age, fifty-two, divorced, *he* has, to *his* mind, solved the problem of sex rather well”(Coetzee 1)<sup>23</sup>. With this implicit comparison, this token rhetorical gesture, Lurie indicates an awareness of a world outside himself. And yet Lurie's evaluation of his success relates only to men *like* him. He constitutes his conception of himself using himself as a starting point; the presumed linearity of the telos turns upon itself. Lurie constitutes himself as teleological tautology. The opening chapter suggests the ultimate circularity of this logic in key ways, from his solutions to the “problem of sex” to his temperament, which “is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body....He lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means” (2).

Crucially, this solipsism extends to his profession. As a function of the post-apartheid restructuring of the South African education system, he is “rationalized personnel.” “[o]nce a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down...adjunct professor of communications” (3). He finds the instrumentalist account of language that serves as the opening premise of the Communications 101 handbook “*presposterous*: ‘Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other.’ His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the

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<sup>23</sup> My italics.

origins of song in the need to fill with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul” (3-4).<sup>24</sup> Whereas otherness is implicit in the handbook’s instrumentalist account of language’s origins – language exists for the sake of inter-subjective relation (“to each other”) – it is absent from Lurie’s account of language’s origins as primarily facilitating affect. In Lurie’s account, there is no place for alterity. Language exists for the sake of the monadic soul’s fulfillment.

Coetzee elaborates this conception into something like an ethos through the lessons Lurie teaches, which the protagonist smarmily asserts benefits nobody but himself; “humbled” by his students’ indifference, teaching “brings...home to him who he is in the world...the one who comes to teach learns the keenest lessons, while those who come to learn learn nothing” (5).

Readers are privy to two lessons Lurie teaches as part of the one special-field course he, as rationalized personnel, is allowed to offer yearly for the sake of morale. Both lessons are inflected by his encounter with Melanie. The first lesson takes place on the Wednesday after Lurie has sex with her the Sunday prior. In it, his reading of William Wordsworth’s encounter with Mont Blanc in Book Six of *The Prelude* is deeply strained: the reading he espouses “is hardly in Wordsworth” (22).<sup>25</sup> Regardless, what emerges is the kind of monad-sustaining phenomenology that Lurie subsequently extrapolates into “covert intimacies” (23) meant for Melanie, who is present in his class.

He quotes lines 524-528 of the 1850 Edition:

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<sup>24</sup> My italics. We will return to Coetzee’s pointed use of the word “preposterous” later.

<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed account of *Disgrace*’s allusion to Wordsworth, read Margot Beard’s “Lessons from the Dead Masters: Wordsworth and Byron in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.” *English in Africa* 34 No. 1 (May 2007): 59-77.

From a bare ridge we also first beheld  
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved  
To have the soulless image on the eye  
That had usurped upon a living thought  
That never more could be. (Coetzee 21, Wordsworth 213)

Lurie's fixation on the phrase, "*usurp upon*" is resonant on several levels: "*Usurp*, the perfective of *usurp upon*; usurping completes the act of usurping upon" (Coetzee 21). Most broadly, there is an implicit phenomenological notion at work. The living thought is sustained in the absence of the corporeal experience. What is imagined supersedes that which is experienced. Hence, Wordsworth and his companions grieved, "Because, he says, a soulless image, a mere image on a retina, has encroached upon a living thought....The great archetypes of the mind, pure ideas, find themselves usurped by mere sense-images" (22). But, Lurie suggests that pure ideas cannot sustain us on a day-to-day basis as they leave us "cocooned from sense-experience." Wordsworth, he argues, "seems to be feeling his way toward a balance: not a pure idea, wreathed in clouds, nor the visual image burned on the retina, overwhelming and disappointing us with its matter-of-fact clarity, but the sense image, kept as fleeting as possible, as a means towards stirring or activating the ideas that lie buried more deeply in the soil of memory."

The implication of Lurie's reading is clear. Heightened sense-impression, the overwhelming experience of the world, *usurps* the imagination. Reality is an affront to memory and the work of the intellect. Encounters with reality should be kept fleeting so as to stimulate the mind. As much as Lurie gestures at the balance Wordsworth is

“feeling” his way towards, the same cannot be said of his own account, which privileges the intellect above all and is threatened with usurpation by sense-impressions.

In light of Lurie’s own personal, historical and geographical situation, his identification with Wordsworth implicates him in what, to the reader, could be an ironic reversal. He identifies with Wordsworth and his encounters with beauty in nature, but, a white academic in South Africa, his identification reads more like blameless entitlement. His fixation on the word “usurp upon” and its perfective, situates the observing mind as lacking in agency, and, replete with colonial resonances, a victim of conquest. This is evident on two counts. First, when Lurie is met with “[b]lank incomprehension,” he proffers an example for the benefit of the students: “Like being in love....If you were blind you would hardly have fallen in love in the first place. But now, do you truly wish to see the beloved in the cold clarity of the visual apparatus? It may be in your better interest to throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form.” Such “covert intimacies” (23) are directed at Melanie and would seem to implicate her in his seduction. She usurped upon him. She needs to be veiled, made modest, goddesslike, just as for Wordsworth, the “wondrous Vale / of Chamouny,” in obscuring Mont Blanc, “made rich amends, / And reconciled us to [more everyday] realities” (Wordsworth 213, lines 528-533).

The second recontextualization of Wordsworth is perhaps more directly referential of colonial expansion: “Wordsworth is writing about the Alps....We don’t have Alps in this country, but we do have the Drakensburg, or, on a smaller scale, Table mountain, which we climb in the wake of the poets” (23). To Lurie, the South African mountain-scapes represent proxies for those that Wordsworth walked. Nevertheless, the



implications are the same. The colonized landscape now usurps upon the intellect: Table Mountain, visible from all over False Bay, calls to mind the initial settlement by the Dutch East India Company at its foot; The Drakensburg holds particular resonance as the nigh-unconquerable monolith across which the Boers trekked at great peril in their Northward expansion into the interior in the 1830s. These landscapes constitute a threat, at once in terms of its overwhelming grandeur, and, perhaps, in terms of its geographical alterity to “the great [western] archetypes of imagination we carry within us.”

Between the first and second lesson, Lurie has other sexual encounters with Melanie, including one about which he equivocates: “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she has decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away” (25). He is confronted by Melanie’s boyfriend after this encounter and his car is vandalized (30-31).

Melanie returns to class and her boyfriend joins her, sitting next to her with “cocky ease” (31). Under this judgmental gaze, Lurie finds himself uncomfortable teaching Byron’s “Lara,” especially insofar as “notoriety and scandal affected not only Byron’s life but the way in which his poems were received by the public. Byron the man found himself conflated with his own poetic creations – with Harold, Manfred, even Don Juan” (31). Lurie refers to Verse 18 of the first Canto, in which Lara returns home and finds himself utterly out of step with his surroundings and is compared to Lucifer: “He stood a stranger in the breathing world, / An erring spirit from another hurled” (Coetzee 32). Lurie reads on:

He could  
At times resign his own for others good,  
But not in pity, not because he ought,  
But in some strange perversity of thought,  
That swayed him onward with a secret pride  
To do what few or none would do beside;  
And this same impulse would in tempting time  
Mislead his spirit equally in crime. (33)

For all intents and purposes, Lucifer is described as a sociopath, one incapable of distinguishing between virtue and vice. Melanie's boyfriend picks up on this, and, speaking up pointedly, implicates Lurie in the same amorality: "He just does what he feels like. He doesn't care if it is good or bad. He just does it." The rest of the lesson constitutes a defense of Byron / Lucifer / Lara / Lurie:

Read a few lines further: His madness was not of the head, but heart....Note that we are not asked to condemn this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong. On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, that is, a monster. Finally, Byron will suggest, it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the word. He will be condemned to solitude. (33-34)

We see in Lurie's defense of Byron / Lucifer / Lara / Lurie, the same assumptions seen in his defense of Wordsworth's phenomenology. Lurie identifies with the protagonist, and

in so doing, blinds himself to the ethical implications once those self-same behaviors are re-contextualized within post-apartheid South Africa. He carefully constructs the amorality that removes Byron / Lucifer / Lara / Lurie from blame. Thus, his claims to the *constitutional* nature of Lara's pathology reeks of an ad hoc rationalization of his own actions. His claims to Lucifer's alterity in the "breathing world," his monstrosity or thingness, are suggestive of his own sense of persecution.

Summarily, while disguising the lessons as "readings" of the text, situating himself as the Enlightenment authority on the Classic, Lurie, in point of fact enacts a very particular and vested performance. Lurie iterates himself in the classroom, and through his blithe suturing of himself to Wordsworth and Byron / Lara / Lucifer, he emerges as a dangerously un-conflicted representative of an ethos out-of-step with his world.

\* \* \*

Three incidents come to mind.

First, I taught *Disgrace* in a class on the contemporary novel at the University of Port Elizabeth. It was 2003. My blithe initial reading notwithstanding, the novel's profile was such by this stage, that it could not be ignored. I read the novel again and found it much more engaging and confusing. I remember, specifically, not knowing what to do with Lurie, with whom I had come somewhat uneasily to identify. He certainly was not someone I could hate unequivocally. I had settled on his rape with Melanie Isaacs as a point of close analysis for the students. "Is it rape?" I asked my class, having read aloud how Melanie goes limp like a rabbit in a fox's jaws.

"Yes," was the unequivocal answer. I was surprised that there was no controversy.

“But it says it’s not quite rape.”

“Lurie thinks that. Of course Lurie thinks that. He’s not going to call himself a rapist.”

“But...” I continued, “we don’t think Lurie is a bad man, do we?”

“Ja, he is,” came the answer, again.

It was a shock. I read the novel again that night.

Second: years later, 2008, as a graduate student at the University of Oregon, I gave a short paper on Lurie’s pedagogy in *Disgrace*, arguing the epistemic nostalgia implicit in Lurie’s teaching. I can be tersely generalizing of the literary humanities and, given the short confines of the paper, was overly aggressive in drawing the conclusion that Lurie represents an outmoded and imperial ideology which is nevertheless still endemic to the literature classroom. I was approached by a faculty member, a woman of color. She gave me a thorough telling off. Lurie as a figuration of an outmoded imperial ideology is a virtual truism, she argued, suggesting that it was a lazy assertion. I responded that, while her claim may have been valid, my broader argument was that rather than dismiss Lurie because he is wrong, we could learn things from him by asking if there is an implicit critique of the academy at work and, if so, engaging it self-reflexively.

“I don’t know if it’s different where you come from,” she responded, “but I feel absolutely no sympathy for Lurie. I taught the novel and asked the class, and not one person identified with that rapist.”

Third: In 2009, I taught *Disgrace* again as part of an African Literature survey course. Again, I asked the class to read passages that described the sexual encounters

between Lurie and Melanie and asked them to place the scenes within the broader power dynamics and shifts of the novel. As an example, I read the “Not rape, not quite rape” scene, wanting to suggest that Lurie, like the fox holding the rabbit, is repeatedly figured as predatory. The room fell to stillness as I read. It was a heavy silence. My voice wavered over the scene. I looked up and saw a student looking at me with an enormous grin on his face. “Is something funny?” I accused.

He kept grinning, his expression unchanged but for my reading of it. He was, it suddenly became horribly obviously to me, utterly embarrassed. “Talking about all this stuff...” he said, “I haven’t ever.”

After class, I called him aside to apologize and he was gracious enough. It did little to assuage my guilt.

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Obviously, it is theoretically untenable to associate the protagonist of a novel with its author. J.M. Coetzee is not David Lurie, despite *some* biographical similarities. *Disgrace* is *not* a memoir even if there are few writers seemingly more reflexively engaged in muddying the line between memoir and fiction than Coetzee. *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and his most recent publication, *Summertime* (2010) are fictionalized autobiographies that recount phases in the life of “John Coetzee.” “Elizabeth Costello,” is Coetzee’s “uncanny performance of his fictional alter ego” who, in *Lives of Animals* (1999) and the eponymous *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), “left critics bewildered in their attempts to untangle Coetzee’s and Costello’s points of view” (Poyner 2). David Atwell describes Costello as a “sui generis” innovation who is a “compromise and a surrogate: a compromise because through her Coetzee goes some way towards meeting

the demands placed on him to step into the public limelight, and a surrogate because she does, to some degree, speak for him – when called on to speak publically, Coetzee [can] stand back and observe the ironies and the play of positions” (Atwell 33-4).

Insofar then, as it is impossible to parse Coetzee’s “real” positions from those of his alter egos – and we might include the typically terse and elusive subject of interviews, “Author J.M. Coetzee,” in their number – his answer to Jayne Poyner’s question regarding how “one negotiates one’s roles as intellectual, academic, and novelist” should be read as a point of interest rather than a statement of thematic intent germane to the novel. Author J.M. Coetzee answers, “I try to avoid the term *role*, which implies that one is giving oneself to a part that is already written. Of course, there is a larger scheme in which we may all be said to be playing roles. But that scheme is invisible to us” (Coetzee, “Interview,” 23).

The response resonates with theatrical and literary metaphors. “Role,” in the way Author J.M. Coetzee would seem to assume Poyner means it, implies “acting,” not with a Brechtian refusal of the actor’s trance, but by complete self-sacrificing immersion: a “giving [of] oneself to a part.” That such parts are “already written” implies at once their artifice and the loss of critical agency that results from the actor’s immersion. He takes it as a responsibility, Author J.M. Coetzee implies, to resist entrancement within the roles he sees *as* roles, notwithstanding the roles within “the larger scheme” – perhaps, in the Althusserian sense, material ideology or, in the post-structuralist’s sense, textuality – that are invisible to him. It stands to reason that a subject who avoids such entrancement must, as part of that commitment, develop a keen critical eye for “roles” that might

otherwise impose themselves from within and without, howsoever they might be constructed.

Crucially, this larger scheme is an escape clause that separates Author J.M. Coetzee's resistance of theatricality and/or artificiality from, for example, Alex Boraine's claims to the stark, unvarnished truth of authentic victim testimony at TRC hearings. Coetzee does not claim "authenticity" for the proverbial "self" that is given over to the pre-written part. Rather, the "larger scheme" suggests the "authentic" subject's "as-yet-invisible constructedness." It is an idea that straddles two crucial theoretical positions. On the one hand, the idea that "larger scheme" by which the subject is constructed *is* invisible accounts for the *material fact* and *political necessity* of essentialist identity claims. On the other hand, insofar as said constructedness is "*as-yet-invisible*," it implies the necessity of a critical project by which to make visible the texts and forms by which the otherwise essentialized subject is constructed.

That said, readers need not necessarily be aware of the nuance Author J.M. Coetzee brings to such questions to observe David Lurie flail between, on the one hand, his self-reflexive awareness of and insistent autonomic control over language as constituting the social, professional, and seductive "roles" he "plays" and, on the other, his deferral to an essential libidinal imperative over which he claims to have no control. This tension fuels his encounter with the university's committee of inquiry, which is established to make recommendations to the registrar regarding charges of misadministration on Lurie's part (he marked Melanie present and gave her a grade for a test in which she did not sit), as well as harassment charges brought against Lurie by Melanie or her proxies.

The Committee echoes the TRC Hearings in obvious ways. There is the broader zeitgeist into which the hearing feeds: just as Apartheid's end gave voice to historically oppressed South Africans, uncomfortably shifting the tenor for those who had been historically empowered, so the hearing takes place on the heels of Rape Awareness Week in which Women Against Rape hold solidarity vigils for "recent victims:" "YOUR DAYS ARE OVER, CASANOVA," (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 43) says a scrawled note slipped under Lurie's office door, suggesting not only Lurie's figuration as an exploiter of women, but also his anachronism. The hearing is similar in function to that of the TRC: "it has no powers. All it can do is to make recommendations;" it is carefully constituted from a broad cross-section of the university community so as not discriminate against Lurie (46-47). Its chair is the Professor of Religious Studies, Manas Mathabane, suggestive of the theological tenor and moral compass brought to the TRC by Archbishop Desmond Tutu,<sup>26</sup> a tenor the novel addresses more explicitly later when Lurie prostrates himself before Melanie Isaacs's religious and evangelizing father.

Regardless of the historical specificity that readers may or may not be capable of bringing to the novel's possible referents, the back and forth between the committee and Lurie is formally suggestive of a broader ontological question: In *whose* eyes, by *whose* words, by *what* words, does the subject exist?

To Lurie, this is more than an academic point of contention. Institutionally, it is a discomfort with the gray areas that constitute the Committee's mandate. Although in the

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<sup>26</sup> Author J.M. Coetzee sees this theological tenor and moral compass as a sticking point in his evaluation of the TRC. He answers to Poyner's question whether or not he believes "the conception of confession" is "misplaced in the public sphere," by positing that in "a state with no official religion, the TRC is somewhat anomalous: a court if a certain kind based to a large degree on Christian teaching accepted in their hearts by only a tiny portion of the citizenry. Only the future will tell what the TRC managed to achieve" (Coetzee "Interview," 21-2).



name of independence it has no “power,” the recommendations it is charged with making nevertheless require it to stand in judgment. Like the TRC Hearings, its ambit is quasi-judicial, a source of cold comfort insofar as it subjects the process to the unsteady play of the letter and spirit of the law. Indeed, this is the tension Lurie invokes with his opening statement. Asked if he objects to any member of the committee as being potentially prejudicial to him, he replies, “I have no challenge in the legal sense...I have reservations of the philosophical kind, but I suppose they are out of bounds” (47). Lurie’s philosophical reservations initially manifest themselves in a defeatist’s insistence on procedural efficiency: “I’m sure the members of this committee have better things to do with their time than rehash a story over which there will be no dispute. I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives” (48). His tone so alienates the committee that it is suggested he finds legal representation. In a telling pun, Lurie’s reply speaks to the uncomfortably correlative nature of juridical and aesthetic concerns in the event of the hearing: “I don’t need representation. I can represent myself perfectly well” (49).

Unfortunately for Lurie, self-representation is not a strong-suit. He is a man of failed performances and lettered solipsism, a fatal weakness in front of a quasi-judicial committee that will make its recommendations based not based on the letter of the law, but also, inevitably, with regard to the extent of their identification with the perpetrator. Lurie’s fate, then, becomes a matter of the effectiveness of his performance.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Lurie *cannot* represent himself “perfectly well” by simple virtue of his autonomic

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<sup>27</sup> Indeed, books by two leading TRC commissioners present in many Hearings, Tutu’s *No Future Without Forgiveness* and Boraine’s *A Country Unmasked*, are littered with examples of sympathetic perpetrators – forgiveness being a crucial aspect of the nation-building ambit of the TRC. More cynically, however, “sympathetic perpetrators” might be cast as *believably* contrite: a matter of effective performance rather than fact.

entitlement. His insistence on self-representation reads as an unwillingness to compromise, a refusal to negotiate the significance of the charges and, most glaringly, for Committee member Farodia Rassool, an unforgivable deflection of himself as subject to history. Pressed to defend himself, Lurie exhibits his customary tone-deafness: “Eros entered” (52). Rassool responds, “Yes, he says, he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is a part” (53). To Lurie, Rassool’s insistence that he situate himself in relation to history is an affront. It identifies him with historical perpetrators, and, in so doing, constitutes an appropriation of the self-image over which he has stubbornly maintained autonomic control. For Rassool, Lurie’s case is allegorical, but Lurie refuses to be representative. In response to what he perceives to be his appropriation by the committee, he constitutes himself as particularly and essentially unfathomable. When the committee suggests that a sincere expression of regret might mitigate the severity of their recommendations, he takes issue with the idea that the committee “trusts [it]self to divine, from the words I use – to divine whether it comes from my heart?” (54). He continues: “I have said the words for you, now you want more, you want me to demonstrate their sincerity. That is *preposterous*<sup>28</sup>. That is beyond the scope of the law. I have had enough. Let us go back to playing it by the book. I plead guilty. That is as far as I am prepared to go” (55). For Lurie, the “preposterousness” of the committee’s divination echoes the “preposterousness” of the Communication’s handbook’s opening premise. Language, Lurie believes, by its very nature, dissimilates. It precisely *fails* to communicate thoughts, feelings and intentions. Only the autonomic

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<sup>28</sup> My italics

individual knows what s/he truly, *authentically*, means – what belies the overlarge and empty human soul. Lurie, in other words, might broadly be understood to be what Derrida would refer to as the engineer, that “theological idea”: a constructor of totalities – language, syntax, lexicon – and “the absolute origin of his own discourse... supposedly construct[ed] out of nothing” (Derrida 281). He self-immunizes with his refusal to be stuff for bricoleurs, disdaining his imbrications in historical narratives not of his own invention, refusing to be an element in a palimpsest the parts of which he does not himself control. The only ethical system that can incorporate his extreme individualism is a radical relativism, so much so, that any claim regarding his complicity in established historical abuses (“abuses,” is a word at which he balks), is also, without a hint of irony in his own understanding, to render him a *victim* of moralistic imposition.

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In the late 1980s I ran around in a little gang on the playgrounds of my primary school. Often we adopted the characters of the A-Team. I fancied myself a babbling Howling Mad Murdoch. Incapable of sustaining nuanced narratives (although no more or less than the series creators, it now seems), our breaks [recesses] inevitably devolved into (mostly) play fight, mimed fist-swinging and head jolting and the rat-tat-tat of imaginary AK-47s. I remember screaming “Fucking kafirs!” and mowing down my white schoolmates with my assault rifle. “Take that, coons!” biting the pin out of a hand-grenade and lobbing it into their midst.

I’m often told that I should not let these moments, and many others like it that I can recount, reflect on me too strongly. Such advice has become a refrain of my time in the United States where discomfort, I believe, is more often pathologized than utilized. I

say the United States, when, perhaps more accurately, it has been a refrain of the middle-class in which I will spend my life, regardless of national context. You were a child, we were children, nobody chose to be raised (t)here, no one chose (y)our whiteness, let it go, get over it, get on with (y)our lives. I am by no means obsessive about my racism, but it has taken a long time for me not to feel defensive about it. I feel less guilty about that reprehensible language than I feel it necessary to be a responsible witness for the young boy who wielded it. It would be a betrayal of that boy and that wrongdoing to suggest that I was *not* my 12-year-old self in those moments. That child was the father of this man.

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Of course, David Lurie's expulsion from the University and his self-exiling to Lucy's farm near Salem is the first in a series of events that, typical of Coetzee's novels, mark the protagonist's disintegration. The danger is to think of such processes as devolutions, as though the silent, asocial wisp of a human, Michael K, of whom the Medical Officer cannot make sense, or the strung-up, emasculated Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, somehow reflect lesser versions of their former, more robust selves. Coetzee is a master of confronting and endangering the illusions that sustain his protagonists, be it K's quiet sense of responsibility to others and their rules, the taxonomic certainty of the Medical Officer, the Magistrate's sense of purpose and humaneness at the edge of Empire, or the lettered solipsism by which Lurie iterates his Enlightened, autonomic individualism.

In *Disgrace*, Lurie exiles himself to Eastern Cape frontier country, Salem, to the small-holding his daughter Lucy shares with Petrus, amaXhosa man who buys portions of

the land with land grants provided by the new governmental dispensation as part of their economic redress program. Petrus, initially a farmhand, still helps Lucy with the dogs she kennels and the flowers she grows. Not long after Lurie's arrival, Lucy is brutally gang-raped by three black men, as Lurie is beaten, locked in the bathroom and has his scalp burnt with the application of a match to metholated spirits. Lucy decides against reporting the event to the police, much to Lurie's mystification: "Is it some private salvation you are trying to work? Do you hope to expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" he asks hers. "No. You keep misreading me," she replies, "Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can't help you" (112).

Lucy becomes pregnant, and when it is revealed that one of her attackers, Pollux (himself, it is difficult to avoid the mythical allusion, born of rape), is known to Petrus, Lucy enters into a marriage with her former farmhand, describing it as an "alliance" or "deal:" "I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game" (203). It would seem to be a reversal of *contrapasso*-like proportions: a man whose entitlements know no bounds, who exploits women of color without regard, who immunizes himself against criticism with practiced lettered-ness, is disfigured by fire and assault, and "loses" his own daughter to an inability to communicate with her, and (at least in his mind) to an historically oppressed denizen of Empire's frontier. A man who refuses to hold himself accountable to history must watch as his daughter insists on doing so despite his pleas that she is on the brink of a "dangerous error. You wish to humble yourself before

history. But the road you follow is the wrong one. It will strip you of all honour; you will not be able to live with yourself” (160).

Petrus is thus figured as the inheritor of Lurie’s privilege, and Lurie, in turn, as the inheritor of Petrus’ marginality. Spending time with Bev Shaw in the animal clinic ushering animals to their death and disposing of their remains, Lurie comes to inhabit the status Petrus does at their initial meeting. Lurie is now “the dog-man” (64, 146), a statement as much of caste or class –Lurie perceives of himself as “a *harijan*” – as it is of his growing sympathy and care for animals – “a dog psychopomp.”

His own language, held so dear as the medium of his prior performance of himself, becomes by his own recognition, inadequate to the task of representing his world. In the moments of the assault, it is the failed instrumentalism of the languages he knows that comes to mind: “He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa” (94) Later, Lurie muses:

He would not mind hearing Petrus’s story one day, but preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth in South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their ariculateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone. (117)

So too must the other means by which Lurie sought to iterate himself, the chamber opera about Byron in Italy come to reflect his new reality. Neither elegiac, nor erotic, it has become comic, reduced to “cracked monotones” and the “plink-plunk-plonk” of the

banjos strings. “So this is art, he thinks,” in a momentary revelation, “and this is how it does its work! How strange! How fascinating!” (184-5).

The novel focalizes Lurie as he shifts around the fulcrums of the assaults (his own of Melanie, that of Lucy), signaling the shift in his apprehension through various imbricated figurations: from his relationship with women (his seduction by/of Bev Shaw marks another reorientation, in which he, “without passion but without distaste...does his duty...[s]o that [she] can be pleased with herself” (150)), to his attitude towards animals, to his understanding of victimhood, to his appreciation of language, Romantic poets, art, and ultimately, himself. The complex negotiation of the protagonist with alterity is charted by the novel in a violently shifting historical context.

Readers willing to concede that they identify with Lurie in any way – be it the go-to “eloquence” of his “literary” or “critical” language, or the monadic solipsism sustained by it – are similarly confronted by the novel’s deconstruction of the protagonist through his encounters with alterity. Ideally this deconstruction does not merely strike such readers on an identificatory or emotional level. In its insistence on signaling its own literariness (literariness as a quality of form inherent to the text), the deconstruction also holds as part of a broader abstract critique. Literariness, the literary sensibility in the event of the reading, when responsibly exercised, accommodates this dialectical effect.

The ideal, of course, is not always the case. Indeed, *Disgrace* is a famously contentious novel in no small part because of the irresponsibility of many of its readers, and I include my own unaffected consumption of the novel as a Christmas gift as a prime if unremarkable example. More remarkable than such a facile reading, are those that appropriate *Disgrace* to the critic’s *a priori* stance, rather than allowing an encounter

with the text to endanger or challenge the positions and assumptions by which the critic habitually iterates him or herself. The novel, slippery and elusive though it is, has all-too-frequently been appropriated as a means by which to reify particular historical, political, disciplinary, and ethical stances. Famously, in 2002, it was cited in the ANC's oral submission to the South African Human Rights Commission Hearing on the Media cited *Disgrace* as representing white stereotypes of black men. "In this novel," presented Jeff Radebe, Minister of Public Enterprises, "J.M. Coetzee represents as brutally as he can the white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man" (cited in Lucy Valerie Graham 435). Graham astutely argues that as far as a theory of the novel is concerned, the ANC's insistence on the direct referentiality and verisimilitude of the novel's white characters in relation to real white people in South Africa is flawed, if for no other reason than that this theory renders "black rapists in *Disgrace* a[s] representative of most black people in South Africa, which is exactly what the ANC would like to refute" (Graham 435).

The novel has also become imbricated in various discussions of animal rights. In such readings, Lurie's growing sympathy with animals is indicative of the novel's broader concern with the humane treatment of animals, a claim frequently bolstered by Coetzee's famous essay, *Lives of Animals*. It is difficult to contend that Author J.M. Coetzee would disagree with such a reading. Regardless, it is profoundly reductive to claim the novel to this ethical purpose, as, for example, Cary Wolfe does in his introduction to *Philosophy and Animal Life*. Wolfe interprets the scene in which Lurie, having worked alongside Beth in the clinic, must pull over and weep, "his whole being gripped by what happens in the [surgical] theatre" (Wolfe 2, Coetzee 143), as an



amplification of Costello's concerns in *Lives of Animals*. In his reading, Coetzee's novel constitutes an intervention in "one of the central ethical issues of our time: our moral responsibility towards nonhuman animals" (Wolfe 3). Of course, certain aspects of the novel *do* lend themselves to a critique of animal treatment. Certainly, animals and Lurie's growing identification with them constitute one of the novel's central motifs. However, Wolfe's reading elides the broader context within which Lurie breaks down, and, indeed, rests on the idea that Lurie *really* is gripped *only* by that which happens in the theatre. It assumes that the animals that are ushered to their death there, *only* represent animals. It might instead be argued that the signifier "animal" is so over-determined in the novel as to make impossible any such direct and easy referential gestures.

The tendency among critics who wish to implicate the novel in such ethical arguments is, almost certainly out of rhetorical expediency, to highlight the manner in which animals are *victims*. Indeed, there is a litany of animal victims in the novel: sheep, dogs, goats "suffer from distempers, from broken limbs, from infected bites from mange, from neglect, benign or malign, from old age, from malnutrition, from intestinal parasites, but most of all from their own fertility. There are simply too many of them" (142). But these animals, the novel makes clear, are not merely animals. They are representative. Four pages later this is made clear: "[B]ecause we are too menny" is at once the scrawled justification for the death of children in *Jude the Obscure* and, without such literary allusiveness, perhaps the phonetic spelling of the phrase in a *Kaaps* dialect. Nor are the animals mere victims. Dogs have torn at the testicles of the goat in the Bev's clinic, the goat itself seems the hobbled figuration of David Lurie, at once emasculated and a victim, even as it is representative of unfettered lust, elsewhere, as we have seen,

associated with the predatory. Indeed, Lurie has a tendency towards what Tom Herron calls “auto-zoomorphism:” (Herron 477) he is a fox holding a rabbit, “the worm in an apple” (Coetzee 37), and in a disdainful comment regarding the committee’s suggestion of his abuse, “a shark among the helpless little fishies” (53).

We see, also, the novel appropriated to disciplinary causes. The clearest example of this is its appropriation to anti- and pro-Romantics Studies within the South African context. Margot Beard’s otherwise useful analysis is a response to claims of critics, such as Zoë Wicomb, that “Lurie may be rejected since he ‘looks to Europe as the center of reference,’” asserting that “‘our feelings and experiences of nature need not be structured by poetic discourses from the metropolis’” (Beard 59).<sup>29</sup> Demonstrating the interplay and development of the Romantic Poets Wordsworth and Byron in the novel, she concludes that *Disgrace* “argues that Romanticism is not simply a Eurocentric throwback, something to be rejected out of hand in post-colonial South Africa” but that it “addresses the major proposition of Romanticism – the essential nature of the creative imagination which is our only way to enter the experience of another” (74)<sup>30</sup>.

Clearly, however, the novel *does* constitute a disciplinary critique. It expressly implicates the Eurocentricity and anachronism of a literature professor, a Romantics scholar who works in a post-colonial South African context, in a dangerous instrumentalism. However, this critique precisely fails to take the form, as Beard claims, of an *argument*. The novel does *not* argue for or against a literary or disciplinary tradition. Rather, *Beard* constitutes an argument through the novel for a literary tradition

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<sup>29</sup> Beard quotes Wicomb, “Translations in the Yard of Africa.” *Journal in literary Studies*, 18. 3-4: 209-33.

<sup>30</sup> My italics.

in which *she* is vested: she writes “[as] one whose research interests lie in the field of Romanticism” (Beard 59). And yet her vehement defense of her *a priori* situated-ness does little to convince that her discipline cannot, or for that matter, *is* not frequently coerced to immunize lettered solipsists from engaging their contexts with the ethical complexity they deserve. Instead, she claims Lurie’s artistic nascence in defense of Romanticism, even as the scene she describes, one of the novel’s last – Lurie, in the yard of the animals clinic, “plink-plunk squawk[ing]” (219) on the odd little banjo bought on the streets of KwaMashu (184) – occurs after Lurie is exiled from the academy, after Lucy’s rape, after his growing empathy with animals. We might agree with Beard that by this stage Lurie’s longing is no longer for a “triumphant return to society as the author of an eccentric little chamber opera,” (214) but that, echoing Keats’s nightingale, he hopes only to strike “a single authentic note of immortal longing.” But that single authentic note does not fall under the proprietorship of Romanticism as a field of study, or any single discipline, field, epoch, or genre. This proprietorship is an academic game,<sup>31</sup> but not the game the novel plays.

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is a game we see Beard play, which is nowhere more explicit than her pointedly italicized evisceration of Colleen M. Sheil’s 2003 article, “Opera, Byron and a South African Psyche in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” in a footnote:

There are some disturbing errors in Sheil’s paper. The French Revolution was *not* ‘proletariat-driven’ (2003, 41); Byron did *not* favour political and social egalitarianism” (2003, 41); *Don Juan* cannot be read as “a narrative of love” (2003, 44). Sheil reads the lines from Lara as *about* Lucifer rather than about Lara *seen briefly as comparable with Lucifer* (2003, 42-3). Most disturbing is her complete misreading of the implications of the term *cavaliere servente*. This term is *not* equivalent to any modern sense of “servant” and to compare Byron’s status as a *cavaliere servente* to Teresa Guiccioli with Lurie’s role as “servant to the dogs” just does not make sense (2003,42). (Beard 75n)

Clearer than Beard’s disagreement with Sheil’s representation of various political, historical and definitional assumptions is the relative claim she stakes to authority and control over the terms of the discussion. The tone constitutes an ontological claim: that she is a *proper* Romantic scholar, whereas Sheil is a peripheral dilettante.

Instead, the novel renders its critique, not conceptually, but in *effect*, should the reader be open to it. It requires a willingness to undergo the difficult and self-endangering process of identifying with and differentiating oneself from the protagonist – like Dr. Beard, a white, South African, Romantic scholar. It requires, also, the recognition that practitioners within the literary humanities constitute themselves through their professions, at least in part. The practitioners simultaneously constitute the field. To claim that the novel argues *for* Romanticism as a field of study is to deny that Lurie constitutes himself through the field (as has been shown), and that that field is susceptible to ethically suspect appropriations in contemporary post-colonial contexts. To argue, as Dr. Beard also does, that such unethical appropriation rests on systemic misreading is to suggest that the field itself it is beyond reproach and that its *practitioners* fail *it*. Clearly, her claim rests on a dualist conception of the relationship between the literary humanities and its practitioners. This is the very depersonalization that holds literary texts and disciplines separate from the lived experience of their readers and practitioners. Simply put, *Disgrace* is not vested in nor should its “message” be reduced to a particular disciplinary tradition. Indeed, to do so is to deflect the aesthetic effect of the novel onto merely disciplinary concerns. It is to avoid the work that literature also does upon the reader. It is to disengage Literariness.

Here, in concluding our discussion of *Disgrace*, we might usefully return to what it is that literature, in Attridge’s and Barthes’s estimation achieves. Our evaluative engagement with the text, the moment in which literariness is activated in the event, is facilitated, at once by the plural points of access provided by the text and the singularity of the subject who encounters it. The particular influence of the novel, the intensity and

urgency it invokes when I read it, bears this out. Whatever I think I come to know about its conceits and metaphors, its allegorical referent, the material reality to which it seemingly bears witness, is undone if not in the moment of the reading, then in subsequent readings. There is no comfort in fixity to be found in *Disgrace*. Then again, it is precisely this lack of fixity that *is* the comfort in *Disgrace*. No longer merely a perpetrator, but also a victim, Lurie responds to Melanie's father's admonition that God can lift him from his fallen stature, Lurie refuses the terms of this potential forgiveness:

I will have to translate what you call God into my own terms. In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term? (172)

Crucially, here, Lurie appeals to the present. Disgrace is a "state of being." It constitutes an ontological claim as much as it does an admission on his part. Disgrace, it would seem, is to live without the comfort of a final word, the Logos. It is, in this regard, a denial of the Engineer's myth. Disgrace, then, is a state of play, flux, of uncertainty in which the subject is accountable, first and foremost, to the present. Disgrace is to refuse simple categorical logic – as much that of the post-revolutionary order as before. In Lurie's coming to terms with his disgrace, he seems also to come into his Literariness. Indeed, this is the state into which the novel formally invites the reader. From its narrator's seemingly omniscient, third person, yet tightly focalized rendering of Lurie –

which plays that characters interiority off against his external representation – to its refusal of easy referents.<sup>32</sup>

And yet it is difficult to render a critical account of this invitation. Take, for example, Michael Marais’s clear formal description of the affective nature of Coetzee’s prose in *Foe*:

In precluding the possibility of a determinate reading, and thereby rendering the text’s meaning ateleological, the novel’s technique of misidentification attempts to fuel the reader’s desire to know. By divesting reading of an identificatory end, it seeks to stimulate an ateleological form of knowledge.

My contention, then, is that the distance installed between reading subject and literary object by the latter’s divestiture of reading of an identificatory end may induce a form of proximity between reader and work that overcomes language’s conceptual separation of subject from object. In encountering an “appearance” of “distance,” that is, the absence of something determinate, the reader should sense the presence of

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<sup>32</sup> Subsequent to my completion of this chapter, I remembered reading David Attridge’s chapter, “Age of Bronze, State of Grace” in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. My reading of “Disgrace,” I realized, had been influenced by Attridge’s, even as, in the event of writing, his did not come explicitly to mind. The occasion of this footnote’s writing enacts yet another such a realization. The subtitle of this dissertation “Literature in the Event in South Africa and the United States” was derived, again without explicit recollection, nor any conscious attempt at allusion, from the subtitle of Attridge’s critical volume, *The Singularity of Literature*. Arguably, my debt to Attridge deserves more than a footnote. Certainly, my intention is not to sell him short by relegating him to 10-point font. However, my oversight strikes me as a key example of the hold the myth of the Engineer has over me. It was a flawed memory rather than ill-intention, that had me believe I was the source of such insights and turns of phrase and this footnote is occasioned by the clear awareness that I am a bricoleur, even though I, perhaps driven by ego, frequently forget that I am.

something indeterminate, something which, in exceeding conceptuality, overcomes the separation between reading subject and literary object.

(Marais 242)

As formally astute as Marais is, and as much as we might agree with his abstract understanding of the way the text affects its readership (and its readership the text), the very tone of the passage seems also to suggest a crucial deflection. A formal understanding of the text's workings does not constitute Literariness. It does not imply openness to the work that the novel does upon its readers and its readers upon the novel.

The challenge of writing about *Disgrace*, as with others of Coetzee's novels, is that it clearly implicates those who undertake literary criticism in historically and politically situated performances. The critic's voice *is* a performance: our tones are practiced, our language and arguments are all-too-often conventional in obeisance to an audience that demands respect for methodological parameters. *Disgrace*, by asking us to identify and estrange ourselves from its academic protagonist, asks us to examine these performances. Who are we to write about literature? Why do we write about it? What do we hope to achieve with our observations and our opining? How do we situate ourselves in relation to the texts we read, the academy within which we operate, the worlds within which we have our being? What is our personal investment in the arguments we make?

I contend that it is a disservice to the workings of Literariness, to the idea of literature, and to the value of literary endeavor to *claim* to answer these questions while simultaneously denying – explicitly or implicitly – that they are deeply and profoundly personal.

## CHAPTER IV

### IN DEFENSE OF LITERARINESS:

#### *COUNTRY OF MY SKULL* AND WHAT THE ACADEMICS SAY

The greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for new ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression. The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterized apartheid society. For writers this means freeing the creative process itself from those very laws....The operative principle in post-protest literature is that it should...reveal new world where it was thought they did not exist, and reveal process and movement where they were hidden.

- Njabulo Ndebele, "Beyond 'Protest'"

I have told many lies in this book about the truth. I have exploited many lives and many texts....I hope you will all understand.

- Krog "Acknowledgments" (SA294/US388)

If *Disgrace* deploys Literariness against itself, takes Literariness as its object, it is also immunized against charges of misrepresentation because it is fiction. *Disgrace* is an allegory; certainly more directly referential of a specific history and context than many of Coetzee's more explicitly abstruse endeavors, but an allegory nonetheless. Critics defend the novel *as* literary – as Lucy Graham does against the charges leveled by Jeff Radebe in the sitting of the South African Human Rights Commission Hearing. Holding any part of the text accountable as generally true to reality (as Radebe does the "racist white"), she suggests, means that all of its representations must be held to the same standard of verisimilitude (by which logic, young black men *are* rapists).

For Antjie Krog's semi-fictionalized memoir, *Country of My Skull*, however, the critical fault-lines run differently. It *does*, qualifiedly, claim to represent historical events



in rough chronological order. Krog's text is based on her experiences as a radio reporter who follows the TRC's various hearings between 1996 and 1998. In an effort to capture the jarring heterogeneity of voices that constituted the TRC, as well as the complexity of a white Afrikaans woman's interpolation by survivors and perpetrators (Krog admits kinship with both), *Country* affects a tenuous stylistic (in)coherence. As Laura Moss writes, Krog destabilizes "generic expectations" so that it is "difficult to pinpoint *Country of My Skull* as *mémoire*, reportage, historiographic metafiction, autobiography, biofiction, or historical document" and, in so doing, illustrates "the...fragmented subject[s]" precipitated by "forced separation of people and communities" (Moss 92). Indeed, Krog self-reflexively invokes this heterogeneous clamor of voices and genres through a literary praxis she refers to as "quilting." In response to a fellow reporter's charge that her account of a TRC journalism workshop is not true to the events, Krog responds, "I am busy with the truth...*my* truth. Of course it's quilted together from hundreds of stories that we've experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen from my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I'm telling the story to" (Krog SA170-171/US225). As a metaphor, "quilting" preempts Leon De Kock's 2001 argument for "seams" as an apposite concept for the irresolvable if entangled heterogeneities of South Africa's socio-cultural and literary composition. Even if minute, the sutures of the quilt's seam remain visible, scarring as they constitute the point of contact between the separate and the different.<sup>33</sup>

What is at stake in the text and the TRC is not merely a metaphor that rives and coheres a nascent national discourse and/or identity, but also the aesthetic lens that rives

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<sup>33</sup> I differ from Ashley Harris with regard to the visibility of the seams upon the "quilt." For her, quilting is an inappropriate methodology precisely because it obscures the seam. I will engage her argument in more detail in both this chapter and its addendum.

and coheres the Literary subject, Antjie Krog and her various figurations (which we will engage further) in the text. It is *her* truth, *her* state of mind. Notably, the quilted “truths” are not complete, finished, or intransigent in her conception. It is subject not only to the “at the time” of the past, but also to the present, to the “now.” Quilting, in other words, suggests the present participle. It is an immanent undertaking, an editorializing, responsive sensibility. It suggests Literariness: the aesthetic and linguistic negotiation between the subject and the world in which they have their being.

Critical responses to *Country of My Skull*, however, often circumvent the immanence of the processes that abstractly engages and affects in its readers – those to whom the “quilted truth” is being told, and who thus enter into a reciprocal relationship with it. Indeed, many critical readings of the memoir take issue with the its historiographical shortcomings, claiming that it fails as a record of events, that it appropriates, exploits, decontextualizes, and editorializes the events of the TRC, with particular spleen directed at its use of victim testimonies. The problem for such critics, invariably, is the way in which Krog redirects the live events of the TRC into an archival document that ultimately defers to the white, privileged subject, Antjie Krog. Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi neatly summarizes these charges: “As critics run up a list of Krog’s failures, they repeatedly point to her use of victims’ testimonies as building blocks for a postmodern collage in which she shuns factual analyses of the moment and afterlives of human rights violations for the sake of impressionistic vignettes that convey her pained reactions to narratives of physical and psychological violence” (Osinubi 109). Perhaps the most measured and convincing of these arguments is rendered by Laura Moss in “‘Nice Audible Cryings’: Editions, Testimonies, and *Country of My Skull*.” Moss does

not center the brunt of her critique on the original South African edition of *Country*, which she nevertheless “gently criticize[s] for both privileging the narrator’s responses over the stories told in the testimonies themselves and for turning individual’s stories into allegories of the nation” (Moss 99). Rather, she focuses on the excised U.S. Edition, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, which she argues backgrounds the literary conceits of the text in favor of a more historiographical or critical affect. In so doing, Moss somewhat backhandedly infers that Krog is complicit in the neo-liberal exploitation of the apartheid survivor testimonies: In excising some of the ambiguity of the narrators’ voices, in further decontextualizing the evidence, and in its textual reconfiguration for a global audience, the revised edition loses too much. If, as Krog claims, as a reporter it is necessary to distill and compress testimonies in order to be heard and absorbed by a South African public that is either passively uninterested or actively disbelieving, it is even more important to extend and situate both testimonies and personal responses to testimonies beyond the “essence of the Commission” for a global audience that has proved itself eager, in turning *Country of My Skull* into a runaway success, to engage in the consumption of the history-making process of the TRC.

Moss’s disaffection with the revised edition would seem a confirmation of Sarah Ruden’s fears, expressed in her 1999 review article, regarding the inaccessibility of the South African edition to foreign readers, who, she claims, “cannot know what is going on” as decontextualized voices, “quoted at lengths far beyond the scope of [Krog’s] commentary....communicate less the more space they occupy” (Ruden 172). By Moss’s logic, Ruden’s hopes for a “more forthcoming” North American revision (then still in the

works), have not been fulfilled. Ruden's is a fierce evisceration of the South African edition of *Country* which (in ways merely echoed by Moss) accuses Krog of exploiting illiterate survivors and skimping over detailed research and analysis in order "to get a book out while the TRC was still in open session and public opinion was still engaged...Krog did not take the necessary time" (168). In what Ruden perceives as the text's insistence on temporal exigency, it repeats egregious short cuts perpetrated by the TRC in its endeavor to constitute a post-apartheid national narrative.

Krog will find defenders to argue that the mimetic nature of her work is appropriate: what is fragmented and uncertain in life should be similar in literature. The ideological premise is that structure is hegemonic and oppresses. As the TRC shed structures from the judicial process in order to open it to more people, Krog's book has loose structures that do not imply authoritative judgment about meaning. The doing away with boundaries – of convention, of law, of taste – has for unmysterious reasons become a crusade in post-apartheid South Africa. But rather than opening up justice for the poor and illiterate and disenfranchised, the TRC may have trivialized their plights by opening what was in effect a judicial discount store. Krog in her rendering may have reduced the victims (and perhaps even the perpetrators) to literary figurines purchases in that store.

(Ruden 171)

The crux of Ruden's argument, then, is that Krog treats survivor's accounts as "literary work[s]" rather than as a public document so no journalistic license is likely to apply."

*Country* lacks method, structure, consistency, and “nearly always shrinks away from exposition and conclusion” (169).

Ruden thus reveals distaste for “autobiographical literature of human rights” that reveals the writer in *process*. This is nowhere more evident than in her ambivalent relationship with temporal contingency, or “immediacy.” Krog fails because she does not properly synthesize the “unprocessed material” (168) presented before and by the TRC. If Ruden was herself “stunned by the [TRC’s] succession of short summaries alone, and unable to say what they might mean for the nation or myself as a resident,” then this immediate response has a limited place in subsequent accounts. On the one hand, she suggests, the “freshness” and “boldness” of some scenes would be lost in “more worked-over prose” which would have “emptied Krog’s observation[s] of [their] immediacy....immediacy is the great strength of the book” (168-9). On the other hand, and herein lies the crux of her dislike for Krog’s memoir, “in a book on this subject, such immediacy can be disturbing” because it refuses “synthesis”. This refusal, in turn, renders stories told before the Commission as less than true “because they have no background or beginnings or endings, which we hold, consciously or unconsciously, as markers of real experience: our individual lives are real to us because we know them in a sort of wholeness” (169). Synthesis, Ruden claims, derives from “years of research and writing” (168) citing Riaan Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* as the unsentimental and not over-simplified autobiographical foil to Krog’s in which there is “too little that is shaped, too little of a story.”

The purpose of this discussion is not to be, as Ruden would interpolate me, a defender of Antjie Krog, although I readily concede being an admirer of *Country* and

other of her works. Rather, I want to defend Literariness as an immanent principle, one that perpetually fragments and reconstitutes the reading / writing / speaking / learning / teaching subject. And while we can appreciate the carefully shaped and storied literariness of the archival text, we need not fetishize “synthesis” as the inevitable experiential outcome of our readings. I would argue that it is, ironically, critics like Moss and Ruden who implicate themselves in a bourgeois fantasy in which the literary, autobiographical, journalistic or historiographical product is always to be privileged over the immediacy of its production. If *Country* is *unfinished*, and this is an arguable assertion, then its value lies precisely in its jarring against the expectation that it be otherwise, especially with regard to its subject matter. Perforce, it breaks apart the categorical logic by which the engineer privileges her universalizing vision, and perpetuates the myth that the edifice she has built *can* easily accommodate the whole gamut of human experience.

In taking Literariness as its partial object, *Country* does not so much privilege the writer-narrator, as fragment her. In refusing synthesis, even as it evinces what Ashleigh Harris calls the “urge towards coherence,” *Country* enacts that dialectic within the reader. In it, embodiment, immanence, violently irrupts through the narrative and argumentative forms from which readers might otherwise derive comfort. It fractures the stability of interpretive stances. In this way it is viscerally at odds with the epistemological assumptions that engender much literary criticism. It is hardly surprising, as I shall argue in the addendum to this chapter, that the critical firestorm that engulfed Krog and *Country* in South Africa in 2006, eight years after its initial publication, centered on a defense of academic integrity. It is not my intention to suggest that Literariness is a

counter to academic practice, but that it is an aspect of literary encounters that such practices often deflect, circumvent, or openly revile.

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Researching, I look online for footage of Nomonde Calata's testimony on the opening day of the Human Rights Violation Hearings in East London on April 16, 1996. Calata famously broke down while telling the story of her husband's abduction and murder on the Oliphant's Pass between Port Elizabeth and Cradock. Fort Calata was a member of the Cradock Four, anti-apartheid activists, all of whom were assassinated by apartheid security police. She was one of the four widows whose testimonies were "showcased" on that first day – I agree with Moss regarding the spectacular nature of the event. Matthews Goniwe's widow, Nyameka Goniwe, recounted the events surrounding her husband's death. Sindiswe Mkhonto represented her husband, Sparrow. Numbuyiselo Mhlauli and her daughter Babalwa spoke of the death of Cicelo Mhlauli.

I remember only Nomonde Calata's scream. Or maybe I don't. I was twenty at the time and would have watched the live hearings in the common room of my dorm at Rhodes University, eighty miles away from the Hearings. Nevertheless, it is a moment of which I must remind myself, for research purposes.

It is frequently cited as a pivotal moment in the TRC's emergence into the South African national consciousness. In his memoir, *No Peace Without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu calls it "the defining sound of the TRC – as a place where people could come to cry, to open their hearts, to expose the anguish that remained locked up for so long, unacknowledged, ignored, and denied" (Tutu 148). In *A Country Unmasked*, Alex Boraine, the TRC's deputy chairperson refers to it as a

primeval and spontaneous wail from the depths of her soul...that transformed the hearings from a litany of suffering and pain to an even deeper level. It caught up in a single howl all the darkness and horror of the apartheid years. It was as if she enshrined in the throwing back of her body and letting out the cry the collective horror of the thousands of people who had been trapped in racism and oppression for so long.

(Boraine 102)

Boraine defers to *Country of My Skull*'s rendering, suggesting it conveys Krog's sentiments, even though *she* puts the words in the mouth of Professor Kondlo, a composite character, an academic, a Xhosa intellectual from Grahamstown, who wants to write a graphic novel, "a comic," about "the tale of Nomonde Calata" called "The Contestation of Spaces" (Krog SA37/US51). Krog interweaves excerpts from Calata's testimony with Nkondlo's appropriative, analytical responses, rendered in the informal setting of drinks "in the sultry eastern Cape Midnight."

According to her testimony, Nomonde Calata saw the photograph of the Cradock Four's burnt-out vehicle on the front page of the *Herald* and, only twenty at the time, "couldn't handle this." She sought solace with Nyameka Goniwe, or Nyami, who "was crying terribly...it affected me also..." Calata breaks down before the Commission. Professor Kondlo says: "For me, this crying is the beginning of the Truth Commission – the signature tune, the definitive moment, the ultimate sound of what the process is about. She was wearing this vivid orange-red dress, and she threw herself backward and that sound...that sound...it will haunt me for ever and ever"(Krog SA42/US57). Boraine's quotation ends here, but in *Country of My Skull*, Professor Kondlo continues:



It's significant that she began to cry when she remembered how Nyameka Goniwe was crying when she arrived at the Goniwe's house. *The academics say* pain destroys language and that this brings about an immediate reversion to a prelinguistic state – and to witness that cry was to witness the destruction of language...was to realize that to remember the past of this country is to be thrown back into a time before language. And to get that memory, to fix it in words, to capture it with the precise image, is to be present at the birth of language itself. But more practically, this particular memory at last captured in words can no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you, because you have taken control of it – you can move it wherever you want to. So maybe that is what the commission is about – finding words for that cry of Nomonde Calata.

(SA 42-3/US57)<sup>34</sup>

I will return in due course to the significance of *Professor* Kondlo and his invocation of “the academics.” The crux of Lauren Moss’s “gentle criticism” of *Country of My Skull* is focused on its deployment of Nomonde Calata’s testimony. Already decontextualized, she argues, Krog’s excisions of Calata’s words renders them as “sound bites” that undermine “the ordinariness of the victim’s story” (Moss 97). Even if self-reflexive, she suggests, the appropriation of the testimony into an extended metaphor of mourning implicates Krog in the simplification or objectification of Calata. In an effort to assert the multivalent nature of Calata’s testimony, Moss refers readers to HRVR and Calata’s quiet and pragmatic determination in worrying about the financial strain her husband’s death put on her family, worries about eviction, about shoes for her children (96). According to

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<sup>34</sup> My italics.

Moss, Krog fails (or at least errs) in her representation of Nomonde Calata's testimony insofar as she did not invoke it *literally*, true to the event itself, with all due respect to the meaning behind Nomonde Calata's original words.<sup>35</sup> Literariness, in this scheme, is akin to inappropriately frivolous falsehood.

Nevertheless, Moss's argument takes hold. I have to concede that *if* I remember Nomonde Calata's testimony at all, I remember *only* her scream. I want to know what she said, how she said it, how the Commission responded, just then, at that moment. I find the transcripts and read them, but the archival footage is exclusively held by the South African Broadcasting Corporation and the National Archives (and then in disarray by Catherine Cole's report) (Cole 189-190n). No such archive exists in the United States. I do, however, find snippets of the opening HRVH embedded in the first episode of *Truth Commission Special Report*, a news program directed by journalist Max Du Preez, that sought to compact the weekly events of the TRC into one hour Sunday evening.<sup>36</sup>

Within the TRC *Special Report*, the murders of the Cradock Four are situated within the broader narrative of the crimes against humanity committed under the Eastern Cape reign of terror by Security Police Officer Colonel Gideon Nieuwoudt, who also

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<sup>35</sup> Moss again echoes Ruden's more strident criticism of *Country*, in particular, the latter's critique of Chapter 18, in which Krog renders the testimony of Lekotse, the shepherd, verbatim, but arranged as verse (SA 210-216/US 278-285). Ruden berates Krog for her attribution practices, "Why only one name? I never met a South African who didn't have a surname; the only thing apartheid reliably supplied to the poor was bureaucracy" (Ruden 171). She takes issue with Krog's "textual and critical highjinks," foreshadowed by the testimony's "rather precious Chaucerian title." She takes great offense on Lekotse's behalf that Krog subjects his testimony to "the worst application of forty-year-old [Jungian and Structuralist] literary theory" (175). "It's hard to imagine such frivolous treatment of a European survivor of a pogrom" (173), she injudiciously and unqualifiedly charges. "What would Lekotse say if he could read the passage? He might try angry assertion: 'I say I was a shepherd because I was one. The door existed and exists. I call the police jackals because they destroy life and livelihood. I mention dogs because there were dogs there.'"

<sup>36</sup> The digitized collection is accessible via streaming video, as digitized by the Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Library at [http://trc.law.yale.edu/view\\_all\\_requests.asp](http://trc.law.yale.edu/view_all_requests.asp). The segment to do with the murder of the Cradock Four and the testimony of their relatives is in the episode aired on 21 April 1996 (15.00 – 20.34).

took part in the assassination of Steve Biko and the Pepco Three. Du Preez, against the backdrop of a television studio control room, provides this context as the segment begins. A jump cut to Nyamake Goniwe's testimony. She faces the camera against the backdrop of an audience. Or, she faces the commission behind whom the camera is set, certainly not an accidental point of view. The audience at home is asked to watch, listen, and empathize with the commissioners. The hand of a counselor rests on Goniwe's shoulder. She reads with methodical restraint through a carefully prepared factual account in English. This is followed by a jump cut to archival footage of 1986 funeral of the Cradock Four, itself contained within a 1992 episode of the journalistic program *Agenda*, in which the revelation of the Security Police involvement of the Cradock Four's assassination is covered. Max Du Preez's voiceover contextualizes these events, detailing high-level governmental sanctions of the crime, panning down the front page *City Press* headline that exposed the regime's machinations. Another jump cut. Nomonde Calata gesticulates with a Kleenex in her hand, overwrought before the commission. She is speaking in amaXhosa which is heard only faintly – so too the beginning of her cry – beneath the English translation of her words and Max Du Preez's voiceover (“The Commission had to adjourn for a while when Mrs. Calata broke down during her testimony”). She throws herself back, both hands to her face. Two counselors on either side rise to her aid. The translator, one sentence behind, finishes the last one, “and this affected me also...” before the full-throated weight of Nomonde Calata's grief is heard. Its pitch overwhelms the sound settings of the microphone. A jump cut to Sindiswe Mkhonto's testimony, which is translated as a determined call for the exposition, prosecution, and accountability of her husband's murderers. More archival footage,

narrated by Du Preez (“And this was when Colonel Gideon Nieuwoudt’s name came up again”), of Nieuwoudt leaving a magistrate’s office. Numbuyiselo Mhlauli then speaks about burying her husband’s body without his hand, which was cut off by the assassins. “We want that hand,” the Afrikaans accented female translator renders her words, as Mhlauli recounts hearing that that it was being kept at the Louis La Grange Police Station in Port Elizabeth. A cut to Fezile Madoda Jacobs’ testimony, translated, in which he recounts seeing the hand in a jar with a watery substance, in the presence of police operatives Hattingh and Nieuwoudt. A jump cut to Max Du Preez. “Torture,” he says, as an irruptive segue, “How many times have you heard stories of South Africans who said they were tortured? And did you believe them? Well, this week, the truth commissioners and the public had no doubts as they sat in silent anguish listening to testimonies of horror.” A new segment begins.

For better or worse, *Truth Commission Special Report* does not linger on Nomonde Calata’s testimony. It is, if anything reduced to *that* scream, and, in the process, so is she. And yet her effect is hardly minimized. She jars against the journalistic editorial narrativization of the Nieuwoudt arc. She is the countermand to synthesis, forcing an adjournment on the HRVH’s carefully wrought process, irrupting, ever so slightly after the fact, the interpreter’s attempts to translate her words from amaXhosa to English. “The academics say,” so Professor Khondlo suggests, “that pain destroys language and that this brings about an immediate reversion to a prelinguistic state.” And indeed, even without reference to the particularities of Calata’s testimony, it is evident in the *Truth Commission Special Report*’s handling of the scream. Semianalysis comes to mind: the body’s chaotic fluctuations, associated in Kristeva’s scheme with the mother

and as-yet-undifferentiated infant, endangers and thus requires the strictures of the patriarchal symbolic order, the realm of grammar, syntax, logic, law. The woman, the mother, and the consoling hands of the female counselors behind her, stop the signifying process. Calata can no longer speak. Du Preez is silenced. So is the interpreter. So is the HRVH. I too am stunned. I replay and replay the segment.

But even the “order” that surrounds Calata’s scream cannot be synthesized, especially after the fact. The broadcast preempts and continues after the moment, so do the HRVHs. That said, between the journalistic editorializing, the voiceovers, the archival footage, the invocation of print journalism, the assiduous reading in English of Goniwe, the translations, the scream of Calata, the determined righteousness of Mkhonto, the image of Nieuwoudt, the wronged bereavement of Mhlauli, the corroborative testimony of Jacobs, the *Truth Commission Special Report* invokes nothing so much as a complex rhizome of irresolvable discourses and performances. After the fact, there is no single shape or story. There is only remediation.

But another fact remains: *bodies* remediate, and do so immanently. In this sense, I differ from Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, who, more sympathetic than Moss or Ruden, addresses the influence on *Country* of radio reportage, and particularly the deployment of non-verbal sounds. He points out that Krog’s rendering of Calata’s testimony mimics the complex rhizome (even if his rendering of Professor Kondlo as “a friend” is strictly inaccurate):

In reproducing the conversation with the friend, complete with the crude attempts at analyzing the meaning of the scream, Krog certainly runs the risk of objectifying victims. Yet that scream was already commodified the

moment it passed into public imagination through the technologies of radio and television transmission. As Krog shows, the exigencies of radio journalism required that sounds be treated as raw material for a transmission loop. In the midst of such journalistic practices, the testimonies matter less as individual transmissions. Rather, their iterations create a “web of infinite sorrow” [(Krog SA32/US45)].

(Osinubi 119)

Osinubi defends Krog by justifying her “objectification” of victims as a requirement of journalistic exigencies. I resist the suggestion that public remediation necessarily renders individual transmissions such as survivor testimonies as “commodities,” or as “raw materials” that, technologically extracted from the privileged site of initial immanent iteration, matter less.

This evaluative logic defers to the idea that remediated events are *merely* archival objects – as radio recordings, or transcriptions, or mere texts. In this regard, Osinubi errs too far in countering Moss and Ruden’s insistence on the privileged literalness of the original event.

As a practice, Literariness requires reading / speaking / writing / teaching / learning subjects to negotiate between the “individual transmission” and the “web of infinite sorrow.” The ethical responsibility of the practitioners resides in the idea that their own responses (subjective iterations in and of themselves) are incorporated into that larger web. In this regard, the literalness of the original iteration (the event of the testimony) is insufficient as a gauge of the effectiveness of its remediation because it holds the reader / writer / speaker / teacher / learner to an unattainable and cold standard

of objectivity. It is also problematic to hold to the idea that remediations are untethered from the original event (that they are merely archival objects) because it runs counter to the crucial status of immediacy and thus history) as an aspect of encounters with texts and performances. Though we may not have been present in East London on April 16, 1996, Nomonde Calata's testimony, or parts of it, still happens to us.

\* \* \*

Only in the context of a critical argument would I feel the need to *confess* that I find it very difficult to write about *Country of My Skull*. Other critical essays help somewhat, but their arguments must fight *another* effect.

I am *shocked beyond words* that *anyone*, kept naked for 10 days by her male captors, should feel the need to fight indignity by fashioning underwear out of a plastic shopping bag – a bag that had survived her body's decomposition when it was exhumed (Krog SA128/US167-168). Or that some even *thought* to slam the dangling breasts of Ntombizanele Elsie Zingxodo in a desk's drawers (SA113-114/US148-9), or to force people into tyres, douse them in petrol, and set them alight (SA34-5/US48-50). Or that white men drank beer and *barbequed* next to the fire on which they burned the bodies of black activists they had murdered (SA60-61/US 80).

I understand that these stories are decontextualized, that they operate as violent puncta that overwhelm the countless banal ways in which Apartheid was perpetuated. They situate apartheid in a realm beyond my immediate grasp, outside my race and class privilege, away from the insidious normality my childhood conferred on black domestic workers and gardeners. I understand that such comparative banalities need to be

addressed with as much fervor and nuance. But when I read *Country of My Skull*, the horror of that *other* world is unavoidable.

I do the best I can.

I invoke Ndebele, Krog, Ruden, De Kock, Moss, Osinubi, Sanders, Watson, Harris, Attridge, Derrida, Barthes, Hughes, Scarry and so forth and so on but I write against myself or just fail to write at all or fixate on single sentences or lie in my dim bedroom watching romantic comedies to escape the clamor in my skull that I'm too lazy too stupid too selfish or indulgent too rational too hysterical too white too guilty too calloused too far away too close too whatever reason I can find to justify my uselessness.

I understand differently now Adorno's injunction after the Holocaust, and Krog's in *Country*: "No poetry should come forth from this. May my hands fall off if I write this. // So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for their words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die." (SA49/US66). I struggle not because *all* words fail in the face of actual brutality and in so doing betray its survivors. I don't believe they fail, or choose not to because that would be too dark altogether. But words do very, very little, and always too late.

And so I do my damndest to do that which I *can* do right, but it is difficult and disallow myself even the briefest swells of delight at success because they, rather than the undertaking itself, feel like a betrayal.

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Professor Kondlo, himself an academic, invokes academics abstractly: "the academics say that...". This explicit invocation is at once a claim to the expertise of an academic and, in its formulation, something of a distantiating. Arguably, this



ambivalence is, or should be, a sustaining hallmark of academic practice. Theoretical and methodological innovation demands awareness and transgression of disciplinary parameters, just as the infant must see herself, that is recognize the outward limits of her body, in order to distinguish herself from the hitherto undifferentiated organism within which she was a mere function. Language, a shared system of meaning, is necessitated only by virtue of subjective division. Professor Kondlo, as Krog writes him, is stunned by a break in that shared system, at once represented by Nomonde Calata's embodied cry, and his own ellipsis-inflected attempt to invoke it: "that sound...that sound...it will haunt me for ever and ever." His invocation of "the academics," then, reflects his desire to bring order to the chaos of the event. Implicitly, he recognizes their function as signifiatory: the memory of trauma must be "captured in words" so "control" can be taken. And yet, despite this desire for a "practical" outcome, Professor Kondlo does not dispel the "haunting" of "that sound."

The bifurcated nature of Professor Kondlo's iteration – the simultaneous claim to and distancing from the status "academic" – marks nothing so much as the recognition that the synthesis and order "academics" strive towards will perpetually war with the volatility of subjective experience – exigencies that pertain as much to academics as they do to the remediations of experiences they attempt to understand. "*Finding* words for that cry," then, suggests the non-eschatological archeological undertaking of the bricoleur.

"The academics say" is a phrase that functions as an infrequent motif in *Country of My Skull*. At least, it occurred frequently enough that I found myself noticing it, often because I found myself wondering precisely *who* these academics were. Deployed un-reflexively, this strategy stands the risk of homogenizing academics and academic

endeavor (as suggested by the definite article that precedes their invocation). Additionally, the effect of the motif is to summon the “status” of academic endeavor. Academic thinking and language, in this regard, serves to bring abstraction to what otherwise is immediate and stultifying – hence, professor Kondlo remediates Nomonde Calata’s testimony through a graphic mode that serves, also, as a critical interrogation of its themes and motifs, subjecting it to cultural, gender, economic, historiographical, literary and psychological concepts. While never explicitly stated, the graphic element of the undertaking situates it as much as an accessible pedagogical undertaking as an evocatively artistic one. Academic remediation, in other words, serves to elucidate and nuance experience. Inevitably associated with the stratification of the academic institution, this pedagogical remediation claims a heightened authority. In addition, perhaps even oppositionally, Krog’s “the academics say” motif – and its deployment within the context of a personal conversation between two people processing the event of witnessing – in effect blurs the differential status of academic endeavor. It thus begs the questions, what, particularly *is* academic thought?

Krog seems well aware that the manner of this deployment risks perpetrating pedagogical paternalism and, more dangerously, the displacement of immanent experience. This is explicitly her worry in a later chapter in which she analyses two testimonies given by applicants to the amnesty committee, a novelistic re-imagining, and a media report about the 1987 murders of Richard Mutase, a Bophuthatswana policeman, and his wife, Irene Mutase. Richard Mutase had put in claims against both a white “superior” who had burst his eardrum in an altercation, and the Minister of Law and Order. In response to these various accounts, Krog’s narrator (an unspecified figuration

of Krog) asks herself, “what is narrative?” She quotes Barthes: “Narrative does not show, does not intimate...[Its] function is not to represent, it is to constitute a spectacle.” And asks, “Does this mean that the narratives about the Mutase killings are not true but simply spectacles for an occasion? And the occasion happens to be amnesty?” (SA82/US103). She intersperses the various narratives with her own account of a fire that swept through the journalist facilities and documents room of the municipal building in which the hearings were being held, ultimately deferring back to “the stories....How they correspond. How they differ. The stylistic traits of oral narrative...” (SA87/US110).

She draws her comparative methodology from “the academics:” “Oral narratives, the academics say, are driven by remembered core phrases and images that carry the distillation of the entire story. From these cores the action, the characters, the conclusions all unfold. And though the narratives may differ in the information they bear, the core elements stay the same. They overlap” (SA88/US111). Noting and detailing how the accounts by amnesty applicants Joe Mamasela and Jacques Hechter vary, with particular reference to the way the Mutase’s bed pillows feature in each, she settles on the realization that the versions differ “on the question of accountability.” She breaks suddenly in her undertaking, explicitly invoking the ambivalence towards the status of academic practice that remains largely implicit in Professor Nkondlo’s bifurcated iteration:

‘Hang on a second,’ a disparaging voice pipes up in my head.

‘What is the point of all this “textual reading”? You’re just neutralizing the story of the death of Richard and Irene Mutase. You’re wrenching the

heart out of the horror. You can live comfortably with the details, once they've acquired no more than academic relevance.'

But I argue back. 'The things revealed by such a reading aren't academic at all. What's ""academic"" about the attempt by everyone involved to avoid responsibility?'

'Take this thing about the pillow, then. "Here's the motif, class." It's just a literary trick.'

"But doesn't it bring something important to the surface? The image of the Mutases, butchered under soft pillows and fluffy blankets, says so much about the brutality of the crime. And at the same time it explodes a whole series of clichés – like the white fear of being killed in your bed, or the idea of living with your head in the clouds – under a sweetly scented pillow.' (SA88-89/US112)

From this internal monologue, Krog shifts to the second person, qualifying "The Truth" that she suggests *must* be taken out of these "versions of truth." This direct address of the reader interpolates them as perceiving subjects who, like Hechter and Mamasela, potentially render "truths" that are convenient rather than factual: "If you believe in your own version, your own lie – because as narrators we all give ourselves permission to believe our own versions – how can it be said that you are being misleading? To what extent can you bring yourself not to know what you know? Eventually, it is not the lie that matters, but that mechanism in yourself that allows you to accept distortions" (SA89/US112).

The distinction between “the lie” and “the mechanism” is crucial. If the former suggests a reified or sedimented version of events (akin, in this regard, to the transcribed oral testimonies she examines), then the latter, the mechanism, suggests a perpetually functioning epistemological machine (at once implicit to and constitutive of the subject), replete with moving parts, changeable, by which such “lies” are filtered, reconstituted, falsified and/or deemed acceptable. It is at once an interpretive and iterative machine. In this regard the bifurcation between the “the academic” and, say, “the empathetic,” invoked by Krog through her own ambivalence and that of Professor Kondlo, suggests nothing so much as two differential settings of that internal technology.

Indeed, I would contend that the formal (or formless) construction of *Country of My Skull*, which Ruden lambasts as shapeless, unfinished, and un-synthesized, functions to *agitate* the reader’s internal mechanism. This is not only evident in the various generic conventions of which the text is constituted (remember Moss’s suggestion that it is difficult to pin *Country* down as *mémoire*, reportage, historiographic metafiction, autobiography, biofiction, or historical document) (Moss 92), each of which requires a different interpretive and iterative lens. It is also modeled by Krog through her various versions of herself – a formal practice that destabilizes the author figure to the point that she cannot be interpolated as a stable guarantor of the text’s significance. She is “Antjie Samuels” (her married name) the journalist, “Antjie Krog” (her maiden name, also evocative of her Afrikaner heritage) the poet, a generic “Antjie” who is both and neither (as suggested by the extramarital affair she fictionalizes within the text, and through which she engages questions of guilt, shame, and complicity), and she is interpolated as Antjie Somers by a piece of hate mail:

*Ou Antjie Somers,*

*Geniet jy nog die aanklagte en Swartsmeerdery van die  
Afrikaners? Is jy nog by jou man of het jy nou 'n hotnot, 'n mede  
wapendraer in jou stryd teen die Nasionale Party waarvan jou pa so 'n  
getroue ondersteuner is/was?*

*K.K.K*

[Old Antjie Somers,

Are you still enjoying the accusations and besmirching<sup>37</sup> of the  
Afrikaners? Are you still with your husband or have you found yourself a  
Hottentot, a weapon-bearer in your struggle against the National Party of  
which your father is/was such a loyal supporter?

*K.K.K.] (Krog SA164/US217-218)*

Antjie Somers is an “androgynous figure in Afrikaans folklore who catches naughty  
children” (SA296/US389), suggesting that “Antjie” is a bogey-woman, a betrayer of her  
own ethnicity and culture (Moss 92).

These figurations suggest different, often opposing, but perpetually interwoven  
ethnic, epistemological, ethical, aesthetic and linguistic dispositions. This is explicitly  
suggested by Krog in her 1999 interview with Gillian Anstey:

I want to be Samuel at times . . . just someone's wife....As a reporter I am  
supposed to speak in correct Afrikaans. But I don't. I speak a lekker<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> A literal translation would render the word “Swartsmeerdery” as “Blackening” or “Black-smearing.”

<sup>38</sup> “Lekker” is a catch-all Afrikaans adjective meaning “nice” and / or “delicious.” The word is so  
pervasive that it can hardly be called slang. Nevertheless it suggests colloquialism. A U.S. analog,  
particularly as it is deployed by the younger set, is “awesome,” although the implications of “lekker”  
are more muted.

Anglicised Afrikaans and I can't report in that. So my reporting is un-me, un-Krog, un-poetic. I see Samuel as the obedient surname that obeys the codes of the SABC and of language, the rules of the game. Krog is the disobedient surname [. . .]. But the older I get, the more difficulty I have in keeping the two apart. (Anstey, quoted in Moss 91-2)

Within *Country*, the interplay of figurations is instructive. Tellingly, the hate mail that associates Krog with Somers is situated in *Country* after an account of a gathering at the Stellenbosch Theological Seminary in which representatives of the *Nederlandsse Gereformeerde Kerk* [Dutch Reformed Church] (*NGK*) were challenged regarding the Church's "subdued" engagement with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process: "the body language of most *dominees* shows they want nothing to do with the Commission. Why? They're afraid of a witch hunt...they're afraid the truth Commission will increase the desire for revenge. They think the findings will not be objective and they say: 'Confession and forgiveness is a religious act, how can it be done in a secular way?'" (Krog SA 64/US216-217). Their resistance is especially resonant because of the undeniable influence of the *NGK* in the establishment and sustaining of white Calvinist-inspired Christian Nationalism, as well as the provision and sanction of theological underpinnings for segregationist policy.

Krog's inclusion of the hate mail invokes the paternalistic influence of this Christian Nationalism. The suggestion of infidelity, and worse, an *interracial* affair, is directly associated with its betrayal. She is Antjie Somers, the bogey-woman. In the South African edition<sup>39</sup>, Krog follows the inclusion with a fictionalized account of

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<sup>39</sup> The U.S. edition also, inevitably, excludes Krog's later justification of the fictional affair, which falls, for her, under the quilting methodology: "I had to bring a relationship into the story so I could

marital infidelity: an episode of lustful indulgence following an argument with a fellow journalist. It is a violent encounter – “My teeth chattering with an unnamed lust to rip open, to tear apart, to destroy, to plunder” (SA165) – suggesting its broader implications. It is not just an affair – it is a suggestion of profound subjective instability, caught up in the broader stakes of warring cultural, ethical, and moral complexes. The affair functions as a metaphor for that simultaneously painful and desirable break with conceptions and principles that calcify the moving parts of that “mechanism in yourself.” In its most benign abstract formulation, the various settings of the mechanism facilitate nothing more than code-switching. In *Country*, however, they *endanger* the subject, not to mention the integrity of the body.

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I read chapter three of the US edition on an Amtrak bus heading North on the I-5 between Eugene and Portland. The chapter’s title, “Stretched Thinner and Thinner over Pitches of Grief” (US37-66), is one I curiously like more than that of the South African edition’s “Bereaved and Dumb, The High Southern Air Succumbs” (SA26-49). My preference is contingent. It reminds me of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Terrible Sonnet, “No Worst, There is none, pitched past pitch of grief” (Hopkins 167). I remember that I first read *Country* (the South African edition) at Rhodes University while leading an introductory poetry discussion group that focused on Hopkins’s sonnets, from his precise and innovative evocation of the minute particulars of English landscapes, to the dark crises of faith and perceived absence of love that harrowed him.

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verbalize certain personal reactions to the hearing. I had to create a new character who could not only bring in new information but also express the psychological underpinning of the Commission” (SA 171). The exclusion of the extramarital affair in the U.S. Edition is telling with regard to its posturing as an historiographical or critical document. Again, for a detailed account of the differences between the two editions and their implications, read Moss.



This is the chapter that contains Professor Kondlo's ruminations on Nomonde Calata's testimony, but also other heavily edited survivor accounts, including a quilted together sequence that refers Sicelo Mhlauli's request before the HRVH, "This inside me... fights my tongue. It is... unshareable. It destroys... words. Before he was blown up, they cut off his hands so he could not be fingerprinted... So how do I say this? – this terrible... I want his hands back" (SA27/US39). This is not how people speak, I think. It's too perfect, poetic, economic. "How quickly our language changes," Krog writes, "'fantastic testimony,' 'sexy subject,' 'nice audible crying'" (SA32/US45).

I look up from *Country* and am physically startled to see an Oregon landscape. I was expecting, without knowing I was home, *that* blue sky above aloes and rusted *koppies*. I remember the metallic clank and scrape of a Karoo *windpomp*'s blades, and knotted grass roots, reaching like decrepit fingers over stones, scraping at thin topsoil.

*Unheimlichkeit*. More worryingly, nostalgia. Is this the kind of language that invokes home for me?

\* \* \*

The body and language, on the broadest level, constitute defining motifs of *Country*. Most obviously, it deals with bodies and languages as staging taxonomies of identity: Black and White and Indian and Coloured and isiZulu and isiXhosa and English and Afrikaans. More complicatedly, *Country of My Skull* interpenetrates bodies and language. It rummages through and around what Frederic Jameson has called "the [Modernist] *metaphysics* of the inside and outside, the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that 'emotion' is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward

dramatization of inward feeling” (Jameson 11)<sup>40</sup>. Crucially, however, *Country* complicates the *metaphysicality* with which Jameson qualifies the inside / outside hermeneutic. Because her text hosts stories of human rights abuses, of battered, burnt and exploded bodies, it is the physicality of iteration – of reading and writing and speaking and listening – that is invoked. *Country of My Skull* is not content to identify the “authenticity” or “truth” that lies beneath the proverbial surface. Its prose focuses not merely inwardly, but *innardly*: “to seeing, speaking is added and the eye plunges into the mouth. Present at the birth of this country’s language itself” (SA29/US 42).

Karli Coetzee points out regarding Krog’s title,

The fact that she refers to the country of her *skull*, suggests that this country is one that is internally created, a country perhaps of the imagination or of memory. The text bears this out. One of the recurring themes is the author’s sense of alienation from what she regards as her country, the country of her childhood and of her father and brothers. The narrative returns again and again to her apprehension that she may not be invited into the new country of her imagination, that which is often popularly called ‘The New South Africa.’ (Karli Coetzee 685)

In Coetzee’s subsequent discussion of the text’s cover photograph by George Hallet of an un-peopled vista, she argues that this landscape, the landscape of the author’s imagination, cannot be lumped in with the un-embodied landscapes of much prior white writing, which “fails...to imagine a relationship with South Africa’s indigenous

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<sup>40</sup> My italics.

inhabitants” (686)<sup>41</sup>. Coetzee argues that the unpeopled landscape of the cover suggests nothing so much as the author’s unstable relationship with it: she is absent from it even as she encompasses it in her imagination; it is the site of childhood nostalgia, the stage of her race’s shameful complicity, and the space into which she wants to be invited by black South Africans: “you whom I have wronged, please / take me // with you” (Krog SA 279, US 365). The landscape thus stages memory, guilt, and desire, and many other internal aspects.

To Coetzee’s otherwise astute interpretation a new level may be added, for her reading of the title elides its most compelling element. The title is far from conventional in signaling the lyrical quality (the text’s staging of internal conflicts) that Coetzee infers. Despite the critic’s italicization of “*skull*” she fails to deal with it specifically in her analysis. Indeed, her reading of the title would have been equally valid had Krog relied on traditional tropes: the text might have been named “Country of my Heart”, or “Country of my Soul,” or “Country of my Mind.” But Krog refuses these conventional tropes for the jarring image of the head bone, seamed together, eye sockets agape, sinuses bared, grinning impassively. The skull does not stand in clichéd metonymic relation as the heart does to emotions, the soul to spirituality, and the mind to the intellect. In fact, even as the skull contains, in its biological aspect, the organ that facilitates our capacity to abstract, the word “skull” displaces the impulse to reduce the text to psychological, theological, and philosophical abstractions by foregrounding subcutaneous viscera. In other words, the skull operates in synecdochal relation to the body, living or dead, in its

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<sup>41</sup> Here, Coetzee draws on her namesake’s text, J.M. Coetzee’s *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. “Official historiography long told a tale of how, until the nineteenth century of the Christian era the interior of what we now call South Africa was unpeopled. The poetry of empty space may one day be accused of furthering the same fiction” (Coetzee, J.M. 1988. 11).

biological or animal aspect. The skull thus implies at once the body's disarticulation and its material presence. Overlaying the empty landscape of the cover photograph, *skull* in a profound sense suggests a viscerally embodied presence.<sup>42</sup>

In Krog's conception, the body's immanent presence within the landscape is closely allied to the body's relationship with the stories brought before the TRC, with language. Landscape is the stage for subjective iteration. Of the Free State countryside of her youth, Krog writes, "This is my landscape. The marrow of my bones....This I love. This is what I'm made of....The land belongs to the voices of those that live in it. My own bleak voice among them....landscape lies at the feet at last of the stories of saffron and amber, angel hair and barbs, dew and hay and hurt" (Krog SA210/US277).

Landscape is a pervasive metaphor for the scope of atrocities and their recounting:

"Week after week, voice after voice, account after account. It is not so much the deaths, and the names of the dead, but the web of infinite sorrow woven around them. It keeps on coming and coming. A wide, barren disconsolate landscape where the horizon keeps on

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<sup>42</sup> The effect of the title's "skull" on the cover of the 1998 South African edition is drawn into stark relief when compared to the cover of the edition published a year later in the United States (notwithstanding other editorial alterations that will be discussed shortly). Most obviously, the latter edition modifies "*Country of My Skull*" with the scholastically conventional post-colonial qualification, "*Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*." Revealing the hand of the marketer rather than that of the poet, the qualification has the effect of undoing precisely that which the "skull" opens up. The visceral embodiment suggested by the South African title is reduced to a set of abstractions. Additionally, the US edition's cover displaces the author's name, which dominates the South African cover in large yellow letters above the title, reducing it in size and placing it against the backdrop of a light green field below the modified title. This gesture, it is arguable, radically alters the reader's expectation of the text. Patently, "Antjie Krog," largely unknown among American readers, has no real cache outside South Africa. "She" will not sell the book: the subject matter, on the other hand, might. In terms of name recognition, the US publication places the South African Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer's review excerpt above the title. In relatively tiny black letters, Gordimer is quoted to have written "Extraordinary reportage...Antjie Krog breaks all the rules of dispassionate recounts". The excerpt signals, in moderate terms, that US readers can anticipate the text to have literary qualities, implicit in the formal innovations, or broken rules, by which Krog brings her emotional experience to established (un)literary historiographic praxis. Additionally, the US edition advertises an introduction by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who, as an American journalist on National Public Radio and its chief correspondent in Africa, who has "a similar signature for US readers and viewers to Krog's or South African readers and listeners" (Coetzee, Karli, 688).

dropping away” (SA32/US45). Just as landscape works immanently upon and within the body, so does the language of the TRC. In this way landscape, in its relationship with the body, becomes associated with the immanent materiality of language.

Krog invokes this materiality variously in *Country*, be it through her close observations of the ways mouths forms Afrikaans words, as is the case with security policeman Paul van Vuuren’s “delabialized vowels and thick, arrogant rhythms” (SA90/US113-114), Captain Jacques Hechter’s “relish in gutturals and occlusive consonants” (SA94/US119), or in the synaesthetic succor she takes from singing the national anthem, *Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika* [God Bless Africa], at the conclusion of an HRVH. Recognizing that here language, Afrikaans, “carries violence as a voice,” she stumbles through the Sesotho parts of the anthem: “It is fragrant inside the song, and among the keynotes of sorrow and suffering there are soft silences where we who belong to the landscape, all of us, come to rest” (SA216-217/US286). She invokes it through the physical effects on the body and mind of sustained exposure to survivor testimonies: “reporting on the Truth Commission...leaves most of us physically exhausted and mentally frayed. // Because of language.” (SA37/US50). She calls it to mind in its biological aspect, “My hair is falling out. I have rashes” (SA49/US65), suggesting, also, later, at a psychologist’s prompting, that Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s prostate cancer is a symptom of repressed anger brought about by apartheid and the hearings (SA170/US224).

Most compellingly, however, she invokes the embodied effect of language on the interpreters/translators of TRC testimony. Catherine Cole outlines the duties and

implications of interpreters at Hearings in *Performing South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*:

The translators were trained to be neutral, but deciding whose idea of 'neutral' would be honored, their employers or their own, was difficult. Their jobs required minute-by-minute choices about words, syntax, tone, emotional expression, and narrative completeness....the very fact that they were interpreters rather than translators made neutrality impossible: they were being asked to provide a reduced truth and functional rendering of content....The interpreters were trained to see emotion and affect as nonessential dimensions of testimony, to produce interpretations that filtered out affect. And yet emotional truth was often central to the witnesses' perception of value. Interpreters *performed* testimony in their glass booths, in their bodies; in the cadence of their voices; in their choice of words, grammar, syntax and style; and in other choices they were forced to make. (Cole 76-77)

Cole's observations are borne out in *Country of My Skull*. Lebohang Matibele, the interpreter of the shepherd's testimony (the rendering of which caused Ruden great Ruden took such offense) is quoted as saying:

You are aware that you are becoming an actor, but you know people will say afterwards, 'Lebohang, you were really smoking – what was going on?' And you didn't even realize you were acting – you know, you are just looking at the victim as he is speaking and unconsciously you end up throwing up your hands as he throws his, you end up nodding your head

when he nods...But it very difficult when they are crying, then they speak in installments. He says something, then he keeps quiet and he starts again...you have to bring the pieces together. (Krog SA220/US290)

Inevitably, such performances take their toll on the subject, who, as the account of a “young Tswana interpreter” suggests, are drawn into the narratives at the moment of remediation: “‘It is difficult to interpret victim hearings,’ he says, ‘because you use the first person all the time. I have no distance when I say “I”...it runs through me with I’.” (SA129/US169).

The immediacy of the interpreter’s engagement with the testimonies is also, in this formulation, a fragmentation of the self, or, at least, the incorporation into the subject of another’s “I”. The interpreter, inevitably, begins to manifest symptoms of the trauma he mediates: “After the first three months of the hearings, my wife and baby left me because of my violent outbursts. The Truth Commission provided counseling and I was advised to stop. But I don’t want to. This is my history, and I want to be a part of it – until the end.” At the forefront of the remediation process, tasked with interpreting for a broader audience the subjective trauma of survivors, the interpreter’s body becomes a repository of their affect. Neutrality, objectivity, literal translation, in this regard, is an archivist’s fantasy. In the body of the interpreter, the language of others becomes deeply and immanently personal.

Such *processes* go to the heart of *Country*’s conception of the relationship among individual, collective and/or national(ist) iterations. Critics, as we have seen, frequently accuse Krog of subsuming the trauma of others into her “hysterical” personal reactions and then generalizing those personal truths into national truths. Ashley Harris astutely

defines this pivotal tension in *Country* as a battle between two conceptions of the author as a “self-expressive poet” and a “poet-as-witness,” arguing that the conflation of these two modes by Krog “allows her to avoid any rigorous contemplation of [the] ethical obligations” implicit to responding, reflecting, and representing “history” as aesthetic form. She invokes De Cock’s “seam” (“differently applied, but just as provisional, paradoxical and contestable”) as a metaphor for the point of contact and differentiation between poetry and history, suggesting that Krog’s textual practice erases this scar.

Her analysis (which responds also to the plagiarism scandal that engulfed *Country* and Krog in 2006 – and which will be addressed in the addendum) addresses the poetic coda that concludes the text. As a lead-in to this coda, Krog writes about the failures and triumphs of the TRC, concluding that, “I want to put it more simply. I want this hand of mine to write it. For us all; all voices, all victims:” (Krog SA278/US364). Harris argues that this “suggests that the poetic voice seeks to bring the varying and multiple threads of the narrative together – and that in its metaphoric and metonymic function the poem makes meaning cohere” (Harris 27). Recognizing that this claim is at odds with the “fractured and multiple nature of the text,” she argues that taking note of Krog’s “repetition throughout the text of the metaphor of quilting, one begins to discern her urge to bring the nation’s fragmented and fractured voices together.” This “urge towards coherence,” she suggests, is evidenced by Krog’s “urge to write ‘it’...in stark contradiction to [her] earlier statement, ‘May my hands fall of if I write this’.” The poetic coda itself, especially in its being written “for us all; all voices, all victims,” manifests what she calls a “slippage between the first-person singular to the first-person plural,” and in so doing suggests that “there is a continuum between the wrongdoings of the



perpetrators called to account by the TRC and Krog, as a white Afrikaner, herself” but that this continuum is “presented in a general and vague manner that obscures rather than bears witness to, the traumatic past”. Harris’s reading, in other words, situates its critique at the other end of the spectrum to Ruden’s – Krog’s text, she argues, too flagrantly “synthesizes” or “shapes” the events of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Krog’s quilting, she suggests, overlays the site of irresolvable difference, or the “seam.”

And indeed, the frame of the poetic coda does implicate it in a slippage between the singular and plural first-person. The poem thus draws (white) readers into a conception of collective responsibility or guilt. However, I would argue that if the function of the coda is to “cohere” the text’s various strands and tenors, then it fails. Situated at the end of a fragmented text, the poem enacts nothing so much as the irresolvable tension between the urge towards coherence (which, counter to Harris’s argument that it is hidden, I suggest Krog explicitly claims and problematizes throughout *Country*) and its impossibility.

Crucially, the poet’s *body* is the site of the TRC’s effect, which is invoked through the familiar conflation of landscape and language. The TRC is personified and directly addressed in the past tense.

because of you  
this country no longer lies  
between us but within  
it breathes becalmed  
after being wounded  
in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull  
it sings, it ignites  
my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of heart  
shudders towards the outline  
new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand  
daily because of the thousand stories  
I was scorched

a new skin  
I am changed for ever, I want to say:  
forgive me  
forgive me  
forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please  
take me

with you. (Krog SA278-279/US364-365)

Unarguably, the poem does address a history past. It *does*, in this regard, situate itself in metonymic relation to the events more broadly – detailing, metaphorically, the traumatic

effects on the body of the stories told before the TRC, suggesting catharsis that comes with hindsight. But the tense of the poem shifts: “I *was* scorched // a new skin / I *am* changed forever”. This change in tense also marks a distinct shift in focus from an insular awareness of the body’s responses, to the necessity of externalization. “I want to say,” followed by the repeated plea for forgiveness, is also, in this regard, a recognition of the other *as* other. The differentiation of the “I” and “you” becomes the stage for iteration: only by its virtue is language necessitated. The distance between “I” and the “you whom I have wronged” is not, crucially, reconciled by the poem. If anything, it is invoked both thematically and, by the caesura between the last two lines of the poem, typographically.

The closing image of *Country of My Skull*, then, does not resolve its tensions. The poem *does* effect a collective voice, but it also invokes the monad pleading for contact across the chasm of history. Krog thus “concludes” *Country*, not with an easy “closure,” but with an image of the speaking subject, immanently embodied, painfully and resiliently alone, riddled by the stories of others and personal experiences, yearning for a new and more productive encounter with the people who share her living space, but who remain, perpetually distant. This is Literariness.

Understood as an attempted “closure,” it is arguable that the coda does ultimately subsume the ethical obligations of the poet-as-witness by deferring to a merely self-expressive mode. In this regard, the coda ultimately undermines the complex of fragmented narratives, genres, stories, and languages the preceding text has wrought upon the reader. But the coda does not alleviate the embodied *process* of witnessing, interpreting, remediating – if anything, it suggests its continued necessity.

\* \* \*

I sit in the faculty lounge of the Rhodes English Department. The new head of the Department has just read a paper in which he argues the necessity of what he calls a “new humanism.” A young black hire from journalism responds with the suggestion that it is not up to white academics to define the direction of an African academy. The room is silenced. I don’t know what to do.

#### An Addendum: Subsequent Language

All that said, Antjie Krog is a plagiarist. The mechanism in myself that allows me to accept this is also the one that pores over the archive, that insists on the exactness of my citations, that worries if my summations of the arguments of others are properly signposted as arguments made by others. This textual practice is exacting in its standards, insistent on careful attribution, and in so doing, protects the property of those enlightened subjects who, brought into the conversation by the enormous archive they produce, stake and squabble over their claims. This is mine. This is yours.

The careful syntax and grammar of academic discourse (with its endlessly deferring parentheses) is, in this regard, nothing so much as the regulatory logic of a game of “Broken Telephone” (or “Gossip,” or, insidiously, “Chinese Whisper”) in which the original iteration must, at all costs, be preserved in all its integrity. At a children’s party the opposite is true: the pleasure derives from the muddled sentence uttered at the other end of the line, which bears the imprint of every little body through which it passed – whispers misheard by ears, or mispronounced by mouths just coming into language. In academic discourse, such embodied fluctuations are impermissible. By its logic, the text does not pass through bodies but resides within an archive, alphabetized by authors’ names. Each author has a sovereign right to the form and content of the archival object

they produce: the currency by which they are paid for their contribution is correct and assiduous citation by all who draw from their work. This is how the author's brainchild becomes his lineage.

Undeniably, Antjie Krog fails to abide by this logic – as Stephen Watson points out in his essay, “The Annals of Plagiarism: Antjie Krog and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection” published in *New Contrast* in early 2006. And yet, this is hardly surprising, considering the manner in which *Country of My Skull* enacts, through the fragmented body of the author-figure, the disjuncture between various interpretive and iterative modes. There are other mechanisms at play than the archive-obsessed citational logic of the academy. Indeed, as I have argued, Krog's figuration of Prof. Kondlo, and “the academics,” as well as her own ambivalence towards conventional critical interpretive methods, suggests that the mechanisms within ourselves by which we justify our critical endeavors need to be answerable, also, to alternative epistemological modes. This is not a defense of Krog. I do not believe that, and cannot know if, there was intent behind her unattributed appropriation of, as our prime example, Ted Hughes's work. At best, the lack of attribution was an oversight. At worst (and Krog did herself no favors with the petulance of her public denials) it comes across as dissimulating and disingenuous.

However, I want to complicate this dynamic by suggesting that the academic community that responded to Watson's essay by entering into an extended internecine squabble, betrayed nothing so much as a singular unwillingness to confront the ways in which *Country of My Skull* directly challenges the idea of individual ownership of ideas and stories through its insistent highlighting of language in its immanent, embodied, iterative, and interpretive aspect. The charge of plagiarism, in other words, is as much a

symptom of the critics' deflection of the text's destabilizing effects and a kneejerk deferral to the comfort of the archive, as it is a justifiable outcome of the impropriety of Krog's practices. Given the occasion to put academic discourse, and its privileging of the sovereign author-figure, under a potentially productive duress (in much the same way that the events of the TRC tore a deep welt into the comfortable veneer of middle-class civility), a shrill and vocal literary set doubled down and laagered up.

Watson's piece is born of a personal vendetta. He accuses Krog of "'concept' theft" (49) because *the stars say 'tsau,'* Krog's 2004 volume of poetic adaptations of nineteenth century /Xam narrative transcriptions, seems to Watson to resemble his own 1991 collection *Return of the Moon: Versions from the /Xam*. Notwithstanding a series of stylistic critiques and *ad hominem* invectives, Watson claims that Krog's adaptation represents nothing so much as a "blatant act of appropriation and...personal opportunism" (60) and that hers is a collection that "belongs not to the history of contemporary poetry in this country, but to the baleful annals of South African plagiarism" (61).

Of greater interest here is that Watson drags *Country of My Skull* into the muck as a "precedent for this sort of thing in her previous career as a writer." According to Watson, *Country* contains unattributed excerpts from Ted Hughes's essay "Myth and Education." He juxtaposes the relevant passages. First, he quotes Krog:

A myth is **a unit of imagination** which makes it possible for a human being to accommodate two worlds. **It reconciles the contradictions of these two worlds in a workable fashion and holds open the way between them.** The two worlds are the inner and outer world. Myth makes

it possible to live with what you cannot endure. **And if the myth has been learnt well it becomes a word – a single word that switches** on the whole system of comforting delusions.

(Watson 59-60, Krog SA190/US250)<sup>43</sup>

Second, noting that the British poet used the terms “story” and “myth” interchangeably, Watson quotes Ted Hughes’s essay:

A child takes possession of a story as what might be called a **unit of imagination**. A story which engages, say, earth and the underworld is A [sic.] unit correspondingly flexible [...] **it reconciles their contradictions in a workable fashion and holds open the way between them [...]** **If the story is learned well**, so that all its parts can be seen at a glance, as if we looked through a window into it, **then the story has become** like the complicated hinterland of a single word. It has become a **word**. Any fragment of the story serves as the ‘word’ by which the whole story’s electrical circuit is switched into consciousness, and all its light and power brought to bear. (Watson 60, Hughes 138-139)

Notwithstanding the legalistic merit of Watson’s charges against Krog (and there can be little doubt that there are remarkable similarities between Krog’s and Hughes’s writing on myths/stories)<sup>44</sup>, he decontextualizes both passages to the extent that their fundamental

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<sup>43</sup> Watson’s emboldened text has been maintained. This dissertation chapter has carefully maintained Krog’s paragraph divisions, which often reflect her poetic instincts. Watson does not extend her this courtesy. As I am primarily interested in *his* charges, I have followed his example here.

<sup>44</sup> Even Krog’s own publisher, Random House, prevaricates on the matter, conceding in one breath that the similarities in phrasing are “striking,” and in the next that they are considering a libel suit on Krog’s behalf (Eva Gray, quoted in “Antjie Krog Denies Plagiarism Claims”).

differences are belied. Watson deflects this context by editing the two to three pages of Krog's engagement down to a paragraph equatable in length to Hughes's.

Hughes's essay, originally published in 1976, invokes the uncomplicated confidence of a British man of letters who, echoing Plato's *The Republic*, argues in broadly universalist terms for the value of myth as part of "imagination" training in childhood education. It is difficult not to infer, especially from Hughes's suggestion of myth's "light and power," Matthew Arnold's ideologically disastrous justification of culture's claims to "perfection" as the antidote to anarchic desires to do as one wills.

*Country of My Skull*'s deployment of "myth", however, is wholly more ambivalent. Indeed, Krog's echoing of "Myth and Education," whether intentional or not, appropriates Hughes's words to a *critique* of universalizing humanism. If, for Hughes, the reconciliation of contradictions opens up the learner to the power and light of history and the imagination, then to Krog it is an easily manipulable site of dangerous falsehoods. Reconciliation of contradictions is, to her, ideological manipulation that fosters "comforting delusion," such as those that sustained myths of white superiority. Her discussion of myth is situated in a passage in which the narrator visits (white) friends and ends up discussing with their child the living conditions of the family's domestic worker. According to the child, the worker doesn't miss her children because "Maids don't feel like other people about their children. They like to be rid of them. Anyway, Alina likes me now" (Krog SA190/US250). The worker does not need a heater in her quarters because "Maids don't get cold like white people." The words around which the myths constellate in Krog's account, are epithets. The Afrikaans word for "maid," *meid*, and the South African equivalent of "nigger," *kaffer*, invariably connote inferiority:



“*kafferbees* – low quality cattle; *kafferwaatlemoen* – tasteless melon; *kafferkombes* – cheap kind of blanket. There are also words like *kaffersleg* and *kafferlui*, indicating the intensive form. Very useless is *kaffersleg*. Very lazy is *kafferlui*. / Like the word *kaffermeid*.”

Krog thus particularizes Hughes’ generalizations and, in so doing, implicitly undermines his argument. As much as a white child might deny it under a “maid” rubric, Alina feels the distance between herself and her children. And she feels the cold in her body. Thus, whereas for Hughes, myths are essential to importing “sharpness, clarity and scope of the mental eye” (Hughes 143)<sup>45</sup>, for Krog myth closes people up until they see all things through the narrow chinks of their caverns: “The function of a myth is to

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<sup>45</sup> So as not to present Hughes as a straw man, it should be noted that he does not limit his understanding to the “mental eye.” Indeed, his argument precisely engages the imagination as a faculty that negotiates between the outer world and the body: “the outer world is only one of the worlds we live in. For better or for worse we have another, and that is the inner world of our bodies and everything pertaining...why can’t this inner world be thought of as an extension of the outer world – in other words why isn’t the sharp, clear, objective eye of the mind as adequate for this world as it is for the other more obviously outer world?” (Hughes 143-4). Indeed, Hughes is often persuasive and writes beautifully about the negotiation:

We solve the problem by never looking inward. We identify ourselves and all that is wakeful and intelligent with our objective eye, saying, ‘Let’s be objective’. That’s really no more than saying ‘Let’s be happy’. But we sit, closely cramped in the cockpit behind the eyes, steering through the brilliantly crowded landscape beyond the lenses, focused on details and distinctions. In the end, since all our attention from birth has been narrowed into the outward beam, we come to regard our body as no more than a somewhat stupid vehicle. All the urgent information coming towards us from that inner world sounds to us like a blank, or at best the occasional grunt, or a twinge. The body, with its spirits, is the antennae of all perceptions, the receiving aerial for all wavelengths. But we are disconnected. The exclusiveness of our objective eye, the very strength and brilliance of our objective intelligence, suddenly turns into stupidity – of the most rigid and suicidal kind. (145-6)

Remarkable, however, is the tone of Hughes’s argument. His insistence on addressing an audience he feels no need to define with the collective pronoun “we,” suggests the universalizing gaze he assumes, which, in its lack of particularity, all but elides the writing and/or reading body or the body being written about. And when he does particularize his experience, as when he illustrates a point with a memory of a magazine spread in which a photographer captured images of (rather than helping) a woman being mauled by a tiger, he subsumes that experience and memory to the broader argument. It might as well have been hypothetical. In point of fact, then, the form of the literary essay in which Hughes makes his argument is at odds with the argument itself. Krog, on the other hand, is very careful to place her abstract ruminations on myth within a material and embodied context. The disjuncture between generalization and particularity, it can be argued, goes to the very heart of her transformation of Hughes’s words (or words like Hughes’s).

provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction. The myth proves that things have always been like this, that things will never change” (Krog SA190/US250).

It is arguable, then, that Krog deploys Hughes against Hughes and in this regard fulfills what Stephen Watson himself argues (via Malcolm Gladwell) is the one justification for the appropriation of another author’s text: “‘borrowing that is transformative [rather than] borrowing that is merely derivative.’ Here T.S. Eliot is exemplary” (Watson 58). Watson suggests that Krog possesses neither Eliot’s sensibility, “let alone his intelligence” (59). This comparison is at once odious and rendered in bad faith when there can be little doubt that Watson *wants* to see plagiarism in *Country of My Skull*. He deploys the figuration of Eliot, a writer whose work, in the Barthesian sense, falls into the category of the classic text, as the canonical counterpoint to the presumptuous woman writer who dares to stir the proverbial pot of conventional patrilineal citation practice.

When “The Annals of Plagiarism: Antjie Krog and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection” was first published, it loosed a firestorm of disagreement in South African literary circles. A lot of the discussion was hosted by an online forum, *Litnet*: from Colin Bower’s impassioned defense of private ownership for the sake of the publishing industry (Bower), itself a response to Barbara Adair’s questioning of the very possibility of uniqueness in an age of pastiche and intertextuality (Adair); to Helen Moffet’s bewailing the tension the debate had caused in the “tiny” Cape Town literary scene (Moffet) and refusal to take sides, a response to Mike Stevenson’s claim that *Litnet* was biased against Watson because it had traditionally privileged Afrikaner literature (Stevenson) and site

convener Ettiene van Heerden's subsequent insistence on the site's impartiality (van Heerden).

Inevitably, the discussion found its way from the relatively specialized confines of literary magazines and online forums to the national print media. For example, *The Mail and Guardian*, a left-leaning national weekly, carried pieces by Shaun de Waal and Colin Bower. The latter extrapolated on Watson's charges:

Kondlo is quoted as saying: 'Unlike the stories of the men where boundaries are set, these stories undermine boundaries: men turn into women and vice versa, animals become people, women fall in love with animals, people eat each other, dreams and hallucinations are played out.' ....

In *We Spend our Years as a Story that is Told*, published 11 years earlier, Hofmeyr writes that stories told by women in the African oral tradition can be understood as "subversive and unsettling accounts in which all known social categories and boundaries are upset. Men become women; animals become human; women fall in love with animals; people eat one another. The stories are also characterised by hallucination, vision and illusion." (Bower)

The following week, two letters to the editor were published. The first from Sarah Ruden reeks of smug vindication. She reiterates her stance from her 1999 review, and summarily dismisses Krog's defenders: "The book has many fans who, if you question them, appear not to have read it or to have reflected on what it contains. It's not hard to see why. Fashionable, feel-good, sloppy books about the new South Africa help the powerful

ignore huge problems” (Ruden “Watson Deserves an Answer”). The second letter comes from Grahamstown-based poet Chris Mann, whose more sympathetic tone cannot disguise the cursoriness of his reading of *Country* implicit in his lack of awareness of its metatextuality:

What also disturbed me is her attribution to a Professor Kondlo of a string of descriptive concepts that had appeared previously in a book by the Wits scholar Isabel Hofmeyr.

Colin Bower's article (March 3) quotes Krog as writing, "my friend Professor Kondlo, the Xhosa intellectual from Grahamstown". Who is Professor Kondlo? Such a person is unknown to me, to academics who have lived in Grahamstown for decades and to others in the field who live elsewhere. Perhaps there has been an error. I hope so. (Mann)

As I have suggested in the chapter proper, Professor Kondlo can be read as a composite character, a figuration of “the academics” whose voices partake in the web of infinite sorrow, rather than function as arbiters of ultimate truth. He is a textual device by which the primacy and authority of academic utterances are purposefully undercut. Professor Kondlo does not reflect mistaken attribution, nor need he *exist* in order to counter the plagiarism charges.

Naturally, Krog herself felt compelled to answer the charges on *Litnet*. Her prevarication, especially with regard to the Hughes passage, is difficult to negotiate, a reality that at once suggests her guilt and the irresolvable complexity of the *Country*'s discursive configuration. Why for example, should she feel compelled in her first response, “Stephen Watson and the Annals of Plagiarism,” to argue that her use of

Hughes *is* transformative, even as she disclaims any influence by the Hughes essay? “It is ludicrous,” she writes, “to label a similarity in idiom (or even conceptualisation) as ‘plagiarism’, particularly with the myriad discussions on the nature of myth – thousands of these on the internet alone.” (Krog “Stephen Watson”). More petulantly, in her second *Litnet* post, she claims to be “a Sylvia Plath groupie and have always been, shall we say, unsympathetic to the poetry of Ted Hughes. *Country of My Skull* was written under great pressure during three months’ negotiated leave from the SABC. There was no way, with so many experts around, that I would have turned to Hughes’s prose essays for information on myth” (Krog “Last Time, This Time”).

Nevertheless, she also renders a more substantive response in her first post which reiterates her understanding of *Country* as caught up in and enacting a *process* of coming into language through the practice of quilting.

*Country of My Skull* is my own, highly personalised version of experiences at the TRC. *Country of My Skull* is NOT a journalistic or factual report of the Truth Commission. In fact, the problem of truth, the ethical questions around the “making” of truth, the use of other people’s truths, the relation between power and truth, and other factors at play in the execution of truth, all form part of the text itself.

For me, we were forging a new vocabulary in an open and democratic society where finally the past had been made known. Everybody was a textmaker. Everyone’s input was equal. Words like *reconciliation, retributive justice, transitional justice, post-traumatic*

*stress symptoms*, etc, which have since become neatly defined and packaged, were still new and open and often unknown.

My desire to respect this equality of input would have been undermined by a bibliography, as it would have foregrounded certain texts as “established truth” while perhaps implicitly relegating the testimonies of victims to something ‘less.’

She lists alternative sources on myth (Ian Buruma’s *Het Loon van de Schuld*, editor Herbert Morris’s *Guilt and Shame*, Johan Degenaar’s *Imagination, Fiction, Myth*, and Carl Jung’s *After the Catastrophe*) claiming to have cited them (Krog SA 237/US311) as well as Isabel Hofmeyr: “The text’s grow next to one another in the vapour of freshly mown language. Nomonde Calata...Isabel Hofmeyer...Elaine Scarry...” (SA47/US63).<sup>46</sup> She also claims to “know Professor Kondlo well,” while conceding in a footnote that it is not his real name. The footnote, in this regard, preserves the agitation effect of Professor Kondlo as a literary device: he is a generic figuration, a type who is nevertheless based in the real.

Krog thus parlayed the discursive heft of “what the academics say,” a heft academics expect, and chisel into the contours of the edifice they collectively build and defend, into the infinite web of language, experiences, and affects that constituted, by her characterization, the TRC. This strategy, she ultimately claims, renders *Country* a generic

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<sup>46</sup> Ashleigh Harris broadened the charges against Krog by arguing that she appropriated the “academic registers of... Elaine Scarry[’s *The Body and Pain*]” (Harris 47). In a footnote, Harris quotes Jacqui Starkey-Melck’s unpublished MA Dissertation, “Reclaiming Her Body, Remembering Her Voice: The Quest for the Unheard Voice in Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story* and Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*,” which juxtaposes the following two passages as, one presumes, pithy evidence: Krog writes that “[t]he academics say pain destroys language and this brings about an immediate reversion to a pre-linguistic state” (SA42/US57); Scarry writes that “[t]o witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language (Scarry 1985: 6)” (Starkey-Melck 17) (Harris 47n).

outlier. In “Last Time, This Time” she suggests that she finds herself “in the bizarre position of being called to account why a fork is not a spoon. Put differently: Why was a non-fiction text not written like a factual report?” She concludes her response by re-invoking the formulation. “What is happening now is more like saying this fork is not a spoon, therefore the fork is a terrible spoon.”

Perhaps the most substantive critical response is that of Ashleigh Harris, published six months later in *Journal of Literary Studies*.<sup>47</sup> Harris argues that Krog's plagiarism in *Country of My Skull* is more deeply ingrained in the text than even Watson sees, and that it is also implicit to her use of TRC testimonies. The result is a more fruitful engagement with the questions at hand, one that nevertheless broadly ignores the potential for a self-reflexive engagement suggested by Krog's figuration of the academics.

Situating her claims within the context of the debate Watson kickstarted, she argues the weakness of the distinction between derivative and transformative appropriations of critical texts: it “hinges on aesthetic opinion: the extent to which the borrowing transforms the original into something new and, hence, poetic. It is unlikely that there can ever be aesthetic agreement” (Harris 47). For her, then, the issue is not only one of aesthetics. Indeed, she happily concedes that Krog transforms the “ideas, though barely the words themselves, into a new genre” (48). Instead, she claims that the problem with Krog's borrowings is that they are not sufficiently signposted as borrowings. The problem is an unethical “erasure of the original” which becomes all the more ethically suspect when it is applied to the historically silenced voices of victim testimonies. She

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<sup>47</sup> Read also Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack's “Hospitality in Karel Schoeman's *Promised Land* and Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*.”

concedes that Krog's strongest counter to this claim is that such erasure was genre-appropriate, quoting the poet's own defense.

Indeed, Krog's attribution of "equality" to all the voices of the TRC would seem to confirm Harris's understanding that she all too easily blurs the text's origin – be it Hughes's, Hofmeyr's, Scarry's, Mhlauli's, Calata's, or Hechter's – and in so doing overlays the "seam" that marks and joins the heterogeneous fragments by which South Africa's histories, politics, cultures, and subjects are constituted. This blurring, she argues, is counter to the text's avowed fragmentary nature, which is contrary to the urge towards coherence that she identifies as disingenuously *implicit* to Krog's text. My own argument is that this urge is an explicit aspect of *Country's* workings, and that the dialectical tension between the text's fragmentation and blurring agitates the mechanism by which readers allow themselves to accept distortions. *Country's* citation practice is nothing if not inconsistent. Certain passages and concepts *are* directly attributed, others are grouped. Whether this inconsistency was intentional – there are instances that evince intent, and, dialectically, others that do not – is a matter of conjecture that situates us in precarious proximity to an ethical reading that relies ultimately on mere intentionalism.

We can be thankful for the substantive nuance Harris and others brought to the discussion. Watson, and few of the immediate respondents, even thought to address the implication of the text's citation practices for witnesses and perpetrators, seemingly circling the wagons in defense of academic practice. However, these later interventions came *after* Watson's spectacularly vituperative and wanton invective. The scandal spiraled outward from a specialist forum to the national press, besmirching a text that, flawed though it arguably is, also has few equals as a self-conscious and visceral



enactment of literary process in the face of real trauma. That the debate nuanced itself, like the TRC Hearings in relation to its *Report*, situates *Country* on the receiving end of a bifurcated event situated between the intensity of the initial public scandal, and the staid and relatively inaccessible nature of its subsequent playing out. The latter cannot compete with the former for effect.

Hence, I entered into this discussion begrudgingly. It is contained in a *mere* addendum. Did Watson's article not enact the very counter to what I want to believe the literary humanities can accomplish, I might not have included it at all. To respond to Stephen Watson's charges is to validate and get caught up in the worst kind of "subsequent language," as Barthes defines it; worst because Watson does not respond to the event of the writerly text, so much as subsume it with an inflexible agenda that pre-exists it and pulls it along. The irony is not lost that I now incorporate his article and its fallout as an afterthought into an argument that serves an agenda of my own. It is not an approach I want to take. That said, under-qualified charges of plagiarism, as with "racism," "homophobia," "sexism," and a whole slew of inherently complicated and all-too-often uncritically deployed accusations, need to be addressed even if they deserve the periphery rather than the center of the debate.

This approach of Watson's is an egregious example of academic endeavor entrenched in an ethos of anti-Literariness. Indeed, *Country of My Skull*, and the difficult negotiations it enacts, hardly matters within the larger scheme of Watson's argument. And yet the pall it casts over Krog's text, which, as I have argued, potentially enacts a visceral and productive destabilization of the reading subject, cannot but hinder the tentatively curious approach of new readers. It just takes a passing remark, "Oh...she's a

plagiarist,” for such a reader’s experience of the text to be irrevocably affected. Watson now matters to *Country of My Skull*, even if *Country of My Skull* does not matter to him. This is another reason his article cannot be ignored, even as engagement with his piece draws attention to it.

In all this, I risk overstatement. Of course, Literariness can overcome the circumscriptions of disgruntled academics. Inevitably, the curious reading / writing / speaking / learning / teaching subject will incorporate them into the larger historical, social, cultural, political and ethical web, the negotiation with which the aesthetic experience of language facilitates. I do not mean to suggest Literariness’s mere fragility, or even its preciousness. And yet Watson’s destructive pedantry is dangerous precisely because it models *incuriosity*, stifles thought, and, should his argument take hold on those who design curricula, limits access. As a literary intellectual and a poet, presumably vested, and striving to be an exemplar of the work that literature does on those who immanently produce and consume it, Watson erred. As Eva Gray suggest in response to Watson on *Litnet*, “copyright fundamentalism...could serve to stifle creativity in a country that needs it badly” (Gray). Indeed, his article resembles less the work of the intellectual, than that of another prodigious reader and judge: the censor.

Censorship is the subject of J.M. Coetzee’s *Giving Offense*. He characterizes the writer (who in Barthes’ formulation is analogous also to the reader, and who I extrapolate to include the speaker, teacher, and learner) as being engaged in an iterative process: “It is...a very private activity, so private that it constitutes the definition of privacy: how I am with myself” (Coetzee, *Giving Offense* 38). This process, he suggests, is simultaneously delicate and brutal: “Managing the inner selves, making them work for

one (making them productive) is a complex matter of pleasing and satisfying and challenging and extorting and wooing and feeding, and sometimes even putting to death.”

This putting to death, he suggests in his chapter on the exiled Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach, is the work of the esoteric censor, who is internal to the writing process:

The esoteric account...is that the writer writes *against* and cannot write *without* a manifold of internalized resistances that are in essence no different from an internalized censor-twin, both cherished and hated.

In intense moments, writing can throw up evidences of bloody or asphyxiating struggles against blockages or resistances: gagged words gagged out. The voice struggles to breathe in, to breathe out, against intimate persecutory figures. (232)

If Krog did plagiarize, it was not for lack of esoteric censors. *Country*, if nothing else, is a text that directly and intimately confronts ethical and aesthetic remediation. The writer is fractured in the process. The same cannot be said of Stephen Watson’s invective, which is aimed at her public utterance from a position, indeed, in defense, of a supposedly unimpeachable academic authority and influence (Watson was, at the time, the Head of the University of Cape Town Department of English; Tom Eaton, an acolyte, was the editor of *New Contrast*). In this light, Watson resembles nothing so much as the exoteric censor, who is the “gag that stifles” a “voice struggling to utter itself.”

A literary academy in the service of Literariness simply *cannot* afford to situate itself so. It must, instead, adopt a mode that encourages the intensity, nuance, and aesthetic innovation driven by esoteric resistances. This does not preclude contradiction, disagreement, or even conflict, as aspects of the web of readers, writers, speakers,

learners and teachers accommodated by the literary academy. But the primary imperative of its work must be the proliferation rather than restriction of curiosity. This may require painful concessions. At the very least, it requires intellectual agility and limber self-reflexivity, so that it does not superimpose itself and its agendas over the intimate workings of *process*.

Crucially, this is not merely a matter methodological awareness. It is an aspect of performance, of affect and effect. J.M. Coetzee implicitly recognizes this in his characterization of censorship in the language of embodied courtship and violation:

Working under censorship is like being intimate with someone who does not love you, with whom you want no intimacy, but who presses himself in upon you. The censor is the intrusive reader, a reader who forces his way into the intimacy of the writing transaction, forces out the figure of the loved or courted reader, reads your words in a disapproving and *ensorious* fashion. (38)

Such *violence*, both esoteric and exoteric, is to be resisted in the work of the literary academy, lest it comes to resemble and perpetuate within and through its students a panoptic nightmare. Apartheid censors, Coetzee remarks, outnumbered writers and artists by more than ten to one (Coetzee 34). The academics would do well not to treat this claim merely as historiographical fact, but also as a caution.

## CHAPTER V

“I’M STILL ME”:

### U.S. MILITARY VETERANS, PERFORMING MEMORY, AND THE TELLING PROJECT

In so far as I have a polemic it is this: trust in the inauthentic,  
the contingent, the practical as a way of arriving at meaning.

- William Kentridge, “Director’s Note,” *Ubu and  
the Truth Commission*.

Literariness, as it has been defined and enacted here, is haunted by theatricality. Like literariness, theatricality is the quality of form by which performances are evaluated and defined as theatrical. It is, of course, a principle and practice that would seem to be more directly and un-controversially associated with the immanence of performance. Theatricality, by most accounts, trades in effect and affect as immanent aspects of the audience / performer dialectic. And yet theatricality, like literariness, is also perceived as a regulatory principle. So, just as Diana Taylor resists the distinction between “writing” as artifact and writing as immanent process, so she polemically distinguishes “theatre” from “performance”: the former, she suggests, is “weighed down by centuries of colonial, evangelical and normalizing activity” (Taylor 15). Performance, on the other hand, carries the possibility of challenge, even self-challenge, within it. As a term simultaneously connoting a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world, it far exceeds the possibilities of these other words offered in its place. Moreover the problem of translatability, as I see it, as actually a positive one, a necessary stumbling block that reminds us that ‘we’ – whether in our various disciplines, or languages, or geographic locations... – do not simply and unproblematically understand each other.

While I subscribe to Taylor's understanding of performance as principally, practically, and methodologically liberating (as evinced in the introduction), I am more reticent than she to consign "these other words," literariness, theatricality, to monological ignominity. In my conception, Literariness and Theatricality can be understood *as* performances – not merely weighed down by, or understood abstractly as, a set of historically determined conventions, but as staging, in their immanence, the subject's potentially productive and self-reflexively alterable iterative and interpretive engagement with his or her world. To enact these possibilities, however, requires that both Literariness and Theatricality be deployed not merely as fixed and regulatory concepts, but as processes.

This chapter, largely anecdotal, offers an account of experiences working on The Telling Project – a collaborative project between civilian interviewers, playwrights, directors, and U.S. Military veterans that enact the tensions between immanence and abstraction, past and present, assumption and surprise, process and product. The chapter begins *en media res* – much as I found myself partaking before I understood or even conceived of the relations between the Telling Project and my broader research project: truthfully, it was not my intention to incorporate my work on *Telling* into my dissertation. Many of the connective strands to the TRC and its ethics of remediation were happened upon after the fact – hence the inclusion of Anthony Kubiak, whose work engages what he conceives of as a definitionally American dynamic, into a first chapter that speaks of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In this chapter it is the South African TRC and two of the plays it precipitated which irrupt onto an American stage.

## The Problem

Since 2007, I have worked alongside Jonathan Wei (Jon) as an interviewer, transcriber, playwright, and producer with The Telling Project, a non-partisan not-for-profit endeavor that facilitates communication between U.S. military service personnel and their civilian communities through live theatre events. The Telling Project process is this: U.S. Military veterans volunteer to be interviewed; those interviews are then transcribed and shaped by civilian playwrights into a performance script, which the veterans, after basic performance training, rehearsal, and editorial refinement, perform themselves.

In that process, one intricate deliberation has become familiar: the translation of memories of deeply personal experiences into forms that approached *art*, an experience for the audience, something representational, mimetic, educational. Indeed, the successes and limitations of the Telling Project reside within the translational seam that both separates and draws together *personal stories* and their *broader significance*. This seam, I propose, is constituted by the dialogical tension between the affirmation and problematization of the “authenticity” of the veterans’ theatrical (re)iterations of their experiences.

Within a larger critical context, the idea of “authenticity” is contentious. Post-structuralism, for example, has pointed to its philosophical impoverishments and dangerous ideological machinations. Critical methodologies have parsed its constitutive elements and have rendered important critiques of identity claims grounded in claims of authenticity, be they based on race, religion, gender, or nationalism. However, though these schools have set the standard for discussion, some of their approaches tend to

engage authenticity as a *mere* idea, which is to say that it is conceived of in the abstract, as a generalizable, ahistorical, homogeneous concept. My experience working with the veterans has suggested that this “idea” of authenticity potentially enacts (rather than merely represents) crucial outcomes which broadly align with the Telling Project’s dialogical mandates. Affirming the authenticity of the veterans’ bodies in relation to the *specific* history they theatrically reactivate (they *enact* in immanent performance a reconciliation of the language of memory and their bodies’ histories), serves the “therapeutic mandate.” In addition, insofar as authenticity can be destabilized or problematized in the audiences’ understanding, and insofar as doing so agitates against the all-too-often blithe identification or antipathy of civilians towards veterans, authenticity serves the Telling Project’s “critical/educational” mandate.

The necessity of the dialogical deployment of “authenticity” is suggested by the sense, felt by many of the veterans, that civilians tend to appropriate veterans’ stories to their own political and social ends. The veterans often identify this in phenomena ranging from cable punditry to insensitive civilian questions (“Did you kill anyone?”). The signifier “veteran,” its bearers feel, is interchangeably deployed across the political spectrum: they are heroes and victims; America’s finest and most dysfunctional; patriots and baby killers; protectors of freedom and human rights abusers; annoying beggars and a *cause célèbre*.<sup>48</sup> For example, Joshua, a young marine, said in an interview and later in

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<sup>48</sup> The Telling Project has completed various productions across the United States, including in Starkville MS, Sacramento CA, and Baltimore MD. This discussion will engage the two productions in which I have had the most direct hand: predominantly, The Telling Project’s first production, *Telling, Eugene*, performed by University of Oregon student veterans, a navy recruit, and marine’s, with reference to its second, *Telling, Portland OR*, performed largely by Portland State University student veterans. Insofar as these first two productions took place in the Pacific Northwest, there can be no doubt that my experiences and the experiences the veterans described speak to regional attitudes as much as national ones. Jonathan Wei, the executive director of the Project, remarked to me on the phone after interviewing Mississippi veterans for the first time that if veterans in predominantly left-



our first production, *Telling, Eugene*, directed by John Schmor,

People drive around with that bumper sticker that says, ‘I don’t support the war, I support the troops.’ ....A bumper sticker doesn’t give us support. What that’s doing is actually supporting themselves. That’s supporting them in their social status....Because saying you don’t support the troops is like saying you don’t support children. What person looks good in society by saying, ‘Oh no, fuck the kids. They don’t need education.’ No. So of course everybody says, ‘I love kids, the poor kids.’ And so who are the new children nowadays? The troops. The yellow ribbons? That’s nice, but that doesn’t support us. (*Telling, Eugene*)

I do not take Josh to be objecting to civilians holding or expressing opinions, so much as their self-serving appropriation of the idea of “troops” in homogenizing and patronizing terms. He also seems to take issue with the incuriosity he sees as implicit to civilians’ associations with veterans. The obviousness of the veterans’ plight suggests to him blitheness: uncritical, willful ignorance, devoid of particularity and safe in its assumptions. He continues,

It just angers me, every time I see a bumper sticker, whether it’s pro-war, anti-war, whatever. The majority of these people have never seen combat, they’ve never seen war, they’ve never seen a day of boot camp, aside from what they see on CNN, Fox News and MSNBC – that’s all people know. They don’t want to know what we went through.

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leaning western Oregon feel the weight of civilians’ political judgment, then veterans in the red states feel burdened by expectations that they conform to standards of All-American militarized heroism. While such regional attitudes do emerge, they should not be perceived as true of all veterans in either, or any particular, context.

To Josh, the specificity of experience, *his* experience, falls prey to broader public discourses in which he, and people like him, are representations, types, figurations, subject to the abstract play of televised and op-ed talking points, endlessly re-circulated and then overheard by veterans in classrooms, corridors, coffee shops and bars.

The Telling Project's therapeutic mandate serves to validate the veterans' proprietorship over *their* stories. The performances, the *telling* of these stories before a receptive civilian audience, function as iterations of individual subjects, public identity claims, ritual reunions of anecdotes with the bodies that experienced them. Under the therapeutic mandate it is crucial that the relation between the story and the particular performer's body is held to be sacrosanct, or authentic. "I'm the luckiest man alive," said Brian, a marine who performed in *Telling: Portland*, and who survived two direct IED strikes in Iraq: "I'm still alive, I'm still intact, I'm still...me" (*Telling, Portland*).

The second *critical/educational* mandate, which is always in dialogical tension with the first, serves to challenge civilian audience responses to veterans and the war, their kneejerk politicization, ill-informed associations, and homogenizing appropriation. However, this requires that audiences take stock of *themselves*. To contextualize this challenge in theatrical terms, I refer to Bertolt Brecht's "Short Organum for the Theatre," and the question by which he preempts objections to his theatre's deployment of character. For Brecht, nothing was as counterproductive to the goal of producing a critical attitude in his audiences as the unthinking, trancelike state of popular realist theatre audiences.<sup>49</sup> He describes them as detached from their bodies, motionless,

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<sup>49</sup> In the "Popular and the Realistic," Brecht makes a crucial distinction between popular realist modes of theatre and the critical realism to which his theatre for a scientific age aspires. In so doing, Brecht reclaims "realism" from the popular theatrical modes which reflect back to bourgeois audiences the visual, linguistic, and experiential conventions of the everyday. Staged drawing rooms look like "real"

“relieved of activity and like men to whom something is being done” (Brecht 509). Hence, Brecht’s famous *V-effekt*, his insistence on the audience’s critical and active engagement, facilitates the *verfremdung* of the audience from the spectacle with which they are confronted. Opposed, then, to popular realist theatre’s denial of the artificers’ hand, Brecht foregrounds theatrical fakery and “acting.” His “theatre for the scientific age” insists on producing *disbelief* and *incredulity* as a prerequisite to its audience’s critical engagement.

This disbelief depends on incredulity towards characters and the performances of actors. Brechtian theatre resists the effects of popular realist characters and their actors, who thrive on psychological ephemera – human essences as unknowable, unutterable lacunae into which the empathizing audience member can pour herself. In Brecht’s theatre characters are moved not from within, but without. They are moved by social *forces* rather than emotions, a structural conceit that dialectically enacts emotions as iterations of historical circumstance as much as ephemeral psychology. Characters are thus pointedly *representative* of contentious attitudes within the contemporary social

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drawing rooms. Acted emotions look like “real” emotions. Performed language sounds like the linguistic utterances they hear performed daily. Popular realism, then, feeds a self-affirming loop whereby the imminently contestable truth claims that sustain the bourgeois “real” are left invisible and unquestioned.

Brecht’s realism, by way of distinction, necessitates ethical and epistemological curiosity facilitated by the immanent aesthetic encounter.

*Realist* means: laying bare society’s causal network / showing up the dominant viewpoint of the dominators / writing the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the pressing problems afflicting human society / emphasizing the dynamics of development / concrete and so as to encourage abstraction.

Brecht’s definition of the realist, informed by his ardent dialecticism, is remarkable for its insistence on immanent process. “Realist,” in his conception, implies not the objectivist empiricist’s fantasy of a material reality that *is* what it appears to be. It is not an ontological claim. Brecht’s “real” has no permanent being. It is “concrete” only insofar as can be said to *have* existed (to echo post-positivist realism’s principle, it existed objectively enough to learn from it) prior to consequent and subsequent abstraction. Abstraction, in this regard, suggests the flux and play of representational forms by which to countermand the illusion that the signifier is grounded in an immoveable object. By Brecht’s account, then, aesthetic realism is only ever a version of reality.

milieu; they are obvious *figurations*, not stock characters so much as historically contingent and recognizable types. Here, then, the objection Brecht preempts: If all characters are representative, he asks, then “Where is the man himself, the living, unmistakable man, who is not quite identical with those identified with him?”<sup>50</sup> This tension between the contingent particularity of the individual subject, and the habitual generalizing of critical enterprise – be it theatrical or scholarly – constitutes the object and form of the discussion that follows.

### The Process

The Telling Project process was established by Jon in collaboration with the University of Oregon Veterans and Families Student Association (VFSA). From 2005 to 2007, Jon served as a non-traditional student advisor and helped facilitate the establishment of the VFSA. The veterans’ organization undertook the task of educating their community (in this case, civilian students) about veteran experiences and issues. To this end they held “Veterans’ Panels,” one of which I attended in early 2007. Five veterans sat in a line before a large lecture theatre. The event was attended by an audience of maybe ten. A moderator, herself a veteran, asked a question. The panel answered one by one, passing a microphone stiffly along the line. Another question was asked, and the microphone was passed back, answers given in reverse order. After a few such exchanges, the audience was allowed to ask questions, which were few, tentative,

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<sup>50</sup> My use of Brecht here is admittedly thematic rather than critical. I do not mean to suggest that he was monological in his understanding of empathy as a countermand to critical engagement. In his later writing, there is a distinct softening in his stance. So Bela Kiralyfalvi argues that Brecht’s position on emotion and reason in a theatre performance is finally made clear in *Der Messingkauf*. In it, the Actor asks “Does getting rid of empathy mean getting rid of every emotional element?” The Philosopher, who Kiralyfalvi associates with Brecht, answers, “No, No. Neither the public nor the actor must be stopped from taking part emotionally; the representations of emotion must not be hampered, nor must the actors’ use of emotions be frustrated. Only one of many possible sources of emotion needs to be left unused, or at least treated as a subsidiary source – empathy” (qtd. in Kiralyfalvi 1990, 27-28).

and anxiety-inducing for the panelists.

The panels fell short of fulfilling the VFSA's educational directive; not least because attendance was low despite campus-wide publicity. As Jon recounted to me, the veterans often suffered "talker's remorse," post-performance anxiety about having said too much or having left out crucial details. In addition, Jon, a fiction writer, spent extensive time with veterans in more comfortable surrounds and felt that their stories and the manner of their telling were lost in the panels. What was required was a formalization of the encounter, the provision of a way for veterans to rehearse their stories and to tell them as they wanted them told before a broader audience. With these ends in mind, Jon and the VFSA negotiated the process by which *Telling, Eugene* and *Telling, Portland* came to be performed between 2008 and 2010.<sup>51</sup>

Accordingly, the method changed. Veterans (and sometimes their family members) now volunteered to be interviewed on camera. The interviews have ranged from 1 to 7 hours. The dictum is that we (civilian interviewers / playwrights) listen for as long as the veterans need to tell their stories the way they want to. That said, while Jon tends to let veterans speak freely, I tend to interrupt, admittedly with editorial intent, with a civilian point of view. So I might say, "You know that would sound extreme to your average civilian. What would you say to them about that?" We both interrupt for clarity's sake – there is, for example, seemingly no end of acronyms to trip up even the most attentive of civilian brains: C.O., M.R.E., I.E.D., F.O.B., and M.O.S. We also interrupt to establish timelines – "Why did you join?" we ask. "How was basic training?" "Where did you go and what did you do?" "What's it like coming home?" These interviews are

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<sup>51</sup> Jon, at the time a fiction writer, invited me to partake in the collaboration in 2007 on the basis of my prior experience writing for the theatre.

transcribed and shaped into a script by Jon and I (an editorial role that goes to the ethical heart of this discussion).

The veterans, after basic actor training, rehearsal and refinement of the script, perform it before an audience. The scripts are patterned roughly along the timelines we establish in the interviews. First “acts” (I use the term loosely) deal with reasons for joining and basic training, second “acts” with service or deployment, and third “acts” deal with the triumphs and / or difficulties of the veterans’ post-military lives. Within each “act” there is a rough division between ensemble pieces and monologues. Ensemble pieces speak to shared veteran experiences: from “being smoked” (painful and exhausting punitive exercise) in basic training, to the quality of the food, to bowel movements in the intimate company of friends, to the collective sorrow at the loss of friends. Monologues are performed only by the veterans whose embodied experiences they relate: from near mortar misses on the way to the chow hall, to sexual harassment by an officer, to waiting on a Blackhawk for what felt like a suicide mission, to dancing with a beautiful Australian woman in a bar in Hong Kong.

From the earliest rehearsals of *Telling, Eugene*, the process was fraught. As playwrights we made decisions with veterans’ stories that made the veterans uncomfortable. One performer-veteran, a marine and an armorer named Shane, lost a much-loved First Sergeant to an I.E.D. in Iraq, and recalled in his interview cleaning the blood off the man’s side-arm. This, it seemed to Jon and me, went to the very heart of the Shane’s experience. This was what he carried with him, literally (it became *his* side-arm) and figuratively. It was written into his monologue. After reading it for the first time, he called us aside. He was worried about cheapening the story. He didn’t want to be (I think

I remember this phrase) “a performing monkey”: not with *that* story, not with the memory of *that* man. For Shane, then, theatre suggested artifice, acting, a kind of elaborate lie. At the very least, it suggested an undercutting or a commoditization of preciously held memory or deep emotion. What was negotiated, due in no small part to Schmor’s handling of the moment, was that Shane should feel no need to learn by rote words he had used in his interview now formalized by Jon and me into a script. Chatting online with Shane about this essay (he is deployed at the time of writing), he wrote “[It] kept the script alive. I never read word for word my monologue....if I just winged, I’d feel like it came from me I guess.”

Accommodating the particular sensibilities of each veteran, keeping the script alive, meant that the broader structure of the performance could not privilege any one emotional arc (all too easily slipped into in accordance with the conventional theatrical form). We consciously did not want to suggest, as Aristotelian catharsis or a *denouement* might, a sense of closure following a rise in the action and a climax. Any such arc would disenfranchise those whose emotional narratives did not fit the formula – veterans whose experience had ended in basic training, like Patrice’s, or veterans for whom deployment had not involved combat trauma, like Justin, or veterans who found being “home” more difficult than being deployed, like Arturo, who felt “safer in Iraq than [he does] now..... I knew what to do....You get food, you get ammo, you get sleep. That’s all you really need. Over here you have to work your ass off just to barely squeak by and it’s pointless” (Telling, Portland).

Sometimes, however, broader emotional arcs were unavoidable. It came as a surprise in the Eugene rehearsals that one of the performers, Jeremy, started angrily

delivering words he had spoken resignedly in his interview. Towards the performance's conclusion, staged as a social gathering of the VFSA interrupted with direct addresses of the audience, Jeremy began to heighten the pitch of monologue as the performances drew closer. Addressing coverage of the war, he *screamed* these lines: "They make documentaries on what's happening, they push their own agendas and they show dead Marines to do it. And not just their coffins, but their bodies. Those are my friends. They're my brothers." Such was the effect of Jeremy's outburst that it potentially situated itself as a climax that threatened to overwhelm the contingent particularity of other veterans' / performers' experience, this despite attempts to work rebuttals into the script. I was uncomfortable with his outburst and asked him, after rehearsal, if he *really was* that angry – a question I regret. In line with the therapeutic mandate of The Telling Project, Jeremy's anger should not have been challenged with a view to maintaining the formal (or formless) integrity of the play, nor the audience's nor my own comfort.

### The Genre

I often question the propriety of my involvement with The Telling Project. I am not a citizen of the United States. I have never served in the military: conscription laws that compelled young white men to serve two years in the apartheid-era South African National Defense Force were abandoned just before I matriculated. However, I was required by government mandate to march weekly on the soccer field in khaki shorts and shirts with the rest of the boys. Marching, then, is something to which I relate. My father served in the R.A.F for seven years in the sixties. I understand his reticence to talk about that time better now than before my involvement with the Telling Project. Even taking such tenuous connections to the military into account, I am a literary scholar, prone to a



sedentary existence, used to trading in archival texts, abstractions, and interpretations.

Unsurprisingly, my impulse has been to make sense of The Telling Project's process in terms of established genres: "verbatim theatre" being the most obvious insofar as practitioners interview subjects, transcribe those interviews "word-for word", and shape them into plays.<sup>52</sup> That said, verbatim theatre is predominantly performed by *actors* rather than those whose stories it purports to (re)present. The result is that its debates tend to pivot rather abstractly around the binaries of "authenticity" and "theatricality." To read one of its most high profile exponents espouse its virtue is to recognize the self-important posturing an uncritical investment in such binaries all too easily becomes. In an op-ed for the Guardian newspaper in 2005, David Hare writes,

All revolutions in art, said someone, are a return to realism. Given that most art forms, particularly in the hands of metropolitan elites, tend to drift away from reality, what could be more bracing or healthy than occasionally to offer authentic news of overlooked thought and feeling? Isn't it the noblest function of democracy to give a voice to the voiceless? And where better than in a medium whose genius is for sustaining scrutiny? What a welcome corrective to the cosy art-for-art's-sake racket that theatre all too easily becomes. (Hare)

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<sup>52</sup> In the creative hands of such writers as David Hare (*The Permanent Way*), Robin Soans (*Talking with Terrorists*, *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook*), Gillian Slovo and Victoria Brittain (who collaborated on *Guantanamo : Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*), verbatim theatre has enjoyed something of a renaissance in the United Kingdom in recent years. In the United States, high profile examples include [Moisés Kaufman](#)'s and the [Tectonic Theater Project](#)'s *The Laramie Project* (which examines from multiple perspectives the small-town murder of gay Wyoming University student Matthew Shepard in 1998). Anna Deavere Smith's work serves as a precursor. *Fires in the Mirror* (1991) which engages New York City's 1991 Crown Heights riots, and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994) concerned with the Rodney King riots, are based on interviews with various participants.

Stephen Bottoms takes the bait in “Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective?” He astutely points out the tenuousness of Hare’s implicit definition of “realism,” and takes issue with his assumption that an unmediated encounter with the “real” is something that the theatre *can* facilitate, or that a mere word-for-word transcription is enough to guarantee such encounters. Hare’s formulation ignores the mediation of the documents upon which he bases his plays (strictly speaking, Hare writes “documentary theatre”), the contingencies of translation, the often politically motivated editing hand of the playwright, the interpretive hand of the director, and the mediation of language through actors’ bodies. I would add that Hare, counter-intuitively for a theatre practitioner, places too heavy an emphasis on language itself, as though it, kept sufficiently intact from the moment of its original utterance, is the bearer of *authentic* thought and feeling. Stephen Bottoms is by no means opposed to the idea of verbatim theatre, but insists on theatricality as its primary virtue. After detailing the ways in which Hare’s work, as well as Soans’s *Talking With Terrorists* (which more appropriately falls into the genre of verbatim theatre), insist on unmediated reality even as they evidence the particular contingency of their playwrights’ sensibilities, he advocates for the *avant garde* aesthetic of Moisés Kaufman’s work *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*. This piece, he suggests, as represents “the kind of theatrical self-referentiality [that] is precisely what is required of documentary [and verbatim] plays if they are to acknowledge their dual and thus ambiguous status as both ‘document’ [or transcriptions] and ‘play.’” Without such self-referentiality, he argues, verbatim “plays can too easily become disingenuous exercises in the presentation of ‘truth,’ failing (or refusing?) to acknowledge their own highly selective manipulation of opinion and rhetoric” (57-58).

Neither of these accounts, however, engages the implications of staging performances by the interviewees themselves. For me, then, an inevitable referent became the events and theatre of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), especially Alex Boraine's invocation of the first Human Rights Violation Hearings (HRVH), which, already encountered in the first chapter, I re-quote here:

This was the secret of the Commission – no stern-faced officials sitting in a private chamber, but a stage, a handful of black and white men and women listening to stories of horror, of deep sorrow, amazing fortitude, and heroism. The audience was there too, and a much wider audience watched and listened through television and radio. It was a ritual, deeply needed to cleanse a nation. It was a drama. The actors were in the main ordinary people with a powerful story. But this was no brilliantly written play; it was the unvarnished truth in all its starkness. (Boraine 99).

As I also suggested earlier, the official record of the Commission, the TRC Report and transcripts, paled in the national imagination compared to the theatricalized spectacle of the HRVHs. Hence, Mark Sanders's characterization of the fundamental disjuncture in the TRC's reception: the event, "situated between the hearings and its report, between listening and watching, and reading is...bifurcated...[with a] resulting disequilibrium between official record and common memory" (Sanders 148). Just as the tension between contingent personal experience and generalizable abstraction bespeaks *The Telling Project's* pervasive challenges, so the "so-called TRC plays" (Hutchison 63) leapt into this disequilibrium, engaging the problem of representing the events of the TRC. Two plays in particular, especially in their intersection, speak to these complicated

entanglements: The Khulumani Support Group's *The Story I Am About to Tell*, which staged performances by TRC witnesses, and Jane Taylor's and The Handspring Puppet Company's *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, which used puppets to render verbatim transcriptions of TRC victim testimonies.

For William Kentridge, the director of *Ubu*, the artificiality of the puppets is crucial a crucial expression of theatre's self-reflexive artificiality: "Our theatre is a reflection on the debate rather than the debate itself. It tries to make sense of the memory rather than be the memory" (Kentridge ix). This explicit but complicated mimetic quality is borne out by the inter-textual conceit of the broader production. Playwright Jane Taylor creates a fictional apartheid perpetrator, Pa Ubu, confronted with the prospect of a Truth Commission. She refigures the protagonist of Alfred Jarry's late nineteenth century marionette play *Ubu Roi*, with its, "grandiose and rapacious" central character: "Part of the satisfaction [of *Ubu Roi* for audiences] arises from [its] burlesque mode [in which] there is no place for consequences. While Ubu may be relentless in his political aspirations, and brutal in his personal relations, he has no measurable effect upon those who inhabit the farcical world he creates around himself" (Taylor iii). This farcical world, sustained by broad performances of "real" actors, is a suitable backdrop for the play's examination of white privilege and the calloused indifference of government operatives to the suffering they inflict. It would, however, jar against verbatim testimonies of HRVH witnesses, even if performed by actors. The solution, at least for *Ubu*, was that testimonies would be performed by puppets, with speaking manipulators behind them.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kentridge concedes that the decision was as much a function of a preordained performance style as it was of ethical constraints (Kentridge xi).

There seemed to be an awkwardness in getting an actor to play the witnesses – the audience being caught halfway between having to believe in the actor for the sake of the story, and also not believe in the actor for the sake of the actual witnesses who are also out there but are not the actor. Using a puppet made this contradiction palpable. There is no attempt to make the audience think wooden puppet or its manipulator is the actual witness. The puppet becomes a medium through which the story can be heard. (Kentridge xi)

For Kentridge, the palpable embrace of the inauthentic, of puppets, allows the audience to “hear” the stories without discomfort at the appropriative gesture implicit to restaging “real” words. Additionally, because the exquisitely carved puppet faces remain unaffected, I would argue that they allow audiences to “hear” without having their critical sensibilities subsumed by empathy.

Kentridge recognizes other attempts to solve the problem of representing the events of the TRC, with specific reference to *The Story I am About to Tell*, which was conceived as educational theatre to spread awareness of the TRC (Kentridge xiii). In it, three HRVH witnesses, Catherine Mlangeni, Dumo Khumalo, and Thandi Shezi, performed their testimonies, re-contextualized as a conversation in a minibus taxi – a pervasive form of public transport in South Africa. The staging was minimalist, six chairs and an ax the only props. The survivors were accompanied by three *actors* responsible for sustaining scenes, comic relief, scripted debate and renderings of fictional perpetrators (Hutchison 65). During the survivors’ monologues, the actors left the stage in a moment that “replicated the TRC [insofar as] the witness tells his / her story alone

downstage center [and] made the audience intensely aware of their isolation and vulnerability” (64). At the same time, the “juxtaposition of [the] stage and [the] TRC...highlights aspects of manipulation and performance, as well as the potential damage such reiteration of narratives of victimhood may do to the narrator, who is not an actor.”

For Kentrige, *The Story*'s use of real witnesses “is only a partial solution to the questions raised by the Commission” (Kentrige xiii),

Because what the ‘real’ people give is not the evidence itself, but performances of the evidence....And these are not actors....their very awkwardness...makes their performances work. One is constantly thrown back...realizing that these are the actual people who underwent the terrible things they are describing. The most moving part for me was when one of the survivors...had a lapse of memory. How could he forget his own story – but of course he was in that moment a performer at a loss for his place in the script. I have no clear solution to the paradoxes this half testimony, half performance raised. (xiv)

Critics too have had a hard time resolving the paradoxes presented by the theatrical re-contextualization of verbatim texts and “real” people. Shane Graham, a scholar invested in the narrative (re)construction of post-apartheid South African subjects, juxtaposes *Ubu* and *The Story* to each other. Lauding *Ubu*'s self-reflexivity, he nevertheless critiques the manner in which the “puppetry relegates the victims to the margins of the play, making them both literally and metaphorically puppets in Pa Ubu's tortured fantasy world” and replicates “however unintentionally, the traumatic exile of

blacks and political dissidents from Apartheid's own fevered vision of a whites-only Africa" (Graham 20). The puppets, and their manipulation, in other words, signify for him the effacement of subjective agency by which apartheid oppressed the black majority. And yet, Graham argues, *The Story* does not solve the problem. He bases his critique on the survivor-performers' affect, by which the "reality" of the survivors' accounts is countermanded. The stories became "calcified in their rehearsed retelling" (14). So Catherine Mlangeni's original TRC testimony had been "punctuated by sobs," but "[b]y June 2000...she had told her story dozens if not hundreds of times....her delivery felt rehearsed, yet halting. Mlangeni's story has perhaps lost some of its force from being reduced to rote formula. Ironically, the literalness of the play's contrived reenactments detracts from the 'realness' of the experiences the play tries so hard to convey" (15). Later, he argues that "*The Story*... asserts the survivors' status as subjects capable of narrating their own stories, and simultaneously undermines that assertion by emphasizing their *loss* of subjectivity through trauma, and freezing their narratives into memorized formulae" (16). The story's "uncritical privileging of 'reality,'" he argue, belies the fact that the stories told are not necessarily True: "survivors of torture and violence might sometimes, of necessity, misremember or distort the untellable truth of their experience."<sup>54</sup>

From a critical perspective, I agree with Graham's characterization of *The Story*'s entanglement of truth, "reality" and rote formulae. Yet, as a facilitator of the kind of theatre to which he refers, theatre in which veterans – survivors too – tell their own stories, I am conflicted. I want to believe Yvette Hutchison's suggestion that *The Story*'s

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<sup>54</sup> Graham makes this point warily, recognizing that it potentially plays "into the hands of those who have a vested interest in discrediting the victims and denying their stories" (Graham 16).

process is palliative for the survivor-performers because learning and rehearsing of their TRC testimonies, both words and gestures, had the effect of “distancing [survivors] from themselves,” (Hutchison 65). The questions are not framed merely by the exigency of critical nuance nor juridical determination, but by what can rightfully and productively be demanded of the veterans in our collaboration. Undeniably, many of the stories we heard in Telling interviews were misremembered and distorted through trauma or disavowal. But the objective *truth* of the matter is hardly what is at stake. It would jar against the therapeutic aims and non-partisan character of the Telling Project if the memories of its participants were framed in term of their potential falsifiability.

That said, Hutchison’s suggestion of the palliative effect of repetition is not merely a matter of “distancing [veterans] from themselves,” but also its opposite. It is about reconciling bodies, immanently, to the vicissitudes of memory. This reconciliation is the standard of “authenticity” to which the Project aspires and which I want to affirm. Indeed, while Graham’s somewhat ungenerous critique of the survivors’ affect (they are not theatre professionals), the idea of “calcification” is useful in defining a phenomenon the veterans themselves resisted – as was suggested by Shane’s discomfort and Schmor’s intervention. Resistance to calcification means that the sustainability of individual Telling productions is limited. Dozens if not hundreds of performances of the same script are unthinkable. Of course, some veterans are more willing than others to reengage and, if need be, alter their stories for and in subsequent public iteration. Facilitating Telling rehearsals and performances as perpetual *processes* rather than “calcified” repetitions of set play-scripts and choreography allows for longevity, even if it is limited.

A reiteration: the association of the TRC and Telling Project bespeaks the



contingent particularity of my own critical and experiential lens. I do not mean blithely to assert their analogical relation, or to elide vast differences in context, processes, and outcomes. Telling interviews are *not* a truth commission. Within The Project's process, the veterans' stories are not thought of as "testimonies" or "confessions." It has neither interest in nor mechanisms by which to demand full disclosure. The Project is not, and *cannot* be, obsessed with the distinctions between perpetrators and victims, although the moral and psychological implications of both categories have thickened the air in interviews and performances.

### The Performance

*Telling, Eugene* was first performed on February 8, 2008, in the dark hall of the Veterans Memorial Association. It began with the amplified voice of Lemuel Charley, a Navajo, paratrooper and heavy equipment engineer in the U.S. Army. He spoke into a microphone behind the ramshackle flats that served as wings on either side of creaky, borrowed rostra. The staging was minimalist. Stools served as the only props. We rented a rig of about 20 lights.

Approximately 400 audience members – veterans of various generations, families, local theatre groups, students, and peace activists who handed out pamphlets before the performance – sat in the audience, a number facilitated by generous media coverage in the week leading up to the performance, especially, we thought, the cover story in the town's alternative newspaper, the *Eugene Weekly* (Steffen, An Army Of Many).

We didn't think Charley would be performing at all (he was told he would be deployed that weekend) for the dates of the production. We found out very late in the process that he *would* be there, too late to choreograph him into the onstage presence of 9

student veterans and one military wife. And so he agreed to tell a story from backstage to begin the production.

Charley told a story he had recounted for Jon and me, first over a cigarette and then again on camera in an interview. “Let me tell you the story of how I learned that the barrel of a gun gets hot,” he began, with a raconteur’s prowess.

There I was. I grew up on the rez in New Mexico during the Hopi/Navajo land dispute. At that time, the government was sayin’ that if you were Navajo and you lived on Hopi land, or if you were Hopi livin’ on Navajo land, you had to move. And my dad was one of those. We had to drive all the way across the Hopi land to get home. So we’d be drivin’ home at night sometimes and they’d start shootin’ at us. Totally dark, and you could hear the bullets comin’ for us. My dad, he’d grab me by the back of the neck and shove me down to the floorboards of the truck. And he’d shoot back. Then he’d hand me the gun and tell me to reload it. And let me tell you, that barrel got fucking hot.

So when I first hit the ground in Kuwait, and we were takin’ fire for the first time, I thought to myself: ‘I know this.’ (Telling, Eugene)

I enjoyed the self-reflexivity of Charley’s anecdote. It announced itself as a story, and used conventional story-telling tics to set the scene (“There I was”). It drew its listeners towards, and then disrupted, its moral. That the barrel of a recently fired weapon gets hot was not the message to which listeners were ultimately referred (a useful tip nonetheless). Instead, the story ends with a remarkable claim regarding the *unheimlichkeit* of the experience of war for a Native-American man born into a long history of violence.

When it seemed that Charley would not perform, we scrambled to find ways to include the story, including suggestions that we play an audio recording. Schmor argued this would have the benefit keying the audience into the act of listening, their primary contribution to the therapeutic mandate. But Charley's story did more. It was, for example, at odds with the rhetoric by which the war had been justified ("We're fighting them there, so we don't have to fight them here"). It tore asunder the cloak of civility by which America elided its own history and present (about which more soon). The United States was not the Promised Land. It was not the "home" for which the military fought and to which they returned to convalesce. By Charley's account, veterans didn't bring the violence they had suffered outside America home with them. America exported violence from within. "Home" was his training ground, the lens by which he understood the violence he encountered in the theatre of war.

I don't know if Charley meant to suggest this historical irony. There is no reason to believe that he didn't. Simply, the story *worked* as a formal and thematic frame. It thus became more than a reflection of Charley's individual experience. In fact, when it became apparent that Charley *would* be in Eugene and willing to perform, the decision was made to "recast" Charley as "Charley." Insofar as the short timeframe made it impossible to accommodate Charley's physical presence in the broader performance, he became a cipher of sorts, an "absent presence," the conspicuously empty chair left by a deployed friend about whom the performers spoke, whom they missed, and whose safety they worried about. In the third act, in an ensemble sequence, the gathered veterans received a phone call from the deployed "Charley." He was offered care packages and told to come home alive. At the performance's conclusion, he walked onstage from the

wings, introduced himself, and received the ovation with the rest of the performers.

In the Telling Project process, consisting at once of the script's arrangement and the contingencies of rehearsal and performance, the significances of the experiences were unavoidably changed. There can be little doubt that civilian participants editorialized and re-contextualized the veterans' experiences – with their collaboration, of course. This is at the heart of the principle of authenticity which I want at once to affirm and problematize. Claims about the simple authenticity of the veterans' stories would deny the fact of their restaging, their performance, the recasting of their experience within a context that required the veterans to find and iterate new meanings that might otherwise not have occurred to them.

Jon and I preempted this process in our scripting. In his interview, Shane had segued suddenly from the memory of his beloved first sergeant's death. "But you carry on," he said, shifting to a story about watching a massive sandstorm engulf three distant marines. "I see these three guys, Marines, way off down there just hoofin' it to get some shelter. I've got my camera out, I'm looking, thinkin' this is gonna make a good shot, following them along. All the sudden, "Whoof!" they just disappear. Gone. Swallowed up. Just like that. Disappeared." Shane's monologue became the point of departure for a recitation of Elyse Fenton's poem "Planting: Hayhurst Farm"<sup>55</sup> by Christina, Jeremy's wife – an explicit shift from the purported authenticity of the monologue to a stylized set piece. Juxtaposing the experience of a medic "shoveling / human remains into a body bag // marked for home" to that of a military wife "planting peppers / on a farm in Oregon nowhere near // the war," Fenton writes (and Christina recites),

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<sup>55</sup> We interviewed Fenton, then a recently graduated MFA student, whose husband, Peenesh Shah had served as a medic in Baghdad. The poem was subsequently published in her first collection, *Clamor*, which won the 2010 Dylan Thomas Prize.

I don't know  
if this is even meant as consolation  
  
but I want to tell you just how easy  
it became to plant the thin bodies  
  
in the ground, to mound up  
the dense soil and move on. (Fenton 19-20)

During the recitation, the performers were cast in blue light as they ritually “garden” behind Christina. Initially, in rehearsals, Shane pushed through his sandstorm story, shifting from grief at his loss into wonderment at the size and power of the sandstorm. It was a tone he maintained throughout, jarring against the quiet reflection of the recitation that followed his monologue. His recognition that the engulfment of the marines by the sandstorm “meant” something more within the scripted context, came to him suddenly. It was marked by a reflective pause between the “Just like that” and the final “Disappeared.” By shaping them into a broader structural framework, Jon, Schmor, and I broadened the intent behind the veterans’ words.

We did not take lightly the responsibility with which we had been entrusted when the veterans volunteered their stories. Ethical second-guessing was a perpetual process accompanying our choices. I cannot, for example, hold myself above the commodification of the veterans’ experiences or responses. I remember sitting in an interview with a young woman who was speaking with heartbroken eloquence about the trauma she underwent during her deployment in Iraq, turning my head to note the time on

the video recording, and thinking to myself, “This is gold.” We assiduously transcribed the interviews, and then sat on the many pages it produced, unsure how to begin shaping or even if we should. Jon and I debated at length how we should define ourselves in relation to the text. Were we authors? Writers? Playwrights? Excavators? When an excerpted version of *Telling, Eugene* was published in the *Iowa Review*, the moment I saw my name in print was accompanied by a twinge of discomfort at the implied proprietorship of the stories and sentiments the piece expressed (from *Telling*).

There was comfort in the fact that the veterans would re-assume control over their stories in rehearsal and performance, especially in light of Schmor’s wry de-sanctification of the script. For example, as a regular attendee of rehearsals, I was happy to be the brunt of Schmor’s humorous figuration of “writers” as pedantic egoists intent on maintaining the integrity of their creations. The undermining of my “authority” (such as it existed at all) implicitly loosened the script up to the veterans’ and director’s embodied innovation. That said, Jon and my differing approaches to reshaping the interviews meant that some veterans had more room to reclaim control than others. The monologues Jon shaped tended to be more impressionistic, which, given a looser structure, gave the performers more room to improvise. I was inclined to use more conventional narrative structures, which gave performers less freedom to play. In the end, the relationships between veterans and the script were as contingently particular as they were heterogeneous. Some were frustrated by formal imposition, others liberated by it.

#### The Afterwords

Constitutively, the Telling process, in its theatricality, necessitates an audience and is thus also directed towards it. The question becomes, what were we trying to do with the audience, and did it, *can it*, work in relationship to the therapeutic mandate of

The Telling Project? It is a question riven with difficult paradoxes, some of which are invoked by Suzi Steffen in her critical reflections on her experience watching Julie Marie Myatt's *Welcome Home, Jenny Sutter* after watching *Telling: Eugene*. In Myatt's play, a returning and traumatized veteran becomes "a catalyst for the healing of those wacky / poignant folk around her." Steffen wonders if her displeasure at that appropriation resulted from her having been "spoiled by [her] immersion in [The Telling Project] story for other plays about the Iraq war." She had "a visceral objection to the ways the playwright paralleled one vet's trauma with the mental illnesses and oddities of 'freaks' around her," suggesting that it is "not only cheap but also rather insulting to veterans -- we'll take your service, your time, your energy, your blood, your limbs, possibly your life, and if you make it home, you can serve as a touchstone for the pain of others." She concludes, "I wonder if the nonfictional strength of the veterans' stories in *Telling* trumped fiction so strongly that the fiction felt offensive. Or perhaps just this fiction" (Steffen, War Stories).

Steffen is right that great care should be taken in the ways veterans' experiences are recast as representative of broader social symptoms. That said, it is troublesome that she perceives *Telling, Eugene* as a "non-fictional" countermand to the "fictionalizing" *Welcome Home, Jenny Sutter*. It suggests an all-too-easy deference to the principle of "authenticity" in which I worry The Telling Project is complicit. There is a larger stake implicit in this deference. Anthony Kubiak's *Agitated States* is a study of "the formulation of American Culture as theatre, and [U.S.] culture's repudiation of that theatricality as the central fact of American history" (Kubiak 12). Kubiak argues that the "Realness" of American identity – claims to the authenticity of American ideals, from

manifest destiny to militarized masculinity – is theatrically constructed, and kept real / authentic by a simultaneous abhorrence and denial of the theatrical. In the process, a national history of violence falls prey to amnesia. History becomes a fantasy: “it appears as a hole around which sign systems revolve” (10). The Trail of Tears is belied by toddlers in turkey costumes at Thanksgiving matinees; equality is self-evident and inalienable (a foundational declaration of U.S. Democracy) even as one in nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34 is incarcerated; The American Dream is believed to be the rule rather than the exception; the State of the Union is always strong; the real Truth of America is militarism and an economy based on it. In light of the artifice by which the Real America sustains itself and circumvents the pain and trauma of its history and present, Kubiak invokes the spirit of Brecht and Artaud, arguing for a theatrical tradition that “points to the wavering distance between theatre and the real, that consciously takes theatre as its object”.

The elision of violent history *within* U.S. borders is part of the struggle for returning veterans. They are often reticent to self-identify, feeling stigmatized by their association with violence in a culture whose theatrically constructed amnesia (and repudiation of theatricality) maintains the illusion that discomfort or trauma is the exception rather than the historical rule. As Jon wrote in answer to Steffen’s blog,

One veteran related to me a sentiment common among folks who have served in Iraq – that you don't deploy to Iraq and come home to the US; you deploy to the US and come home to Iraq. [One reason] for this apparent inversion...is that wartime reality in this country is very, very far from the reality of war. Coming home is, for many veterans, confronting a



populace to whom they aren't entirely real any longer; where they have been, what they have done and in fact who they are is, in the public mind, 'over there,' rather than here.... 'Telling' is trying to ameliorate this condition. (Wei, War Stories Comment)

That amelioration is not merely a matter of revealing the "truth," as Jon suggests later, so much as facilitating curiosity, incredulity, disbelief in the audience regarding the constructed-ness of their imagined relationship with their communities, nation, and the world. Revealing and destabilizing the theatricality by which the audience's understanding is maintained, in other words, is crucial to what The Telling Project is trying to do.

But that is easier said than done, especially when participants in the creative act are the historical subjects to whom it refers. I don't know that we succeeded, not least because it is difficult to see from an audience perspective. I am privileged and stymied by my participation. I *know* how the veterans' accounts and sentiments were edited. I had a hand in their shaping. I took many of those decisions. I have access to the stories that were excluded and the reasons why. I know that stories were isolated, edited, re-contextualized in keeping with the aesthetic requirements of theatre rather than merely in deference to the "truth" or "authenticity" of the original. I cannot un-see the artifice.

For what it's worth, then, I am convinced that *Telling, Eugene* was theatrical, even self-reflexively so. There was no attempt at narrative coherence, barring a loose adherence to the broader structure of the interviews. It is a palimpsest, an imbricated set of stories, a series of sometimes parallel sometimes contradictory episodes. It moved between generalizable ensemble pieces and personal monologues, frequently blurring the

lines between. It included poetic and ritualized recitation.<sup>56</sup> It shifted between diegetic passages and direct addresses of the audience. Lighting changes were often stark. The performers moved the stage props around in full view of the audience. There was no attempt, in other words, to sustain aesthetic realism. Indeed, the obvious discomfort of many of the performers and the clumsiness of the mime (and evaluative judgments of skill are a moot point here) made very clear the artificiality of the medium. As Brecht recognizes in “The Short Organum,” if good acting makes the audience forget themselves, then “bad” acting does the opposite (Brecht 509-510). The veterans’ performances were certainly not honed into impeccable *gests*, but the effect was to disrupt easy naturalism. Arguably, even the venue and the scenario of the performances – the full diversity of Eugene crammed into the Memorial Association Hall – challenged audience members’ comfort and entitlement to unexamined subject positions. To some audience members, theatricality *was* apparent. “Bad acting. Too much cussing,” I overheard one young impromptu reviewer remark. “How much of it was real?” I was recently asked by an audience member. “Just enough to make you care, not enough to stop you asking questions,” I answered, with more certainty than I felt.

That uncertainty arises from the conflictive nature of the idea of authenticity as it is enacted in *Telling, Eugene*. A contrary interpretation of *Telling*’s staging can, and has, been suggested, one against which I have no argument, but which, in its opposition to my claims suggests the dialecticism implicit to the therapeutic and critical/educational mandates. In this latter interpretation, the movement of props in full view of the audience, the jarring of performance registers, and the clumsiness of the mime, do less to highlight

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<sup>56</sup> In *Telling, Eugene*, for example, the performers recited “The Pledge of Allegiance.” In *Telling, Portland*, cadence (“It dunno, but I’ve been told...”) was liberally used as a motif.

the theatricality of the veteran's performances, than they do to undermine the very theatricality that seeks to estrange the audience from their naturalized understanding of civilian / veteran relations. The "badness" of the performance, in other words, serves to reify the authenticity of "real" veterans telling their "real" stories in sincere ways *despite* the explicit artifice of the forum. Theatricality, in this sense, does not invoke incredulity on the part of the audience, but becomes the contrapuntal "lie" by which the unquestionable "truth" or "realness" of the veterans is confirmed.<sup>57</sup>

The sincerity of the veterans' story-telling – and they *have* to be sincere in resisting the disingenuousness they feel they confront daily – draws the audience into an empathetic relation to them. In some instances, this empathetic response must come as a surprise. Schmor reported after *Telling, Eugene's* initial performance hearing an audience member remark to a friend, "I didn't need to know that."<sup>58</sup> In other instances the audience members' identification with the veterans works at cross-purposes with the idea that they should examine their own critical lenses. Their attendance at *Telling* productions, in other words, assuages their discomforts with the disjuncture between the theatre of war and theatricalized America. They leave assured that they know what it is *really* like. They've done their bit to inform themselves. They've cared sufficiently. In so doing, they affirm rather than challenge their imaginary if naturalized relationship with their communities, nation, and world. "How can it be anything *but* pro-war?" I was asked by a senior colleague vested in anti-war politics. Another audience member, a concerned mother,

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<sup>57</sup> I want to thank Professor Linda Kintz for this and many other insights.

<sup>58</sup> His exclamation was especially resonant because this was a dreadlocked gentleman, "a hippie," the very embodiment of the kinds of "Eugene locals" towards whom some of the veterans expressed antipathy, no doubt believing themselves to be doing so in equal measure to what they assumed was his antipathy towards them. Regardless, his "I didn't need to know that," which we interpreted with scant knowledge regarding the young man who had uttered the words, spoke to us about biases visibilized and simple antagonisms complicated.

asked me for a DVD of the production so she could show it to her son who, she said, had too idealistic a notion of the military. The performance served *their* purposes.

At the conclusion of *Telling, Eugene* the veterans stepped downstage and introduced themselves. The house lights were raised. They cited their names and the branch of the military in which they serve(d) while looking directly at the audience that had been obscured by the stage lights in their eyes. There was a moment's silence. And then the audience stood as one in ovation. The veterans embraced each other in relief. They stepped off the stage into the audience, many members of which stayed to talk to them.

My critical misgivings are still subsumed by that moment. I stood, and applauded in full admiration. I was *not* uncomfortable with the catharsis of the moment (catharsis, despite our attempts to avoid it formally, seems to be unavoidable). Even with hindsight, I want it to be the unquestionably wonderful moment it seemed, then, to be. I want it to be beside the point that the performance might be interpreted as perpetuating naturalized accounts of militarized U.S. identity. Augusto Boal's critique of Aristotelian empathy rings loudly. It *is* coercive and serves dominant ideologies (Boal 35). Loving the men and women on that stage, I want that ovation *not* to strike me as a false note within the broader context of perpetual global war. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans, combatants and civilians, have been displaced, injured, killed. Thousands of American lives have been ended and affected. This is an occasion for lamentation. War is detestable. I want it to be beside the point that we celebrated, in that moment, even with the best possible intentions, the network of civilian and military complicity. I want *not* to see it for what it possibly, insidiously, was: an ovation directed at heroic suffering (and

resilience) on the part of individuals acting on behalf of nation, with scant attention paid to the suffering of people “over there,” out of sight, far away. No applause should come from this.

Then again, maybe that applause was not *just* a false note. Nobody was applauding a martial victory. It was not a triumphal denigration of those who also suffer but do so out of sight, far away – Jeremy had spoken too movingly of the suffering he saw in Iraq for that to be okay. Indeed, the recent celebration of Osama bin Laden’s extra-judicial killing, the dancing in the streets, is a distinct counterpoint. Rather, the ovation was a recognition of the local impact of a global war – perhaps too local, but such is geography, and such is immediacy, and such is theatre. It was an iteration, even if a momentary gesture, of responsibility towards the people on the stage, people with whom we live. It was a recognition of courage, not in battle, but in candor, of the struggle to find a new language for the kinds of embodied experiences that are stigmatized out of currency in order to sustain a civil veneer.

What remains questionable is the measure to which the audience members were required to examine the ways in which *their* language engaged or distanced them from the immanence of violence, how it situated *them* between the body and the text, between memory and performance, authenticity and artifice.

I cannot say that we have found equilibrium. I cannot provide an answer to the quandary at the heart of The Telling Project’s theatrical and this essay’s critical undertakings: is it possible ethically and aesthetically to negotiate between the authenticity of the subject’s experience and the wider social and global context into and about which it is spoken? If I have a polemic, then, it is this. It is worth trying. The

Telling Project remains *in process*. There will be need as long as there is a war somewhere away and a home somewhere else that fails to respond to it with the critical, aesthetic, ethical, political and embodied seriousness that something as hateful as war demands.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: RISKING LITERARINESS

#### IN THE CLASSROOM

For time flows on, and if it did not it would be a poor look-out for those who have no golden tables to sit at. Methods wear out, stimuli fail. New problems loom up and demand new techniques. Reality alters; to represent it the means of representation must alter too. Nothing arises from nothing; the new springs from the old, but that is just what makes it new.

- Bertolt Brecht "The Popular and the Realistic"

In the introduction, I set out to reconcile my scholarly identity with the world in which I have my immanent being. This, I suggested, was necessitated by the recognition that the national, social, cultural, aesthetic and ethical upheavals of apartheid's end and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had largely bypassed my undergraduate and early post-graduate scholarship. In the broadest sense, this reconciliation of scholarly identity and worldly immanence has been progressively enacted through this dissertation's implicit narrative arc. It began in the South Africa, travelled through various reading, writing and teaching scenarios in South Africa and the United States, through my involvement with the Telling Project, and brings me here, sitting, as I often have done, in a coffee shop with a glass of water and a cup of coffee and books, hardly looking at the keyboard of my laptop.

Despite where I am sitting, the world is in no less a state of upheaval, even if the lines are blurred by the sheer scope and complexity of the issues. In the time I have been away from home, the scourge of HIV/AIDS has hardly abated. Dangerous economic disparities persist, as government service delivery to the underprivileged is stunted by incompetence, corruption and lack of will. Women, children and men endure an epidemic of sexual violence. Property crimes in South Africa are pathologically violent. The

bowdlerization of Rainbow rhetoric fuels xenophobic hatred that continues to seethe in townships and inner cities alike. As in the U.S. (facilitated in part by U.S. private contractors) a prison industrial complex implicates the government in the perpetuation criminalized identities, rather than socially-conscious rehabilitation. This, in all its ugliness and difficulty, as well as its beauty, resilience, honesty, and confrontationalism, is my country.

All around and inside South Africa and the United States, violence and injustice refuse to comply with the cathartic arc we are asked all-too-blithely to prefer. Syria burns. So does Yemen, and Bahrain, and Tunisia, and Somalia, and Pakistan, and Sierra Leone, and Palestine, and Israel. And Afghanistan. And Iraq. And Libya. The more benevolent and considerate face of the current administration sanitizes perceptions of a U.S. military industrial complex, which continues unabated, shifting its focus to different economic interests compelled, as ever, by corporate stake holders. American exceptionalism continues to justify its international actions. The specter of triumphalism, the dancing in the streets at the news of Osama bin Laden's extra-judicial killing, is a sobering reminder that the U.S.'s often bellicose foreign policy is popularly sustained by amounts to self-righteous bloodlust. Within the United States, the "post-racial" era supposedly ushered in by the election of Barack Obama belies continuing systemic racism and classism. Prisons overflow, predominantly and disproportionately with young men of color. Farmers and immigrant farm-workers reenact historical scenarios that America, and its post-civil war, post-civil-rights-era dream of itself, would rather ignore than confront. This is no mere laundry list of ills. This is the world that enacts itself in my



body and the bodies of the people I encounter daily. This, in all its ugliness and difficulty, as well as its kindness, scope, diversity, and changeability, is the world in which I live.

Because this is also the world in which our students live, it demands of the literary academy a detailed and invested engagement with its pedagogical praxis in higher education. Unfortunately, critical engagements with pedagogy tailored to literature *per se* have tended, barring a few notable outliers, to be insipid. The social urgency, innovation, and impassioned polemics enacted in much contemporary criticism have not found their way into a sustained discussion of what it means to teach and learn about literature in a time of upheaval. It is arguable that the short shrift given to literary pedagogy in higher education is simply a reflection of a broader systemic imbalance. As Russell West-Pavlov writes, “[t]he practice of teaching as one of the central pillars of the academic profession, for many academics whether by choice or because of institutional factors *the* central aspect of their job, is consistently neglected by literary studies” (West-Pavlov 14).

Indubitably, there are numerous reasons for this relative neglect. George Levine places the imbalance on the shoulders of disciplinary reward systems. In “Two Nations,” he points out that reward structures within the institutional framework of the literary academy overwhelmingly favor research over teaching:

For as long as I have been in the profession, there has been an obviously internal division, often even in the work of individual faculty, between dedication to teaching (which may in some instances impede professional success) and dedication to research and criticism (which is the preliminary condition for stardom). . . . The point is not that faculty do not work at teaching or value it, but that the profession systematically divides the two

activities and rewards one half much more than it does the other, even when both activities are done by the same faculty member. (Levine 9)

Levine also suggests the influence of broader economic factors to which literary studies programs and departments are institutionally subject. Within the literary academy, he argues, composition programs are the most directly engaged in the practice and theorizing of teaching. However, these programs operate not in the service of “the literary” (barring, of course, the economic benefits of their association with literature departments – primarily in terms of the graduate students they afford fellowships). Rather, they situate the “real” value of literary study, not in terms of a disciplinary integrity or output, but in its appurtenance to other, vocationally-based disciplines. Hence a bifurcation results between “the literary” and “the pedagogic”. While the “question of pedagogy gets attached, in most instances, to the teaching of writing...the institution as a whole remains doggedly loyal to the patterns of literary training” (10). Even as pedagogy remains, then, a crucial part of literary studies’ institutional survival, pedagogy in the service of the literary studies and the literary *per se* remains largely under-theorized.

What Levine characterizes as a “loyalty to patterns of literary training,” Mary Schmelzer characterizes as a more insidious symptom of disciplinary panoptic oversight. In her Foucauldian account of pedagogy within the English department she argues that “[t]eachers are most usually rewarded for method and style. The most successful have found new ways to do old things. Their very particularity announces pedagogic freedom that remains unchallenged only if what they do participates in the economy of the system, only if it preserves its truth claims” (Schmelzer 131). The classroom, then, is not a site of *disciplinary* innovation, rather, the institution sanctions advances in pedagogical practice

only if they do not challenge the (purported) integrity of “literary studies.” According to her account, then, the free-wheeling unpredictability of classroom transactions is a threat to “the discipline.”

For George Levine, this “threat” would *seem* to be a boon. The classroom is pivotal precisely because it “requires scholarly and critical sophistication, but it also requires a clear idea of what literature is, of what is entailed in reading and criticizing it. It requires, in fact, some very self-conscious theorizing” (Levine 14). I want to take from Levine’s stance the necessity of *self-conscious theorizing* as it is occasioned by pedagogical endeavor, and will elaborate on it in due course. However, I want also to problematize the “clarity” which Levine, and as we shall come to see, Elaine Showalter, perceive to be prerequisite to effective literary pedagogy. “Clarity” regarding “what literature is,” as I understand Levine’s idea, is the outcome or the product of the *process* of self-conscious theorizing. Clarity, as an end in itself, means that the messy immanence of the process is belied by subsequent language. Clarity defers, recalling Barthes, to Ideology, Genus and System and thus girds up, rather than perpetually challenges and redefines disciplinary bounds.

Elaine Showalter holds the idea of “clarity” regarding disciplinary bounds in such high regard, that she goes so far as to disclaim “self-conscious theorizing.” Her 2003 publication, *Teaching Literature*, was a high profile publication. Indeed, the journal *Pedagogy* dedicated a largely laudatory roundtable review of *Teaching Literature* to its release. Martin Brickman heralds it as “a coming-of-age for literature pedagogy” (Brickman 141) in part because of the esteem in which its author is held (suggesting, for him, the de-marginalization of pedagogy within the literary academy), and in part

because it champions the need, in Showalter's words, to "reconceive our pedagogy to make it as intellectually challenging as our research" (Showalter 11). As laudatory as this aim is in principle, however, Showalter remains unconvincing. Indeed, her rigid adherence to disciplinary parameters, supposedly with a view to pedagogical pragmatism, would seem to contradict the audaciousness of her theoretical work, evidenced especially in her groundbreaking feminist critical approaches. So, in her direct response to Levine's "Two Nations," she disagrees that self-conscious theorizing is necessitated by pedagogical challenges because it "usually means entering into a long dark tunnel from which very few teachers, let alone clear ideas about literature, emerge" (21).

Instead, Showalter asserts clear disciplinary boundaries by restricting her purview to established genre. Even as she concedes that literary studies, as a (post-)discipline, includes a variety of different media, she assiduously clarifies, or restricts, the terms of her discussion, arguing that while English professors legitimately teach "film, television, and all kinds of cultural materials that fall outside [traditional] literary rubrics...for those areas there are already special manuals of teaching and analysis" (22). So, "for [her] purposes...teaching literature means teaching fictions, poems, plays, or critical essays."

"Our objective in teaching *literature*," she later argues, "is to train students to think, read, analyze, and write like *literary* scholars, to approach *literary* problems as trained specialists in the field do, to learn a *literary* methodology, in short, to 'do' *literature* as scientists 'do' science" (25)<sup>59</sup>. Mantra-like in this sentence, "literature" "the literary," and implicitly "literary studies" are characterized as obvious quantities, with pedagogy as its mere organ, a proverbial ministry of its propaganda. Implicit to

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<sup>59</sup> My italics.

Showalter's formulation is the suggestion that research (literary science) is pedagogy's superior and determining antecedent. In this sense, literary pedagogy is doomed to play catch-up to literary research. Vice versa, the discipline's abstract wing is fated to lead its "most practical aspect" (Spivak 299) by the nose.

Showalter's primary investment in restrictive disciplinarity renders her awareness of the complicated dynamics that constitute heterogeneous classroom scenarios as merely token. In her contribution to the *Pedagogy* round table review, Beth Kalikoff ascribes a "fairy-tale patina" to Showalter's pedagogical musings: "*Teaching Literature* is... situated in a disorienting professional landscape inhabited largely by faculty at elite public and private research institutions. There is little acknowledgement of the political, historical, and fiscal challenges that inflect contemporary teaching and learning at less-privileged sites" (Kalikoff 152).

I would add that Showalter is cavalierly cursory in the way she deals with experience that falls outside the comfortable purview of the elite literary academy's pervasively middle class constituency. Chapter 9, "Teaching Dangerous Subjects" begins with a paragraph and a half on the subject of race, a discussion she dismisses with the claim that "the awareness literature teachers bring to representations of race, dialect and ethnicity, does not usually extend to the many other difficult subjects literature presents, and sometimes romanticizes" (126). A brief list of such subjects is followed by two discussions worthy of subheadings: "Suicide" and "Explicit Sexual Language". Chapter 10 is "Teaching Literature in Dark Times." It raises the specter of personal, communal and national trauma as needing to be dealt with in the literature classroom "as a way to remind us that our role and subject are not cleanly detached from the world, but messily

entangled with it” (140). These two chapters constitute a token fifteen pages (125-140) of “discomfort,” cathartically laid to rest by a conclusion entitled “The Joy of Teaching Literature” (141-143). Mere reminders of literary studies’ entanglement with the “world,” *Teaching Literature* suggests, are enough. Certainly, in keeping with Showalter’s earlier assertion regarding the vice of self-conscious theorizing, the intractable messiness of this entanglement should preclude any attempt to engage its definitional implications for the discipline.

I am not satisfied with Showalter’s implicit claim that “reminders” of our discipline’s and pedagogy’s messy entanglement with my world are sufficient. That, disciplinarily and pedagogically, we need “reminding” is an indictment. It suggests the illusory conflict-free normalcy with which the discipline and its classrooms are pathologically imbued. Frankly, I find this adherence as offensive as Michael Hames-Garcia does “the injunction to not teach ‘politically’ and to leave questions of identity and power outside the classroom....The university remains a site of struggle and controversy in part because it remains reflective of the struggles and controversies surrounding identity, power, oppression, and resistance characteristic of the nation and its history” (Hames-Garcia 20). Neither the long dark tunnel of self-conscious theorizing where Showalter’s much-feared madness lies nor our messy entanglement with the dangerous world outside is anathema to literary disciplines. They *should* be constitutive thereof.

To Levine’s, Schmelzer’s, and West-Pavlov’s diagnoses of the relative neglect of pedagogy within literary disciplines – diagnoses which hinge broadly on institutional reward systems and economic imperatives – I would add an epistemological determinant.

*Literary* pedagogy remains under-theorized and under-utilized because the classroom refuses to bend to the discipline's archival comfort zone. The immanent dynamism of the classroom does not comply with disciplinary methodologies directed at stable textual objects. Rather, students and teachers bring their worldly repertoires into the classroom, repertoires that endanger the primacy of literary archival objects disciplinary curricula center. The comfort of stable forms, be they textual or methodological, are challenged by the irruptive present which endangers any attempt at overarching abstract structuring. The best laid plans do not guarantee outcomes. The comfort of generic conventions – traceable narrative, character development, catharsis, resolution, denouement – are rarely allowed us when we stand in front of or sit among our students. Classrooms are inherently unstable organisms to which the literary scholar, comfortable lording over definable and stable objects, is uncomfortably subjected.

Such discomfort is *not* to be avoided, either within the classroom or our research endeavor. Indeed, understanding literary encounters as scenarios – and here the literature classroom is our primary example – discomfort is a symptom of constitutive tensions that Literariness, as I have defined it throughout this dissertation, accommodates in ways that mere textuality cannot.

Literariness is the hinge, the dynamic sensibility that enacts the relationship between the embodied repertoire and the literary object. Through Literariness, reading / speaking / writing / learning / teaching subjects situate themselves in immanent relation to language in its aesthetic (and thus historical and ethical) aspect. In so doing, they also implicitly (and in ways literary pedagogy should seek to make explicit) enact the version of the world to which they ascribe. Embodied responses to literary texts and dynamics –

which may at first take the ostensibly simple form of pleasure, or pain, or resistance, or agreement, or empathy, or antipathy – are thus also implicit identity claims. These responses enact biases patterned into us by history, embodied and abstract, interpersonal and familial, racial, gendered, classed, local, regional, national, global. Understanding the workings of text upon the body and the body upon text within the literary scenario allows us to visibilize, parse, and hold to critical and historical account biases which might otherwise remain naturalized and entrenched.

Crucially, this requires a perpetual shifting of the objects and outcomes of literary pedagogy. The archival text is not the sole source of evidence. Nor, for that matter, is the embodied history of the subject. Both ways mere solipsism lies. The ultimate site of analysis is the intersection of the body *and* literary language, their immanent encounter. Foregrounding this immanence as the point of departure for analysis, however, requires a willingness to trade, not just in ideas, interpretations, and theories, but also, crucially, in affect. What is required, in other words, is a willingness to *risk* the self-reflexive *performance* of literary pedagogy.

I do not use the term “performance” thematically. Showalter does so in *Teaching Literature*. For her “Performance anxiety” is a way to understand the nerves that accompany the academic’s classroom endeavors (Showalter 13-17). Performance is a set of pragmatic skills – “Speaking skills can be learned” (34). Or, it is a pedagogical methodology. “Performance teaching” is a student-centered approach prompted by the imperative to “teach drama” (79-87). Rather, I contend that performance *constitutes* literary pedagogy.



Simply understanding the classroom as a scenario, as Diana Taylor defines the term, makes this clear. The literature class, to claim its ontology, *is* a performance event. It has a regimented starting time and end time. The classroom is its stage, arranged in keeping with the conventional embodied attitudes enacted in pedagogy, be that the circle of a de-centered classroom, or the forward facing, tiered arrangement of top-down pedagogy. The participants, in all their diversity, bring to it repertoires of their own, which butt up against the strictures imposed or freedoms allowed by the space.

Seeing the event of literary pedagogy *as* performance, the literary pedagogue enacts his or her epistemological lens. It is to recognize the *repertoire* of pedagogical practices at play within and in relation to the space. Importantly however, it is also to appreciate the plural that constitutes the classroom transaction, and the willingness to *risk* shifting within the repertoire as the dynamic demands it. No *single* pedagogical methodology can accommodate the heterogeneity of dynamics inherent to the event of literary pedagogy. If literary pedagogy in higher education is to entangle its means and ends with the world beyond disciplinary parameters, then it is necessary that it allows itself to be a *reactive* rather than a merely prescriptive or prescribed praxis.

I am reticent, in this regard, to superimpose established schools of pedagogical practice on the literature class. My own experience, teaching in South Africa, and then at the University of Oregon, suggests to me that such a superimposition is problematic not just across national lines, but even within any given pedagogical event. In a South African classroom, for example, the imbalance of privilege and educational resources meant that classroom discussions were a particularly difficult to negotiate. My impulse, on the one hand, was to elicit the voices of students whose experiences had been

excluded from the discussion in higher education. Dissipating my authority (the utility of which was first suggested by the older student's irruption of my lecture on Apartheid drama, anecdotalized in the introduction), had the effect, on the other hand, of simply reactivating problematic historical social dynamics. Given the opportunity to speak, privileged students who had never had that right systemically challenged, occupied the floor to the detriment of historically silenced subjects. I did not, at the time, have the courage to take control of the scenario, fearfully convicted, as I freshly was, that to do so would be to re-impose my own historical privilege.

At the University of Oregon, teaching was an entirely different affair. So used were students to de-centered pedagogical modes that their silence, it began to seem to me over time, was rarely an expression of their historical marginalization but an all-too-frequent enactment of obdurate entitlement. The implicit assumption was that others would fill the silence. To such students, speaking up was to risk laying themselves bare to counter-claims, to confront the possibility that they were misled, through their interpretations of the literary texts, in the versions of the world they ascribed to. This conflicts they neatly circumvented by immunizing themselves in relativistic individualism.

I have grown more combative in my classrooms. If I initially avoided calling on students in an effort to maintain their comforts, it has gradually become a risk I am willing to take. I am increasingly aware of the pedagogical value of a well-timed interpolation of a student, as well as the willingness to engage in qualified if emphatic disagreement with their claims. Their responses to this affective use of language, as I understand and visibilize them, are pivotal points of departure for self-reflexive critiques.

Of course, the same effect can be elicited when students disagree with each other, which requires a more de-centered approach. Regardless, whether I agitate my students, or they agitate each other, the resultant responses – discomfort, hurt, anger, acquiescence, identification, antipathy – are not ends in themselves, but iterations of identities (the subject in relation to their world) in immanent process. Emotional responses are “what we all (students and faculty alike) go through whenever we learn something worthwhile” (Hames-Garcia 32).

I am reticent to suggest particular pedagogical methodology because to do so would be to fix the classroom transactions in ideology, genus, criticism. The propriety of a literary pedagogical methodology depends on the scenario of its enactment. The pedagogues historical “Authority,” the bugaboo of critical pedagogies that seek to de-center it, is not necessarily by dint of its past, undesirable. The insistence on recitation that characterized early classical education, as Graff describes it in the first chapter of *Professing Literature*, is not without *any* pedagogical value. A New Critical close formal reading is not rendered necessarily unethical because it has been used in the past to immune a white male academy from historical developments and embodied responses that threatened the rational order of things. Nor should we discard pedagogical methodologies that seek to reconcile students to their own voices simply because they seem to enact an atmosphere of blithe relativism. Seemingly uncritical responses to literary texts that center the student’s “feelings” or historical contexts to the detriment of textual focus are not in and of themselves a failure. Such (un)critical and (failed) pedagogical modes are dangerous only when any one becomes naturalized to the point that it invisibilizes others as alternatives, when we fail to appreciate “the plural that

constitutes” the pedagogical scenario. The expansion and contraction of the classroom around the pedagogue’s or students’ authorities is crucial if literary pedagogy is to *agitate*, rather than *still* the “mechanism in yourself that allows you to accept distortions.”

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The quarter in which I complete this dissertation and write this conclusion, coincides with my teaching of a class on militarized masculinity. I want to describe a moment that, for all I know, was a moment of abject pedagogical failure. I hope it wasn’t. But I don’t. This is the risk I take.

In the third week, having defined our preliminary theoretical terms – “militarization,” the “military industrial complex,” and “hegemonic masculinity” – and subjected them to examination through a close reading of *Othello*, we moved on to five Wilfred Owen poems, mostly written in France while he was recovering from trench fever.

Especially “*Dulce et Decorum Est*” struck a chord with the class. I read it out loud. Not so secretly, I fancy myself somewhat as a performer of poetry, certainly more than most of my students. I often grimace inwardly when they flatten carefully wrought meter and disabuse poems of their potential intonations in the effort to keep up with complex sentence structures. I read to them, aware that I risk centering my own voice and the implicit arrogance of the gesture, in order to invoke, as well as I can, poetry’s affect.

In “*Dulce*,” First World War soldiers have turned their backs on the battle and are trudging, “Bent double, like old beggars under sacks / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags....towards [their] distant rest,” when, “Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling...” (Owen 55).

Owen's command of visceral immanence was not lost on the students. They noted, with attention to detail, the effectiveness of Owen's irruption of the soldier's slow tortuous progress towards safety. I point out formal structures that enact this sudden shift, the spondaic direct address and flurry of unstressed sibilants. We hone in on the horror that follows:

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

A caesura marks a shift in temporality. Owen's speaker is no longer in the moment, but confronts, after the fact, its terrible embodied residue: "In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning." In the final stanza, Owen situates the traumatic event and its residue as a jarring countermand to prevalent nationalist discourses which glorify military service. Had you been there, he tells an unseen respondent,

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory  
The old Lie – *Dulce et Decorum Est*  
*Pro Patria Mori.*<sup>60</sup>

A student raised her hand. I called on her. She spoke carefully. "I think that what he's saying is that we can't understand, I mean, those of us who aren't there, you know?"

I ask her to elaborate.

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<sup>60</sup> It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.

“Like my brother. He was in Iraq.” The silence in the room thickened. “He’s not the same as he was. He’s been diagnosed with PTSD. And I think it’s really difficult for him because he always says that nobody understands what it was like and nobody gets it so he just keeps to himself.”

I thank her for bringing the poem, written nearly a century ago and a continent away, home to this classroom, today, through her and her brother’s experience. But my thanks belie my feelings regarding her claims. I’m resistant. And, *again*, I’m unprepared. Resistant to what? Her claims and her brother’s claims aren’t falsifiable. I know enough veterans to know that his sense of isolation is not unusual. What then? Do I risk talking it out? This *matters* to her. This is not merely an exercise in abstract thought. She will go home with my response. I risk something *real* when I speak. Frame the risk, I tell myself, as other students raise their hands.

“Hold on just a second,” I say “I want to talk some more about what Sarah<sup>61</sup> just said. Again, Sarah, thank you. And please don’t take what I am going to say as disapproval of your understanding or of how your brother understands his experiences. This stuff is very difficult to talk about because it’s so very personal and it affects us so deeply...but then, that’s exactly the reason to think about it carefully, right? Is it okay with you if I talk through what you just said?”

She assures me with a nod that it is okay. I choose to believe her, and continue, “I find myself very uncomfortable when people say things like you *can’t* understand because you *weren’t* there and *didn’t* experience it. There’s something so final about all those negatives. And I resist that. Not because I believe I *do* understand. I’ve never been to war. I’ve never seen what your brother has or Owen’s speaker. But that’s also not

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<sup>61</sup> For reasons of my own, I have not used her real name in this anecdote.

really what's at stake, is it? Do precise details matter in our ability to understand someone else's experience? Does our experience have to be *objectively* and *precisely* the same for us to claim to understand trauma, or suffering, or happiness, or love for that matter? Because if that's the criteria, what hope do we ever have of any kind of understanding of other people? Am I still making sense?"

I direct this question more broadly at the class, who, by and large, assent.

"There's a very fine line here, I think. On the one hand, we hold the experiences that define us to ourselves, because they are *ours*, and we have a right to them for that very reason. On the other hand, and this is what I worry about, I wonder how often we hold them to ourselves simply because it feels safer to do so. Claiming sole authority, saying nobody else can understand us, is a way to avoid the process of *making* ourselves understood, with all of confrontation, and failure, and concession that that process requires of us. Does that make sense?" I'm always very conscious that this verbal tic, this need for affirmation, may be infuriating to students. Still, by the quizzical expressions on the students' faces, it did not make sense.

"It's like...mmm..." I scrambled. I looked down at the page I held in my hand. "It's like this. Is Owen's speaker...screw it, *Owen*. Is Owen saying that people who spread the Lie that it is glorious to fight and die for one's country *cannot possibly* understand what it's like to *actually* watch someone *actually* die of gas inhalation?"

No, they agreed.

"Exactly. Otherwise, why write the poem at all, right? Why put yourself through that? Why remember out loud. Why recall the nightmare, and fuss over just the right words to make sense of it for yourself and for others? There's an act of *faith* at the heart

of this poem, right in the moment of its writing. Owen believed, he must have believed, that someone, somewhere, sometime, would take the time to *read* it, to pay *careful* attention, to allow the details of the moment, details that hurt him to recall, to affect them. Because that's what his experience has taught him. It's the best way, maybe the only way he knows to counter the Lie, the language by which the horrendous death of young soldiers was being justified."

I worried that I'd lost them. I'd spoken for a long time. Was I proselytizing? I was conscious that the room had contracted around my authority in a way that was potentially detrimental rather than useful.

"Sarah, your brother may have a number of reasons not to speak about what happened to him. Maybe it's too soon. Maybe it hurts too much. And maybe that is how it has to be for now. But I can't accept the idea that we, in this class, or in our familial relationships, or in society at large for that matter, *can't* understand each other. I mean maybe we can't. But we have a responsibility to *try*. We have an *ethical* responsibility to *try*, if for no other reason than to justify the leap of faith that people make when *they* try to speak to us – or write for us, or whatever. Because blindly accepting that we can't understand, that just too easily becomes an excuse for incuriosity, a reason to stay unchanged or unchallenged by the way other people see the world. To close them out. To shut them up. And then what?"

I felt red in the face. I was embarrassed by my own un-ironic sincerity. I *meant* that. Now I felt insufferable, like I'd spoken *at* them. I took it on faith that the deep and thick silence in the room meant something worthwhile had been achieved.



And that left me stranded with twenty minutes still to fill. There was so much else and nothing left to say. I could confront them further. There was deep history of injustice to talk about: the illusion of the trauma-less American home front, the solipsism implicit to America's de-theatricalized theatrical versions of the nation, the evolution of psychological "disorders" brought to an avowedly "ordered" home by American soldiers, and the ways in which they were and continue to be stigmatized. This was the safer ground of abstract ideas of masculinity and nationalism and textuality.

I didn't want to dissipate the moment but had nowhere to go. "Anthem for a Doomed Youth" I said after a moment's silence, "is a poem about civilian funereal rites and the ways in which they make us comfortable with the idea of death." I began to read,

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons. (44)

\* \* \*

That pedagogy is constitutively a performance is important because it allows us to bracket off from the everyday events that surround it. This is not only a matter of the institution's regimentation of time. The self-reflexive confrontationalism enacted within the event of and by Literariness is not perpetually sustainable. In "The Art of the Contact Zone," Mary-Louise Pratt writes about an experimental class in which she sought to theorize and enact (literally and literarily) trans-cultural encounters in a way that accommodated confrontations that accompany such events. The outcomes, as she describes them, were admirable.

All the students in the class had the experience, for example, of hearing their culture discussed and objectified in ways that horrified them; all the students saw their roots traced back to legacies of both glory and shame; all the students experienced face-to-face the ignorance and incomprehension, and occasionally the hostility, of others.... Virtually every student was having the experience of seeing the world described with him or her in it. Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom – the joys of the contact zone. The sufferings and revelations were, at different moments to be sure, experienced by every student. No one was excluded, and no one was safe.

(Pratt 40)

Implicit to the experience of learning and teaching, in this formulation, is *risk*. It is risky to allow yourself to confront the spectral vision of yourself that others hold. It is difficult to have your authority challenged, especially with regard to your own version of the world. The immanent and intensive negotiations between self and other (be that between the body and the text, between pedagogue and student, or student and student) that constitute the best kind of literary pedagogy, are difficult to sustain. The period ends. We close the covers of our books. We stop writing. We keep still. We step away. Pratt describes the necessity of the performance's bracketing:

The fact that no one was safe made all of us involved in the course appreciate the importance of what we came to call "safe houses." We used the term to refer to social and intellectual spaces where groups can

constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression....Where there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone.

It is, as I have argued, inevitable that students bring their biases, their versions of the world into our classrooms. It is as inevitable that they return to the worlds that inspire those versions after class and after their degrees, whether they major in literature or not. Whatever the extent of their exposure to literary studies in their higher education, however, we should strive to make it count. By enacting Literariness in our classrooms, the hope is that they return to and subject their worlds to more nuanced understandings, that they are sensitized to the affect and effect of the language that sustains them and their worlds, and that they are wary of the circumscriptions that still rather than agitate their aesthetic (and thus also ethical) curiosities. The hope is that, should they feel their worlds need changing, they ethically enact the wills and means to affect that change.

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